

Alcibiades on the Couch

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In *Seminar VIII*, Lacan states that the problem of love interests us “insofar as it allows us to understand what happens in transference [...]”¹ In the seminar’s central reference, Plato’s *Symposium*, love is approached, firstly, at the level of dialectics, and later, Alcibiades’ presence demonstrates its painful consequences, teaching us about love on the couch.

In the symposium, speeches about love unfold.² Socrates replaces love with desire.³ Love, a daemon, a child of Póros (Resource) and Penía (Poverty) is he says, love “for something”. Lacan clarifies that the expression “love is giving what you don’t have”⁴ responds to this passage.

If, however, Socrates introduces lack into the field of love and desire within discourse, Alcibiades’ entrance portrays a subjective suffering from this lack as an inaccessibility to the object. As Patricia Bosquin-Caroz notes, “it is exactly from the non-conjunction of desire with its object that the signification of love emerges at the end of [...] the metaphor of love.”⁵

A drunken Alcibiades bursts into the symposium and transforms the praise of love into a praise of Socrates. Bitterly confessing his attempt to make Socrates reveal his desire by showing him a sign.⁶ Socrates refuses and thus does not allow the metaphor of love: the substitution of the *erómenos* by the *erastés*.⁷ For Lacan, Alcibiades is frustrated⁸ because he, a “man imbued with desire”⁹, does not move into the lover’s position, where, when present, “shows a highly remarkable absence of the fear of castration [...]”¹⁰ Socrates deprives him of this position, leaving him in what is, for Alcibiades, an unbearable state: being passively treated “as the beloved.”¹¹ Here Alcibiades is left to suffer in the position of lack. When Socrates finally responds, his intervention that has “all the features of interpretation”¹² is that Alcibiades’ praise is not aimed at Socrates but at Agathon, and it is the latter whom Alcibiades wishes to conquer. Therefore, Agathon is Alcibiades’ object – *cause* of desire, while Socrates is merely the object

¹ J. Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VIII, Transference*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. B. Fink, Cambridge: Polity, 2017, p. 38.

² Plato, *Symposium*, trans. A. Nehamas & P. Woodruff, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1989.

³ Lacan, J., *The Seminar, Book VIII, Transference, op.cit.*, p. 115.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁵ Bosquin-Caroz, P., *Painful Loves, Presentation of the Congress Theme 2025*. Available at: <https://www.nlscongress2025.amp-nls.org/nls-congress/2019/1/4/the-argument-f9m84-j29wf-cxnty-nr5k6-6d4wr-68sd3-kbtpg-salss-sajl7-c7n7m-pt22g>

⁶ Lacan, J., *The Seminar, Book VIII, Transference, op.cit.*, p. 137.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁸ Bosquin-Caroz, P., *Painful Loves, op.cit.*

⁹ Lacan, J., *The Seminar, Book VIII, Transference, op.cit.*, p. 157.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 149.

that is desired.¹³ Socrates, an early prototype of psychoanalyst only knows about matters of love and points this out to the unfortunate lover.

Thus, for the loves that we encounter in analysis, and invite “to let themselves be caught in the net of signifiers, in order to make jouissance enter into resonance with language”¹⁴, it is essential to bear this distinction in mind. Knowing nothing other than how these matters of love work, we must encourage Alcibiades on the couch in order to seek the Agathon behind Socrates.

¹³ The term ‘object – cause of desire’ will appear three years after *Seminar VIII*, in Lacan’s *Seminar XI*. It is employed here to show the difference between the object around which the drive turns and, thus, motivates desire, and the object that is supposed to fulfil it.

¹⁴ Bosquin-Caroz, P., *Painful Loves*, *op.cit.*