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‘Til Death Do Us Part: Lacking in Love or Loving Lack

Abstract: The death drive, as conceived by Freud and elaborated upon by Lacan can paradoxically be considered as an integral part of the social bond, including the love relation. When considering romantic love, couples are bonded together via their shared ways of deriving enjoyment from missing the object of the drive; that, is, they bond over their shared—or complementary ways of suffering. At the same time, via the structure of extimacy and the repetition compulsions couples repeat instead of remember, many bonds of love—with their resulting complaints—are founded in the *hainamoration* of one’s own jouissance. Finally, contrary to existentialist notions of freedom which depend upon the powers of consciousness, love aligned with the perpetual self-destruction at the heart of the drives can, in fact, be deployed to facilitate someone’s freedom. Couples who take the risk of exposing their lack to one another can gain additional agency through seeing the Other as lacking and adopting a position of nonbelonging. Examples of such possibilities for freedom will be given via a consideration of a kind of love operative via the vicissitudes of the relationship between Connell and Marianne in Sally Rooney’s 2018 novel *Normal People*.

Keywords: Lacan; love; nonbelonging; death drive; freedom

No psychoanalysis would be worthy of its name without, at its core, consisting of love stories. From speaking about love between parents and children, siblings, friends, romantic partners, unrequited love, and of course the analysand’s transference love, the bonds of love can initially seem relatively devoid of subjective freedom. Analysands repeat instead of remember the traumatic failures of the love relation and wish to be freed of its conflict, hatred, jealousy, and destructiveness. If only, they might say, my partner and I could communicate better, really understand each other, stop fighting, and so on, then I would be happy in my relationship, then I could really live. Via the capitalist discourse, neoliberal ideology promises solutions to these relationship discontents. It does so, for instance, by way of subscribing to a dating app and trading in your current partner for a new, improved one or through the promise of good communication and empathy through the purchase of Gary Chapman’s immensely popular book *The Five Love Languages* (1992). It is not for nothing that Chapman’s book now includes half a dozen versions tailored to different markets— including “The 5 Love Languages for Men,” “The 5 Love Languages of Children,” “The 5 Love Languages Military Edition” and even “The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace.” Via the 5 love languages rubric, the attainment of a harmonious, happy relationship is reduced to something marketable and teachable—like learning to speak a foreign language and eventually becoming fluent in it. From a Lacanian perspective, however, we might say that each and every speaking being has their own love language; all communication is miscommunication and it is impossible to ever completely understand our own experience, let alone that of the other. Wishes for perfect communication and the cessation of arguments, jealousy, and so on boil down to two fundamental and related fantasies: first, that there is such a thing as a harmonious sexual relationship—or, in other words, that castration and lack are not irrevocably at the heart of existence; second, that the drives,

which Lacan tells us are all death drives, could be tamed and peacefully incorporated into the fictions of the ego.

In contrast, the romantic relationship between Connell and Marianne depicted in Sally Rooney's 2018 novel *Normal People* is demonstrative of the impossibility of a symbiotic union of body and soul while simultaneously featuring the rich, satisfying, and at times exquisitely painful singular coupling of their unconscious death drives. Just as the process of Lacanian psychoanalysis involves the construction of and eventual traversal of the fundamental fantasy, of someone's essential way of positioning themselves in relation to lack and the Other which is repeated ad infinitum, the eroticized shifting dynamics of social status and power between Marianne and Connell play a role in their progressive construction of a fundamental fantasy that is not shared so much as it is in certain respects complementary. Through symptomatic repetitions rife with the jouissance of rejection and nonbelonging, Marianne and Connell gradually assume responsibility for their desire and attain the subjective freedoms associated with what becomes a sinthomatic coupling—or perhaps a sinthomatic uncoupling. As such, the bonds of their love cannot be considered without death drive.

Normality and belonging vs. abnormality and nonbelonging: fantasies of taming the drives

The opening chapters of *Normal People* are set rural Carricklea, County Mayo in Ireland where we are introduced to Marianne and Connell, two students in their last few months of secondary school who appear to their peers to have very little in common. The two of them are divided by significant differences in class, social status, and physical attractiveness. In terms of class, Marianne is wealthy and lives in a mansion with her cruel older brother (Alan) and her cold lawyer mother (Denise) who employs Connell's mother (Lorraine) as a housecleaner. Not only does Connell live with his single mother in relative poverty in a council house, but he is considered to come from a trashy family; Connell himself was the result of his mother's teenage pregnancy, and his uncles have gone to prison. On the other hand, Connell is a handsome and popular jock whereas Marianne is a fiercely intelligent, unpopular, excluded loner with crooked teeth and a plain face. The on-again, off-again nature of their romantic relationship notwithstanding, what draws and keeps them together is the death drive. Marianne describes something of this: "She feels pleasurably crushed under the weight of his power over her, the vast ecstatic depth of her will to please him" (Rooney, 2018, p. 241). The self-defeating, pleasure-pain of the death drive irresistibly calls them together at the expense of their own social status and of fulfilling what is expected of them.

With its fantasy of normalcy, Connell's brief relationship with his girlfriend Helen serves as an example of the paler pleasures of the pleasure principle-driven iterations of the social bond. Contrasting with Marianne's plain face and crooked teeth, we are told that Helen is beautiful, and "has a great smile, great teeth" (ibid., p. 160). Helen studies medicine, has a full circle of friends, gets along swimmingly with Lorraine, and invites him to spend a holiday with her family. "To be known as her boyfriend plants him firmly in the social world, establishes him as an acceptable person, someone with a particular status, someone whose conversational silences are thoughtful rather than social awkward" (ibid., p. 161). With Helen, it's easy, normal, to say I love you, even though it had never seemed possible before (ibid., p. 161). However, Connell is

not so much in love with Helen as he is infatuated in the imaginary with his fantasy of her and the person he becomes with her. "He finds himself rushing to the end of the conversation [with Helen] so they can hang up, and then he can retrospectively savor how much he likes seeing her, without the moment-to-moment pressure of having to produce the right expressions and say the right things" (ibid., p. 160). With Helen he denies the unconscious truths of his drives and playacts a role in which his speech acts, desires, and way of relating fit perfectly within the social order. Connell does not feel truly seen by Helen, which is to say that he does not expose his nothing, his lack to her, and this hiding has a certain steady pleasure to it. This pleasure principle version of the non-rapport of the sexual relation is not truly love, relatively devoid as it is of giving what one does not have, of desire, or of exposing one's lack.

In contrast to how he feels with Marianne, "[w]ith Helen he doesn't feel shameful things, he doesn't find himself saying weird stuff during sex, he doesn't have that persistent sensation that he belongs nowhere, that he never will belong anywhere" (ibid., p. 175). Marianne and Connell are joined together in their abnormality via the lack in the social order, by the death drive, which incites jouissance rather than pleasure. Unlike Helen, Marianne sees Connell in his extimacy, in his lack, and this is what makes their love so alternately compelling, frightening, embarrassing, and maddening. Out of fear of losing face, Connell takes pains to hide, for instance, his intelligence and his interest in literature from his popular secondary school social group, Marianne sees and appreciates his about him, encouraging him to pursue his desire at university—a desire which he had not realized he even had. Likewise, Connell "always thought [Marianne] was damaged" (ibid., p. 189), but yet even while dating Helen, Connell writes Marianne long emails, rescues her from an abusive relationship, kisses her, and pays rapt attention to her, preferring this partner who is lacking from the point of view of the external Other. To love someone means to love their lack, a lack which extimately corresponds to one's own lack. As Lacan puts it in his eighth seminar, to love is to love the object *a* or *ágalma*, as the cause of our desire one locates in one's partner (2015, p. 143).

Connell and Helen's version of the sexual relationship with its supposedly smooth march towards marriage and family testifies to nothing more than the socially held fantasy of what a "normal" relationship should be. Their relationship is bound to self-destruct—not only because of Connell's increasingly obvious love for Marianne and the jealousy incited in Helen, but also on account of its disavowal of the self-destructiveness at the center of the social world itself. By comparison, Connell's love for Marianne is so strong precisely because it is founded by way of the death drive, of the destructive, "terrible hold he'd had over her, and still had, and could not foresee ever losing" (Rooney, 2018, p. 176). At the start, Connell unconsciously desires to have power over Marianne, to function as a master figure for her and enjoy a relation that revolves around the anal and invocatory drives. This denial is the motor force behind his initially treating her so poorly—without realizing it—by refusing to acknowledge their relationship in public. The more we try to deny our castration the more we are unfree and enslaved by repetition compulsions. Correspondingly, there are substantial differences in romantic partnerships depending upon whether the union is founded primarily on the death drive or on fantasies of the exclusive reign of the pleasure principle as well as the degree to which each partner accepts lack and adopts an ethical position of nonbelonging.

In various ways, Marianne and Connell are interpellated as occupying positions of nonbelonging, or as abnormal by the regime of normality. The pleasure principle erects the fantasmatic screen of normality, and Helen temporarily protected Connell from having "that persistent sensation that he belongs nowhere, that he never will belong anywhere" (ibid., p. 175). The death drive, on the other hand, unites Connell and Marianne through their sharing "the same spiritual injury" such that "neither of them could ever fit into the world" (ibid., p. 242). As such, Connell and Marianne are united via their death drives, finding a kindred spirit in each other by way of their "weird" thoughts and pleasures which subvert their efforts to fit in with the crowd and enjoy a confident, smooth inclusion in the symbolic order. "It's not like this with other people" (ibid., p. 242) and never feeling lonely (ibid., p. 239) when they are together are two statements which demonstrate that they are bonded through the lack at the heart of the death drives (Galioto, 2023). Although both Connell and Marianne long for a feeling of belonging and at various times precariously attain it, they ultimately identify with positions of abnormality and nonbelonging. The impossibility of ever fitting into the world has something to do with (albeit not exclusively, to make a pun) being interpellated by the social order as trash: Connell takes on the position of trash via social class and Marianne embodies trash in her masochistic—although ultimately hysteric—fundamental fantasy.

Occupying the position of nonbelonging necessitates a certain assumption of lack—a lack which might be considered as the refuse or trash of the Other. A full consideration of what it is to take up the position of lack necessitates thinking through lack on the side of the subject—with the subject standing in for a lack in being around which the drives revolve—and lack on the side of the Other—of the Other's castration. On the side of the subject, one model for the subjectification of lack is the psychoanalyst. Lacan in *Television* (1974) speaks to the psychoanalyst's occupation of the position of lack, of playing the role of the object *a*, alternately calling the analyst's position as that of the saint or trashitas. Having subjectified lack, the analyst stands in for the unconscious or trash insofar as it is that which the analysand would prefer to throw away. To act like a saint is to embody a way of being comfortable with lack, with the object *a*, and with the unconscious. On the side of the Other, a subjective position of nonbelonging is what Todd McGowan, for instance in his book *The Racist Fantasy* (2022), emphasizes is ultimately an ethical stance that refuses to participate in the surplus jouissance—racist and otherwise—that comes from taking part in the capitalist discourse's disavowal of the lack in the Other. There is thus a certain subjective freedom for a couple united in nonbelonging.

Whereas some couples are united in belonging to the world, enjoying symbolic success or privilege or the community found in religious congregations or fandom of sports teams, other couples find themselves bonded through their shared status as misfits, racialized others, or some other category of reject of the social order. From this latter category we have the prototypical lovers' proclamation "it's us against the world!" A couple who adopts this rallying cry are not necessarily occupying the ethical position of nonbelonging elaborated upon by McGowan, since the social reject can function as a position within the dominant ideologies of the Other, and as such, couples can bring bad faith to their supposed status as rebels on the fringes of society. More commonly, marginalized individuals are interpellated as not belonging anywhere, and marginalized couples can understandably fantasize that if only they were to find some way to

belong in the majority group that their suffering would abate and they would live happy lives. In other words, the subjective freedom associated with an ethical position of nonbelonging hinges upon an acceptance of castration—both one's own and that of the Other.

Although the ways in which Connell and Marianne, respectively, feel interpellated by the social order as trash do correspond to positions of nonbelonging, when the two of them initially avoid facing—much less subjectifying—their own desire, these positions of nonbelonging constitute symptomatically restricted subjective positions. Similarly, as though it were a dirty secret, they tend to hide their relationship from the social world, as if their relationship does not exist unless it is sanctioned by social expectations. In other words, for much of the book, neither does their love unite them in a position of nonbelonging nor does it lead to subjective freedom insofar as they do not have the courage to follow their desire and embrace lack. Correspondingly, in *Normal People* not only is there an evolution of the relationships that Marianne and Connell have to one another but also a transformation of their own relationships to the drive. The backdrop for this evolution is provided by shifting dynamics of power and social status, whereby one or the other of them can be seen in the phallic position as having what it takes to belong. Through the process of subjectifying their desire and embracing lack, Marianne and Connell shift from a love which is symptomatic to their love as sinthomatic.

A child is being beaten

At the beginning of their relationship, although Connell to a certain extent exposes his own lack to Marianne, sharing thoughts and things about himself (e.g., his enjoyment of learning and literature) which do not fit in with the expected profile of a popular jock, he obsessionally doubts his love for her and keeps his relationship with her secret. In this vein, after the first time they have sex, Connell thinks that "he seemed to fit perfectly inside her…But why Marianne?...Some people thought she was the ugliest girl in school. What kind of person would want to do this with her?" (Rooney, 2018, p. 25). Connell continues to attempt to hide his lack from his social group, feeling deeply humiliated by what he extimately locates in Marianne, by that within himself which exceeds and does not belong to the figure of a popular male athlete. "[H]is life would be over" (ibid., p. 28), he thinks, if people found out. The cowardly disavowal involved in such a double-life ultimately leads to an eruption of his unconscious and the self-undermining that is characteristic of the drives; Connell represses his desire for a relationship with Marianne such that it never even occurs to him to ask her to the Debs school dance. Instead, he asks Rachel, the most popular girl in school. Although Marianne had until then played along and pretended that she was no one special, her discovery of Connell's betrayal leads her to the abrupt realization of his mistreatment of her, which she can no longer tolerate. In other words, Connell's denial of his own lack led to the self-destruction of the drives and to the destruction—albeit temporary—of their relationship.

Initially, Marianne plays the role of the anal object, of the trash, and idolizes Connell, whose superior attractiveness, athletic ability, and social status renders him in possession of the phallus. As an hysteric, "she felt she would do anything to make him like her" (p. 18). Just prior to their first kiss, Connell says "I think it would be awkward in school if anything happened with us" (ibid., p. 15) and Marianne is the one who suggests that the nature of their relationship could

be secret, that "no one would have to know" (ibid., p. 15). Marianne initiates this perverse pact of sorts, allowing herself to be alternately treated as loved and as trash to be thrown away as soon as representatives of the socio-symbolic matrix are present. In turn, Connell takes up the role of uncastrated master figure and incarnates the object of the invocatory drive, of the voice as superego, when after their first kiss he commands her to keep their kiss a secret. Marianne gives herself over to Connell and masochistically enjoys the position of the anal object. The first time they have sex, she is "on her hands and knees" and then says "thanks" afterwards as though Connell had rendered her an undeserved favor (ibid., p. 22).

Marianne's formula for a sexual relationship might be said to closely adhere to the formula for the varieties of fantasy in Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten". Although Marianne's father is dead, her remaining family members either ignore her or demean and abuse her in clear demonstrations of *jealouissance*. Marianne is quite literally beaten as well as relentlessly bullied by her older brother Alan. After receiving top exam results, Alan goes into one of his jealous, saying, "You're so fucking pathetic" followed by "Do you think you're smarter than me?" (ibid., p. 146). After she laughs involuntarily in response to his saying "You should hear what people in town say about you", Alan wrenches back her arm and spits on her (ibid., p. 147). Marianne's mother Denise clearly favors Alan despite his cruelty towards Marianne and his lack of symbolic success. For instance, Denise gives Marianne Christmas money with no card and in same envelope she uses to pay Connell's mother (Lorraine). In this not-so-festive ceremony of holiday gift-giving, Denise pounds the table, yelling, "You think you're special, do you?" (ibid., p. 148). To the jealous accusations of both her mother and her brother, Marianne responds in the negative: no, she's nothing, nobody special, trash.

The child who is beaten is paradoxically assured of her place in the other's heart through the passion that inspires the beating. She is special precisely insofar as she, as trash, is paradoxically powerful as an object of disgust that inspires jealous rage, beatings, and the pounding of fists. She is the anal object of fascination who inspires men—her brother, her university boyfriend Jamie, her Swedish lover Lukas—to beat her, tie her up, tell her she is worthless trash. Marianne makes herself into the child who is being beaten and thus loved. That being said, she experiences a great deal of suffering, humiliation, and psychic deadening from this position that she is compelled to repeat, with her only respite coming from hiding herself or being ignored by the gaze of the Other; there is little subjective freedom in her vacillation between these two poles of being the Other's trash. This is not to say, however, that Marianne's path to increased freedom will involve mastering the masochism of her death drives and transforming her fantasy from "a child is being beaten" or "a child is being demeaned" by an Other who gets off on beating her to something like "a child is being praised and prized". The death drives are inherently masochistic and destructive, eliciting jouissance precisely from the impossibilities of attaining the object or being perfectly loved and understood by the Other.

First, Marianne begins by unconsciously wanting to be hurt, to be thought of as nothing, seen as nothing special, to be a dirty secret, trash, an outsider not fit for Connell to acknowledge in public. As such, she orchestrates taking up the passive position of the drive, seeking to make herself the degraded object. Her first movement into a more active subjective stance is initiated

when Connell asks Rachel to the Debs instead of Marianne. In this symptomatic act, Connell's death drive sabotages his desire to be with Marianne. This desire quickly becomes retroactively clear to him when he "entered a period of low spirits" (ibid., p. 76). "He had recurring dreams about being with Marianne again" (ibid., p. 77) from which he would "wake up feeling so depressed he couldn't move a single muscle in his body" (ibid., p. 77). Connell's depression is here demonstrative of Lacan's formulation of it in *Television* as a "moral failing" or a "moral weakness, which is, ultimately, located only to thought; that is, in the duty to be Wellspoken, to find one's way in dealing with the unconscious" (1974/1990, p. 22). In other words, Connell's depression indicated his failure to acknowledge, take responsibility for, and act in accordance with his unconscious desire. In turn, Connell's symptomatic act awakens Marianne's desire to be acknowledged as special to Connell and her refusal of a position of pure refuse. Marianne removes herself entirely from Connell's gaze and reach through ceasing to attend school—she studies for exams at home instead—and refusing to take his calls. She even stands up to Alan when he angrily insists that she speak to Connell. (How dare she refuse to do something a male has asked her to do?). In these refusals Marianne actively asserts her desire.

Hiding, saving face, and the mi-dire of speech

When we next find the pair in conversation, they are both students at Trinity College, Dublin where through a reversal of their power dynamic Marianne has become an accepted member of a popular social group, "suddenly has a cool boyfriend and Connell is the lonely, unpopular one" (Rooney, 2018, p. 76). Marianne is now regarded as looking pretty and being worthy of having friends, whereas Connell feels ashamed of his poverty and feels his lack of wealth makes him a social outsider. Even as they resume their sexual relationship one drunken night, both of them continue to suffer from insecurities that lead them to try to hide their lack and their desire for one another. Marianne says she thinks she is unlovable (ibid., p. 104), cries when they watch *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, turning "her face away so it looked like she wasn't crying" (ibid., p. 105), and fails to tell Connell about her family's mistreatment and lack of love for her. Over a year later, when she finally discloses the extent of the abuse she suffers from her family, she explains she hid it from him because she was afraid he would think she was damaged (ibid., p. 189). Not only do we learn that Connell always thought she was damaged, but seeing her as damaged, as abnormal, may have been the condition for the possibility of his love for her.

After Connell's work hours are cut he can no longer afford to pay his rent. Connell procrastinates and then tries but fails to ask Marianne if he can move in with her so that he does not have to move back home for the summer. Instead, he tells her only that he cannot afford to pay rent in the summer; this part of the truth was itself challenging to admit because in the face of her riches, he dislikes bringing up his relative poverty (ibid., p. 125). Marianne jumps to the conclusion that Connell means he wants to move back home and does not wish to be with her. In the absence of Marianne's direct declaration of her desire to stay in a relationship with him, Connell defensively brings up what he doesn't want and says, "I guess you'll want to see other people, then, will you?" (ibid., p. 129) to which Marianne responds "sure" "in a voice that struck him as truly cold" (ibid., p. 129). Afterwards, Marianne's interpretation of the event was that Connell had said "he wanted to see other people" (ibid., p. 114) to which she had assented

because “she was never really his girlfriend, she’s not even his ex-girlfriend. She’s nothing” (ibid., p. 114). Each of them, in other words, quickly assumes the position of the nothing, of trash, rather than risking the exposure of their desire for the other.

Although in these bungled communications the reader could blame class differences and a lack of clear communication on their breakup, thinking if only they could have said what they truly wanted then they could have lived happily ever after, the material, class-based conditions of their relationship (Owens, 2022) and this and many other misunderstandings cover over the real of the impossibility of the sexual relation. Speech is always a half saying, a *mi-dire*, says Lacan, and so there is no such thing as a perfect transmission of human experience. Neither can the fantasy depicted in Aristophanes’ *Symposium* contribution be realized—that of two people, two hearts, two souls, harmoniously joining together as a perfect sphere. At the same time, there is something to be said regarding the respective failures of the couple to take up the ethics of *le Bien-dire*, the Wellspoken. With each of them shrinking from avowing their desire and exposing their lack, they retreat from the possibilities of love bonded by the drives and their respective repetition compulsions sever their connection once again.

Within a few weeks of Connell’s departure, Marianne embarks upon the first of several relationships with explicit sado-masochistic dynamics occurring in the bedroom. Marianne dates Jamie, a fellow wealthy Trinity College student whom everyone in their shared social circle believes is a good match for her despite the demeaning comments he sends her way. In one scene, after remarking on Jamie’s insecurity—he is a transparent braggart and intellectually and otherwise Marianne is superior to him—she goes on to tell Connell that Jamie is a sexual sadist (Rooney, 2018. p. 136). Having become more aware of her drives, after they begin dating Marianne initiates their sado-masochistic sexual relationship, telling Connell later that she “wanted to submit to him” and “[i]t’s not that I get off on being degraded as such…I just like to know that I would degrade myself for someone if they wanted me to…And it turns out he likes to beat me up” (ibid., p. 137). Marianne goes on to explain that with Jamie she is “acting a part” but with Connell she “actually had those feelings” and “would have done anything [he] wanted [her] to” (ibid., p. 139). In contrast to her relationship with the insecure Jamie, the interplay of power, desire, and love is more compelling with Connell, who moreover says he would not wish to hit her. Although in a sense through beating and choking her during sex Jamie gives Marianne the masochistic jouissance that she seems to want, they are neither aligned in mutual desire nor by way of the circuit of the drives.

When, at a social gathering after Connell and Marianne each win a prestigious scholarship, Connell witnesses Jamie’s mistreatment of her, Connell rescues her, walking her out. As such, although it is not Marianne’s desire but that of Connell that leads her to walk away from Jamie, she later breaks things off with Jamie. What is more, later that night Marianne shares for the first time with Connell something of the extent of how poorly she is treated by her family. She admits that her brother recently told her she should kill herself, and that he mother stood by and witnessed this without much protest. In this fashion, Connell and Marianne each make progressive moves toward exposing their lack and the subjectification of their own desire through the assistance of one another. Marianne, for instance, had encouraged Connell back in

Carricklea to study literature instead of going to university in Galway like all his friends and becoming a lawyer—a career path which did not interest him. Love here appears variously as wanting the other to pursue their desire and as loving the other's lack.

After Marianne ends things with Jamie, she quickly regains her former position as a social pariah. Marianne goes on an Erasmus year in Sweden where she again finds herself in a painful position of nonbelonging—one which is not simply due to her inability to speak Swedish. During this year, Marianne and Connell continue to speak and write to one another, but they shrink from subjectifying their desire. In this, they are paradoxically united in the jouissance of depression (Connell eventually goes to see a therapist), their lack of subjective agency subjecting them to the ravages of their drives. While in Sweden, Marianne's repetition compulsion escalates in harmfulness when she enters into a relationship with Lukas, a Swedish artist. Their visits with one another consist largely of sadomasochistic sexual relations—or what Lukas calls "the game"—during which she is not allowed to talk or make eye contact. Even after the sex is over he likes to tell her

> You're worthless…You're nothing. And she feels like nothing, an absence to be forcibly filled in…She experiences a depression so deep it is tranquilizing, she eats whatever he tells her to eat, she experiences no more ownership over her own body than if it were a piece of litter. (ibid., pp. 196-197)

Marianne feels unreal, not feeling hunger, thirst, or desire except in fleeting moments. She has dropped out of agentic subjectivity and reduced her existence entirely to the operations of the anal and invocatory drives. As the object of litter, of the anal drive, the phallic Other, Lukas, brings the voice and she gets herself superegoically commanded and denigrated. In another sense, Connell derives particular jouissance from the invocatory drive—both as a writer and in the delicious silence he enjoys when he is together with Marianne.

Given Lukas's relative lack of consideration for her personhood and Marianne's exclusion from a community, Marianne seems even more closely aligned via the drives with Lukas than she had been with Jamie. But again her heart isn't in it. It is as if she has succeeded in killing both the Other's desire and her own by so completely transforming herself into the object of the Other's demand. With Lukas, Marianne performs the rote repetitions of the drive and doggedly represses her desire. Notably, Marianne leaves this hollow pretense of a relationship on her own account this time. Interestingly, the catalyst for her standing up for her desire occurs when, in the midst of being tied up, Lukas says "I love you…and I know you love me" (ibid., p. 203). Horrified, Marianne demands to be unbound and commands "Don't ever talk to me like that again" (ibid., p. 204). Marianne wonders, "how could he tie the notion of love to the basest forms of violence?" (ibid., p. 204). Marianne's assertion of her subjectivity is incited by her anger at the reduction of love to the level of demand and the destruction of the drives and herself as a mere object. Whatever is between them is not about desire, about giving what one does not have, and not about revealing one's lack. Although the love relation cannot be considered without the jouissance of the drives, it also cannot be reduced to it.

For Connell's part, during Marianne's Erasmus year in Sweden he focuses his efforts on being normal, on belonging, and therefore dates Helen. Through hiding from his desire in this fashion he lays the groundwork for his depression, the onset of which is tied to learning of the

suicide of his friend Rob from secondary school. In a clear identification with Rob, he fantasizes "about lying completely still until he died of hydration" (ibid., p. 210). Rob had been "a very insecure person, obsessed with popularity" (ibid., p. 232). Connell visits a therapist, and reveals that he keeps returning to the thought that not only is Rob gone but he cannot have his old life back (ibid., p. 224)—his life in which he felt he belonged and was normal. Connell, like Rob, has been consumed by the inauthentic search for popularity and belonging with the corresponding attempt to have the phallus in the eyes of the social world. The death drive, however, subverts such attempts at every turn. The crisis of his depression therefore announces itself as a crisis of his singular desire and of how he obsessionally relates to his lack and to the death drive.

We are gathered here today to witness the joining of two deaths

Connell's depression lifts when he, as a writer, starts writing again, putting suffering into words. Connell has great trepidation for being exposed as a poor writer, and so it is only after much struggle and the encouragement of a friend (Sadie) that he eventually submits a short story for publication in the college literary magazine. Upon acceptance, albeit under a pseudonym allows it to be published. He takes another risk and applies for an MFA program in New York. In all of these decisions he acts upon his own desire, thus exercising the subjective freedom opened up by be willing to expose his own lack.

Four months later, Connell and Marianne are in his room together and after some fumbling assumptions that each of them wants Marianne to leave, they are finally able to voice their love and desire for one another. However, this blissful union comes to an abrupt end only minutes later when Marianne asks Connell to hit her and he refuses to do so. Although he does not wish to hit her, he knows he enjoys and has "cultivated" the "effortless tyranny over [Marianne] someone who seems to other people, so invulnerable" (ibid., p. 255). As such, Connell's jouissance and drives do align with Marianne's. One's relationship to the real of the drives can be more or less conducive to the survival of the love relation, because in order for the love—and the lovers themselves—to live on, the death drive cannot completely take hold of the subject. Connell's refusal sets in motion Marianne's own refusal of the extremes of the death drive.

What is more, Connell's refusal of Marianne's request for him to beat her is itself a response of love or of recognition of Marianne at the level of being. Lacan's formula for love from Seminar XIX is clearly relevant: "*I ask you to refuse me my offering, because this isn't it*" (2018, p. 77, *italics in original*). At the heart of Marianne's beating fantasy is a man, a powerful master figure who could beat her, but instead holds himself back. Connell reads the desire behind Marianne's demand, and there is a correspondence between her lack and his own.

Being seen at the level of being, or having one's desires and one's drives recognized however, does not feel straightforwardly pleasurable as the exposure of one's lack elicits an intense vulnerability. Feeling horrible shame after Connell's refusal to hit her, Marianne insists on walking home. Marianne is met upon her arrival by Alan, who, in a fit of rage ends up drunkenly giving her what she had asked (Connell) for; after Alan throws a bottle against the

wall she flees to her room, holding the door handle and the weight of her body against the door to prevent Alan from entering, but the handle slips from her hand and the door bangs open, hitting her square in the face and breaking her nose. Blood streaming out of her face and nose, Marianne makes an important and unprecedented move away from her repetition compulsion and towards subjective freedom. Marianne calls Connell, minimizing what happened at first, but asking him to drive over and get her. Upon arrival, he quickly discerns the nature of what had happened and they leave together after Connell threatens Alan with his life. In admitting that she wanted Connell's help, that she chose the bonds of love with him over the shackles of destruction and degradation tying her to Alan and her mother, Marianne gives her desire as an agentic subject to Connell and—at least in that moment—leaves behind the realm of belonging as the trash object.

Both Connell and Marianne, in turn, set a limit to the extreme of the masochism of the death drive while at the same time accepting more than ever that they are bound together in love by the drives. Seven months later, they are still together when Connell announces that he has been accepted into the MFA program in New York. Marianne, we are told, is now capable of believing that Connell loves her, that she is worth loving instead of trash. In spite of Connell giving her the power to tell him to stay, Marianne encourages him to go to New York, to pursue his desire at the expense of their togetherness. Love, here, is depicted as giving up one's own enjoyment, and even the potential longevity of the relationship itself, for the sake of encouraging the other to pursue their desire. "What they have now they can never have back again" (ibid., p. 273). Accepting the essential flux of life, of the death of each present moment and each fictional idea of what one has or does not have in a romantic relationship paradoxically allows for a sinthomatic love connection—one which is bound together by a couple's singular, or, to make a bad pun, coup-ular ("*coup*" being French for "cut") acceptance of the lack of enjoyment at the heart of the death drive.

A Lacanian psychoanalytic vision of subjective freedom coincides with the construction of and identification with the sinthome: as a knotting together of imaginary, symbolic, and real, it is one's radically individual solution to living in a social world with the ultimate real of death. To make freedom possible in life as well as in love, the death drive, the motor force of the unassimilable real, must facilitate the destruction of the ego's fictions and something of an undoing of the self as well as of the Other. In this process, one must have a certain kind of openness to the horror of the real. Neither the self nor the Other can be seen as having the potential for completion; there is no Other who can provide meaning to life. Instead, one radically assumes responsibility for our actions and lives through identifying with the sinthome, the irreducible kernel of the real that resists symbolization or understanding. In other words, one identifies with the perpetual failure to achieve any substantive presence, knotting oneself together in a way that is more inclusive of the death drive itself. When a couple unites in this failure, in the lack at the heart of the self and the Other, in the impossibility of the sexual relation, the regimes of belonging and normality are revealed in their unfreedom. In contrast to the bonds of marriage, the bonds of sinthomatic love—which may of course also involve marriage—are not forged in the vow "'til death do us part" but instead in an implicit acknowledgement of being in each moment joined together in death.

Since at the end of analysis the individual's enslavement to covering over lack is disrupted, resulting in a savoir-faire regarding the real, the process of psychoanalysis typically reduces the occupation of the social link in the form of aggression. However, sinthomatic love, bound in desire and with the real of the death drive, can absolutely involve jouissance in hitting, physically restraining, or otherwise demeaning one another—especially in, but also outside of the bedroom. As such, perhaps somewhere there is a real-life version of Marianne and Connell who are, at this very moment, yelling vulgar nothings to one another: "You freak!" "You weirdo!" "You nothing!"

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