Lacan: from Desire to Love

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Lacan passionately tries to provide an all-embracing and spectacular illustration of his theories by drawing on different aspects of mathematics. He makes topology, a significant detour for a comprehensive understanding of his theory of desire. He lays out his topology of desire by drawing four graphs that are known as ‘graphs of desire’. These graphs and their pertinent algorithms and symbols are selected as pedagogical tools and as a method for a coherent organization of his teachings about desire. He outlines his graphs first in his Seminar VI: Desire and its interpretation (1958-1959) and develops them further in several of his seminars and his essay, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” (1960).

Graphs of Desire

![Graphs of Desire](https://www.braungardt.trailetics.com/projects/psychoanalysis/lacans-life/graph-of-desire/)

The graphs like a geometrical map of a building are evolutionary. The Graph-I, as Lacan calls it the ‘cell of desire’ is composed of two intercrossing vectors. One is the horizontal vector → (S S’), the vector of the signifiers or signifying chain and the second is the horseshoe-shaped line ∩ (Δ$) that symbolizes the primitive subject of intention and the barred subject. These two lines have two intersections, known as the point de capiton (button-ties and anchoring point) that are drawn more fully in Graph-II as O and s(O) as the points of the interaction between the signifier and the signified (slippage into another signifier). The two intersections operate retroactively, in a way that the message is received from the codes and a mine of signifiers from the intersection O that designates the Other. The cell of desire demonstrates how the primitive and instinctive need alters into the signifier, when it inhabits demand in language. Here the subject learns and plays
with the first signifiers such as a phoneme, ‘alternating wails’ that evolve later as words through which demand accommodates the biological need. Lacan refers to Freud’s grandson Ernest’s game with the presence and absence of his mother—fort-da to describe the process of the formation of the signifiers. The Graph-II accentuates the imaginary measurement of desire. The crucial part of this graph is the Vector → e-i(o), exposing the formation of the ego in the mirror stage. The ego that is structured by outside image, alter-ego and the other with lower case in Lacan topology. The vector → Signifier-Voice; O-s(O) is the unconscious signifying chain which produces in the conscious signifying chain the metaphoric and metonymic dimensions. Lacan refers to the interaction of two signifying chains (conscious and unconscious), the production of multiple signification and the status of divided subject in the imaginary and the symbolic akin to the operation of a poetic discourse. This point is of enormous significance for the interpretation of poetry as a signifying process in the imaginary. For Lacan, a poetic and literary discourse generates psychoanalytic ideas and facts. Myths in their revelations as Lacan reminds us represent psychological truths in their raw and real forms. However, Lacan’s biographer and commentator, Élisabeth Roudinesco sees Lacan’s literary engagement as an attempt to make everyone Lacanian.

 Whoever the author he is speaking about maybe, Lacan initiates a process of incorporation: he thinks the other is stating the same thing at the same time as he is. He often judges earlier thinker or writers to have anticipated his own reflection. We’ve seen how he was able to argue, not without humor, that Plato was already Lacanian. (Roudinesco, 2014, 49-50)

Graph-II identifies the gap that is created between the thing that represents the subject and the formation of the words from that thing. In this gap, desire is experienced as the desire of the Other. The thing here denotes that part of the need that cannot be accommodated by the demand. This leftover represents part of the being of the subject as well as the Other that emerges in desire as the object cause of desire. By way of illustration, Lacan in Seminar-VI, situates this thing or object the Harpagon’s treasure box buried in his backyard in Molière’s comedy, The Miser. When Harpagon loses his treasure box, he loses his own intimate being. Lacan emphasizes that Harpagon’s doesn’t know his desire. Apparently, his desire is buried in the treasure box, but his desire is the retention and possession of the treasure box. Lacan argues that the unconscious separates the subject from his own being, and he reaches out to his own being through the metonymy of being, which is desire. The complete Graph-IV, shows the structure of desire in both the imaginary and in the symbolic registers. Desire, d is perpetually connected to fantasy $<>a in the symbolic, as the ego, e is in a perpetual contact with i(o), the specular image in the mirror. Both connections in the imaginary and the symbolic bear evidence that the desiring subject must encounter with a lack in himself and the Other. The upper part of Graph-IV is a replica of the lower part. However, the players and what is being played out are diverse. The lower part illustrates the imaginary structure of the subject and the upper the symbolic and unconscious structure of the subject and desire. The lower vector → signifier-voice, and the upper vector → jouissance-castration respectively identify the subject of statement at the conscious and the subject of enunciation at the unconscious. The subject of unconscious emerges in the conscious discourse through signifiers, which is not the I of the discourse. Lacan gives a backhanded-complement to describe the difference between the subject of statement and the subject of enunciation whereby
the complementary part signifies the conscious statement, and the insulting part is the unconscious enunciation.

Graph-III, *Che Vuoi?* (What do you want?) illustrates the residues and link of desire to the transitory stage in the imaginary in which the first experience of desire, arising from a state of hopelessness in the infantile life. The question is asked when the subject gets frustrated and hopeless because the Other to which the question is addressed is unable to reply. The Other itself is subject to lack. Because of this double lack, the subject encounters unsatisfied residues in his discourse of the demand, which contains the drive as well. The demand satisfies the need but the demand for love, which is the essential part remains unsatisfied. Even the Other is unable to do anything about it. Therefore, the drive that is related to the demand for love attaches itself to the signifier in the unconscious. Fantasy as a life-saving boat provides the subject with an alternative way of finding a relationship to the object of desire. Thus, *Che Vuoi?* open window for the entrance of desire in the imaginary with the mediation of fantasy. Graph-III illustrates that the line of desire ends up with fantasy. The algorithm $<>a$ is introduced by Lacan like any other formula as an abbreviation. In the algorithm, $=\bar{a}$ barred subject; lozenge, the symbol $<>$, comes from mathematic, which means ‘greater than’ or ‘lesser than’; $a$ is the object petit $a$, the object cause of desire. The complete graph shows the drive in the locus of the Other ($<>D$), which takes up the position from which the signifiers well up. The formula of drive ($<>D$), indicate that the drive is located in the demand for the Other. The third graph as Lacan calls it bottle opener and master key in *Écrits* is thus a moment when the subject experience desire because of its helplessness when it encounters with the opacity of the desire of the Other. The opacity begins with the subject’s failure to get a convincing answer or an ‘oracular reply’, from the Other. This very question introduces the subject to the field of his own desire. In analytical experience as Lacan emphasizes through the transference, the patient puts the same question to the therapist.

*Che Vuoi?* “is the question that best leads the subject to the path of his own desire, assuming that, thanks to the know-how of a partner known as psychoanalyst, he takes up that question, even without knowing it, in the following form: “What does he want from me?” (Lacan, 2006, 690)

Desire is the desire of the Other. The Graph-IV charts desire in both conscious and unconscious levels (vector that runs from the signifier to the voice) and unconscious level (vector that runs from *jouissance* to castration). This graph illustrates the articulation of desire in the imaginary and the symbolic registers. These two levels also expose the split nature of the subject as well. The most important point that we learn from Lacan graphs of desire, is the notion that the *I* of discourse isn’t the author of the production of the meaning, since the subject receives his own message in an inverted form from the Other. This is illustrated in Graph-IV by the two vectors curved above the vectors (signifier—voice; *jouissance*—castration) that run counterclockwise from the locus of the Other—the treasure of signifiers or “word-mill” to use Lacan words. The subject realizes the void and lack in the Other that makes the Other so impotent to provide an answer. In this traumatic situation, the subject creates and uses fantasy as a defense against the helplessness (*Freudian Hilflosigkeit*) we outlined earlier. This helplessness arises from the truth that the subject encounter the truth of his being that is totally dependent on other for its own survival. This powerlessness also signifies even the harder truth of the fact that he can never be able to become One with the Other. The fantasy helps the subject to survive from his troublesome, hate/love experience with
the other in the imaginary, as Lacan says, “every fantasy is articulated in terms of the subject speaking to the imaginary other” (Lacan, 1958-1959, 16). For Lacan like for Heidegger, an existential anxiety arises from this situation of helplessness (détresse). For both thinkers, anxiety is thus a confrontation with nothingness. The experience of this helplessness is the first experience of desire on the part of the subject who has no recourse whatsoever. The subject uses his resources from the mirror stage that drive the subject to vacillate between a sense of victory and submission.

Lacan thus turns away the focus from the Cartesian understanding of desire as an event of the self-conscious ego. The door to desire is open in the recesses, ruptures and fissures of the consciousness that always wants to disguise the unconscious desire.

In *the Seminar VI: Desire and its interpretation* (1958-1959), Lacan present Freudian legacy, philosophy and literature as major points of reference in developing his theory of desire. In analysis, various symptoms and actions and thoughts are presented crucial for bringing desire into play. Symptoms are always entrapped in the mechanism of desire. The energy that animates desire is the object-seeking libido. At the outset of the seminar, Lacan criticizes Aristotle and other ethicists for their imposition of limits on desire. For Aristotle and Plato before him, desire was a desire which at the same time was ethical and for an ultimate good. In other words, every activity within the soul doesn’t deserve to be called desire, unless it is directed for a noble objective. They could be called desire, as Aristotle argued, only if these activities are underlined by the force of reason and ultimate good. Thus, for Aristotle, desire defines an activity which is rational and moral at the same time. In the same way, pleasure is ethical when directs desire to the teleological objective of the sovereign good. That is why an insane ecstasy of a madman cannot be characterized as desire for Aristotle, because such an ecstasy is not governed by morality and reason. This philosophical bewilderment vis-à-vis desire comes to Aristotle from Plato that continued to exist until Hegel in Western metaphysics. The only exception is Spinoza, who breaks away with Platonic ethic in the field of desire. Spinoza refers to pre-Socratic notion of desire as a living force and self-preserving natural essence of life. Spinoza’s claims that desire is an intrinsic tendency of a thing, organism and man to continue sustenance of their existence.

Desire is at the heart of human subjectivity or the whole structure of subjectivity as Lacan argues at the end of *Seminar-VI*. It is like what Spinoza calls desire *cupiditas* the very essence of man, as Lacan states about desire as “being the very key, or the mainspring in us of a whole series of actions and behaviors, which are understood as representing the deepest part of our truth” (Lacan, 1958-1959, 423). Lacan’s statement that desire is the desire of the Other implicates that in our desire, there are two objects that represent the lack in both the subject and the Other. These objects are the causes of desire and the phallus as an object *in* desire that functions as the marker of desire. As signifier, the phallus signifies the subject’s desire as the desire of the Other. As we mentioned above, the object of desire, object *a* holds part of the subject and part of the Other. Having and retaining this object is the insurance of the being of the subject and his desire. The object *a* is the hole left behind by the signifier in the unconscious. This hole is “a sucking force that pulls and
animates the signifiers, giving the chain consistency" (Nasio, 1992, 80). Like the ‘donkey’s carrot’ as Lacan remarks, this object remains always ahead of the subject. The phallus plays the role of the presence of the lack and nothingness in the symbolic. With the mediation of the object in desire or the phallus, desire is materialized. “Desire is the metonymy of being in the subject; the phallus is the metonymy of the subject in being” (Lacan, 1958-1959, 19). Among the chief characteristics of both objects of and in desire is the fact that they change their places along the metonymy of desire. When Hamlet is in love with Ophelia, she is an object a, and when Hamlet rejects her, she holds the place of the phallus in his desire. When she is dead, she represents the nothingness towards which desire desires. This is the reason that desire is insatiable, and it clings metonymically once for this and then for another object.

A substantial part of Lacan’s Seminar-VI: Desire and its interpretation (seven weekly sessions) are dedicated to the study of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. This is an exemplary and a fully-fledged model of Lacan’s interpretation of a literary work. Besides his psychoanalysis being the backbone of his inquiry into Hamlet, in a multidisciplinary setting, Lacan considers key observations in the critical discourse about this drama since the Renaissance period. At the outset of the seminar, perhaps having Shakespeare in mind, Lacan implicitly pronounces that philosophers and poet have more authority to speak about the concept of desire. Still, an inquiry into the concept of desire for him would have been more authentic and precise when a poetic insight about desire was coupled with supportive dramatic actions. This is the reason why Lacan is so passionate about the drama and despite his disavowal, to the contrary, the impression we can get is that he is engaged with every move of Hamlet as a real person not a dramatic character. Hamlet’s desire is the desire of a hysteric when he rejects Ophelia, asking her to go away and become a nun. A hysteric desire is characterized by the unsatisfied desire, and the hysteric is often incapable of love. His desire veers off course to the desire of the obsessional, when he jumps in to the grave of Ophelia and cries out to Laertes that thirty thousand brother would not match his love for her. An obsessional always quests to achieve an impossible desire. Ophelia is a central character in the drama that functions as a ‘barometer’ of his desire. Hamlet is not a hero of no action, the idea that has been often repeated in the traditional criticism of the play. Hamlet in unable to act only on one thing. We will return to this in a moment. In Goethe’s inquiry into the drama, Hamlet’s ability to act was ‘paralyzed’ by his preoccupation with intellectual preoccupation. T S Eliot saw this so-called inaction as the major weakness in Shakespeare’s characterization of the hero. Coleridge saw in Hamlet exceptional perseverance, as he remained on the path he had chosen to the end. As states above, he is hesitant only one action—fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him by the ghost of his dead father, the ghost that comes out of nowhere as Lacan says but from Hamlet’s unconscious. Lacan relates the motivation for this proverbial hesitation in literature to self-punishment for, in his unconscious, King Claudius is his own rival, a person who has committed a crime that Hamlet is also unconsciously guilty of. Lacan clarifies this, “the loathing which should drive him (Hamlet) on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remained him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish" (Lacan, 1958-1959, 205). Hamlet can act on the expected action only when he is in his own hour. This is the moment when he is fatally wounded, and he is expecting his own death at the end of
the tragedy. The death unites the subject with the Other. For Lacan, everyone has his/her hour in the drama. Ophelia’s *hour* comes when she commits suicide. Gertrude’s *hour* is when she is poisoned, and Claudius arrives to his own *hour* when he dies. The famous phrase at the start of Hamlet’s soliloquy in *Scene I, Act I* of the play, “To be, or not to be—that is the question,” explains that Hamlet is guilty of being for as Lacan argues this choice of *either/or* enables Hamlet to enter the chain of signifiers. This chain is identified with lack—the lack of being from which desire arises as the metonymy of lack of being. That phrase also means that Hamlet’s desire is for his being. Hamlet’s father’s ghost also functions as disguised phallus and the signifier of lack for the hero’s desire.

Lacan neglects nothing in his criticism. He examines socio-historical significance of *Hamlet*, as the drama reveals a tranquil social milieu under the imminent threat of foreign invasion. Two years later in *Seminar VIII: Transference*, he criticizes Hegel for seeing a religious redemption in *Hamlet*. “This is where Hegel’s investigation intersects ours, for in truth, we don’t find the slightest trace of reconciliation in *Hamlet*…there is no resorting at any point in Hamlet to the mediation or some sort or redemption” (Lacan, 2015, 281). When Lacan states that *Hamlet* is the tragedy of desire, he means Hamlet doesn't know how to desire. Thus, crisis in his desire brings his downfall. This also signifies Lacan’s repeated statement that never ‘give up on your desire’. Desire is both human weakness and a path to his survival as well. “Not give up on your desire,” a formula that, let’s not forget, Lacan says usually signifies “do your duty” (Badiou, 2014, 33)

*Lacan’s theory of love* is more complicated than his theory of desire. It is perhaps wise to provide a grounding for the understanding of Lacan’s theories of love by recalling some of his repeated statements about love, of which some may be self-contradictory: *Love is a metaphor; love is an illusion; love is deceptive; love is closely linked to hating; speaking about love is imbecilic, in love one doesn’t know that he or she is giving something she/he doesn’t have, love is for the semblance of the object, love is love to be loved, etc.* Each of these oracular statements gives a significance insight. The lover and the beloved have a presence in a love-bond or the signifying process of love as two signifiers. The lover doesn’t know what he is willing to give. Nor he has what he is giving. By the same token, the beloved also doesn’t know what she has that attracts her lover. Simply, the substitution of one for the other is the metaphor of love. In other words, the lack in the lover as the signifier, is substituted by the object of the beloved. (Gilbert, Chitin D., 1996). In Lacanian theoretical parlance, a metaphor is the substitution of one signifier for the other signifier; and a metaphor signifies the trans-positional nature of love. In his *Seminar VIII: Transference* (1960-1961), Lacan argues that relation between love and transference indicates that there is a pervasive artificiality at the heart of love, for in transference, an illusion of love relation between the analyst and the analyst happens. This transference in love relation is, in fact, a displacement of the players in such a way that transformation from a love relationship between the subject, and the other takes place. What the lover seeks in his beloved is not the real one he unconsciously loves. In addition, the lover loves to be loved and for this, he needs a beloved to ensure he is the object of the other’s love. The lover offers just what is the signifier of the lack in him? These remarks describe love as an illusion ad deception. The illusion and deception arise from the discrepancy between the unconscious truth and its conscious configuration in transference. The ambivalence of the subject towards the specular image in the imaginary is evident in a coexistence of opposing
feelings of love and hate. The inter-subjectivity in the mirror stage is marred with love-hate relationship between the ego and its alter-ego (specular image). Speaking about love is imbecilic, for if we put a Lacanian screen on the discourse of love, everything is not true there, as Lacan says in *Encore*, “Love is addressed to the semblance” (Lacan, 1998, 92). At the unconscious level, *I love you* means that I recognize the lack in myself and want to place my own lack on the one I love. For providing an example of the imbecilic facet of love, let us sketch an anecdote: suppose X falls in love with Y. The beloved Y reciprocates the love of X. After a while, Y bluntly refuses to love X. But X continues to love Y to the core and insanely begs her to restore their love. The Y continues to refuse. The X finds his world crushed. He feels like the world’s miserable person. The tragi-comic exchange of love and rejection goes on unabated. After a few years, the refusing Y suddenly makes herself available for the X. The X is intoxicated of happiness and arranges for marriage. But shortly, this time the X surprisingly walks away from his ex-beloved Y and ends his love story. Now, whenever the X looks back at his love story, his dreams, insomnia, love-sickness, wasting time, strivings, insane begging, etc. he would be laughing at himself. Hamlet would have the same feeling if he had looked backed at his love with Ophelia. Once loved, then rejected, and then jumping to her grave and express his ecstatic love. In Lacan’s theory, the funny aspects of love emerge at the intersection between the imaginary and symbolic. The love/hate game begins to flourish between the ego and its alter-ego in the imaginary. The instability of this relation in the mirror stage alters the most sacred love story into a hilarious experience. Keeping this in mind, Lacan in *Seminar XXII: RSI* (1975), calls love ‘the comedy of psychosis.’

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As it was mentioned above, desire is the desire of the Other, because, what is lacking in the Other causes its desires. Like desire, love also circles around this lack and needs to fill this void with the love of the beloved. Thus, the loving subject transports his own lack to the Other. In the intersection between desire and love, desire acts to take the loved-object back, which never happens because the real object is lost. This object in both desire and love is the object a, that causes desire in the first place. This is what happens in the adventures of Don Juan. He must find another woman to seduce in order to continue his desire, because each woman he encounters that is not the one he is seeking unconsciously. In *Seminar XX: Encore*, Lacan argues that in Don Juan, the search for the real object is endless, because the chain is destined to one-minus, (minus phi - ψ), the imaginary phallus.

Lacan locates the birth of love in the field of desire when desire is essentially the desire for the Other’s desire. He presents an anecdote that he himself calls it a myth of his own making for his modality of love. He emphasizes that this anecdote has the structure of a myth, because myths show psychoanalytical issues as real. In *Seminar VIII: Transference*, Lacan mentions twice this anecdote. A careful examination of both is necessary for a better understanding of what Lacan intended to impart.

The hand that extends toward the fruit, the rose, or the log that suddenly bursts into flames—its gesture reaching drawing close, or stirring up is closely related to the ripening of the fruit the beauty of the flower, and the blazing of the log. If, in the movement of reaching, drawing, or stirring, the hand goes far enough toward the object that another hand comes out or the fruit, flower, or log and extends toward your hand—
and at that moment, your hand freezes in the closed plenitude of the flower or in the explosion of a log which bursts into flames—then what is produced is love” (Lacan, 2015, 52).

“For in its root and essence, desire is the Other’s desire, and this is strictly speaking the mainspring of the birth of love, if love is what occurs in the object toward which we extend our hand owing to our own desire, and which, when our desire makes it burst into flames, allows a response to appear for a moment: the other hand that reaches toward us as its desire” (178-179).

Two mysterious hand reaching out to a flower. The first hand that reaches to the object, the fruit, the rose, or the log, is certainly the hand of the one who is loving and the object is the object a, the object cause of desire: flower, fruit, and log. Alenka Zupančič, in her essay “The Case of the Perforated Sheet,” refers to this anecdote and chooses a body part as the object of love from literature. But the object is in flame because of desire. It exists as a signifier of the lack and castration. Lacan in Seminar XI: Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, links object a to love. At the heart of love, this object compensates for castration and the void in the subject. Lacan goes even to the extent that each subject has his own object a. For example, for Alcibiades, the intellectual kernel of Socrates is his object a. We know from Lacan that lover brings his own lack and castration to place it in the beloved who on her part also is lacking the object. In the anecdote, the one who loves finds his hand frozen ‘in the closed plenitude of the flower or in the exposition of a log which bursts into flames' because this object is the object of the Other’s desire. It is not the object of his own desire but the object the desire of the Other that produces love, as the second passage testifies. The second hand freezes the first hand when it reaches to the fruit like the statue hand freezes Don Juan’s hand. This means that desire is the desire of the Other. The second hand, freeze the first hand, the hand of the lover, because the love and desire of the Other replace the lover’s desire and love. This is what happens as Lacan argues in the seminar, between Socrates and Alcibiades (Plato’s Symposium). Alcibiades “is set ablaze” (Lacan, 1958-1959, 178), by the object a hidden in Socrates’ proverbial ugliness. The master analyst, Socrates “designates it as transference love, and to redirect him (Alcibiades)to his true desire” (179).

Similarly, the picture of Portia hidden in the lead casket becomes the object a of desire that the Bassanio wisely chooses in The Merchant of Venice. For he is the one who recognizes his lack by selecting the worthless casket. The inscription on the lead casket signifies this: “who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath” (2.7, 11-12). In love and desire, the subject’s object of desire is lost to the object of Other. Lacan goes on to explain further his myth of the fruit and two hands by identifying the second hand that is reaching out to the first on, the hand of the Other. The reciprocity in love which Lacan terms as the miracle of love is signified by the second hand, the hand of the other. This is the moment when the loving subject becomes the object of the beloved. This miracle completes recognition of the lack on both sides. Thus, in the economy of unconscious, love is an exchange of the lack between the engaging parties. As transference in analytical experience shows, love gives the opportunity to the subject to love one and desire other at the same time. In mystical love, desire walks away from the love-bond, for in this love, the loving subject seeks oneness and unity with the beloved God. This oneness kills desire as Lacan emphasizes.

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To say a final word on hate—the other side of love: Lacan’s Möbius strip postulates the co-existing of binary oppositions, including love and hate. This makes the boundary between love and hating porous. In Seminar XX, Lacan coins the neologism, *hainamoration* (hatelove, hateloving) to illustrate the co-extensiveness between love and hate. As we remarked earlier, hate arises in the imaginary when the narcissistic subject finds himself in a love-hate trap with the specular(ideal) image or the ego-ideal. The loved one occupies the locus of the ego-ideal in the mirror. In the symbolic register, this hatred finds itself in relation between the subject and the Other. As Lacan lays emphasis that *true love* is the kind of love that is addressed to the being.

Notes


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