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Misers or lovers? How a reflection on Christian mysticism caused a shift in Jacques Lacan's object theory

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Abstract In his sixth seminar, *Desire and Its Interpretation* (1956–1957), Lacan patiently elaborates his theory of the 'phantasm' ($\$\diamond a$), in which the object of desire (*object small a*) is ascribed a constitutive role in the architecture of the libidinal subject. In that seminar, Lacan shows his fascination for an aphorism of the twentieth century Christian mystic Simone Weil in her assertion: "to ascertain exactly what the miser whose treasure was stolen lost: thus we would learn much." This is why, in his theory, Lacan conceptualizes the object of desire as the *unconsumed* treasure—and, in that sense, the "nothing"—on which the miser's desire is focused. But the more Lacan develops his new object theory, the more he realizes how close it is to Christian mysticism in locating the ultimate object of desire in God, in a sevenfold "nothing" (to quote the famous last step in the ascent of the Mount Carmel as described by John of the Cross). An analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* allows Lacan to escape the Christian logic and to rearticulate the object of desire in an 'unchristian' *tragic* grammar. When he replaces the *miser* by the *lover* as paradigm of the subject's relation to its object of desire, he substitutes a strictly Greek kind of love—*eros*, not *agape*—for the miser's relationship to his treasure. Even when, in the late Lacan, "love" becomes a proper concept, its structure remains deeply "tragic."

Keywords Love · Desire · Simone Weil · Object *a* · Christian mysticism · Tragedy

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> For the good which we can neither picture nor define is a void for us. But a void fuller than all fullness.
>
> Simone Weil[1]

In *Gravity and Grace (La pesanteur et la grâce,* 1947), the twentieth century Christian mystic, Simone Weil, writes: "To ascertain exactly what the miser whose treasure was stolen lost: thus we would learn much."[2] Jacques Lacan quotes that sentence a few times in his sixth Seminar (*Desire and Its Interpretation,* 1958–1959).[3] Initially, he cites Weil in an affirmative way, considering her aphorism to be an excellent illustration of his own theory of desire and, more precisely, of the object of desire. Yet, the more he reconsiders the quote, the more he realizes it is not as compatible with his ideas—and with psychoanalytical theory in general—as he initially thought. All this results not only in a disagreement with Weil but in a profound modification of his own theory of desire as well, a modification concerning the object of desire.

After a general reflection on Simone Weil's quote (1) and on the reason why Lacan refers to it (2), this essay will clarify the shift Lacan's theory of desire makes in these years. For it is precisely the confrontation with that quote, and with Weil's general theory of desire, that forces Lacan to reshape his own theory (3–5) in a profound manner. If desire *identifies* man's fundamental relation to reality (including to himself), as Lacan states, than it is not the image of the *miser* which provides an adequate illustration but the one of the *lover* (6).[4]

1 Miser

Is it really so difficult to detect what the miser is missing when he has lost what he could miss the least, as Simone Weil's aphorism says? In a way it is, if only because it is uncertain that he would miss anything at all. Would he miss his treasure? In fact, he *always already* has been missing it. This is precisely why he is a miser: not only does he deprive everyone else of the enjoyment of his treasure, but he also denies himself this pleasure. Although absolutely attached to it, he leaves it untouched and thus by depriving himself of this treasure, he is not able to name what he is missing. In fact, he misses *nothing*. Yet, in a mysterious way this 'nothing' does not stop him from longing for his treasure. He keeps on suffering from this loss, even though it concerns strictly 'nothing.'

[1] Weil (1948, p. 15, 2002, p. 13).

[2] Weil (1948, p. 26; p. 23).

[3] Lacan quotes this passage for the first time in the lesson of December 10, 1958; Lacan (1996, p. 100). April 8, he returns to that passage (1996, p. 333). He quotes the aphorism once again in the next lesson, April 15 (1996, p. 342) and in that of May 13, 1959 (1996, p. 410). For a general overview of Simone Weil's oeuvre from a Lacanian perspective, see: Fajnwaks (1998). It is remarkable however that Fajnwaks does not refer to the cited passages from *Seminar VI*, the only ones in his oeuvre where Lacan explicitly discusses Weil. See also Wajcman (1999, p. 32).

[4] This essay retakes and re-elaborates one of the central theses in the first chapter of my *Eros & Ethics: Reading Lacans's Seminar VII*; De Kesel (2009).

The miser aphorism occupies an important place in Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace,* for it illustrates the main theme. In an aphoristic way, this book explores the fundamentals of Christian religiosity. Humans, Weil explains, try to have things under control, and they try to be masters of their own lives. It is then that they meet life's *gravity*, if only because things like control and mastery are easier asserted than achieved. Failing in these tasks, people feel the burden of the human condition. But they will meet *grace* when they put a stop to their obsession with control and give way to trust in the creator of the universe, i.e., trust in the gratuitousness on which rests all that is.

It is crucial here not to immediately condemn Weil's thought as mere piety, for an interesting and historically important theory of human desire underpins it. That theory says that, if one obstinately tries to satisfy one's desire, one risks times full of 'gravity.' Desire requires a dimension of 'grace,' of permanent openness to a satisfaction *to come*. And this is what the miser does: he installs such openness by leaving the object of his desire (i.e., his treasure) non-enjoyed, not even by himself. What a miser does in a pathological way, Christian religion does in a non-pathological one, Weil argues. For what else is the Christian God, so Weil says, than a kind of non-enjoyed treasure stimulating human desire without ever satisfying it? What else is He but a kind of *nothing*, a point of mere negativity that keeps our desire going? What we ultimately long for is 'nothing.' And because 'nothing' is actually able to satisfy us, we do not stop longing, replacing *every satisfying thing* by another 'thing of nothing' inciting us to long again.

This is what Christianity is about, Weil argues. It is a practice rather than a doctrine. 'Practice,' not only in the sense of an ethics but, more basically, a way of coping with desire. The reason why we *feel the need* to relate to God and to follow His commandments, is not so much because God exists, but because this kind of attitude to life makes us aware of what we fundamentally *are*: desire. In the end, the 'thing' which is supposed to be God is a 'thing of nothing,' but precisely in that Christian perspective, He grants the Christians to cultivate and celebrate the desire *they coincide with*. Longing for God, we long for an emptiness and give way to our full desire. Weil writes:

> Always, beyond the particular object whatever it may be, we have to fix our will on the void – to will the void. [*Et tout, par delà l'objet particulier quel qu'il soit, vouloir à vide, vouloir le vide*]. For the good which we can neither picture nor define is a void for us. But a void fuller than all fullness. […] The good seems to us as a nothingness [*néant*], since there is no *thing* that is good. But this nothingness is not unreal. Compared with it, everything in existence is unreal.[5]

So, for Weil, the miser cited in the quote above is not a negative figure. His figure lays bare the Christian truth about human desire, saying that desire is about nothing, albeit a wonderful 'nothing' giving desire its only possible '*raison d'être*,' a thing that will never stop it from longing, from desiring. That is why the non-existence of God does not make Christianity senseless. On the contrary, the first time Weil mentions the miser, she writes:

[5] Weil (2002, p. 13, 1948, p. 15).

> The miser deprives himself of his treasure because of his desire for it. If we can let our whole good rest with something hidden in the ground, why not with God? But when God has become as full of significance as the treasure is for the miser, we have to tell ourselves insistently that he does not exist. We must experience the fact that we love him, even if he does not exist. It is he who, through the operation of the dark night, withdraws himself in order not to be loved like the treasure is by the miser.[6]

To love God, even if he does not exist, He does what He is created for: keeping human desire going. This is God's 'creative' force. This is the core of Simone Weil's Christian mysticism or, which amounts to the same thing, of her theory of desire.

In that theory, the miser is paradigmatic, but not as a moral example to follow. Weil's point is not that we should all become misers. On the contrary, she pleads for generosity and grace. But, in a merely formal way, the miser's type shows that riches are about 'nothing,' and that, consequently, man can be happy with 'nothing.' It is an idle thing to seek after riches, for even poor, one can be as happy. Happiness is not a matter of owning things, it is a matter of desire and, by definition, changing its object into nothingness. In fact, Simone Weil's analysis of the miser endorses western asceticism, both the philosophical one like that of Diogenes of Sinope or the Christian one with its long monastic tradition from Antonius to Thérèse of Lisieux. Both of the ascetic traditions have deeply influenced the entire western culture, including the variety of today's promotions *for* soberness and *against* squander and waste.

Although she refers to a religion dating from pre-modern times, Weil's religiosity—including her theory of desire—is profoundly modern. At least if you define modernity's paradigm as an affirmation of the primacy of human finitude. Medieval Christianity acknowledged human finitude as well, but from the point of view of the infinite God. Humans were finite with regard to the infinity of the divine. Since modernity affirms the death of God, man's finitude is to be defined from that finitude itself. There is nothing but finitude, and the infinite is but an illusion dreamed of by finite beings.

Although she is a convinced Christian, Simone Weil embraces the core of modernity, because she looks at human longing for God from another angle than medieval Christianity. Her starting point is the reality of that longing rather than the certainty of God's existence. Even God's non-existence does not affect the sense of one's desire for Him.

2 Phantasm

Lacan's interest in Weil's aphorism concerns the 'theory of desire' underlying it. This one is remarkably similar to the one he is elaborating in his sixth seminar. Like Weil, Lacan puts forward the primacy of desire, saying that, for humans, desire

[6] Weil (2002, p. 15; p. 18).

coincides with life. So, if one's desire was *really* satisfied, one would stop longing and, thus, living. That is why the ultimate object of desire is to be conceived as *nothing*, and not as something or, in Lacan's term, *not* as a signifier. Living on signifiers, desire's ultimate object is no signifier at all, but the void or lack that makes the machinery of signifiers—as well as desire—function. What we ultimately long for is the lack or void responsible for the signifier's endless referring to other signifiers.

In Lacan's theory of that time, that lack is known as the 'phallus.' It takes a while before the libidinal infant finds the adequate position vis-à-vis that lack, void or 'phallus.' In the imaginary stage, the infant has no 'self' and creates therefore a first kind of 'self' by imagining itself to be the *signifié* of the *signifiants* it has to live off. Unable to win on its own the pleasure it needs (since, libidinally, it lives by the pleasure principle), it initially receives the required pleasure immediately from the other, sometimes called the 'first other' or the 'mother.' 'Mother' here is meant not in the normal, female sense of the word, but—seen from the infant's perspective—in the sense of an instance of immediate pleasure satisfaction. In that sense the infant 'is' the 'phallus of the mother,' *which is to say that he coincides with the place on that limitless body where it produces pleasure satisfaction*.

Here, Lacan writes 'phallus' with a small 'ph' in order to indicate the *imaginary* constitution of the libidinal being. The child, although extremely needy, imagines *the world* to be needy. It presumes that the world needs *him*. That world reveals itself to him in the shape of a never-ending stream of signifiers that are completely meaningless to him, but the infant's libidinal trick is to behave as if he himself is the ultimate and only meaning (*signifié*) of that world.

Yet, the infant is not able to permanently constitute himself as the *signifié* of the world made of *signifiants*. Very soon, he is forced to realize he is *not* the most significant other in the world, *not* the one all signifiers refer to. This is why in order to constitute himself he actually needs the *signifiant* as such, i.e., in reference to what, in the realm of *signifiants*, keeps on differing its *signifié*. Instead of a *signifié*, he will find a *signifiant* signifying only its lack of *signifié*—in other words, a mere *signifiant*.

In other words the child can no longer regard himself as the 'phallus of the mother.' Now he has to constitute himself in reference to the 'Phallus of the Father,' i.e., a Phallus that the 'Father' also misses because he (i.e., the symbolic order, the world made of signifiers, conceptualized *now* with a capital) has been 'castrated.' Nobody owns the 'truth, the ultimate meaning' of the universe, not even the Father who stands for the Law the infant has to live off. In religious terms, this means that the libidinal being has to constitute himself in reference to a *dead* God, a God unable to satisfy the promise connected to His name. Or, in Lacanian terms: the infant now has to constitute himself *as desire* that will always remain unfulfilled. This is a desire that has a *symbolic* nature, meaning that it constitutes itself within the realm of signifiers, endlessly referring to other signifiers, unable to reach the definite, ultimate *signifié*. This kind of *symbolic* constitution will enable the child to acquire a more or less stable identity, and to become a more or less mentally healthy man or woman.

Lacan's theory of the subject does justice to the plasticity of human identity because it sees us as extremely flexible and adaptable. Man's identity constantly slides from one signifier to another. Not bound to any pre-given essence, it can again and again modify itself and nonetheless stay identical.

But how does it manage to stay identical? As one's identity always changes, what remains the same? What gives one's desire steadiness? How can its endless flexibility, its permanent gliding from signifier to signifier be stopped? 'It cannot be stopped,' since nothing can satisfy that desire.

And yet that 'nothing' is *not simply* nothing, so Lacan argues. It does not give human identity the facility, without any restriction, to be what it wants to be. Man does not dispose of a limitless possibility to freely choose his identity, for there is no instance preceding that choice. There is no subject that precedes desire. It is desire that precedes the subject and, thus, identity. Desire, being the name for our human finitude, implies the radical finitude of our identity, unable as it is to consciously create itself out of nothing.

This is why, in the eyes of Lacan, the symbolic constitution of human identity does not simply replace the imaginary one. Once human identity has become symbolic, it nonetheless retains an imaginary dimension. This dimension remains present, not only through the persistence of the mirror image (which the libidinal being identifies with in the stage of the same name), but also in the *phantasm*.

In the course of his sixth seminar Lacan actually reflects on the *phantasm* when he refers regularly to Simone Weil's aphorism of the miser. On the one hand the miser is immensely flexible in the way he deals with desire and postpones its satisfaction and on the other hand he remains spellbound by his one and only treasure and gives his desire an inflexible, fixed identity. What, then, fixes his desire? 'Nothing,' as mentioned above, the 'nothing' his treasure corresponds with. So, how can 'nothing' establish one's identity? How can 'nothing' fix the extremely flexible desire someone 'is'?

The Lacanian concept of the phantasm is a suitable answer to this question. With this concept, Lacan *locates* the 'nothing' of the libidinal subject in a concrete and contingent environment. This way the 'nothing' is placed meaningfully and so it can fulfill a particular function.

In order to explain this we should ask the following question: in what sense is the subject 'nothing'? Certainly not in the *real* sense of the word. As a libidinal being living by 'pleasure,' the infant is not able to gain that pleasure from the *real*. It will have to gain it from the 'fictional,' and to 'invent' a subject/bearer for that pleasure. The imaginary structure is a first trick. The libidinal being supposes itself to be the completion of a world marked by lack. As already noticed, it supposes itself to be the *signifié* of a universe made of *signifiants*. So, unable to live on the level of the real (i.e., being itself a '*manque-à-être*')[7], it has to live on the level of the symbolic, i.e., within a world marked by lack. And it does so by imagining itself to be the completion of that lack. This way, it invents a first 'self,' a first subject, a first point from where it is able to organize its libidinal economy.

[7] Lacan (1966, p. 655, 676).

This imaginary self cannot hold, since it is build upon a denial of reality, i.e., of the symbolic universe marked by lack. The only way out of that impasse is to alienate itself completely within the realm of signifiers, where it has to constitute itself as desire, a desire that originates in the Other, in the symbolic universe driving failing libidinal satisfaction endlessly from one signifier to another.

Here, the subject is 'nothing' in the sense that it only exists thanks to the signifiers by which it is represented. The subject is now a mere supposition, a fiction 'posited' under ('sub') the signifiers that represent it. Or, to put it in terms Lacan once used to define the signifier: *the subject is what a signifier represents for another signifier*.[8] The subject is 'nothing' in itself, it only exists in the stories told about it and these require endlessly new stories.

So what is the phantasm? It is an imaginary formation that replaces the imaginary ego after its alienation in the symbolic. This formation retains an imaginary picture of that very alienation, of the way the libidinal being disappears underneath the signifiers, hence only existing in being represented by them.

Two elements characterize the phantasm.

(1) First of all the phantasm is an imaginary *Gestalt* giving consistency to the symbolic subject. It consists of a fixed scenario of signifiers in which the subject is substituted by the signifiers. The traumatic experience of the libidinal being, when it was forced to constitute itself merely as "what a signifier represents to another signifier," got 'frozen' in an imaginary knot. That 'knot,' that fixed scenario is the phantasm, and now it is the ultimate foundation for the identity of the libidinal being, for that the imaginary procedure no longer works and the ego is no longer able to regard itself as the *signifié* of all *signifiants*. So the phantasm takes over the function of the ego when the imaginary condition is being replaced by the symbolic one. Instead of the ego, the phantasm provides steadiness and firmly guides the libidinal economy sliding on the symbolic surface. That anchoring point is indispensible for the libidinal economy to constitute a 'self' or identity.

(2) Secondly the libidinal system's ultimate bearing surface, which is the phantasm, is oriented towards the desired object in which desire supposes its full satisfaction. This is the object Lacan defines as 'object little *a*.' The signifying chain of the phantasm is structured *around* that object, but does not contain it. It only points at it as if it were something unreachably remote. Hence Lacan's 'matheme' for the fantasme: $◇a ($: the split subject; ◇: in relation to, longing for; a: object little *a*). Although the phantasm's scenario orients the libidinal economy and its symbolic identity in the direction of that object, it functions at the same time as a barrier keeping the subject at a distance. The phantasm orients the libidinal economy towards its object of full satisfaction, but at the same time protects the economy against that satisfaction and its object, since the actual fulfilment of one's desire would imply the death of the subject (who 'is' desire).

[8] Thus Lacan in his Seminar IX, *L'identification* (1960–1961), the session of December 6, 1960, the last sentences; Lacan (2000, p. 47).

In '*Ein Kind wird geschlagen*,' 'A child is being beaten,' Freud explains a fantasy that provides a phantasm in the Lacanian sense of the term.[9] It is a phrase a few of Freud's patients uttered repeatedly without showing great emotional difficulties during their analytic cure. The hidden wish underneath that sentence, so Freud discovered, said something about the child's position towards the father. He found out that, on the most unconscious level, it expresses the child's wish to be beaten by the father. That strange wish loses its mystery when one look at it from a Lacanian perspective. For Lacan, the fantasy articulates, in the shape of a wish, the alienated situation the child is in, slashed down as she is *underneath* the symbolic order—or, which amounts to the same thing, subjected as it is by the signifier. That whish and its 'story' or 'scenario' names the condition the child is in. It articulates her subject-position, since she is the supposed '*subjectum*' underneath "the signifier representing her for other signifiers."

That precise subject position—i.e., the particular way the libidinal being has become the 'surface' bearing the signifiers that constitute its identity—is imaginarily set down in a fixed scenario of signifiers. So, that phantasm *locates* the void around which the symbolic identity is circling. Thus, it constitutes the fixed base for its ever-moving desire. The miser's phantasm is circling around his treasure, and precisely because of its phantasmatic nature, the treasure functions as a void, as a kind of nothing: as the lack which is constitutive for the gliding of the signifying chain that supports the miser's desire.

The notion of phantasm is of crucial importance to conceptualize the moment of enjoyment or *jouissance*. Since desire names our human condition, satisfaction of desire—enjoyment, *jouissance*—is not possible in a real, but only in a 'fake' way, i.e., in a way that keeps desire going. Enjoying the ultimate object of desire, the subject does not appropriate it, if only because it is 'nothing.' What is more, the subject *loses* himself in that nothing. What gives him the feeling of being released from all lack and desire, is the fact that he loses himself—read: his subject—at the moment of his enjoyment. At that very instant of loss, the libidinal system is no longer supported by the subject, but by an even more basic 'bearing surface,' the phantasm. That is why Lacan defines *enjoyment* (i.e., satisfaction on the level of the subject) as phantasmatic: the bearing function in the libidinal function is taken over by the phantasm. Enjoying his treasure, the miser does not appropriate or consume it. His enjoyment means rather that he *is consumed* by it. The miser's *jouissance* is that he gets lost in his treasure. At such moments, it becomes clear that the only support for his libidinal economy is his phantasm.

So, desire is ultimately caused by a thing of nothing which is difficult to define on the level of content (hence Weil's aphorism), but *topologically* locatable at the center of the phantasm, being the last imaginarily support of a subject's desire that floats upon the waves of signifiers. In the first sessions of his sixth seminar Lacan develops his theory of desire and he quotes Simone Weil's aphorism affirmatively.

[9] Freud (1953–1961/XVII, p. 179–204). Lacan comments on Freud's essay in the lessons of February 12, 1958; Lacan (1998, p. 233–243) and January 7, 1959; Lacan (1996, p. 140–142). He returns to it again in the lesson of June 10, 1959 (1996, p. 482–484).

A few sessions further however he admits his disagreement with Weil and changes profoundly his theory of desire. Applying Weil's question about the miser to another case, Lacan will discover that Weil's analysis of the 'nothing' as cause of desire is not correct and that, thus, her Christian theory of desire is not compatible with the psychoanalytical one. That case is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

3 Hamlet

Hamlet is an example of a genuine psychoanalystic case for it is a play about someone obviously suffering from mental illness. His father has died recently, and almost as recently his mother has remarried his uncle. Hamlet cannot stand this situation so feigns madness and, at times, balances on the verge of real madness. Lacan's psychoanalytical diagnosis indicates 'neurosis,' which he defines as an incapacity to maintain the position of 'subject of desire.'[10] Indeed, Hamlet can no longer cope with desire: neither the desire of his mother, nor the one of his fiancée (Ophelia, with whom he breaks off), nor the one of his own. He no longer positions himself as the subject of desire and has relapsed into a merely imaginary position. In Lacanian terms: he has relapsed into a merely imaginary ego-position.[11] He no longer accepts the lack he is marked by (i.e., desire). This is why he focuses on the lack present in others (his mother, uncle, lover, friends) in order to unmask it. According to him there simply should be no lack in the world. It is the *demand* of an infant, who regards himself as the completion of that lack (not 'his majesty the baby' misses something in the the world, it is the world that misses him, 'his majesty' supposes).

Hamlet is no longer such an infantile 'majesty.' He is the adult son of his deceased father, a father marked by lack, by death. Hamlet, the son, cannot stand this, since his father's ghost has pointed to his killer, namely the current husband of his wife (his brother, Hamles Jr.'s uncle). In the opening scene of Shakespeare's play the ghost of the father asked Hamlet to find an answer to that 'lack.' The infantile imaginary trick (i.e., to act as if his mere being is the answer to that lack) is no longer possible. Yet, his neurosis indicates that he has relapsed into an imaginary Demand position similar to the one of the infant.

Although Hamlet feigns madness and harasses the royal court with profound and basic questions, he is not in a philosophical mood. Even his most famous question, 'to be or not to be,' is not a philosophical one.[12] It is a question about himself, about his subject position. Lacan translates it into: 'to be or not to be *the phallus*.' 'Am I or am I not the completion of the Other's lack?' Or, which amounts to the same thing: am I the imaginary ego that fills in the *demand* of the Other, or am I the subject of

[10] According to Lacan, Hamlet's clinical picture (who is after all not a real person but a literary invention) is "both" hysteria and obsessional neurosis. See the lesson of 18 March 1959; Lacan (1996, p. 315).

[11] This is to say that he relates to the world in the way of the *demand*: being himself a lack in the symbolic order, he *demands* that that lack should be filled in and proposes himself to be the filling-in of that lack. For Lacan's development of the concept *demand*, see Lacan (1966, p. 617 ff).

[12] Hamlet III, 1 (verse 56).

the unfulfillable *desire* of the Other. As Hamlet is no longer able to keep his symbolic subject position (as subject of desire), he has relapsed into an imaginary position of an ego, desperately trying to find a definitive answer to the lack the Other is marked by—the Other being his mother, his uncle, his fiancée, the court, the world). During the entire play, he will try to overcome the imaginary ego-position and recapture the position of subject of desire. Therefore he will have to acknowledge and to assume the lack he is marked by, namely the lack of desire. Only during the last moments of the play, when he gets touched by death (i.e., by the poisoned sword of his friend/rival Laertes), he definitely finds himself again in the position of subject of desire.

The process of regaining the symbolic subject-position starts with a rediscovery of the *object* of desire (the *object small a*), i.e., when one is no longer able to put oneself (imaginarily) in the position of that object. At that moment the phantasm regains its function and reintroduces one's desire. According to Lacan, Shakespeare's Hamlet is a telling illustration of this process.

The turning point in the play is Hamlet's 'rediscovery' of his love for Ophelia, who is his former object of desire. She is the object little *a* around which his phantasm circles. During his neurotic crisis, Hamlet not only reviled Ophelia, but he humiliated and neglected her as well. As he did with his mother, he denied her being marked by desire and lack. And, which is typical of an imaginary procedure, he regards himself as the filling of that lack. He relapses into the position of the 'phallus of the mother,' the filling of the lack of the Other. What Hamlet has to retrieve, is that very lack. Or, in his 'phallic grammar': he has to retrieve the phallus *as such*, the phallus/lack not supposed to be filled up by himself. During his neurotic crisis, Hamlet is in search for an appearance of the phallus as such, i.e., as lack: the Phallus with a capital P (standing for the symbolic Phallus which escapes the imaginary identification of the subject. Or, as Lacan says, he is in search for a "phallophanie."[13] This confrontation will break the imaginary deadlock he is in and re-introduce the possibility of a symbolic subject-position.

Let us focus on this famous "phallophanic" scene in the play. Having just returned from his trip to England, Hamlet unexpectedly witnesses the funeral of Ophelia who has committed suicide. From his concealed position behind the graveyard's bushes, he watches how, overwhelmed by grief, his best friend Laertes (Ophelia's brother) leaps into the grave to embrace his sister one last time. There he lashes out again at the one who has been responsible for all this, Hamlet. Precisely at that moment, the latter comes into view. He, too, leaps into the grave and there the old friends come to blows. Nobody loved Ophelia more than me, Hamlet shouts:

> I lov'd Ophelia: forty thousand brothers
> Could not, with all their quantity of love,
> Make up my sum.[14]

[13] For "*phallophanie*," see the lesson of April 29; Lacan (1996, p. 386–390). See also the one of May 13, 1959 (1966, p. 405).

[14] Hamlet V, 1, v. 290–292.

Reviled a minute before, the deceased is now again the beloved Ophelia, more desirable than ever. In the bed of her grave, Hamlet regains his object of desire and starts re-conquering his position of subject of desire.

What then transforms the *miscognized*[15] Ophelia suddenly into the 'object' in which lack (phallus) and desire become attractive to him again? What makes Ophelia's dead body a "phallophany"? Precisely the fact that she is dead and mourned—mourned, more precisely, by another, Laertes. At the end of his lesson of April 15, 1959, Lacan refers to "this furious fight at the bed of the grave" as a scene which indicates the function of the object as what can be re-conquered only at the price of mourning and of death [in order to become the again the phantasmatic support of desire].[16]

Hamlet's relation to Laertes, his bosom friend and role model is thoroughly imaginary, Lacan argues. His mourning marks him almost to a 'lack,' and it is this lack that Hamlet's neurotic state intends to '*miscognize*,' thus '*miscognizing*' both his own and Laertes's desire.

However, in the bizarre churchyard scene, this imaginary strategy fails. Modeling himself upon Laertes, Hamlet can no longer identify with him as though he, Hamlet, was the filling*(-in)* of his friend's lack. Facing the *dead* Ophelia, he now identifies with Laertes insofar as Laertes' lack explicitly shows the impossibility to be filled (*in*), i.e. insofar as Laertes *desires* Ophelia. For Hamlet, Ophelia appears as the object of Laertes's desire of which he, Hamlet *cannot* occupy the position (or, which amounts to the same thing: fill in the lack). So, as Hamlet identifies with the mourning Laertes, he installs a definitive distance between himself and the object he now thoroughly desires again. At the same time, Hamlet's phantasm about Ophelia is restored as well as the basic condition that enables him to regain a desiring subject-position.

Where does Lacan's Hamlet find his 'real' self, i.e., the desire that he 'is'? Not in a *real* lack, in any case, If it were really lived, such a 'lack-in-itself' would imply the death of the one who lives it. He can find himself only in a symbolic lack, Lacan emphasizes here. He finds himself at the place where the symbolic order lacks and where, in its (phallic) lack, it comes full circle. His odyssey may have begun as an escape from all lack, it arrives at that very same lack. At the end of this quest he discovers that the emptiness of desire (he once so hated in his mother and his lover) is his ultimate *raison d'existence*, as well as the keystone of his identity. To his father's demand, who beseeches him to undo the lack that struck him, he finally answers by offering himself as a mere lack—as a deadly wound. He finds the answer to his question about desire nowhere else than in the emptiness and nothingness of his desired object. In this emptiness and this lack, he finally meets his true 'self': this is the core of Lacan's interpretation of *Hamlet*.

And where, according to Simone Weil, does the miser find his true 'self,' that is, his desire? Not so much in the tangible riches he cherishes but in the 'lack itself' for

[15] "Miscognition," *"méconnaissance*," is the conceptual term Lacan coined for imaginary denial. See Lacan (1966, p. 668, 675, 809, 816).

[16] "[…] cette sorte de bataille furieuse au fond d'une tombe sur lequel j'ai déjà insisté; cette désignation comme d'une pointe de la fonction de l'objet comme n'étant ici reconquis qu'au prix du deuil et de la mort"; lesson of 15 April 1959; Lacan (1966, p. 352).

which the riches stand. Weil's miser found himself in the "emptiness" that lay hidden behind the riches, and which, for anyone who detaches himself from all his riches, could be experienced as a true fullness.

Lacan's theory of *desire*, as it gained shape in the course of his sixth seminar, *was about to* 'close' the whole problematic nature of desire and its lack in on lack itself, a "lack" operating as both the motor and the keystone of the autonomous symbolic order. The subject, being nothing other except "what a signifier represents to another signifier," finds his 'self' in the nothingness of the ultimate object he desires. Such would have been the conclusion. Lacanian theory of desire would have been a standard example of desire theories in our western tradition, as exemplified by Simone Weil's.

4 *Das Ding*

Yet, things have turned out differently. The final sessions of Lacan's sixth seminar already show how that he was less and less satisfied with a merely imaginary or symbolic characterization of desire's ultimate object.[17] At the moment when he finally explains Hamlet's "phallophany," as he had announced with great pathos to his audience, he no longer seems able to read Ophelia exclusively as the phallus. The object of desire and the phantasm (in this case, Hamlet's) no longer seems able to be thought exclusively as imaginary or symbolic. What he already had been calling the "*objet petit a*" during the last two seminar-sessions, he is now going to characterize as real.[18] In the final lessons of the sixth seminar, this intent becomes more and more pronounced.

This way he corrects his own idea that desire, arriving at its object, arrives at an empty signifier. Instead, desire relates to an empty object that is not symbolic, but real. That correction, giving a 'real' status to the object, implies an extra de-centering of desire. Desire is orientated not simply towards an empty object that makes desire restart again and again in its own symbolic circle, but towards a point outside that circle, a point in the real.[19]

[17] It is impossible to examine here these last lessons of Lacan's sixth seminar in detail here (*Le désir et son interprétation*, 1958–1959), where, reluctantly, he tries to distance himself from his exclusively 'phallic' (i.e. symbolic) interpretation of Hamlet's phantasm so as to put an increasing emphasis on the real character of the object-pole of desire.

[18] The term "objet (petit) a" refers to the *a* of Lacan's definition of phantasm, for which since his fifth seminar he uses the matheme $\$\diamond a$ [to be read as "S barré poinçon a": the barred, split subject ($\$$) insofar it relates ($\diamond$) to the object of desire (*a*)]. In his sixth seminar, the expression "objet *a* (du désir)" slowly begins to operate as a more or less standard term (see for instance the lesson of December 17, 1958; Lacan 1996: 119). As a specific concept, "objet petit a" only emerges in his seventh and eighth seminar after Lacan had conceived this "*objet a du désir*" as '*das Ding*' and as '*agalma'* respectively. According to Jean Allouch, the term became a concept when Lacan extracted all imaginary connotations from the object. In the second chapter of his *La psychanalyse: une érotologie de passage*, he shows how Lacan treated this '*objet a*' both as imaginary and as real for a year, causing a lot of ambiguity in his theory. Only a strictly 'mathematical' formulation enabled him to cut the knot; see Allouch (1995, p. 31–42).

[19] "But what is important to maintain is the opposition from which this exchange operates, i.e. the group $ vis-à-vis *a* [formula of the fantasm: $\$\diamond$a], of a subject which is certainly imaginary but in a most radical way, in the sense that it is the mere subject of the disconnection, or the spoken cut [*la coupure parlée*]

In the final analysis, the object still functions as a signifier, but it points not purely to other signifiers, but also to the real. Lacan puts it like this: "to being… insofar as this is marked by the signifier."[20] This is to say that the path desire follows on the surface of the signifier, is "open," pointed in the direction beyond that surface.[21] In the closing sentences of this lesson (which, in Lacan's own words, forms a sort of "pre-lesson" on the theme of the following seminar)[22], he also refers explicitly to this openness. The psychoanalytic cure operates exclusively within the "'cut' of the word," claims Lacan, but to this extent processes an "opening […] towards something radically new."[23] No one who glances through the next seminar he will give a couple of months later, will misunderstand this hint: he is indisputably referring to '*das Ding*,' one of the main concepts in his seventh seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959–1960). In that seminar Lacan found the solution of the problem raised about the status of the object. In the end, it is not the phallus, the symbolic lack, but *das Ding,* which is real.

The concept of *das Ding* is taken from one of Freud's 'sketches' about the neurological functioning of the libidinal apparatus, the *Entwurf* (1895).[24] There, analyzing how language works in the system of *Vorstellungen* that constitutes the unconscious, Freud writes that these *Vorstellungen* (i.e., traces of memories about stimuli which gave pleasure) are from the very beginning disconnected from *Das Ding* of which they are as it were the 'attributes.' The unconscious is a field of 'attributes' that never *really* express the 'substance' they refer to—or, in Lacanian terms, a field of signifiers turning around a *Thing* which is located outside that field. Since the signifiers form the field in which desire operates, *das Ding* is its ultimate and inaccessible 'object.' 'Inaccessible,' not because it is the 'nothing' or 'void' that makes the signifiers work, but because it even differs from that kind of nothing. The de-centered structure of the subject (missing the answer to the *Demand* at the very moment it gets it) is now de-centered in an extra way: even in the 'nothing' that

Footnote 19 continued
insofar as the cut is the basic scansion upon which the word is built [*en tant que la coupure est la scansion essentielle où s'édifie la parole*]. The group, I say, of the subject with a signifier which is what? Which is nothing else than the signifier of being, to which the subject is confronted insofar as being is itself marked by the signifier" (Lesson of 5 July 1959; Lacan 1996: 534; my translation). In the same lesson, he defines the object constituting the kernel of the phantasm as a (real) remainder escaping the symbolic surface of desire; Lacan (1996, p. 534).

[20] Lacan (1996, p. 534).

[21] Still in that final lesson, Lacan explicitly characterizes that ultimate object of desire—baptized meanwhile as the "object a"—as "something open: "L'objet comme tel, l'objet a, si vous voulez, du graphe, […] c'est quelque chose d'ouvert […]." (1966, p. 533). Or, as Bernard Baas puts it in his book, *De la chose à l'objet*: "thinking man as desire is thinking his most basic 'experience' as 'openness'"; Baas (1998, p. 24).

[22] Lacan (1996, p. 542).

[23] "C'est de l'ouverture [qu'il s'agit], c'est de la béance de quelque chose de radicalement nouveau qu'introduit toute coupure de la parole." Lacan (1996, p. 542).

[24] Freud (1987, p. 373–477). For a comment about the problematic place of this text within Freudian psychoanalysis, see Sulloway (1979, p. 113–131).

founds its symbolic identity, desire misses itself. An extra de-centering marks the de-centered symbolic subject of desire.

So, the introduction of *das Ding* makes the Lacanian subject a split one in a more radical sense than before. Before that the split was between the imaginary ego and the symbolic subject, a split to be conceptualized as the phallus, the void of the signifier splitting again and again the imaginary *Demand,* thus delivering the dimension of desire and the symbolic. The ultimate object of desire was the split subject which could never be appropriated by desire.

In Lacan's new conceptualization, the ultimate object does not coincide with the subject in any sense. In the nothingness of the ultimate object the desiring subject does not find, but *loses* its 'self.' The subject is built upon a 'nothing,' a nothing that keeps the subject longing for its 'self,' but ultimately makes it lose any 'self.' If it would *really* arrive at the point to which desire drives it, the subject would cease to be a subject and its entire libidinal economy would definitely collapse.

Is satisfaction on the level of the subject—enjoyment, *jouissance*—simply impossible? Lacan's answer is negative. Enjoyment is possible, but it is to be defined in a precise way. Already in his fifth seminar (*The formations of the Unconscious*, 1957–1958), Lacan has explained that enjoyment coincides with the fading of the subject: the subject disappearing in the 'lack' underlying the symbolic order, thus leaving desire intact.[25] Enjoying his treasure, the miser loses himself in the lack underlying that treasure, which makes him all the more long for it. In the new theory of desire, however, losing oneself in the object of desire is—instead of linking up with it—leaving the only realm in which a libidinal being is able to live (the symbolic order). It means joining the real, which for a desiring subject implies death.

How, then, is *jouissance* possible in Lacan's new theory? This is thanks to the phantasm. In case of *jouissance*, that imaginary scenario of signifiers takes over the function of the subject. In the experience of enjoyment, the subject disappears and at that moment its function of supporting the libidinal economy is handed to the phantasm. In the moment of *jouissance*, when someone enjoys the ultimate object of his desire, his subject fades away and it is lost in the enjoyed object. This should be lethal for both the subject and its entire economy, were it not that there is a kind of supplementary support, which is the phantasm. Even if the subject fades away, the libidinal economy is supported by his phantasm, by a scenario of signifiers keeping the object of desire at a distance, thus leaving desire (including the split between subject and object) intact.

What the phantasm enables is an excess inherent to the structure of desire. Desire is not oriented towards a self-preservation of its subject, but towards a deadly excess—an excess that *really* would be deadly, if at that very moment, the phantasm did not take over its functions.

[25] Lacan introduces a first theory of *enjoyment* in his analysis of *Le balcon*, a play by Jean Genet; Lacan (1998, p. 261–268).

5 Ethics

It is not a coincidence that Lacan's modified theory of desire and enjoyment is the central topic in the seminar entitled *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.[26] The implications of that modification for moral theory are indeed far-reaching. For one can ask the question which ethical status the good human desire is ultimately striving after? The entire tradition has answered this question by putting forward the self-preservation of the subject. As ultimate object of desire, the Supreme Good stimulates the potentialities of his real 'self,' so Aristotle states, delivering thus the main ethical paradigm of western tradition. In that sense, the *object* of moral longing is obviously for the benefit of the human *subject*. Even Bentham's utilitarianism, the antipode of Aristotelian ethics, embraces that formal paradigm: good is what guarantees the greatest happiness for the largest number of people and happiness is what serves people's self-preservation.[27]

However, the split—at the heart of the moral agent—between the subject and the object radically reorients the entire ethical grammar. Of course, the moral subject wants happiness and all kinds of good things, but the Supreme Good that guides moral desire ultimately lies *beyond* happiness, beyond any good, even beyond a good that is nonexistent or 'nothing' (as in Weil's theory). Lacan's modified theory conceives the enjoyment of the ultimate good no longer as a way to gain the highest virtue, not even as an appropriation of 'nothing,' a nothing that re-introduces the subject into the endless circle of desire. Enjoyment is not to be conceived as 'appropriation' at all. For Lacan, enjoyment means *losing* oneself and, more precisely, losing oneself in the nothingness of the ultimate object of desire.

That loss certainly has the effect of re-starting one's desire, but at the moment of *jouissance* itself, one leaves behind all desire, i.e., all care for good and happiness. Enjoyment—including ethical enjoyment—is now to be considered as *consuming*—in the strong, destructive sense of the word—all good and happiness. One of Lacan's illustrations is the potlatch, a gift-ritual of Native American tribes in which, during the winter feast, the half of their 'gross national product' is squandered and wasted.[28] The aim of economy is not to stock up, but to consume and squander the profit. A potlatch shows what this means in a way that cannot be misunderstood.

What goes for economy, goes for ethical desire as well. Its basic principle is not the one of profit and self-preservation but of loss and self-abandonment. Unconsciously, ethics is oriented towards transgression and excess. Its ultimate point of reference is not the Supreme Good, but Radical Evil. A fulfilled ethical desire does not accomplish the good we long for but, on the contrary, destroys all the good things desire lives on. From an ethical perspective, j*ouissance* is by definition an evil thing, since it no longer takes into account the things which matter when living under a desire regime. And, similarly, the ultimate object of desire is ethically evil as well.

[26] Lacan (1986).

[27] Lacan (1986, p. 21 ff).

[28] Lacan (1986, p. 275).

One could very well ask whether now ethics is possible at all. Of course it is, and Lacan stresses the ethical status of psychoanalysis. But what in his eyes changes is the foundation of ethics as well as its usual presumption. From a Lacanian perspective, ethics can no longer consider itself as founded in the fulfillment of what it promises, i.e., in the 'object' of its moral striving. It can only base itself on the *desire* for that 'object.' The latter's *fulfillment* would destroy that which humans are living on: desire. This is to say that, as subject, one can definitely *not* occupy the position of the 'object.' Even if he realizes that this object is a kind of 'nothing,' he cannot even gain that 'nothing' (as for instance Simone Weil's miser did). He cannot speak or act ethically *from* that position.

If one does so, if one speaks and acts from the locus of *das Ding*, one takes up a 'perverse' position. In an exemplary way, that position is shown in the work of Marquis de Sade. There, so Lacan explains in his seminar on ethics, one meets a world beyond desire: a universe where no lack or law obstructs complete satisfaction.[29] Yet, lack and desire that are supposed to have disappeared, of course have not, since they are human life's very basis. They have only been *denied*. That denial has a peculiar twofold structure: the sadist constructs a scene where he first 'carves' his own lack (his finitude, his dependence on the law, his insatiable desire, his mortality) into the body of the other, his victim; and, secondly, once that body is fully marked by lacks, he denies the existence of all lack and supposes the victim to be in complete *jouissance*.

The pervert takes up the position of the enjoyed ultimate object of desire, which he can only take up by denying its radical impossibility. The effect of that denial is a sadistic universe in which the sadist condemns everyone around him to suffer in order to 'show' that suffering has ceased to exist.

The antipode of perversion is sublimation. Sublimation acknowledges the object of desire in the impossibility that it be subjectified, be occupied by the subject. "It raises an object […] to the dignity of the Thing," Lacan writes in his seminar on ethics.[30] It puts something in the place of *das Ding*, thus withdrawing it from the stream of signifiers and making that stream circle around it. Lacan's favorite example is Courtly Love, a poetic praxis 'raising' the beloved woman 'to the dignity of the Thing.' Instead of occupying the place of *das Ding,* the loving poet puts his Lady—his 'Domina,' whom he gives the full right to dominate him—there, i.e., in a fictitious, poetic praxis. For apart from that, the poet leads his life as a married man with a spouse and children. In the poetic praxis of courtly love, he explicitly regards himself as subject of desire, subjected to desire's law. And he recognizes that law to be promulgated by the object of his desire, his Lady. Courtly love, being by definition unhappy love (since the lover can never reach his beloved), is a celebration of desire—*unfulfilled* desire—as being the truth of love. This is to say that love's truth is not *jouissance*. *Jouissance* is the aim of love, but like its object, it cannot be subjectified. It can only be acknowledged as what definitely resists

[29] In his seminar on ethics Lacan starts an elaboration of perversion theory which he will only accomplish in its tenth seminar, *Angoisse* (*Anxiety,* 1962–63) and in his essay 'Kant avec Sade'; Lacan (2004, 1966, p. 765–790).

[30] Lacan (1986, p. 133, 1992, p. 112).

subjectification, as what can only have the status of *das Ding*, orienting desire but unable to be appropriated.

6 Misers or lovers?

The lover Lacan refers to here, is he not similar to Simone Weil's miser, whom he appreciated so much in the first sessions of his sixth seminar**?** Is the courtly Lady, raised 'to the dignity of the Thing,' not put in the place of the nothingness that orients desire as its ultimate object? And is the lover not attached to a kind of nothing similar to the miser spellbound by his treasure?

Both the miser and the lover are indeed figures illustrating the nothingness of desire's object. But they do not so much illustrate that object as such, as the positions one can take vis-à-vis the object. In this, they do really differ. The shift Lacan's theory of desire makes in his seventh seminar is precisely about that difference.

Weil's miser illustrates the constitutive 'nothingness' desire longs for. According to her, the miser is the negative personification of 'an asceticism of desire.' Recognizing the nothingness as man's ultimate object of desire, one can stop longing and be content. The real wealth is to the poor, to those who do not need any wealth to feel rich. In antique times, this was the way the stoics and the cynics cultivated desire. Christianized by a variety of monastic movements in late Antiquity, it dominated our culture for centuries and (whether or not secretly) lasted until modern and postmodern times. In Simone Weil's modern Christian mysticism, this insight made the miser a paradigmatic figure, as it did in the theory of desire Lacan elaborated in his sixth seminar, where he approved Weil's aphorism about the miser.

He approved it at least for a while. In the end, it is obvious he had only been seduced by it—until he discovered the danger of the miser's paradigm and of the theory of desire behind it. For what does it mean that the miser appropriates the nothingness of his treasure? In the light of Lacan's modified theory, this means that he identifies himself with his treasure—an identification that, because it concerns a nothingness, keeps his desire ongoing. Yet, since identification denies the strict distinction between subject and object, the miser in a way subjectifies the object of desire. This is why he is such an objectionable person. Enjoying his treasure, he treats the nothingness of that treasure in a way that is quite similar to perversion. As the famous play of that name by Molière shows, the miser, too, projects the nothingness onto others.[31] He wants them to have nothing, and this is in a sense what he enjoys the most. The fact that the other has nothing, is for him a perfect repression for both the nothingness of his treasure and the nullity of his *jouissance*.

This is why Lacan realizes that the miser is not an adequate and positive example to illustrate the general primacy of desire. His identification with the nothing of his treasure is built on a hidden denial of that nothingness, a denial that creates a cruel

[31] Molière (2004). In that play, moneylender Harpagnon, the miser, is the cause of the misery of his servant, his son, his daughter, her fiancé and a few others.

social environment. The miser *forces* others to be happy with nothing, and he derives his *jouissance* precisely from the denial of their suffering. The fact that one is satisfied with nothing, easily implies that one *can* be satisfied with nothing or, even, it implies that the command that one *must* be happy with nothing. Secretly, one speaks *in the name of* the nothingness desire is about, or—in Lacanian terms—one occupies the position of *das Ding*. In other words, that theory of desire easily gives way to a perverse position, a position where people are forced to act *as if* they *really* live in the realm of *jouissance*.

Here, Lacan must have recognized a crucial feature of the Christian theory of desire embraced by Simone Weil. Lacan was very sensitive to the idea that the Christian doctrine acknowledges the nothingness that the entire universe, including human desire, is built upon. The central point in that doctrine is Christ's crucifixion, which is an image of the death of God, i.e., of the symbolic void underlying a universe imaginarily supposed to be totalized and grounded in its eternal creator. Christianity's truth lies in the admission of God's death, of the 'lack' underlying the symbolic order—an admission repressed by the dogma of the resurrection.

Yet, in one of the later sessions in his seventh seminar, Lacan characterizes the core of Christian doctrine, the "image of the crucifixion," as an "apotheosis of sadism."[32] The image of the tortured body is not that sadistic as such, but particularly its effect upon the religious life of the believers. The cruelty of the image does not only stand for the nothingness of God as an object of desire, but also for the effect it has upon those who are preached at to enjoy that nothingness. The ascetic imperative, so deeply intertwined with the Christian doctrine, *commands* people to be happy with nothing, which is to say: to do *as if* they live in the fulfillment of the Law, in Christ's love or, in Lacanian terms, in *jouissance*. Celebrating the nothingness as such, it is true, stimulates desire, but in *commanding* people, a perverse procedure is involved, projecting that nothingness onto others who are obliged to do as it is "fuller than all fullness."[33] That commandment is similar to the miser who in the end enjoys his treasure by obliging the people around him to *really* enjoy nothing.

Not the miser, but the lover supplies the paradigm of desire's primacy. Thus the conclusion Lacan draws from his reflection on Simone Weil's aphorism. The nothingness in which desire finds its final satisfaction needs in a one way or another a concrete, material object, in order to prevent its subjectification together with its perverse effects. This is why not religious love, but courtly love is the most appropriate illustration of desire's paradigm.

The courtly lover does not love 'nothing,' he loves his Lady. And he cannot reduce that Lady to the nothingness his desire unconsciously longs for. In other words, he cannot spiritualize his love for her. His love is about her, his poems sing. He loves her, he does not love love. He is not able to regard the 'nothing' the Lady stands for as self-evident, and live his love from the very position of that nothingness, as is the case in the love/desire Simone Weil has in mind. With the courtly lover, the initiative of all amorous activities is ordered by his Lady. It is she

32 Lacan (1986, p. 304, 1992, p. 262).

33 Weil (2002, p. 13, 1948, p. 15); see above, in one of the quotes in point 1.

who gives the lover '*assags*,' (Occitan for 'tests' or 'orders'); and these cannot be *not* obeyed, thus the courtly law decides. In the normal—at that time undoubtedly patriarchal—world, it is man who lays down the law. In the poetic universe of courtly love, man has totally given up that position. There, the law is laid down by the object of his desire, his Lady. And since courtly love is by definition the culture of unhappy, failing love, the lover will never have access to the position from where the Law is laid down to him.

Precisely by putting a concrete woman in the place of *das Ding* (i.e., the nothingness of desire's ultimate object), and not some spiritual reference such as God or Love or, even, Nothingness, one avoids the risk of denying the gap between the subject and the object of desire. This is why the "void" Weil discovers in the heart of love and desire, is indeed "fuller than full," but for that very reason a wrong kind of void for understanding the basic structure of love and desire. The void Lacan discovers underlying that structure does not have any fullness at all. It is the gap between subject and object, a gap that cannot be celebrated in an ascetic way, making it "fuller than full." That gap must be celebrated in a concrete material way, loving a desired object that cannot be appropriated. More than in the case of Weil's miser, in the one of courtly love, it is obvious that the lover is the only subject of desire, and not of *jouissance* at all.

The strict split between subject and object or, what amounts to the same thing, between desire and jouissance is a basic structure to understand the libidinal grammar of human being. It conceptualizes accurately the de-centered structure of his subjectivity. Man *is* his desire, he is founded not in what he (imaginarily) thinks he is, but in the (symbolic) lack that has split him from what he desires to possess or to be (including 'himself'). And that de-centering movement cannot come full circle because it is characterized by a surplus de-centering, orienting desire towards the deadly beyond of its symbolic world. This surplus de-centering prevents any sublimation of desire from spiritualization or other forms of ascetic appropriation. Thus, the way to deal with desire is to keep material, concrete, 'down to earth.'

Yet, that split between subject and object—or between desire and *jouissance*—is split *within* the subject, within desire. The object is a factor *within* the structure of the libidinal subject. It is, more precisely, the constitutive element of its phantasm. Similarly, *jouissance* is the factor of satisfaction in the economy of desire, but it does not attack the general primacy of desire in the libidinal economy of the subject. We cannot go more deeply into this, but one can say that Lacan's further oeuvre is in a large part a prolonged reflection on that de-centered structure. That reflection continues with an increased emphasis on the object, i.e., the ultimate support of the libidinal economy that replaces the subject when *jouissance* occurs. It consequently continues with an increased emphasis on *jouissance* as well, a *jouissance* which both de-centers the subject and gives it nonetheless its ultimate support.

In his later seminars Lacan never discredits the paradigm of the lover. In conclusion I would like to mention an example from his twentieth seminar in which he defines the libidinal being as '*Âmour*': a way to express the primacy of the

'object small a' as the ultimate ground for man's libidinal existence.[34] In that seminar he refers again to Christian mystics, and now he does not distance himself from them, because he recognizes in them the excessive tendencies underlying human desire.

Being desire, we are lovers, not misers.

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[34] See for instance the seventh session, entitled by J.-A. Miller "Une lettre d'Âmour," of Lacan's Seminar *Encore* (1975, p. 73–82, more specifically, p. 77 ff).