

# The truth is a lemon meringue

Jacques Lacan, *Transference: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII*, trans. Bruce Fink, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2015. 368 pp., £30.00 hb., 978 0 74566 039 4.

Bruce Fink, *Lacan on Love: An Exploration of Lacan's Seminar VIII, Transference*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2015. 288 pp., £55.00 hb., £17.99 pb., 978 1 50950 049 9 hb., 978 1 50950 050 5 pb.

The title of Bruce Fink's new book implies that it contains an explication of Jacques Lacan's position on the subject of love. However, early on in the text Fink states 'There is, in my view, no singular theory of love to be found in Freud's work or in Lacan's work: there are only attempts to grapple with it at different points in their theoretical development.' It is no surprise, then, that Fink opts to provide an encyclopedic account of Lacan's various thoughts on love and related topics rather than a straightforward conceptualization of love from a Lacanian perspective. Drawing from a wide range of sources, including many of Lacan's seminars and several of his written texts, Fink's book seeks to give the reader a synoptic account of Lacan's views by addressing the subject of love from as many angles as possible.

Fink acknowledges that he is not being exhaustive, comparing his own book to Jean Allouch's *L'amour Lacan*, which discusses each of Lacan's mentions of love 'in turn'. Significantly, Fink seems to think that by adopting his approach he is being faithful to his subject, reading Lacan here as Lacan reads other thinkers. Of Lacan's method of reading, Fink writes, 'Although Lacan pays very close attention to the particular theory being adumbrated, insofar as there is one, in a text, he is nevertheless extremely attentive both to the letter of a text ... and to the general trajectory and at least apparent breaks in the trajectory of the text.' It seems reasonable, on this basis, to assume that Fink thinks his book is pursuing this same method in his approach to Lacan's discourse. It does not attempt to unify the things Lacan says about love, but rather highlights their fragmentation.

Fink begins by looking at Lacan's views on love from the perspective of each of his three registers: the symbolic, the imaginary and the real. Each of these offers a very different understanding of what love is. Within the symbolic, one's relationship with others is determined by what position one occupies and what role one plays. Writing of the hysteric, Fink says 'it is not the specific qualities or personality traits of the other woman that are so important to her; what is crucial is her *structural position* as someone who finds

a way to elicit a desire in a partner whose desire may well be experienced by the hysteric as flagging if not altogether dead'. By contrast, in the imaginary, love is narcissistic. Such self-love is integral to identity formation but can easily become self-destructive since, as Fink explains, 'insofar as love is the narcissistic aim to make one of two ... it aims at the annihilation of difference'. Finally, Fink indicates that it is love, for Lacan, that can link someone experiencing Other jouissance, the pleasure that destroys one's sense of self, which is associated with the real, with their partner in the symbolic. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate much on this idea.

After sketching love in terms of Lacan's three registers, Fink moves on to what he calls 'General Considerations on Love'. Here, Fink seeks to provide short expositions of Lacan's views on several subjects related to love. For example, courtly love – a subject which Lacan deals with most extensively in his seventh seminar – is, Fink argues, a particularly acute manifestation of the tendency to avoid the intractable difficulty of making a real connection with one's romantic partner. Elsewhere, Fink explains that Lacan considers Aristotle's notion of *philia* naïve because it presupposes that everyone wants and pursues what is good. Regardless of whether such characterizations are correct or incorrect, they do not seem to do justice to ideas that have incited the sort of vitriolic response that, generally speaking, Lacan's ideas have received in academic and psychoanalytic circles. If Fink makes Lacan's ideas clear, he also makes them digestible, unthreatening. There is no distinct discrepancy in terms of content between Fink and Lacan; it is formally that they diverge. Where Lacan is elliptical, Fink is direct; where Lacan equivocates, Fink defines. Lacan comments cryptically on philosophical texts like the *Symposium*, semi-obscure dramas like the Coûfontaine trilogy, and technical papers by historical and contemporary psychoanalysts; Fink peppers his text with illustrations from Jane Austen novels, allusions to contemporary pop music, and intuitive examples drawn from his long career as a psychoanalyst.

*Lacan on Love* also contains a two-part commentary on Plato's *Symposium*. It is here that the most interesting parts of the book can be found. As I have already noted, Fink is sensitive to the way in which Lacan reads texts. He recognizes, for example, that for Lacan 'love consists in the very transitions and paradoxes' of Plato's dialogue. It is odd however that, given this recognition, Fink seems not to have fully appreciated the implications that Lacan's approach to reading has for writing about him. Fink seems to think that it is enough to aggregate Lacan's comments on love and explicate them clearly. While this approach makes his book a useful tool for students and scholars, it contradicts Lacan's statements about reading in Seminar VIII, *Transference*, and elsewhere and it flies in the face of the very procedure that Fink himself so eloquently articulates. One source of this problem is indicated by the paucity of references made in *Lacan on Love* to two thinkers who had a pronounced impact on Lacan's method of reading: Alexandre Kojève and Leo Strauss. It is well known that Lacan regarded Kojève as his friend and teacher. What is less well known is that both Lacan and Kojève were influenced by Leo Strauss.

Early on in Seminar VIII, newly translated into English by Fink himself, Lacan mentions a conversation he had with Alexandre Kojève. He relates Kojève's claim that 'Plato hides from us what he thinks just as much as he reveals it to us.' Later, Lacan says,

to all ancient and especially modern commentators an attentive scrutiny to the dialogues shows that they quite obviously contain an exoteric as well as a hermetic element. The most peculiar forms of hermeticism, right up to and including the most typical pitfalls bordering on illusion [*leurre*], on difficulty produced for its own sake, have as their aim not to be understandable to those who should not understand.

This is certainly hyperbole. Relatively few Plato commentators admit that the dialogues have an esoteric dimension. The most famous contemporary exponent of this approach to Plato's texts is Leo Strauss, and although he seems to associate these views with Kojève, there is reason to believe it is actually Strauss's ideas that Lacan draws from here.

Kojève and Strauss were long-time correspondents and friends, and at the beginning of their correspondence there is a pronounced disagreement between them about how to read Plato. Strauss wrote to Kojève in 1957, 'I disagree with your procedure. The interpretation of Plato always grows out of the thorough interpretation of each individual Dialogue,

with as little reliance on extraneous information ... as possible.' By the time Kojève and Lacan had the conversation Lacan cites, it seems that Kojève has, however, adopted a much more 'Straussian' view. He tells Lacan that he must understand why Aristophanes had the hiccups in order to interpret the *Symposium* successfully. Here, Kojève is pointing to the argumentative function of action *within* the text. In a letter from 1959, two years before Lacan's cited conversation with Kojève, Kojève identifies himself as a 'faithful Strauss disciple'.

The connection between Lacan and Strauss is further supported by Lacan's citation of Strauss in his 1957 text 'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud'. While discussing metonymy, Lacan suggests his audience read Strauss's *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952). In this text, Strauss argues that ancient and medieval philosophers wrote so that they could communicate their views to their intended audience without running afoul of whatever political and religious authorities they were subject to. Lacan endorses the book not only because it provides examples of how language can say more than it seems to, but also because of the specific relationship Strauss articulates between the text's esoteric and exoteric dimensions. Lacan seems to agree with Strauss that the esoteric message of a text cannot be sought anywhere else except within the text's exoteric presentation. For Lacan, signification is produced when the metonymic slippage of the signifier is arrested by metaphoric substitution. This is also how a symptom is formed. A signifier (the symptom) replaces 'the enigmatic signifier of sexual trauma'. The symptom-signifier and the signifier of sexual trauma cannot be connected by the traumatized subject because there is a series of metonymic displacements in between the two. Like the symptom, the linguistic signifier does not derive its meaning from a signified or even from another signifier. Rather, meaning arises from the same condensation and displacement that create the signifiers themselves in their contradistinction from a traumatic intrusion. Consequently, texts are nothing but their surfaces, a collection of letters that are only meaningful due to their dynamic topography; that is, in their non-relation with what cannot be symbolized. Strauss seems to be making a very similar point when he says in his book on Machiavelli, 'The problem inherent in the surface of things and only in the surface of things is the heart of things.'

This coincidence of Lacan and Strauss will no doubt surprise some. Strauss is frequently castigated

for committing the intentional fallacy. He seems to do this quite clearly in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, where he appears to claim that philosophical authors write their texts so that their secret message can be understood only by attentive readers. However, 'political esotericism' is only one type of esotericism that can be found in Strauss's work. Strauss's friend and student Seth Benardete distinguishes, in his book *The Argument of the Action*, ancient (metaphysical) esotericism from modern (political) esotericism. According to Benardete, ancient esotericism 'says that it is in the nature of things that things are hidden', while modern or political esotericism 'says it is in the nature of the city as now constituted that this is so'. Lacan and Strauss both seem primarily to subscribe to ancient or metaphysical esotericism. In the twelfth session of the seminar, Lacan says,

It is, of course, characteristic of truths to show themselves completely. In short, truths are solids that are perfidiously opaque. They don't even have, it seems, the property we are able to produce in certain solids – that of transparency – they do not show us their front and back edges at the same time. You have to circumnavigate them [*en faire le tour*], and even do a little conjuring [*le tour de passe-passe*].

This is why both Lacan and Strauss advocate reading texts 'to the letter' (*à la lettre*). The truth is disguised not only due to political pressure; it is self-disguising. The surface of the text displays the various masks the truth adopts for itself. Since it is nothing outside of these misdirections, it is only by tracing the truth's illusory manifestations that it can be grasped. The similarity between Strauss and Lacan here is evident in the latter's claim that

what Plato shows ... is that the contour traced out by this difficulty [the difficulty of speaking about love coherently, which the speeches of the *Symposium* together demonstrate] indicates to us the point at which lies the fundamental topology which stops us from saying anything about love that holds water.

Lacan's point is that Plato's position is not found in any of the speeches that appear in the *Symposium*, or in the structure of the text as a whole. Instead, Plato demonstrates the impossibility of articulating what love is, revealing something to us something about love *in the process*.

Despite their similar viewpoints on reading, Lacan writes very differently to Plato and Strauss, who both invite simplistic (mis)readings. These simplistic readings, when worked out thoroughly, point beyond

themselves. Lacan's style, meanwhile, is thoroughly difficult. There is no firm ground upon which to rest, even for a moment. It is not entirely clear why Lacan does things this way, but it seems likely that it has something to do with how he conceives the relationship between the symbolic and the real. The real cannot be symbolized by language; but, rather than limit language, this separation from the real allows language to function almost autonomously. Of course, the two are never fully distinct for Lacan: *das Ding* and, later, the *objet petit a* are 'that which in the real suffers from the signifier', as he puts it in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. However, this point of contact reinforces rather than lessens their separation. As Lacan says, 'the Thing in question is, by virtue of its structure ... the Other thing'. To speak of the real, then, requires that one speak lies: 'the subject asserts that the dimension of truth is original only at the moment at which he uses the signifier to lie'.

The problem is that this makes the truth vulnerable to the imaginary, the register of illusion. Lacan's discourse, then, seeks to avoid both the authoritarianism of the symbolic and the seductiveness of the imaginary. He does this by setting up chains of signifiers such that they self-destruct where they would otherwise become either meaningful and coherent or aesthetically pleasing. The real is none of these things. In this regard, Lacan's critics are, in a sense, correct: there is nothing to Lacan's words. His discourse is designed to give way under the reader's weight so that they are plummeted time and again into the hole of the real. Lacan's characterization of Socrates' essence is one of 'emptiness or hollowness'. Using Cicero's translation, Lacan explains that Socrates' *inscientia*, his emptiness with regards to knowledge, 'is non-knowledge constituted as such, as empty [*vide*] by the void or vacuum [*vide*] at the centre of knowledge'. The same description could be applied to Lacan himself.

Fink does not seem to agree. Like Kojève before his conversion to Straussianism, he seems to be under the impression that there is a message behind the signifiers of the text. This message is presented in an unclear manner, but it is not itself unclear. Therefore it can be translated into a simpler idiom. But Lacan indicates that this is not the case. Fink's text is undoubtedly valuable for those who wish to study Lacan's views on love. However, if those views are in any way related to the movement of the seminar's discourse then one would be better giving up the ease of Fink for the labyrinth of Lacan's own text.

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