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Lucky Breaks and Funny Coincidences: From the Tragedy of Desire to the Messianic Psychoanalysis of Love

Abstract:

This essay explores Jacques Lacan's theory of desire as functioning according to the logic of tragedy and compares it with Alenka Zupančič's concept of love as comedy, demonstrating however that the latter remains too caught up in the Lacanian worldview to truly capture the active side of love. The essay argues that Zupančič's interpretation of Lacan can be reinterpreted again through the lenses of "messianic psychoanalysis" – psychoanalysis "slightly adjusted" – standing not on the side of the tragic acceptance of fate, but of the promise of "more life." Drawing from the reflections of Agata Bielik-Robson, Eric Santner and Jonathan Lear, this essay intends to demonstrate that Zupančič's comedy of love can be reconciled with the more relational notion of love as a psychoanalytical counterpart of messianic Exodus. An example of such a liberating combination of eros and wit can be found in Freud's interpretation of Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva*.

Keywords:

psychoanalysis, love, comedy, Jacques Lacan, Alenka Zupančič, narcissism

On first glance, it would seem that psychoanalytic theory has much to say about love. However, the issue is not so simple. As Leo Bersani notes, psychoanalysis cannot form the foundation for any theory of love because it is skeptical about “the very possibility of a subject loving an object.”¹ Problematic status of other-love in psychoanalysis was brought to the fore by Sigmund Freud in his paper on narcissism. Even though Sigmund Freud tries to distinguish between narcissistic object-choice and “truly objectual” anaclitic object-choice, the latter turns out to be merely a different form of self-love: love for the forever lost perfectly fulfilling object, mother, or father, the founder and guarantor of primary narcissism.² Moreover, Freud discovers that falling in love is inherently narcissistic in itself, since the overvaluation of the beloved object characteristic of love relations relies on a displacement of narcissism. On the basis of Freudian theory, the narcissistic element dominates in every amorous relation because the libidinal energy involved is always merely borrowed from the ego and always ready to return to it.³ This inevitably leads to a narcissistic mode of relating which aims at unity and complete dissolution of otherness.

The topic of love comes up in Freud’s writing surprisingly rarely. On the contrary, it constitutes one of the most important themes in Jacques Lacan’s theory, where it usually appears in the form of desire. Jacques Lacan acknowledges the difficulties related to the narcissistic ideal of love as a unity that “never makes anyone leave himself behind”: “if that ... is what Freud said by introducing the function of narcissistic love, everyone senses and sensed that the problem is how there can be love for an other.”⁴ By locating desire not in the imaginary register of narcissistic fullness but in the domain of the symbolic that is structured around lack (the inherent negativity inscribed within the function of speech), Lacan tries to escape the idealized conception of love as a fusion of the two into One.⁵ Yet, as I will argue, the inherent negativity sustaining desire’s quest does not provide any way out of the illusory positivity of narcissistic fusion. In as much as love-as-desire aims at the primary lack, it

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- 1) Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, 72.
 - 2) Freud, *Complete Works*, vol. 14, 87–91.
 - 3) Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 77.
 - 4) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XX*, 47.
 - 5) Vighi, “L-D-L,” 68.

does not promote any different, non-narcissistic mode of relating to others: instead, it becomes a passion for the void.

If narcissistic desire functions according to the logic of tragedy, sustaining the fruitless search for the forever lacking object and delineating the individual's inescapable fate, the conceptualization of the "real" or truly relational love would require a shift towards comedy. Such is the intuition of Alenka Zupančič; a Lacanian philosopher who tries to find a place for both comedy and love within the Lacanian framework, connecting them through the concept of sublimation as de-sublimation, an operation that changes the relation between different elements present in the structure of desire. I will argue that although Zupančič's idea is highly promising as a psychoanalytical conceptualization of love, it struggles with explaining love's active, relational aspect, due to the attachment to the Lacanian dogmas. I will thus try to slightly "de-Lacanianize" Zupančič's conception, bringing it together with the intuitions of what Agata Bielik-Robson has called "messianic psychoanalysis" – a psychoanalysis liberated from Freud's fatalism and concentrated on the possibility of a different future, no longer overdetermined by the past. Drawing mainly from the reflections of Eric Santner and Jonathan Lear, I will attempt to reframe the notion of lack, central to Lacanian thought, shifting the focus onto the seemingly opposite notion of excess. In the light of such a modification, Zupančič's conception of love as comedy can be revised and reconciled with the notion of psychoanalytical Exodus: the genuinely relational struggle for the liberation from the deadlock of narcissistic desire.

Desire's Tragic Quest for Lost Being

Lacan's initial position on the topic of love, starting from his first seminar entitled *Freud's Papers on Technique* (S1), is in line with Freud's views from "On Narcissism" and "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego": love has an inherently imaginary and narcissistic structure, it is a passion for the ideal image of one's own ego transferred onto the other person. In this sense, love "reopens the door to perfection" (S1, 142) – perfection unachievable for the human individual who, frustrated with their own incompleteness and impotence, falls under the seductive spell of the love-object as a supposedly self-enclosed, autonomous being, as complete as the alienated image one sees in

the mirror during the primary scene of narcissistic misrecognition. Paradoxically, the more the subject impoverishes themselves, becoming a slave to the elevated and idealized love-object, the more they fuel their own narcissism. This is why Lacan calls love a “fatal attachment” (S1, 146) and “a form of suicide” (S1, 153). Quite rightly, he opposes the enigmatic ideal of the “genital love,” widely accepted among his contemporaries as a supposed goal of psychoanalytical therapy. The idea that love fulfilled serves as a proof of the subject’s health is not only naively moralistic but also, what Lacan does not explicitly mention, dangerous because what is hidden under the vague terms of “fulfilled” and “genital” love is nothing other than the narcissistic fantasy of wholeness and perfection, the same one that leads to the suicidal passion for the idealized object. Wary of this narcissistic trap, Lacan develops a conception of love that thrives on negativity and explicitly rejects the notion of wholeness. But in order to escape the omnipresence of narcissism, Lacan has to supply the imaginary character of love with a different component; that of the symbolic, the domain of speech.

“Without speech, in as much as it affirms being, all there is is *Verliebtheit*, imaginary fascination, but there is no love” (S1, 276–77). This “love” different from imaginary narcissistic infatuation, love that aims at being through speech, appears later on under the name of desire: one of the major themes in the entire Lacanian *oeuvre*.⁶ Birth of desire is concomitant with the first articulations of the helpless human infant’s needs addressed to a caretaking other through the medium of speech – or, to be precise, the medium of symbolic signs in general, since the first signal of need is rather a cry than a word. This medium is not neutral: it does not simply translate biological needs, but instead transforms them, deviates them, so that what one demands is always something more than a satisfaction of need. Desire emerges precisely with the frustration of every possible demand that always asks for more than it explicitly states. And the object of desire, *objet petit a* (“object little *a*”), what we “*a*(in’t) got no more,”⁷ is the object of the primordial lack: “little *a* expresses subject’s tension, the tension that lies

6) Lacan sometimes uses the terms “desire” and “love” interchangeably, while at other times he distinguishes between the two. Usually when the two are opposed, “love” means the imaginary relation inscribed within the narcissistic framework of the overvaluation of one’s own image, while desire means the quest for the elusive *objet petit a* that develops mainly in the symbolic sphere, even when it presents itself through imaginary fantasies.

7) One of the possible expansions of the abbreviation *objet petit a*, apart from the standard *petit autre* (little other): “because it’s what *on n’a plus*, what we ain’t got no more” (Lacan, *The Seminar, Book X*, 117).

in the margins of all these demands and that none of these demands can exhaust. This something is destined to represent a lack.”⁸

The lack at the very heart of desire is the center of the entire Lacanian theory of love. It is not only a lack of satisfaction of one’s insatiable demand but a more general lack underlying our early frustrations: a lack of some part of being, lost forever with the emergence of speech; “this veritable being ... flees and is already eternally lost. Yet it is this being that you are attempting to connect up with along the paths of your desire.”⁹ In Seminar VII, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, the lost being never to be found again appears under the name of *das Ding*, the inaccessible Thing, “that which in the real, the primordial real ... suffers from the signifier” (S7, 118). While at this point Lacan calls the Thing “the beyond-of-the-signified” (S7, 54), later on this lost bit of realness is no longer situated beyond language but rather given the status of the remnant, remainder. It survives every encounter with the signifying system not as a proper substance but as a specter, a lack haunting the subject and reminding them of the lost being they have never experienced. Due to this spectral status as the always-forever-lost, the Thing or the *objet petit a* is never the object of desire but rather the cause of desire, something outside the field of desire that structures it from behind, the exterior center around which the subject’s entire psychic life gravitates.

Desire cannot be possibly satisfied, in as much as its true object is lack itself. Particular objects – other people the subject encounters and tries to love – are merely imperfect substitutes for the lost piece of one’s being. The subject sets out to be disappointed, sliding from one object to the next. What one looks for in the other person – the precious *agalma* hidden inside – is never to be found.¹⁰ This tragic misunderstanding explains the peculiar cruelty of lovers who in their games of desire are willing to tear the beloved apart, piece by piece, in order to get to the obscure remnant of the lost being and its forbidden jouissance. In Lacan’s famous words from Seminar XI “I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you – the *objet petit a* – I mutilate you.”¹¹ The subject looks for “something more” because the missing

8) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VI*, 372.

9) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VIII*, 37.

10) *Ibid.*, 137–38.

11) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XI*, 268.

piece of the Real is, as Lacan often repeats, veiled and covered with false images. This concealing of beloved objects, putting them at a certain distance in order to make them resemble the inaccessible piece of being, comes to the fore in the Lacanian interpretation of Freud's concept of sublimation – “the most general formula that I can give you of sublimation is the following: it raises an object ... to the dignity of the Thing” (S7, 112). Sublimated desire, of which the most prominent example given by Lacan is the mechanism of courtly love, can only worship the other person from afar, “through the door of privation or of inaccessibility,” without any regard for their individual qualities and particular needs (as noted by Lacan, all poems in the tradition of courtly love seem to be written to the same person: the generic *belle dame sans merci*) (S7, 149).

Thus, while desire was supposed to be an escape route from the narcissistic passion of *Verliebtheit*, it turns out to be as narcissistic and fatal as the displaced love for one's ego analyzed by Lacan in his first seminar. What one searches for in the other – an elusive remnant of greater life – is, as Lacan eventually admits, a lost part of oneself, split off due to the fact that one is subject to language, to individual death and finitude, that one “is no longer immortal.”¹² In the quest for immortality *via* desire for the adored object is not, as it initially seems, simply raised to the dignity of the Thing – it is rather used by the subject to save their own dignity.¹³ Desire's logic is therefore parallel to the logic of narcissism in which the transference of illusory wholeness and perfection onto the image of the other makes up for the experience of one's own incompleteness. In as much as desire structures the subject's reality, it elevates and illuminates others and renders them visible to the subject, but only at the cost of their disappearance as concrete individuals. Desire facilitates their visibility as the incarnations of the Thing, but at the same time it necessarily distorts the way they appear for the subject, imposing on them a narcissistic scenario of the subject's fundamental fantasy and sacrificing their particularity to the insistent “unconscious theme.” It is a repetition compulsion that constitutes the individual's psychic fate:

If analysis has a meaning, desire is nothing other than that which supports an unconscious theme, the very articulation of that which roots us in

12) Ibid., 205.

13) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VIII*, 171.

a particular destiny, and that destiny demands insistently that the debt be paid, and desire keeps coming back, keeps returning, and situates us once again in a given track, the track of something that is specifically our business. (S7, 319)

The intervention of speech that was supposed to save us from the “fatal attachment” to the narcissistic image brings about another form of fatal attachment: the subjection to the metonymic script of destiny, the idiosyncratic grammar of desire that allows for no deviation from the given track. Instead of using speech to establish relationality and communication, desire strangles the other person with words, replacing the common, everyday otherness of our neighbor with the sublime otherness of the Thing. It transforms the individual into a signifier, erasing their “fleshly and historical reality” (S7, 214–15), emptying them of all their particularity in order to make them resemble the sublime void, a blank screen onto which one projects one’s fantasies about the lost narcissistic whole. Negativity at the heart of the Lacanian theory of desire, brought in by the concept of lack, does not shatter the ideal of narcissistic fullness, rightly rejected by Lacan’s criticisms of genital union. It rather supports this ideal, though rendering it unreachable, forever chasing its remnant, the place of lack itself.

Love’s de-Sublimation

Sometimes however, the mechanism of sublimation can bring about quite surprising results, potentially disrupting the narcissistic scenario. While taking up the topic of deeply non-sublime sublimations, Lacan analyzes a peculiar poem from the tradition of courtly love, written by the twelfth century poet, Artaud Daniel, in which the beloved Lady demands that her admirer blows in her anus (“puts his mouth to her trumpet” [S7, 162]). Lacan interprets this as a rare moment when the other, the woman behind the signifier, speaks in her own voice and responds to the poet who tried to turn her into the Thing:

One finds there the response of the shepherdess to her shepherd, for the woman responds for once from her place, and instead of playing along ... she warns the poet of the form she may take as signifier. I am, she tells

him, nothing more than the emptiness to be found in my own internal cesspit, not to say anything worse. Just blow in that for a while and see if your sublimation holds up. (S7, 215)

This strange reply can be read as the Lady's attempt to be free from the script of desire – since there is no beyond of language, the Lady outmaneuvers the poet from within the signifying system, refusing to play along and beating the poet at their own game. However, when Lacan interprets the “internal cesspit” from the Lady's answer as the ultimate form taken by the Thing, “the emptiness of a thing in all its crudity” (S7, 163), he fails to acknowledge the undeniably comic aspect of this response. The Lady escapes the poet's idealizing efforts by laughing at them, turning them into a joke; seeing through the metonymic chain and exclaiming “that's crap!” (literally), in the words of Jonathan Lear's anonymous patient who, during therapy, suddenly experienced a fortunate rupture their entire “unconscious teleological structure.”¹⁴ Precisely at this point indicated by the Lady's comic response, the possibility of love as a way out of the drama of desire opens up.

Lacan devoted only a few sentences to comedy but, even though scarce on the subject, he nonetheless associated it with the phenomenon of love different from the dark passion of desire or narcissism: he writes, “it is not enough, in speaking of love, to be a tragic poet. One must also be a comic poet,” pointing to the reason why the troubadours of courtly love were merely calling love's name in vain.¹⁵ This is the main point of Alenka Zupančič's argument, developed in at least three of her major works: the appendix from *The Shortest Shadow* (SS) titled “On Love as Comedy,” *The Odd One In*, and *What Is Sex?* Zupančič tries to solve the problems evoked by the Lacanian notion of desire, by contrasting the desirous mode of sublimation known from Seminar VII – the elevation of the object to the dignity of the Thing, which leads to the transformation of the other person into a signifier of the primordial lack of being – with another concept of sublimation understood as an inherent mode of functioning of the Freudian drives (SS, 179). Sublimation in this context means a deflection, deviation from the original aim and does not entail any exaltation of the object, quite the opposite, it is rather

14) Lear, *Happiness, Death*, 116–17.

15) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VIII*, 109.

a de-sublimation akin to perversion. This almost perverse, de-sublimating maneuver, providing a solution to the eternal conflict between desire and satisfaction, belongs to the domain of love, but also to the domain of comedy. Love changes the vertical structure of sublimation (the “banal” object and the Thing that illuminates it and gives it its significance), into a horizontal one in which the object and the Thing appear on the same level enabling an interplay between them – an interplay which Zupančič interprets as comedic (SS, 166). While in the tragic paradigm of desire there is an unbridgeable gap between the accessible object and the unreachable Thing (or the fleeting *objet petit a*, remnant of lost jouissance), in the comic paradigm of love the object and the Thing appear next to each other, none of them being more true and more real than another. Love as comedic de-sublimation does not expose the Thing as a mere appearance, an illusion covering some “true self” of the beloved person – such movement of unmasking would simply mirror the sadistic search for the other’s hidden *agalma*, characteristic for the tragedy of desire. Instead, love and comedy aim at the minimal difference between the two appearances, at the split within the same that takes up the shape of a montage, a funny coincidence: if there was no minimal difference between coinciding objects, we would not be able to notice that they are, in fact, the same – we would simply see one object, having nothing to laugh about and nothing to love. In Zupančič’s words:

The other whom we love is neither of the two semblances (the banal and the sublime object); but neither can she be separated from them, since she is nothing other than what results from a successful (or “lucky”) montage of the two. In other words, what we are in love with is the Other as this minimal difference of the same that itself takes the form of an object. (SS, 175)

What we fall in love with is thus not our fantasy of the sublime lack of being – the inaccessible core of the other person hidden somewhere underneath everyday appearances (this is the elusive, always-already-lost object of desire) – but neither it is a disillusioned “real” object stripped away from all our fantasies. It is rather the minimal gap between these two: “to love means to perceive this gap or discrepancy, and not so much to be able to laugh at it as to have an irresistible urge to laugh at it” (SS, 174). In the peculiar demand of the Lady, from Arnaut Daniel’s poem, we can see that it is

precisely this hilarious discrepancy that allows the woman to escape the suffocating script written out for her by the poet's desire – not through an exposure of the “real,” flesh-and-blood person behind the poem, but through a disruption of the poem's literary convention itself. And while this particular instance of a jarring rupture has nothing to do with love, the amorous encounter shares this structure of a scandalous yet saving de-sublimation, a comedic split within the pattern of desire pointing to a parallel split within the beloved other to their non-identity with themselves.

Zupančič draws attention to this shocking aspect of the trick performed by love when she compares it to a good joke, one that “always involves a dimension of an unexpected and surprising satisfaction, satisfaction of some other demand than the ones we have already had the opportunity to formulate.”¹⁶ While in desire the wish remains unfulfilled, in love fulfilment suddenly arises without a preceding wish. Hence the overwhelming, traumatic character of the surplus satisfaction involved in an amorous encounter: love is literally too much, something the subject had not asked for and could not possibly prepare themselves for. Cruel as most jokes, on a certain level love is a violent passion, but not in the same way as desire. Violence in love is done not to the other person, mutilated in the name of the sublime “purity of Non-being,”¹⁷ but to the narcissistic ideal of purity itself. In the words of André Green, “psychical life – like life – is merely a fruitful disorder. . . . All erotism is violence, just as life does violence to inertia.”¹⁸ Love's violence acts on the side of life's “fruitful disorder,” of betrayal and contamination. Within the framework of the tragic ethics endorsed by Lacan in Seminar VII there is no greater crime than betrayal, “giving ground relative to one's desire” (S7, 321), compromising on it, rendering it impure. Because desire aims at the other's “real being,” it expires when said other “betrays” this being in themselves (“when the loved being goes too far in his betrayal of himself . . . love can follow no longer” [S1, 276]) – and that happens every time the other turns out *not* to be the Thing, a pure void, or a perfect whole; but rather a fragile, finite creature, never entirely one with themselves. Every object betrays desire's quest, apart from the lack itself taken as an object. If desire brutally forces the other to participate in the narrative shaped by the

16) Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 133–34.

17) Lacan, *Écrits*, 242.

18) Green, *Life Narcissism*, 127.

subject's unconscious destiny, love forces the subject to betray their destiny, "luckily breaking" up the metonymic chain of signifiers and letting the other person be.

However, Zupančič herself does not develop her argument in the direction outlined above, instead associating the rupture involved in the experience of love and its traumatic potential with the Lacanian notion of the drive – which, according to Lacan, is nothing but the death drive.¹⁹ In Seminar VII Lacan endorses the tragic ethics of faithfulness to one's desire up to the bitter end, or to the point of "second death" where desire becomes "the pure and simple desire for death as such" (S7, 282). Only then the "false metaphors of being (*l'étant*) can be distinguished from the position of Being (*l'être*) itself" (S7, 248). Desire, no matter how narcissistic, has a privileged relation to being: it is an "homage to being," to being as forever lost and thus finally indistinguishable from non-being.²⁰ Yet in "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire" Lacan shifts his perspective from the primacy of desire to the primacy of the drive, now framing the desire as a "defense, a prohibition against going beyond a certain limit in *jouissance*" and condemning the sublime ethics of the Greek tragedy, characteristic for the desire as the "supreme narcissism of the Lost Cause."²¹ By remaining true to the Lost Cause of originary lack through the unfolding of the metonymic chain of substitutes that are never "it," desire protects itself from the intrusive "it" of *jouissance*, a terrifying enjoyment emerging between the lines of desire's script and forcing the subject to face the fundamental lack not as the primordial loss but as the inconsistency within the capital Other, the signifying order itself. Drive instead circles around this place of lack in the Other, producing unexpected *jouissance* along with its movement.

On the first glance this description fits well the functioning of love as a surprising dissonance within the structure of desire. Indeed, Zupančič links the temporal logic of love to the logic of the drive, by strongly distinguishing it from the logic of desire (SS, 176). In the logic of desire, the subject is always in a condition of belatedness towards the always-already-lost *objet petit a*. The desiring subject cannot catch up with the object of lack, leaving desire permanently unsatisfied in the game of endless

19) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XI*, 205.

20) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VI*, 450.

21) Lacan, *Écrits*, 246–47.

metonymic shifts. Drive, on the other hand, is always satisfied – but this satisfaction is excessive, unexpected, and unasked for. However, the destructiveness of jouissance experienced through the circular movement of the Lacanian drive is in no way similar to the “fruitful” violence of love understood as a disruption of narcissistic desire’s deadening inertia. If only for this reason that drive itself functions according to the principle of inertia: “if desire constantly questions, drive presents an inertia where questioning stops.”²² Jouissance, the painful satisfaction of the drive, takes up the form of persisting, stubborn symptoms restricting the subject’s sphere of movement and entrapping human individuals in an *automaton* in which something enjoys itself at their expense.²³ The drive as the repetition compulsion that holds us in the deadlock of our shameful little satisfactions seems to have little to do with relational love: its immutability is rather structurally similar to the tragic predicament of faithfulness to the unconscious destiny of desire. It is thus no coincidence that both desire and drive ultimately aim at death – not the physical death, but rather the “second death” of desire, or “the portion of death in the sexed living being” represented by the drive.²⁴ Underneath the metonymic shifts of desire one finds the circulating, nonrelational death drive. Lacan himself admits that in relation to the pleasure principle, the death drive is not really a way out but rather a permitted transgression.²⁵ Desire and drive are therefore complementary accomplices – while the former follows the symbolic law of the pleasure principle up to the point of death, the latter provides “little deaths” or the controlled transgressions permitted by this law, successfully preventing any real transgression. In both cases fixation on the lack, either external or internal to the signifying order, has a privilege over the relation with the other person. In *Ethics of the Real*, Zupančič argues that if one follows the logic of desire to the end, sacrificing its very cause, one immediately flips to the logic of the drive;²⁶ it seems, however, that the logic of desire is itself always already aligned with drive’s deadly repetitive, inertial, insistence. Yet, more importantly, it is even more difficult to fathom how relational

22) Salecl, *(Per)versions*, 50.

23) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XI*, 166.

24) *Ibid.*, 205.

25) *Ibid.*, 197.

26) Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 243–44.

love can exist on the side of the drive: the side to which one gets when one utters the final “That’s not It” addressed not only to every insufficient object but to the cause of desire itself, putting to an end desire’s quest along with what makes love actually possible – the visibility of objects and the subject’s susceptibility to their presence.

Zupančič’s attempt to explain love using the Lacanian concept of the drive stumbles upon a major obstacle: drive *qua* death drive is “essentially solipsistic”²⁷ and has no other aim than simply to return into the circuit. While desire mutilates the other person but cannot do without them, drive does not need them at all, content with its own repetitive, circular movement and the “autistic jouissance” produced along the way.²⁸ The logic of the Lacanian drive is incompatible with any notion of mutuality, understood not as an exchange between two independent egos – the modern ideal Zupančič rightly opposes – but as a reciprocal working through of the narcissistic ideals of both independency and fusion, which are articulated in different ways in various structures of desire. It is no coincidence that, in Zupančič’s phrasing, through love we relate to our own jouissance, otherwise inaccessible, which is turned into something we can actually desire (SS, 180) and not the other person’s jouissance – the often off-putting, terrifying alienness at the very heart of the other’s existence. If, as Zupančič argues, love-as-drive allows the subject to actually relate to the other, then it has to work through not only our jouissance but also through the other’s painful, traumatic core. In order for that to be possible, some different, non-orthodoxically Lacanian concept of the drive has to be in place – a relational drive in which sublimation as deviation from the original aim can be combined with a genuine openness to the otherness of the other not as the capital Other, but as our everyday neighbor, suffering as much as we do due to the libidinal twists and turns. If love is to be understood not only as an affect but also as a relation and an active reciprocal struggle, the formula “to love the other and desire my own jouissance” (SS, 180) is not enough: one has to establish a relation not only to one’s own enjoyment but also to the other’s enjoyment and anguish that often makes the other person so difficult to love.

Zupančič clearly struggles with the limitations of the Lacanian idiom, when she describes love as a “nonrelation that lasts,” alluding to Lacan’s famous statement on the

27) Salecl, *(Per)versions*, 51.

28) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book X*, 45.

impossibility of the sexual relationship: “What happens in a love encounter is not simply that the sexual nonrelation is momentarily suspended with an unexpected emergence of a (possible) relation, but something rather more complex: it is that the nonrelation itself suddenly emerges as a mode (as well as the condition) of a relation.”²⁹

While it is true that framing the love encounter as a “possible relation” – as a love story structured according to the unconscious script that governs one’s desire – merely covers over the break produced by love’s comic intervention, excessive insistence on the impossibility of any relation runs the risk of neutralizing love’s activeness. In Zupančič’s phrasing love seems to be more of a passive astonishment in the face of miraculous impossibility than an active effort to broaden the sphere of possibilities. The challenge would be to preserve love’s rupture without turning it into just another possibility, but at the same time without contenting oneself with a simple affirmation of the wondrous impossible. Zupančič tries to achieve this, by referring to a nonrelation that “suddenly emerges as a mode of a relation,” yet it remains unclear how such paradoxical relationality actually functions. However, if one takes Zupančič’s argument a small step further outside Lacanian orthodoxy, by drawing inspiration from a different psychoanalytical philosophy, one can perhaps provide a more satisfactory account of love as “the accidentally produced way out of the impossibility.”³⁰

The Funny Miracle or Love as Exodus

In order to conceive love as a real way out of desire’s deadlock and not merely a “permitted transgression,” one has to introduce a necessary modification to the Freudian and Lacanian theory. A modification that could render love possible within the psychoanalytic framework is the one that leads towards “messianic psychoanalysis,” using Agata Bielik-Robson’s phrase – psychoanalysis transformed in order to realize its saving potential against its own fatalistic tendencies.³¹ Augmented with messianic intuitions,

29) Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 135.

30) *Ibid.*, 134.

31) Bielik-Robson, *Another Finitude*, 146. I am deeply indebted to Agata Bielik-Robson for her complex argument in favor of a more messianic reading of Freudian psychoanalysis. In this paper I follow her interpretation of Eric Santner’s and Jonathan Lear’s works, although with modifications necessary for the shift of focus to the subject of everyday love.

psychoanalysis would no longer function according to the Greek tragic paradigm in which the psyche is bound to the compulsory repetition of the past, but rather according to the Jewish paradigm of Exodus, a liberating break with the fatalistic patterns of desire and the circularity of the drive. Association of the concept of Exodus with the comic aspect of love cannot be considered a far-fetched and arbitrary maneuver. In the tradition of Jewish philosophy there is a special place for a potentially messianic function of humor. Ernst Bloch, for example, writes about the joke as the “clever way out,” an evasion, a “narrow gap to the side” in which something new can appear.³² What a good joke and a fortunate love encounter have in common is that they both constitute small, inconspicuous gateways through which life can slip away, escaping the over-organized, rigid order imposed upon it by various psychic structures. These precarious and unheroic solutions (Bloch states that wit is the way out of the weak – the same can be said about love³³), nevertheless have a triumphant quality about them. In Freud’s wonderful comparison, a joke passed from one person to the other is compared to “the news of the latest victory.”³⁴ Love also heralds such a victory, in as much as it emerges in the fleeting moments in which one overcomes the fatal attachment to one’s previous losses and opens up to the “wittily serious *novum*” of the other person.³⁵ I thus propose that in order to capture the truly subversive potential of love as comedic minimal difference, Zupančič’s interpretation of Lacanian concepts should be read again through the lenses of messianic psychoanalysis.

Messianic psychoanalysis relies on a subtle yet significant shift of perspective, which can be compared to the Benjaminian “slight adjustment”: instead of grounding its conception of the human psyche in the notion of lack, it begins with a different – although not simply contrary – notion of excess, of life’s inherent too-muchness. Jonathan Lear frames this fundamental excess as a pure energetic tension, “breaking-through of quantity without quality”³⁶ which provokes feelings of absolute helplessness even in the mature individual, while Eric Santner calls it “a strange sort of surplus vitality

32) Bloch, *Traces*, 151–52.

33) *Ibid.*, 151.

34) Freud, *Complete Works*, vol. 8, 15.

35) Bloch, *Traces*, 152.

36) Lear, *Happiness*, 109.

that has no proper place in the world.”³⁷ However, an important reservation has to be raised: libido’s “surplus vitality” cannot be reduced to a pressure of biological forces breaking through cultural constructs. The excess is not some ecstatic, abundant fullness pouring out of the ego, but rather something inherently stained with negativity. What is more – and what tends to get lost in Lacanian view – this negativity has a relational character. Libidinal surplus reveals itself to us under the guise of loss, hence it can be so easily read as a primary lack. As noted by André Green, the loss of the first (and each subsequent) love object is traumatic precisely because it testifies to the existence of a previously undetected alien surplus in the other person, of an “unknown life” of the other who has undergone a change unnoticed by the ego.³⁸ The loss happened because the object has always been outside the subject’s narcissistic control. The first loss is experienced as a first seduction: an exposure to the other’s too-muchness, to their “unknown life” which takes the form of an enigmatic message addressed to the subject.³⁹ After the loss of the beloved object one is left only with an unsolvable riddle: what have I missed? The experience of an inexplicable surplus in the other forces the subject to confront the same surplus and inconsistency in themselves – from the first seduction onwards, they will try to transform this excess into some kind of meaning (the notion of originary lack can serve as a prime example of such a meaning).

The fact that the individual is thrown amidst enigmatic messages inaugurates what Santner calls “the drama of legitimation” constitutive of human subjectivity.⁴⁰ Each attempt to translate the enigmatic message, each socio-symbolic identification that is supposed to embed the subject in the signifying order and provide them with a legitimate place in the world of interpersonal relations leaves behind an untranslatable remainder. This disturbing surplus – which according to Santner is neither deadening nor enlivening, but “undeading” – in turn provokes repeated efforts of its translation into even more constraining and anxiety-provoking structures, forcing the subject to spiral into “signifying stress.”⁴¹ Although the too-muchness introduced by the first

37) Santner, “Miracles Happen,” 95.

38) Green, *Life Narcissism*, 111.

39) See Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, 125–30.

40) Santner, *Psychotheology*, 36.

41) Santner, “Miracles Happen,” 86.

encounter with the other's unknown life cannot be contained by any fantasy, each individual fantasy is driven by this excess. The surplus of undead energy is repeatedly organized into a symptomatic pattern, "a distinctive 'torsion' or spin that colors/distorts the shape of our universe."⁴² Desire, understood by Lacan as an unconscious theme, an idiomatic script according to which particular objects are elevated and given significance, follows the swerve of the "distinctive torsion," shaping our destiny. Most often this drive destiny turns out to be a curse – a trajectory that is too narrow, a grammar that is too rigid – causing us to return to the same place over and over again, with seemingly no way out of the vicious cycle. In this perspective, desire and drive go hand in hand: the undeadening too-muchness of jouissance linked by Lacan to the circular movement of the drive also sustains the symptomatic swerve of desire's metonymic sliding. Yet the undeadness of the Lacanian drive is not the only form which can be taken by life's inherent excess. Since this excess springs from the traumatic relation with the other person, it is possible to retrieve it from its solidified, undead forms and engage it in active struggle towards a different kind of relation – that of love.

According to Santner, in neighborly love one finds the way out of the undeadening structures of meaning, the Exodus not "from ordinary life into a space beyond it" but rather from "the fantasies that keep us in the thrall of some sort of exceptional 'beyond'" into everyday life.⁴³ Love is thus "a miracle that happens," even in the disenchanting world of modernity. In his reflection on revelatory love, Santner closely follows the thought of Franz Rosenzweig, according to whom the event of revelation is a call for love that singles out the individual from the symbolic whole – as opposed to each identification that inscribes the subject within this whole. However, the interpellation of love cannot happen without symbolic interpellations: the object singled out by love arises on the ground of symbolic identifications as a trace of their failure, a non-metabolizable remainder. What one falls in love with is thus the "gap in the series of identifications," the singular way in which a particular person is not exhausted in the sum of their predicates – the same unsettling surplus that previously caused the most terrible trauma.⁴⁴

42) Santner, *Psychotheology*, 39.

43) *Ibid.*, 30–31.

44) *Ibid.*, 73.

Zupančič's minimal difference, a split between the two coinciding appearances, can be considered another name for this surplus. It is crucial that the split is here inseparable from coincidence.⁴⁵ Love does not act as pure splitting, a destruction of all surface appearances that reveals their inadequacy in comparison to the deeper truth of the beloved person "how they really are." It rather reveals that there is no deeper truth and that all our identifications, fantasies, and scripts of desire, even though limiting and undeadening, are nevertheless necessary, because only through them (and their inevitable failure) can we grasp the indefinable excess of life and use it for the purposes of authentic relationality. As noted by Santner, the paradoxical character of revelatory love consists in the fact that it actually reveals nothing.⁴⁶ It shows only the minimal gap between coinciding identifications which has no explicable content. Zupančič associates the comedic minimal split with pure nonsense: easily accessible, hiding nothing, yet impossible to circumscribe (SS, 171–72). This surplus quality accounts for the fact that jokes immediately stop being funny once they are explained or paraphrased. A good joke momentarily suspends the anxiety-provoking "never-ceasing work of symbolization and failure at symbolization, translation and failure at translation."⁴⁷ The vicious cycle of signifying stress breaks once we stop trying to paraphrase the comic minimal difference and instead simply burst out with laughter.

In the case of love, the sign of this liberating breakdown is the feeling of surprise. The only way to point to the gap between identifications or semblances – to the "object" singled out by love's interpellation – is to wonder at their coincidence. According to Zupančič, the formula of love would be "how surprising it is that you are you!" – a non-tautological phrase conveying the inexplicable difference between the two instances of "you."⁴⁸ This joyful affirmation of the incomprehensible surplus in the other person contrasts with what Lacan writes about the exclamatory "You!" as the defense against the terrifying proximity of the Thing:

45) Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 137.

46) Santner, *Psychotheology*, 90.

47) Santner, "Miracles Happen," 92.

48) Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 135.

What does the emission, the articulation, the sudden emergence from out of our voice of that “You!” (Toi!) mean? A “You” that may appear on our lips at a moment of utter helplessness, distress or surprise in the presence of something that I will not right off call death, but that is certainly for us an especially privileged other – one around which our principle concerns gravitate, and which for all that still manages to embarrass us. (S7, 56)

The “You!” that tries to tame “that prehistoric ... Other, which suddenly threatens to surprise us and to cast us down from the height of its appearance” can of course be nothing more than a “vain incantation and fruitless connection,” as opposed to the productive interpellation of love (S7, 56). Instead of taming otherness, love cherishes what is the most threatening about the other – the same bewildering opacity that forces desire to turn the beloved into the terrifying, distant Thing. “How surprising it is that you are you!” acts as a confession of love through which one addresses in the other person precisely what makes them traumatic – the surplus escaping every formulation of their personality – without taming or appropriating it by filling it with content.

To put it into different idiom, it can be said that the object of love is neither the mask, nor the real, naked face covered by this mask, but rather the surprising minimal space between the masks, the result of the fact that no costume fits quite right. The notion of masquerade plays a significant role in psychoanalytical thought where it is mostly used within the context of the analysis of femininity. The conception of womanliness as masquerade was introduced by Joan Riviere in her famous article from 1929 in which she proposed that femininity is worn by women as a mask in order to hide their possession of qualities reserved for men and to avoid reprisals for this “stolen property.” A female subject puts on a façade of femininity in order to pretend that she is lacking, to “disguise herself” as merely a castrated woman.⁴⁹ This idea was later praised and to an extent adopted by Lacan. The passages on women, “much more real and much truer” than men, remain the rare moments in Lacan’s *oeuvre* when the privileged position of lack is put into question.⁵⁰ In Seminar X Lacan describes, not without admiration, the attitude of a female analyst, Lucia Tower, during

49) Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” 94.

50) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book X*, 191.

her work on a particularly difficult and exhausting case. In the crucial moment of the analysis the male patient, whose desire has finally been clarified, subjects his analyst to a long, sadistic persecution in search of the place in which the analyst is lacking, *objet petit a*, “the little piece that’s missing” (S10, 195).

Tower allows for this and sustains her patient’s sadistic search, despite it being hard for her to bear. According to Lacan, she acts like this not because of some innate feminine masochism (the idea of such a disposition inherent to women was endorsed by Freud and common in post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory⁵¹), but rather because “she knows quite well that search as he might, he will never find anything” (S10, 199). If there is no true essence beneath feminine masquerade, there is also no place of lack, something that could be exposed, unmasked: “What is blindingly obvious is that woman lacks nothing” (S10, 181). In as much as desire stems from lack, the feminine (all too often victims of the masculine desire’s sadistic quest, are much more suspicious of the seemingly inevitable libidinal destiny to which desire’s signifying scheme is subjected. Of course, they are also desiring beings, yet they “know the worth of the yardstick of what they are dealing with in desire” (S10, 191). That is why they are able to outwit the man who searches for the Thing behind the mask – not by showing him the naked truth, but by forcing him to face the dissonance within the feminine masquerade.

A woman “knows very well that she doesn’t lack anything” (S10, 199), however it does not mean that she is a perfect narcissistic whole, content with her own fullness. It is rather that in a feminine subjective position, the lack can be looked at from a different perspective. According to a famous Lacanian statement, women are “not whole,”⁵² each of them being an exception without a sovereign rule, “a part which is no part (of a whole)” – which for Rosenzweig and Santner is precisely the object singled out by revelatory love.⁵³ From the “tragic” perspective, woman does not exist, she is merely an overlapping of masks with nothing underneath. Hence, the radical status of feminine anxiety: an ontological anxiety of literally being nothing, proper to human subjectivity as such (in Lacanian theory adopting the feminine strategy is a require-

51) See Quindeau, *Seduction*, 92–94.

52) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XX*, 7.

53) Santner, *Psychotheology*, 65.

ment for truly becoming a subject).⁵⁴ But from the perspective of messianic psychoanalysis, this “nothing,” a minimal difference between the masks, becomes a surplus “something” – not a remainder of lost being, the illusory *objet petit a* for which Lucia Tower’s patient searched in his sadistic quest, but rather a remainder left in all our attempts to connect with the lost remainder. The Exodus from the beyond of fantasy into everyday life, releasing the subject from the anxious preoccupation with finding meaning, has to be preceded by a certain work of mourning. One has to give up the search for the lost object of narcissistic union, for the purity of true being underneath the mask, and accept the necessity of betrayal – the fact that we are betraying ourselves in every moment, no matter how hard we try to be consistent, leaving behind a certain remnant that can only be loved or laughed at. Lacan writes that Lucia Tower’s patient has to mourn ever being able to find the mark of his own lack in his female partner before he will “be able to start having a laugh.”⁵⁵ What perhaps lays beyond the boundaries of the Lacanian view is that while the subject will never find what they look for, they might, surprisingly and funnily, find something else: “a possibility of new possibilities” of relating, not taken into account by desire’s rigid script.⁵⁶

Gradyva – The Comical Work of Love

The idiosyncratic narrative of the subject’s desire tames the unbearable too-muchness of life, yet at the same time it painfully constricts the range of possibilities, reducing them to a single thread which comes across as an inescapable fate that can only be followed up to the point of death. When the unconscious scheme of desire reaches an impasse in the face of the surplus within the beloved person, what one discovers is not merely a new possibility – a new relationship, another love story among many others – but a change in the sphere of possibilities. If none of our identities fits us perfectly, if between our symbolic masks there is always a minimal difference, a condition of our lovability, then we are not doomed to any of them. Desire is not transcended, rejected just like each of its objects in the sublime gesture of “That’s

54) Zupančič, *What is Sex?*, 57.

55) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book X*, 199.

56) Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, 204.

not it,” but only slightly modified. Without desire’s script there would be no visible objects and no subject of love in the first place – we would be left only with the too-muchness of pressure, or as Lacan would have it, the silent, circulating death drive. Far from being a marvelous impossibility, love is rather a celebration of possibility: of the most important one, the possibility of shifting the sphere of possibilities. According to Jonathan Lear, such a shift happens when one manages to take advantage of a chance disruption of one’s unconscious teleology – a literal “lucky break.”⁵⁷ In these rare moments when the subject looks at the intricate patterns of meaning they have created and exclaims “that’s crap!,” a true happiness can be found, not as a successful realization of a plan but as a fortunate collapse of all the plans one has hitherto followed, consciously or unconsciously.

A similar sentiment resonates in Zupančič’s conception of love: “the funny (as well as the subversive) side of a love encounter lies precisely in the fact that the other ... is an answer to none of our prayers and dreams but, rather, the bearer of an unexpected surplus-element.”⁵⁸ Of course, the excess within the other is present also in the situation of desire – the difference between desire and love lies in the fact that while the subject of desire is agitated by this traumatic too-muchness, they try to translate it into familiar patterns by raising a barrier of inaccessibility and turning the surplus into lack. Love, on the other hand, takes advantage of desire’s failure: instead of rushing to mend the break within desire’s metonymic chain with another meaning, it preserves the fissure and uses the collapse of the signifying structure to change the entire horizon of possibilities. The “lucky montage” of masks one encounters in love is not a perfect harmony but always, at the same time, a lucky break (SS, 175). Love involves a dimension of a profound rupture. Because such a break can only be perceived when it occurs on the ground of a certain pattern, love cannot exist without desire. Through the “funny miracle” of love (SS, 174) – the “miracle that happens” – the cracks in desire’s narrative turn into small ways out, or in Santner’s words: “the very locus of our psychic rigidity ... at the same time harbors our singular resource for ‘unplugging’” from the drama of legitimation.⁵⁹

57) Lear, *Happiness*, 129.

58) Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 135.

59) Santner, *Psychotheology*, 81.

However, love's miracle does not simply happen once and for all. Taking advantage of the lucky break in the structure of desire requires an active effort on both sides, an effort that constitutes love as a relation. Lear describes love's struggle on the basis of the therapeutic process: in psychoanalytic therapy the positive transference – the encounter with the analyst as the possibility of new possibilities – comes into a productive conflict with the negative transference, meaning the analysand's inclination to treat the possibility of new possibilities as just another relationship, a new instalment of the painfully familiar "same old story."⁶⁰ The resistance to break out of the old patterns of desire engages the hidden forces of the patient's "undead" libidinal energy which in turn can be used to propel psychic transformation. In this vision love is a tedious "birthing process" driven by the clash between old scenarios of desire and the new relationship that cannot be fully inscribed within these scenarios without leaving behind a disruptive remainder.⁶¹

An account of such a "work of love" – even though it is fictional – can be found in Freud's analysis of Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva*. In Jensen's novel Hanold, an archaeologist, falls in love with a woman depicted on an ancient marble relief who is pictured while taking a step and thus is given by him a name "Gradiva" – "the girl who steps along." During a trip to Pompeii he miraculously encounters the same woman as a flesh-and-blood person. As it later turns out, the supposed "Gradiva" he has met is actually his forgotten childhood love, Zoe, who quickly sees through his delusion which is nothing other than a particularly undeadening script of desire, an infatuation "with something past and lifeless" that nevertheless takes hold of Hanold's living present.⁶² Zoe (whose name in Greek means "life") adjusts to the scenario and plays the part of Gradiva, the dead girl from Pompeii, because she knows that this is the only way to free Hanold from his illness, retrieving his love for her – a love she reciprocates – that has been petrified in the form of an "archaeological" fantasy. The plot of the novel, this "'commonplace' love-story,"⁶³ is structured around a lucky montage

60) Lear, *Wisdom Won*, 183.

61) *Ibid.*, 183.

62) Freud, *Complete Works*, vol. 9, 22. I would like to thank Adam Lipszyc for drawing my attention to the analysis of *Gradiva* as Freud's most beautiful – and probably the only – text on non-narcissistic love. For Lipszyc's reinterpretation of Freud and Jensen's works see Lipszyc, *Freud: logika doświadczenia*, 135–60.

63) Freud, *Collected Works*, Vol. 9, 22.

of Zoe, Hanold's childhood friend, Gradiva, and the ancient sculpture that became the object of the archaeologist's obsession. Zoe takes advantage of this montage and sustains it, at the same time preserving the necessary minimal difference, a lucky break that eventually allows Hanold to work through his captivation with Gradiva, releasing his repressed love for Zoe and opening up to the possibility of a genuine relationship with her. In Zoe's speech, the lucky break (at the same time, a lucky montage), takes a joke-like form: her wittingly ambiguous remarks correspond both to Hanold's fantasy and to the "real" sequence of events, without privileging one or the other, but rather lovingly pointing to the funny dis-harmony between them. "It is a triumph of ingenuity and wit to be able to express the delusion and the truth in the same turn of words" – writes Freud.⁶⁴

Yet love under the guise of wit takes neither the side of truth, nor the side of delusion; the object of Hanold's love is neither Gradiva, a lifeless sculpture nor simply Zoe, how she really is, finally unmasked from the costume of fantasy. The delusion, infatuation with the dead and buried past, is caused by a repressed childhood love that nevertheless could not possibly realize itself without the mediation of delusion. Zoe knows that she would never be able to "dig her friend out of the ruins" if there were no ruins to begin with; This is why she does not hesitate to put on the mask of Gradiva (as a woman, she is perfectly aware that there is no true substance behind the masks anyway).⁶⁵ The ruins, undead structures of desire, capture the libidinal too-muchness that springs from the trauma of the first encounter with otherness, preventing it from simply dispersing and preserving it, so it can be used in the workings of love.⁶⁶ In one of the final scenes of Jensen's novel, when Hanold is "cured" at last, Zoe plays for him the role of Gradiva once again, walking past her beloved through the ruins of Pompeii in the same manner as the fantasized woman from the marble relief, "the girl who steps along." This "triumph of love" that celebrates the saving minimal difference, the split between the lucky montage of masks, is at the same time the triumph of comedy

64) Ibid., 84.

65) Ibid., 39.

66) In the story of Gradiva, Hanold's obsessive fixation on the lifeless sculpture is the necessary condition of his later love for Zoe (in as much this fixation also springs from his repressed childhood love for her): if Hanold's libido was unconstricted and free to move on carelessly from one object to another, he would probably fall for Zoe's attractive friend, Giza, instead, precisely as Zoe fears.

and the triumph of life itself (the heroine is after all named *Zoe*).⁶⁷ Lacan states that in comedy “life goes by, life triumphs, whatever happens” (S7, 314). One might add that in every “commonplace love-story” life can only triumph among the ruins: every effort of love is a struggle to dig the beloved out of the ruins without believing that it can ever be done completely, with no remainder. The ability to sustain this effort by establishing a relationship with the remainder, with the gap between reality and delusion that is the condition of the possibility of new possibilities, requires the involvement of a drive entirely different from the repetitive death drive – a “nonconservative drive” that reaches into the past but not in order to compulsively repeat it but rather to transform it, opening it up to a breath of fresh air.⁶⁸ Only such a drive, as noted by Lear, would explain therapeutic action and the action of love itself.

Conclusion: Love by any Other Name

All the features that distinguish love from desire and narcissistic striving towards unity – the focus on the unique gap between appearances instead of the Thing hidden behind appearances, the affirmation of lucky breaks within the subject’s unconscious structures instead of the rigid faithfulness to one’s fate, the opening of the way out of the current sphere of possibilities instead of an endless return to past losses, and the continuous relational effort directed at the everyday other instead of mutilating them in search of “something more” – converge in amorous language. What love and language have in common is that they both require the activity of sublimation understood as a divergence from the original aim, a metaphorization of direct urges and needs. Giving up literal satisfaction and nourishing oneself with words instead, what Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török call the “communion of empty mouths,” proves to be necessary for overcoming the narcissistic illusion of omnipotence and forming horizontal bonds.⁶⁹ Language-creating sublimation is simultaneously always a desublimation, in as much as the illusion of perfect union is replaced by the reality of imperfect communication. With speech, as with love, one never gets exactly what

67) Ibid., 40.

68) Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, 167.

69) Abraham and Török, *The Shell and the Kernel*, 127.

one asks for: this is the start of the drama of desire but also the possible beginning of the comedy of love, since in the communion of empty mouths one can find something completely different from the lacking fullness one longs for.

Lovers search for the “right word,” the one that according to Rosenzweig (and Santner) would transform the undeadness inherent to the logic of desire into “blessings of more life.”⁷⁰ In as much as it pertains to the singularity of the beloved person and simultaneously to a rebirth through the disruption of reality’s current shape, the “right word” one looks for in love is a form of a new baptism: a name even more proper to us than the one we were given at birth. Zupančič suggests that affectionate nicknames given by the lovers to each other can serve the function of naming the minimal difference, opening up the space in which individuals can work with the miracle that has happened, instead of simply stopping in awe at its impossibility.⁷¹ The affinity between love and the act of naming was also acknowledged by Lacan: “anxiety is only ever surmounted when the Other has been named. There is only ever any love when there is a name, as everyone knows from experience.”⁷² Yet, a replacement of a name with a nickname, as in Zupančič’s concept, marks a step towards a more messianic version of psychoanalysis and a deepened understanding of love. A silly nickname reflects the other person’s singularity better than the given name, because it includes the dimension of inherent betrayal, the inconsistency within the beloved’s most intimate sense of existence. The difference between the name and the nickname can be compared to the difference between the vain and empty “You!” exclaimed in order to tame the anxiety-provoking Thing, and the “How surprising it is that you are you!” that transforms the lack of consistency – the source of anxiety – into a loveable surplus.

A highly unique mode of speech that starts from a funny nickname, a witty joke, constructs a space in which new possibilities of relating to the previously traumatic surplus can be explored. This way out is never opened once and for all: love can always reverse into anxiety, once again viewing the surplus as lack. Being in love means being able to live with this risk, without losing the hope for the possibility of new possibilities.

70) Santner, *Psychotheology*, 142.

71) Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 138.

72) Lacan, *The Seminar, Book X*, 337.

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