

3

THE IMAGINARY

We begin this chapter with an exploration of Tetsot'ine mourning and the anxiety that their particular encounter with loss creates for the English explorers. The position of mourning is particularly acute for Greenstockings, who transfers the experience of mourning the lost hunters to her own particular struggle in mourning the loss of maternal love. I will make sense of this experience of the loss of maternal love by engaging a theoretical debate between Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler on the status of the imaginary in relation to the symbolic and the real. In particular, I will make use of Butler's critique of Žižek and other Lacanians to highlight the productive nature of the imaginary in its relation to lost possibilities of love.



The English associate the Tetsot'ine with lack. This is made especially evident when the English witness a Tetsot'ine mourning ritual and the encounter the Tetsot'ine have with loss. As they look to the shores of Winter Lake, to the slim, twisted trees, the English continue to be suspicious of the old man Keskarrah and his prediction that they will

soon come upon an esker of large trees to build shelter for the winter. However, just as they discuss these reservations, the Tetsot'ine are gone, having forged ahead to a distant island. The English do not see them, but hear the sound, "a sound they could not order, a tintinabulation of insanities." (61) The Tetsot'ine are on an island and "they were jumping wildly about ... shrieking." (61)

The English cannot order the sound, and Hood cannot order his sketch. He cannot capture "a coherent quadrant of the world through which he was being carried." (61) The vistas ahead of him are widening and Hood feels himself "tugged towards a periphery in the corner of his eye that, when he yielded, was still never there." (62) This is a strange drawing experience for Hood, one where "he felt his body slowly tighten, twist; as if it were forming into a gradual spiral that might turn his head off at the neck." (62) Just "[l]ike one of those pathetic little trees." (62) Hood experiences an affective transfer to the trees on the shore of the lake. Although he discovers "that perfect sphere of unbordered sameness" so often associated with northern tundra, at that very moment of this discovery, he also understands "that the continuous world was, nevertheless, not at all or anywhere ever the same." (62) We have already referred (in chapter 1) to the confusion of boundaries that is experienced in the Canadian North because of the distinctive confluence of land, river, lake, and ocean. The confusion of boundaries leads to a confusion of awareness. And the confusion of [boundaries?] makes for a unique mode of desire in the drawing experience, one that lacks the dependable frame to capture an image. Hood experiences disorientation, a loss of control, one that he is not used to.

Ahead on the island, the Tetsot'ine are experiencing loss as well. From one loss to another. Two Tetsot'ine hunters have been killed and the distant lake has not yet given them back. The English now witness what they call "Indian grief." (63) The English officers "could not in a lifetime have imagined such grief." (63) The Tetsot'ine

were overwhelmed with bellows and weeping and screams ... with lodgepoles being broken and skins ripped, kettles crushed, axes splintered, dogs throats being slit, and everything, any thing or animal that came to hand, smashed and torn and bleeding, being flung everywhere into the lake. The small island blazed with the necessity of destruction. The Yellowknives

were attacking their canoes, breaking the very guns with which they were to hunt. (63)

Why are the Tetsot'ine making themselves poor? Judith Butler, in *The Psychic Life of Power* (23–25) follows Freud's analysis and speaks of the difference between a mourning of the lost object and a melancholia that signals uncompleted grief. For Butler, mourning involves a longing to grieve, not just the loss of the object which has died, but, through a grieving of the lost object, a grieving of the lost possibilities of love, those objects one was never able to love. This is an experience of the loss of the loss, an awareness through grieving of the always already lost object. Melancholia, on the other hand, marks an inability to grieve, an inability to grieve not only the loss of the object but also the lost possibilities of love. Melancholia represents an attachment, an attachment to the attachment that is broken or lost, a stubborn attachment.

The Tetsot'ine in their grief have attempted to destroy their possessions. They destroy the order and security that possessions symbolically bring to the psyche. They destroy the symbolic law of society that depends for its reproduction on acquiring possessions. The symbolic law is grounded in the power of the father, where the father's word considers itself master to the screaming voices of the Tetsot'ine. We could also say that the English horror at the Tetsot'ine mourning speaks to a melancholic mood, an attachment to the father's word as the symbolic law of society, an attachment to the master's discourse that forecloses the route back through dispossession and screaming to the lost possibilities of love.

The attachment the English have to the word of the father is demonstrated when, after leaving the Tetsot'ine to continue their grief, they paddle on and at the end of Winter Lake they find Keskarrah's forest, exactly where the old man had promised it would be. The place was ideal: "stream water, many large trees, the shelter of the esker against the northern winds and its dry, coarse sand for a foundation ... [and] excellent white clay ... for chinking between house logs." (67) The contrast here is stark. The Tetsot'ine experience the loss of loss, while the English begin to build a winter settlement and give thanks to the

father as Franklin, their commander, performs Sunday services. This invocation of the father's word reinstitutes a symbolic order of the father, a control and permanence for the English in the face of the troubling sense of loss that they witnessed in the Tetsot'ine. Instead of the screams and wailing dance, the English have the words carefully prescribed by the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. The anxiety experienced by the English in the face of Tetsot'ine mourning indicates an inability to mourn, and the attempt to reinstitute a particular form of melancholy, one that, through a stubborn attachment, sets up the word of the father in place of the lost object and the lost possibilities of love.

This inability to mourn the lost object is a distinctive feature of English masculinity. In fact, it is an enduring feature of masculinity of not only the English men, but also the Tetsot'ine men.

Greenstockings emerges from the communal grief cleansed. She feels that the grief has allowed her "to release all the accumulating weight of stolid living." (72) Yet her cleansing is a very distinctive cleansing: "she felt clean, strong enough to do anything, to carry anything, any man who thought himself powerful enough to climb onto her." (72) Her mourning, her cleansing, has, in a sense, wiped away any internalized normative expectations concerning her gendered identity, that which might be expected of a woman by both the Tetsot'ine men and the English men, both Broadface and Back.

Broadface is beautiful to Greenstockings, but his face is still that of a man. While making love, Broadface hisses in Greenstockings' ear that he is looking for a son. She wants nothing to do with this, and throws him off. She says to him: "At least your words are big." (73) In rage he draws his knife, but she is too quick, already poised with a knife between his legs: "no man is quicker than a woman." (73) The hunter's knife is no match for the knife that skins, the knife that can easily castrate the man and reduce his power to simply words. Broadface continues with words, words which are designed to performatively bring about that which the norm of female subservience requires: "You're my woman.... You'll want me, you'll be moaning for me again." (73) Greenstockings responds with contempt: "Words.... Always your big words." (73) Men and big words.

Broadface and Back are alike as men. As Back stares at her, Greenstockings thinks of the time he tried to take her. Back, like all the other men, would like to take her. Back is brave, and he sits in his canoe "with his head so high." (74) Yet, Back's phallic power is

like Broadface's words, powerless, helpless before the knife. Or so Greenstockings hopes.

Greenstockings hopes the English are dead before they kill everything here. Keskarrah responds: "You're just a woman," adding that "every woman knows what she knows." (75) He agrees with her in her assessment of the English, agrees with her knowledge: "I don't understand how we'll be able to live in our world with These English." (75) They bring along all this stuff, attached to their possessions which keep them from experiencing radical loss. And they are "always making marks, marks on paper that any drop of water can destroy." They are always depending on the word to still the restless forces that might bring about a plunge into the abyss. "They always have to hold something in their hands, something to make marks on, or to look at things or through knowable instruments." (75)

Keskarrah dreamed that Greenstockings would be a woman. She came from between her mother's legs: "And there you were, a small bloody body not wanting to come out between your mother's legs. Where I had already been quite often." (76) Keskarrah recognizes the knowledge of Greenstockings as a woman's knowledge that he too has accessed through dreaming. And that knowledge has its origins in the mother, so that if he has been able to partake in it through his dreaming, it is because he has been in the mother, in the same place that Greenstockings has been, and, as we shall see, wants to return.

Birdseye is not so sure of Keskarrah's participation. She says: "For men, women are *just* places to go, go in and go out." (76) Keskarrah does not believe that this is what he has done. He says that "women are the place of living and men want to be there too, then they are both truly alive." (77) However, Keskarrah believes that fathers have a privileged position over that of the daughter in relation to the mother: "Women just come out of there, but a father is always first inside a mother, children understand that." (77) According to Keskarrah, men want to go in and women want them to because that is the source of longing, of a desire which keeps things alive. Although the daughter's desire for the mother is analogous, Keskarrah believes that the male's desire is to be given priority in speaking of desire in general. In the last instance, desire is to be defined by the father's right to be first.

Keskarrah believes that the mutual desire between men and women in the Tetsot'ine world is different from the desire of the

English: “These English are human, but they are...different. As if they could travel all their lives without needing women to live.” (77) Keskarrah considers himself as a Tetsot’ine male, as a Tetsot’ine father, to be different from the English.

Yet, Greenstockings objects to Keskarrah’s comments, claiming that the English do not live without women. She says that “they just take women anywhere they travel.” (77) To Greenstockings this is what is to be expected of all men, where women are just places to go in and out. So, whereas Keskarrah has tried to differentiate the Tetsot’ine male desire, and his own in particular, from the English male desire, Greenstockings and Birdseye see the two desires as the same.

Birdseye, with a woman’s knowledge, sees what is happening with the English, especially with their instruments, their technology: “Maybe through those instruments the sun lets them see how the world is. For them always there, always the same.” (78) Keskarrah is “dumbfounded.” (78) He had never considered that the instruments were deceiving, and he did not in particular consider the way in which these instruments “might make [his] world more fixed than his own awareness could recognize.” (78) If the sun lets the English see the world in its permanence, then the sun deceives, because the world that the Tetsot’ine live and thrive in is always changing, part of the longing, part of the mourning and then the longing. And the power of the sun that the English harness can deceive. In particular, the power of Richard Sun, the doctor, can deceive. Just as Keskarrah has been deceived by the power of the instruments, so now he is deceived by the power of English medicine.

This is what Greenstockings sees anyway: “if he [Keskarrah] does not believe in the power of These English, why does he go every day to Richard Sun for another portion.” (79) The portion of salve that he hopes will cure the illness Birdseye has acquired, even though that very illness was brought by the English.

And as she applies the salve to her mother’s face, Greenstockings realizes that her present relationship with her mother, where she applies English medicine to an English disease, is so different from a previous relationship with her mother. It is so different “from the memory of lying against Birdseye’s back under the furs of the animals.” (79) Back then, “when they were all the furry animals sleeping, dreaming together curled together skin to skin.” (79) Back then, “she was a skin of happiness folded into exquisite awareness within sleep.”

(79) These memories of her mother contrast with her later experiences with men, none of whom “has ever again helped her remember such anticipation.” (79)

These feelings of maternal care are feelings Greenstockings felt “as an unthinking child.” (79) She longs for that kind of thinking again where “she can think of...nothing.” (79) Is this desire for the mother a regressive infantilization of Greenstockings as subject? Or, alternatively, is she returning to an imaginary point zero, where new possibilities for subjectivity can be conceived? More generally, does the return to the mother represent a foreclosing of access to the ground of desire in the non-object, closing down the route to new possibilities for desire, or is the return to the mother the very route by which the ground of desire in the non-object is accessed, thus allowing new possibilities for desire?



Judith Butler can again help us, this time in making sense of the role of the imaginary. In her article “Arguing with the Real” (1993) Butler claims that the work of Žižek ends up “foregrounding the symbolic law and the real, and backgrounding the imaginary.” (188) Before we pursue Butler’s critique we should specify exactly what is meant by the concept of the real.

The concept of the real comes from Lacanian psychoanalysis (see Lacan 2002, Fink 1995, and Dean 2000). The real is that which is both prior to the expression of symbolic language and which emerges when symbolic language fails. In a sense, the development of the subject in symbolic language is made possible by an endless misrecognition of the real for what we more commonly call “reality.” We are so reliant on our linguistic and social version of “reality” that the entry of the real into our lives is radically disruptive. All of our linguistic and social structures necessarily fail in relation to the real.

The real is so elusive to our understanding because it emerges in the experience of the subject only after his/her subjection to symbolic language. This experience of the real occurs through a break in symbolic language. It is when symbolic language breaks down for the subject that the subject experiences the real.

How then do we gain knowledge of the real as a critical force? The specific psychoanalytic answer coming from the Lacanian tradition is that we gain experience of the real through a special type of object: the *objet a*. *Objet* is French for “object” while *a* refers to the

French word “*autre*,” meaning other. Therefore, with the *objet a* we have “the object of the other.” The *objet a* is an object of desire which is radically other to our everyday reality and our everyday self. It is thus no ordinary object, but an object that is strange and unsettling to our usual sensibilities.

The value of the *objet a* is that it has no inherent relation to “reality” and, more specifically, reality as expressed in the present normative order. Desire for the *objet a* in relation to the real is a desire that places us in contact with the void or lack that is the ground of Being. This means that we as subjects do not control the *objet a*; rather, the *objet a* is **always already lost** because as it expresses itself it immediately cuts away from the control of the subject who desires it. Due to its power of attraction the *objet a* elicits the desire of the subject but is immediately cut away from the subject into the real such that we could say that the subject does not really control the object but the object (in its relation to the real) controls the subject. A common response of our society to the experience subjects might have of objects being cut away into the real is to domesticate these strange objects by replacing them with normatively acceptable objects of desire. To counter this, psychoanalytic criticism seeks to highlight and emphasize the relationship of the subject to these strange objects that exceed the symbolic order.

To return to Butler’s critique, the standard Lacanian presentation views the symbolic law as subversive of a fixation on image-constancy engendered by the imaginary. By subverting imaginary illusions, the symbolic law places us in contact with the real, that which is unsymbolizable, and because of this, the source for ever new productions of language and desire within the symbolic. It is not that the symbolic directly hits the real. Symbolic forms hit the real indirectly, through their subversion of the imaginary. And it is not that the real is the source of desire. Hitting the real, if only indirectly, opens the space for new forms of desire within the symbolic.

In contrast to this perspective, Butler wants to highlight the work of the imaginary in relation to the real and oppose what she sees as the Lacanian emphasis on the relation between the symbolic and the real.

Some Lacanians might claim that Butler misconstrues Lacan’s notion of the imaginary. However, I think she does so for productive, and possibly, strategic reasons. In *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), Butler refers to the imaginary “as the permanent possibility of

misrecognition, that is, the incommensurability between symbolic demand ... and the instability and unpredictability of its appropriation.” (96) Symbolic identity is “derailed in the imaginary” and thus “the imaginary signifies the impossibility of the discursive – that is, symbolic – constitution of identity.” (96, 97) There is subsequently an equation made between the imaginary and the unconscious where the unconscious is understood as “that which thwarts any effort of the symbolic to constitute sexed identity coherently and fully, an unconscious indicated by the slips and gaps that characterize the workings of the imaginary in the unconscious.” (97)

This seems to be a reversal of the standard presentation of the imaginary by many Lacanians, where the imaginary and the process of misrecognition are associated as stabilization of identity into a coherent whole that wards off awareness of the real. As I said, though, this reversal could be done for productive purposes. If Butler wants to shift the analysis away from the relationship between the symbolic and the real (with the imaginary ignored), and toward the relationship between the symbolic and the imaginary, things change quite a bit.

For Butler, the symbolic is a historically specific set of norms or laws that foreclose and abject certain possibilities for the subject. The imaginary represents the taking up of those possibilities denied by the symbolic within a specific political practice. Take homosexual love. If homosexual love is foreclosed and abjected by a reigning historical symbolic, then affirming homosexual love represents an imaginary turning to those lost potentialities of love denied by the oedipal dynamic of compulsive heterosexuality.

Instead of the lost possibility of homosexual love we might highlight here the lost possibility of the mother’s love. It then becomes possible to view the plural forms of identification made possible by the bonds of attachment in the maternal, and the problems that ensue when those forms of identification are denied expression, as an imaginary base for later resistance to the symbolic norm. Although Butler herself does not highlight this connection of the imaginary and the maternal, the logic of her argument can certainly lead in that direction.

Here, we can in some way see a rehabilitation of the notion of the real, now no longer in alliance just with the symbolic, but with the imaginary as well. It also means that we rethink the bonds of attachment that are part of the maternal, not as leading to an imaginary misrecognition that thwarts a relationship with the openness of

the real, but as an imaginary misrecognition that is directed to the constraints of a particular dominant symbolic, and one that thus allows for a productive relationship with the openness of the real.

These reflections of Butler seem to be at odds with the particular form of Lacanian thought endorsed by Žižek. Žižek, in *The Fragile Absolute* (2002), highlights a radical cut from a world of imaginary identifications, and seems to endorse a particular form of sacrifice that can only come through the symbolic. Imaginary forms of identification, like those that flow from the attachment bonds of the maternal, prevent an encounter with what Žižek calls the traumatic event of love. The issue of trauma is very important because Žižek believes that traumatic experiences herald a break in the symbolic chain which has the beneficial effect of providing us with an encounter of the real and the possibility then of subjectivizing the trauma without rendering us psychotic.

In a sense, Butler and Žižek agree that possibilities emerge through a break in the symbolic. However, for Žižek, the break with the symbolic has already been prepared for by a break with the imaginary. It is this double break in the form of trauma that allows the subjects in their destitution to experience in a radically contingent way the real. For Butler, the break in the symbolic is aided by an appeal to the imaginary where an encounter with the real occurs when the symbolic is derailed by the imaginary.

Thus, if we can say that Greenstockings experiences her relationship with (some) men as traumatic (her constantly being taken), then her attempt to turn to the memory of her mother would constitute, in Žižek's eyes, a misdirection, one that flees from an encounter with the traumatic real. However, if Greenstockings' return to the memory of her mother is a return to an imaginary image that allows her once again to retrieve lost possibilities of love, then the effect is not a misdirection, but in fact a movement toward the openness provided by an encounter with the real. This return to the lost possibilities of love in the maternal is important in understanding the unfolding relationship of love between Hood and Greenstockings. This raises the possibility of thinking of their love as a love that recaptures the lost possibilities of maternal love and by so doing places them in contact with the real as a source of freedom.