

Section

2

INTERSUBJECTIVE
LOVE

1

RECOGNITION

The quest for gold is a central theme in *The Man from the Creeks*, since it tells a story about the Klondike Gold Rush by reworking, through narrative, the Robert Service poem “The Shooting of Dan McGrew.” The quest for gold that drives the characters of Lou, Peek, Ben, Gussie, and Dan in Kroetsch’s narrative is no simple quest for the jackpot of money. It is a quest for the ultimate object of desire, that which will completely fulfill desire. Yet, gold is not that ultimate object itself, for the object that completely fulfills only exists in the real, and thus is a non-object that can only be approximated through substitutes. Gold is, thus, to use Lacanian language, the *objet a*, an object of desire which stands as a substitute for the ultimate non-object of desire in the real.

It is in this sense that Kroetsch in his essay “Why I Went Up North” speaks of the quest for gold as quest for blankness and erasure. To go North and search for gold is to seek an unravelling of self in the hope that you are able to catch hold of the freedom acquired when you pass from the possession of gold to the real of desire.

Kroetsch thinks of this quest as a form of heroism, yet, when we turn to *The Man from the Creeks*, we soon realize that the distinctive heroism of the North that searches for the freedom of desire is intricately bound up with the search for love and home. This does not mesh with the common understanding that Kroetsch celebrates post-modern heroes that are bent on unravelling conventional definitions of self and desire. However, as Tiefensee has pointed out, Kroetsch's novels display a strong affinity for the kind of dialectical movements associated with Hegel; in fact, we have in Kroetsch not postmodern heroes, but Hegelian heroes. And it is significant that Hegelian heroes establish their heroism primarily through partnership.

In this first chapter of Section Two we will concentrate on the theme of recognition. Kroetsch's novel begins with the emerging form of recognition between Lou and Ben as they travel north to the Klondike. Drawing on the work of the psychoanalytic theorist Jessica Benjamin (1985), I will argue for an affirmative understanding of our identification with others and our dependency on their recognition. I will propose that, within the context of mutuality, identification and recognition can produce a negation where the other emerges as an outside other who can provide the subject with ideals of change that are transformative. I want to defend the connection of recognition and negativity and show how this connection is demonstrated in the ongoing relationship between Lou and Ben.



The first partnership established in *The Man from the Creeks* is that between mother and child, the bond between Lou and Peek. Lou and Peek are on a ship travelling north to Skagway. They are on their way to the Klondike to get rich on gold. It is Peek's birthday, and Lou decides to give him a birthday gift, some cinnamon rolls stolen from the ship's kitchen. Lou's gift is a gift coming from the loving mother, an attempt by the mother to confirm and solidify the bond the son has with her. Yet, this is a bonding that quickly unravels in the face of the law, when Lou is caught as a thief.

The particular unravelling of this mother-son partnership in the face of the law is connected to issues of oedipalization. In the face of questioning by "some guy in a uniform" over the missing cinnamon rolls, Lou attempts to maintain the structural position of the father, even though the material father is absent. Peek whispers to her that he doesn't have a father. Lou responds: "Everyone has a father." (6)

In a sense, Lou and Peek, mother and son, form a dyad, yet Lou insists that they are part of a triad that includes the father as the third. If the presence of the third represents the law of society, then Lou's response to the uniformed man of the law is an attempt to normalize her and Peek's status.

Despite her attempts to invoke normality, Lou is accused of being a thief, of being contrary to the law. The stampedeers on the ship are all gold-hungry. Lou, in her status as thief, becomes, in a sense, the cause of their desire. They do not know where the gold is; it is the missing object of their desire. Lou becomes the *objet a*, the spectral stand-in for the real, the shadow that blocks access to the object in the real. The stampedeers shout at Lou in anger because her position as thief is bound up with her position as mother. The woman who loved and stole reminds them of the loved ones they left behind and reminds them of how broke they all are now. The stain at the heart of the real must be removed, must be sacrificed. So the stampedeers intend to make Lou walk the gangplank.

Enter the stranger, Ben, whom we first encounter through his voice. Žižek has emphasized the notion of the traumatic voice, the voice whose presence is upsetting, which haunts the scene in such a way as to send us headlong into an encounter with the traumatic real itself. (1996) The stranger's voice is upsetting, but in a way that does not conform to Žižek's notion. His voice "didn't quite fit in with that crowd" (12), but the reason for the lack of fit is that, in comparison to the stampedeers on the boat about to enact crude justice, the stranger was "listening as well as talking". (12) His was "a searching voice" one that was a "shade too gentle" for the mob. (12) He was a Klondiker, "but of a strange kind." (12)

The strangeness and the non-conformity of the stranger's voice come from its ground not in trauma, as Žižek would have it, but in intersubjectivity. The stranger Ben directs his presence toward recognition of the other, Lou, so that her legitimacy as a subject is confirmed, despite the attempts by the stampedeers to deny it. I will have much more to say about intersubjectivity later, but at this point we can register an important theoretical dilemma: does strangeness and being ill-fit for the norm require the wrecking of normativity altogether and a traumatic passage into the void of the real, or does it require a doubling back to the norm, a passage through the norm toward freedom? The stranger Ben seems, at this point, to take the latter route, and does so through establishing a partnership with Lou.

The stranger's intervention, however, will require a payment. He says: "I'll pay this woman's fare." (12) Yet, when asked to produce the money payment, "the stranger offered his two empty hands." (13) He has no gold for payment of the debt owed by Lou's transgression. However, instead of gold, the stranger has whiskey to offer. All the other stampedeers have carried with them the required grubstake to get them to the Klondike and to survive there materially as they sought their gold. The stranger, instead of a grubstake, has whiskey, and the stampedeers are more than willing to wipe out Lou's debt in exchange for the sweet liquid. If Lou's transgression reminds them of their impoverishment, whiskey can surely make them feel rich again, if only momentarily. The "ecstasy" and "unspeakable bliss" (16) found in whiskey serves here as a seductive displacement for the object gold, which is itself a displacement for the ultimate non-object of desire. The stampedeers have two barrels of whiskey, and Ben, Lou, and Peek are lowered in a boat to fend for themselves. They drift to the shoreline with their provisions.

It is soon discovered on the shore that Ben's grubstake contains none of the essentials of material survival, like flour and sugar that all Klondikers are supposed to have. Each Klondiker is required to have in his possession a year's supply of materials. However, Ben explains that all the boxes and sacks he has brought along are packed with sawdust and kegs of whiskey. The third has whiskey, not food. This brings to mind the basic distinction between need and desire. Need is immediately satisfied, like the mother's breast-milk for the child, like flour and sugar in the grubstake. Desire is always fulfilled (never fully, of course) through mediation. You need food to survive, but you desire whiskey, because it is whiskey that reminds you of the ultimate non-object. Whiskey reminds you of the real, not only because of the intoxication of the drink, but also because, and most perhaps more importantly, whiskey has a relationship with the more sought-after object of desire, gold. Whiskey as an object of desire works because you can trade with it. Ben explains to Lou and Peek that whiskey can be used as a trading item to get them to the gold that they want the most. One signifier of desire can be traded for another more important signifier of desire, in order to move closer the true cause of desire.

Lou's opinion of whiskey is related to her opinion of men and bars. Men frequent bars to drink whiskey and thereby forgo their role as fathers in the home. In other words, whiskey trades on male narcissism where the man removes himself from the partnership with the

woman and the home to find an easy route to bliss through the bottle. Whiskey as an object of desire signifies for Lou a lack of partnership and a lack of recognition that comes through partnership. In her experience, whiskey has meant that the partner vacates the scene.

However, Ben disagrees with Lou's assessment of whiskey and seeks to convince her otherwise. He tells her that he has no intention of drinking the whiskey. He says to her, "We need it, partner." (29) Ben wants to be partners with Lou, and has no intention of leaving the scene. Lou knows of the advice that you don't get to the Klondike by yourself, but she is skeptical of Ben's advances. She asks Ben, "And what will this partnership cost me?" (30) She fears that the kind of partnership most men are interested in has nothing to do with mutuality but with finding a slave. Ben protests that he desires a mutual partnership and Lou finds her self drawn to his message: "she was listening." (31)

We can observe here the formation of a significant partnership that has as its third mediating element the presence of whiskey. A partnership with whiskey is to be distinguished from a lonely male with whiskey. They both seek a route to the cause of desire, but the partnership with whiskey establishes a triad that has as one of its distinguishing features a fundamental reliance on the intersubjective recognition of the partners. On the other hand, the lonely male with whiskey seeks to find desire outside its recognition of the concrete other, outside its relationship to this social ground. He wants to go straight to the source without mediation through the other, especially the feminine other.

On the shore, Lou and Ben, according to Peek, are "about to found a city." (36) They are hardly in a rush to get out of there. They first want to build a home. This home has whiskey as its ground. They "put together a snug-enough shelter." (43) It is even "homey." (43) And as they settle in, Ben and Lou begin to flirt. They do so by exchanging numbers about how the whiskey could be traded. Their desire for each other is enacted through an exchange relation. The whiskey brings them together. They can then sit around the fire, not drinking whiskey, but talking whiskey, a pure exchange relation. Ben and Lou together begin "calculating, guessing, journeying ... speculating." (44) These are all forms of mediated desire with whiskey the key third element and with home emerging as the ground.

Peek, who is narrating this story, tells us that he had been partners with Lou (even bed-partners on the boat), but that now his

position is being usurped by Ben. In the new home on the shore, Ben and Lou put their quilts together to make one bed, with Peek now sleeping outside. Peek is not at all disturbed by this removal. In fact, he feels quite liberated now that he is no longer bound to a partnership of symbiosis with the mother. His desire is freed up to explore the exciting outside world while his mother Lou is preoccupied with her new partner. And he seems to be quite successful in a way, because he finds clams to eat, and a grizzly bear teaches him how to catch salmon (and isn't the grizzly here a unique kind of partner for Peek?).



The search for gold by Ben and Lou and Peek is a richly symbolic one that indicates a distinctive relationship to the northern frontier, one that involves the experience of partnership, the relationship of one subject to the other. Jessica Benjamin, in her work *Like Subjects, Love Objects* (1985), asserts that although the subject may think it is self-constituting, it is invariably related to the other, first through identifications, and second through dependence of the recognition of the other. Only the second relationship can lead to what Benjamin calls intersubjectivity. Identification with the other can mean incorporating the other into the self and demanding, in a gesture of omnipotence, that the other be just like the self. Dependency on the recognition of the other can only occur through what Benjamin, using Hegelian terms, calls negation, where the other is an independent other who is able to act on the subject in such a way as to change the subject. (231) Thus there is a distinction to be made between “the other whom we create through our identifications and the concrete outside other.” (233)

Recognition in relation to the negativity of the other is crucial because recognition can lead to a problematic “Hegelian synthesis” where the other is incorporated into the self and mastered. Identification then becomes a closed circuit of identity where the non-identical is excluded and we arrive at the problem of the imperious absolute subject. As Benjamin says, “if the other were not a problem for the subject, the subject would again be absolute.” (233)

It is thus only when two concrete subjects enter into a partnership where each becomes a negative pole for the other that intersubjective recognition occurs. Is this what Ben and Lou are experiencing? Is this what Kroetsch is asserting about the quest for gold through

their experience? Are they northern heroes in Kroetsch's sense? Remember Tiefensee's critique of Kroetsch. Her assertion is that the dialectical act of negation in Kroetsch's novels produces heroes who incorporate the other into the self, returning to a mastering identity that is unchanged by the experience. She is certainly correct to point out that this is a possibility within the structure of the Hegelian dialectic, a criticism I will return to later. Yet, she fails to mention the other possibility of dialectical unfolding, the other possibility of negativity, where the other is recognized in its otherness and fundamentally changes the structure of self, so that the return to self is a non-identical return. It is my belief that the partnership of Ben and Lou, and other partnerships we have yet to discuss (e.g., Peek and Gussie Meadows) are expressions of this second movement of the dialectic and negativity.

