

# 2

## INTERSUBJECTIVITY

This chapter deals with the concept of intersubjectivity. The concept of intersubjectivity is closely tied to the workings of the dialectic. There are, however, different ways of interpreting the dialectic. Against the grain of Tiefensee's critique (1994, chapter 4) that Kroetsch's stories give us heroes whose dialectical struggles with otherness end up conquering and mastering otherness, I will argue that, in *The Man from the Creeks*, we are given heroes whose dialectical struggles with otherness do not conquer and master otherness, but reveal an intersubjective ground of love.

The debate over the dialectic will involve a turn to interpretations of Hegel. I will first look at Žižek's fascinating Lacanian defense of Hegel (1989, 1993), where he sees the move from external reflection to determinate reflection as the production of an alienated image grounded in pure negativity, from which the subject reconciles himself with his lack.

Yet, whereas Žižek's Lacanian reading of Hegel denies the value of intersubjectivity, believing that the bonds of intersubjectivity are

tied to imaginary forms of misrecognition, I want to argue for the value of intersubjectivity in understanding the nature of Hegelian heroes. We will trace the emergence in Hegel's *Logic* of an intersubjective structure, where the final movement of the "determinations of reflection" is established through the concept of "ground." This allows for a relation between conflicting determinations that define subjects and a commonality that lies beyond singular perspectives. We will refer to this relation and this commonality as one of "love," a love that does not cancel the difference of subjects but retains difference through the dynamics of intersubjectivity. Lastly, I will argue that Hegelian heroes generally, and the heroes in *The Man from the Creek* particularly, do not wish to close the gap between subjects through absolute knowing (Tiefensee and the critics of Hegel), nor are they seeking to work through negativity to the prime subjective awareness of lack (Žižek). Rather, they seek out partnerships of love that form the ground for the freedom of their desire.



On the trek up and through Chilkoot Pass, the stamperders are struck by an avalanche. Avalanches can wreak havoc on body and spirit, and this one determines very particular unravellings.

Although Ben, Lou, and Peek have for days been climbing "The Stairs" – like other stamperders, hauling their provisions on their backs, small load by small load – they miss being caught in the avalanche because Peek is sick. Peek has the shits. He's leaking big-time, unable to contain himself, unable to keep stuff locked inside. Yet, this leaking, this uncontainment, is itself contained within the tent-home that Ben and Lou have constructed at the bottom of the Pass. It's good to let it all out, cleanse the body and spirit of all the shit that has accumulated. But it's also good to feel safe in a space that holds you while you unravel, a space that contains the uncontainment.

The avalanche brings about another unravelling, different from Peek, but not unrelated. During the search for those caught in the avalanche, Lou comes back to the tent in a foul mood. She says to Peek, "They found your father." (101) The missing third that is nevertheless present seems here to be asserting its rights. Peek replies, "you never told me about *my* father." (102, emphasis in text) Lou asserts that "[e]verybody has a father." (102) The father who was

always missing for Peek is now found, but the discovery reveals a dead father, a frozen phallus that is impotent yet important.

His importance for Peek lies in Peek's discovery that there are physical characteristics that he shares with his father – stringy brown hair, strong nose, bold ears. Yet, the story goes on to add that Peek's father, J Badger, shit when he died. Despite the imaginary lure of recognition provided by hair, nose, and ears, Peek discovers that big daddy phallus is just a piece of frozen shit.

Daddy as shit is intimately connected to Peek's shitting. At the same time as daddy phallus unravels to reveal itself as frozen and dead, Peek experiences an unravelling that is very much alive, one that burns through his ass. On the one hand, father is frozen and dead; on the other hand, son is running hot and alive. And it is significant that the alive unravelling of Peek – who is beginning to understand how useless and necessary the daddy phallus is – is contained within the tent-home, held by the presence of Lou and Ben. Two insights form here simultaneously: one, the necessary presence and subsequent realization of the frozen phallus, and two, the necessary presence and subsequent realization of the maternal container. The story reveals that both are required for the free flow of desire.

After making the final trek up Chilkoot Pass with their grubstake, Ben receives a letter from the customs agents that is written by a woman named Gussie Meadows. It reads: "Dangerous Dan is worried about my travelling alone. He says I should try to partner up with you." (113)

With reference to the debate between Derrida and Lacan about the status of the letter's arrival, Žižek (1992) claims that Derrida is wrong to criticize Lacan's contention that the letter always arrives at its destination. This is not a move into transcendental thinking, according to Žižek, because although the message always gets to where it's supposed to go, its arrival is marked by a fundamental incompleteness or lack that marks its connection to the real of desire. We could say that in the case of Gussie Meadows' letter, the letter arrives, but arrives incomplete, thereby setting in motion an unfolding of desire. Peek tells us that "It was Gussie Meadows who lured us on." (115) On to Lake Lindeman and Bennett City.

The letter arrives incomplete because we encounter very different interpretations as to the meaning of the message in the letter. And much of the conflict over interpretation has to do with the meaning

of the “partnership” mentioned in the letter. Ben believes that it announces that Dan wants to get his “crowd” together in Dawson City in order to continue together, as a group, their quest for the gold. Ben’s assumption is that there is a real intersubjective desire on Dan’s part to bring everyone together to benefit equally in the riches of gold.

Lou interprets things much differently, and it is her interpretation that seems to foretell more of the story’s subsequent unfolding, particularly in the way it is both right and wrong, or better, in the way it is right in being wrong. Contradicting Ben, Lou argues that the letter says nothing about getting a “crowd” together, only about Dan’s intention of getting Gussie Meadows to Dawson City. Delivering Dan’s possession, whom Lou calls a “namby-pamby fancy doll” (113), is the real meaning of Ben’s “precious message.” (115) The obvious implication here is of jealousy on Lou’s part, jealousy for a woman referred to by the men as a “looker” entering into the intersubjective dynamics of the group to lure the desire, not only of Dan, but also possibly of Ben. Yet, as we shall see, the incompleteness of Gussie Meadows’ letter and the desire for partnership is not so much about Dan in Dawson City, or even Ben, but instead concerns Peek, and specifically, Peek’s sexual awakening.

Lou is right to see Gussie Meadows as a troubling element for the existing partnerships, but this trouble has less to do with her relationship with Ben (Lou thinking that Ben might chase after Gussie, ending their partnership), and more to do with the disturbance of the tie between mother and son. Lou’s jealousy will turn out to have been significantly displaced, because her jealousy is for the partner who is a rival to the mother’s love. This may not result in the death of her partnership with Peek, but may rather involve its displacement onto another scene, and its extension to wider networks of love and desire.

Different interpretations of the letter lead to differential unfoldings of partnership where love and desire are implicated. The letter arrives in such a way as to enact an interpretive play in which various partnerships, various intersubjective bonds, are released to the vagaries of love. Kroetsch’s story of the search for gold is a story in which numerous partnerships of love unfold in a movement of the dialectic that establishes the identity of what we have called Hegelian heroes. Despite Dianne Tiefensee’s suspicion (1994, chapter 4) that Kroetsch’s

stories bring us Hegelian heroes who triumph over difference and rule imperiously, there is in this story the emergence of partnerships of love in which difference and contingency are not sacrificed but celebrated within the context of bonding.



Tiefensee claims that Kroetsch's work indulges in a deconstruction of meaning in order to return to the source of desire. However, this deconstructive movement is, in her view, grounded in voice and presence. Voice has the power to attain presence through the telling of a story in which everything is undone and we arrive back at nothingness, the origin of desire. Tiefensee believes that this arrival back at the beginning ends up reconciling the divisions generated in the story so that we arrive once again at a non-divisive origin.

According to Tiefensee, the divisions in Kroetsch's stories are produced through a constant doubling, a doubling that invariably introduces a third element, and hence, produces a movement through triangulation. The presence of the triangle evokes the image of the dialectic. The dialectic works, as we all know, through negation. Tiefensee believes that in Kroetsch's stories the work of the dialectic serves to negate the self in order to return to the self. This, in fact, is the quest of the masculine hero. The hero pursues the full presence of self by positing the other as his own other and subsequently emerges heroic and victorious over the other.

Tiefensee contends that, rather than getting postmodern heroes in Kroetsch's works, we really end up with Hegelian heroes, men who use the drama of the story and the otherness available through the storytelling to conquer and master the other. Tiefensee's critique of Kroetsch sounds much like the critique of Savran concerning post-WWII American culture. To connect Tiefensee with Savran we can ask the following question: Is the masochistic logic in Kroetsch one that sacrifices the conventional masculine self in order to recapture a conquering masculinity associated with the oedipal father? In particular, is the story that unfolds in *The Man from the Creeks*, a story that charts a movement to the North, no different from the stories of the movement to the American western frontier, a story of the triumph of oedipal masculinity?

In order to better situate ourselves in this debate, especially as it concerns the workings of the dialectic, it may be helpful to turn to

interpretations of Hegel's *Logic*. If Tiefensee is wrong about Kroetsch, perhaps she is wrong about Hegel as well.

One possible route to defending Hegel is through Žižek. In such works as *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993), Žižek has argued that the vaunted self-reflection of Hegel consists in the continual failure of self-reflection, where self-consciousness confronts its own ungraspability, confronts the pathological stain that is the subject.

With reference to Hegel's *Logic*, Žižek maintains that "determinate reflection" is misunderstood. It is often believed (especially in left-Hegelian circles) that "determinate reflection" results in the elimination of alienation. Alienation is itself produced through the workings of "external reflection" where the essence is outside or opposed to the subject. This can be overcome, so it is thought (e.g., by Feuerbach), by the subject reappropriating the powers alienated in the other. Žižek finds this reappropriation problematic and contrary to Hegel's logic. According to Žižek's reading, we move from external to determinate reflection by experiencing the alienated image as the inverse of the essence as pure negativity. In other words, to use Lacanian language, the alienated image is established at the level of fantasy through the forms of the *objet a*, in response to which the subject does not attempt reconciliation through the means of a reflective mirror, but instead resolutely confronts its lack as a constitutive lack based in the real.

However, if we follow Žižek's reading of Hegel, the tensions arising from the relationship between the subject and other are never mediated by the presence of intersubjective bonds. There are no productive partnerships in Žižek. Peter Dews (1995), drawing on the work of Fink-Eittel, critiques Žižek for ignoring the emergence in Hegel's *Logic* of an intersubjective structure. Perhaps, then, Žižek is also wrong about Hegel.

If we turn to Hegel's *The Encyclopaedia Logic* (1991), we can see the emergence of an intersubjective structure for thinking. Hegel argues that in "positing reflection" we only encounter the meanings we have projected on to things, generating a form of solipsism. In "external reflection" we experience helpless alienation by finding the meaning of the object outside our own being. It is in "determinate reflection" that we are able to establish a relation to an outside object which is "reflected into itself." How does this work?

If in "external reflection" we find that the meaning of the object is external to our subjectivity, "determinate reflection" overcomes the

otherness of this insight by turning it into a “relating relation.” It does so principally by understanding that the act of finding meaning is our own, our own ability to distinguish between a “surface” and an “interior.” (§§ 115–120)

What then do we do with conflict over interpretation? For Hegel, the way to ensure that there is an awareness of the relation between conflicting interpretations is to draw attention to the final “determination of reflection” which is “ground.” Ground highlights the commonality between conflicting interpretations despite their difference. (§ 121) The subject now grounds its identity through its relation to others, and begins to reflect and conceptualize from that ground. This does not mean the contingency of individual subjects is eliminated: it is as contingent, self-reflective individuals that subjects can affirm the commonality that binds them. In Dews’ understanding, we can call this binding of subjects “love,” a love that does not cancel the difference of subjects, but retains that difference through the dynamics of intersubjective recognition. (Dews: 244)

This brings us to Hegel’s theory of the “concept.” The concept overcomes the problem of abstraction, especially the problem of subjects abstracting from their relation to others. The subject now grounds its identity through its relation to others, and begins to reflect and conceptualize from that ground. And it is, in particular, the conceptuality of language, so fundamental to human social life that, as Dews tells us, “establishes a permanent possibility of reconciling conflicting subjective perspectives.” (245) In this sense, the “life of the concept” refers to a “constant process of rupture and negotiation.” (245) This does not mean the contingency of individual subjects is eliminated: it is precisely as contingent, self-reflective individuals that subjects come to accept and affirm the commonality that binds them.” (245) Dews calls this “love,” a love that does not cancel the difference of subjects, but retains that difference through the dynamics of intersubjective recognition.

There has been strong criticism of the Hegelian understanding of the concept. The suspicion has been that the tension between subject and other is reconciled in the perspective of absolute knowing where all negativity (and thus all the contingency and particularity of subjective life) is eliminated through the “negation of the negation.” This critical suspicion is especially evident in the tradition of psychoanalysis. If the truth that psychoanalysis reveals to us involves the unpredictability and unmanageability of the real, then the promise of

absolute knowing would be the denial of that truth. For Dews, however, the Hegelian “negation of the negation” involves something quite different from a difference-denying absolute, namely “the self-destruction of the negative relation between consciousnesses whose relation to themselves (and thus to each other) is negative or abstract ... with the result that the other ceases to be a limit to the self.” (248) To negate the negative is thus to establish various partnerships of love, where subjects’ relation to each other does not constitute a barrier to the unfolding of desire but its necessary condition, leading sometimes to unexpected arrivals.

Thus, Hegelian heroes do not attempt to eclipse the gap between self and other through absolute knowing (Tiefensee and the critics of Hegel), nor do they seek to pass, via negativity, into the abyss of the real (Žižek); rather, they seek out partnerships of love which, as ground, allow them the possibility for the freedom of desire. To see this unfold in Kroetsch’s story we need to turn to the relationships that unfold in Bennett City.



Ben, Lou, and Peek arrive in Bennett City on the shore of Lake Bennett. Bennett City is a tent-city housing thousands of stamperders, all madly constructing boats, waiting for the ice to move out so that they can travel down the Yukon River to Dawson City. It is in Bennett City that Ben, Lou, and Peek find Gussie Meadows, who, they discover, has set up a hardware store to supply the stamperders with materials to build their boats.

Gussie Meadows’ hardware store is not a brothel, even though Lou is convinced that it is. Lou may be right in a sense, for the story establishes strong associations between store and brothel, or more particularly, between work and desire. The store is not a brothel, yet there are lots of men coming out. As well, the colourlessness of the men is contrasted, first, with the many-coloured clothing of Gussie Meadows, colours that Peek associates with the colours of the rainbow, and, second, with the exotic smells that permeate the store, smells of roses, smells of the East.

While Ben and Lou establish a tent-home in Bennett City, and begin to plan the building of a boat, Peek is hired by Gussie Meadows to help out in the store. Peek knows how this all works, because of his work at his mother’s store in Seattle (Lou ran a pawn shop there).

(124, 125) We see here the first indication of the strong connection, in Peek's experience, between Lou, his mother, and Gussie Meadows.

This connection is intensified when Ben and Lou enter the store and find Gussie Meadows feeding Peek. (127) Is she feeding him as generous boss, good mother, or as Peek's first lover? Peek and Gussie Meadows are talking and eating and laughing. (128) Clearly, the positions of boss, mother and lover are intermingling here. Lou is not impressed.

In the classic oedipal narrative for the boy, the father's position is one that, through identification (and possibly fear), draws the boy away from the clutches of the mother and introduces him to the exciting outside world of work and desire. This allows the boy (in the fixed heterosexual logic of the narrative) to then establish desire for other women, beyond the love of the mother. With Gussie Meadows we have the presence of the other woman, as rival to the mother. Yet, in Peek's case, there was no oedipal father to instigate this movement to the other woman. What is interesting about the position of Gussie Meadows is that she combines the role of paternal identification, maternal nurturance, and erotic lover. She is guide, boss, mother, and lover. To use Kristeva's terms (1982), we have here the presence of maternal-paternal conglomerate where desire is excited for Peek through a figure that is an extension of the mother's love, yet at the very same time, takes on the role of paternal guide in the world of work. We therefore have, in Gussie Meadows, the presence of the "imaginary father."

Gussie Meadows becomes an imaginary figure of identification for Peek where a distinctive intermingling of work and desire are manifested. While busy in the aisles of the hardware store, Peek and Gussie are constantly bumping into each other, which gets Peek's juices going. At night he masturbates buried in his bearskin blanket and fantasizes being buried in Gussie's skirt. (132) Both the bear and Gussie bear the mark of a third for Peek, but a particular third that both partakes in the maternal connection and seeks distance from it.

The Bear has been a constant presence for Peek on this journey. While on the shore, with Ben and Lou busy doing the home thing, Peek goes off looking for adventure and food. He encounters a grizzly bear who teaches him how to catch fish with his bare hands. The bear thus becomes a kind of paternal guide, teaching lessons in the outside world of labour. Later at the summit of Chilkoot Pass,

the trappers provide Peek with a bearskin blanket to keep warm. Ben and Lou decide to buy this blanket as a present for Peek. Here, added to the role of paternal guide, we have maternal container. Yet, it is a maternal container that is removed or distanced from the embrace of his mother, and this distance allows him to masturbate and dream of Gussie.

Lou, as a jealous mother who mistakes the son's lover for a whore, thinks Peek should leave the hardware store, afraid he is being corrupted by the bad outside world. Gussie intervenes, now in the role of businesswoman, and says that Peek can't leave. He's needed as a worker, the paternal guide announcing to the mother that her son is now needed in the outside world of work and desire.

One day after work, Peek stays with Gussie Meadows for supper. They move into Gussie's private place at the back of the store. What is interesting about Peek's experience here is the near-total lack of mastery he enjoys in the presence of Gussie. If the phallus is presumed to master, and if Peek's entry into the exciting outside world of desire is meant to initiate that mastery, then here we find that the phallus fails both miserably and pleurably.

Upon entering her private place, Peek catches the scent of pure ambrosia and it makes him dizzy. Peek asks Gussie about Dan McGrew, who he thinks is her true lover, the true bearer of the absent phallus. Gussie replies that "I'm here and he's there." (139) Yet, Peek is also here and he is holding hands with Gussie.

As Gussie calls Peek a "man" and asks him, "Have you ever kissed a woman?" (140) Peek replies that he has "kissed Lou." (140) Gussie finds that a strange answer. Perhaps she is not aware of the extent to which she has become a maternal extension. Gussie proceeds to kiss him and Peek tries to return the kiss. She likes it that he doesn't know how to kiss, enjoys the mentorship.

Peek then buries his face in Gussie's slip, just as he had done earlier in fantasy. Gussie's stockings, made of silk, smell of basil and cinnamon, again making Peek dizzy. These erotic, dizzying smells in Gussie's private place remind Peek of the smells of the apartment he and Lou had in Seattle. Gussie pulls her skirt over Peek's head and he is instantly sent into a topsy-turvy pleasurable confusion. It is significant that Peek, in learning to be a man, approaches Gussie, not with phallic mastery, but with a dizzying confusion of the senses. Peek's manly training brings a non-mastery (unmanly in the traditional sense) that sends him beyond ego-pleasure, into a different form of

pleasure, a pleasure that speaks to a distinctive form of the death-drive, the death of control and mastery.

Things are even more scrambled when we try to make sense of Gussie's position here. In the traditionally conceived arrangement, it is important not to mix identification with desire. In the case of the boy's maturation, the boy's desire for the mother is interrupted by the identification with the father, who allows him to transfer his desire from mommy to a future mate. The paternal figure of identification, for the boy, is not to be mixed with the feminine figure of desire. This allows the boy to assume a sense of mastery over the id through identification with the father that can then be applied to the outside figure of desire, who is a substitute for the mother.

However, when we look at Peek's relationship with Gussie, we see that she serves as a figure of identification, assuming the position of the traditional third, allowing him separation from his mother Lou. His identification is with both a feminine and a masculine third. On the one hand Gussie is a feminine third, who indulges in the exotic colours and smells of the feminine, and who offers a dizzying space of confusion for Peek's desire that leaves him in a position of pleasurable non-mastery. On the other hand, she is a masculine third, teaching Peek how to handle a gun and how to shoot accurately. As Peek tells us, "She was showing me ... how to build a space around myself." (146) Thus, we have confusion of boundaries at the same time as building of boundaries.



This issue of masculine and feminine identification is explored in an important essay by Jessica Benjamin entitled "Sameness and Difference" (1985). Benjamin begins by stating that our understanding of sexual difference is "no longer seen as being triggered by the discovery of anatomical facts." (49) In light of this, she wishes to explore now the ways in which the body comes to *figure* difference. Despite this understanding, the dominant assumption in the culture at large is that acknowledging the difference between males and females has a higher value than recognizing the sameness between them. How might we incorporate difference without repudiating sameness? Possibly we could establish a tension rather than a strict opposition. (50)

Benjamin wants to look critically at the notion of identity. For sexual identity has come to mean a fixed difference with strong

boundaries between masculine and feminine. She believes we need some framework that embodies plurality. We need to make a distinction between identity as rigid and identification as more plural. This leads her to formulate a conception of sexual difference that moves away from the rigidity of the oedipal model, one that incorporates the many identifications that exceed the rigidities of identity prescribed by the oedipal model. (52)

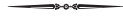
What has been previously undervalued is the “coming together of likeness and difference.” (53) Especially identification with the parent of the opposite sex. Here we have an identification that crosses the boundaries set up by identity as rigid sexual difference. Benjamin tells us that both girls and boys are originally bisexual in that they identify with both parents. They are “overinclusive” in that “they believe that they can have or be anything.” (53)

Although boys and girls may begin with a nominal gender identification, this is not a core gender identity. The self identifies being part of one gender through “concrete representations of self-body and self-other body interactions, which are retroactively defined as gendered.” (54) Yet, this identification is very tenuous. The child still identifies with both parents, who are only beginning to be differentiated from each other. In fact, this core sense of belonging to one sex does not organize all experience of gender. It only makes sense if we think of it as the starting-point from which future gender ambiguity arises. (55)

According to Benjamin, the nominal gender identification is succeeded by an early differentiation of identifications in the context of separation-individuation. Traditionally, the father represents separation, agency and desire, and even if this holds, ideally, both boys and girls continue to identify with both parents so that the father is important for the girl as well as the boy. Benjamin calls this parental figure of identification the *rapprochement* father. Yet, she is emphatic that this figure can be played by figures other than the biological father who represent separate subjectivity. (57)

The above considerations mean that an important distinction must be made between the *rapprochement* father and the classic oedipal father, a distinction similar to the one Kristeva makes between the imaginary father and the oedipal father. The function of the *rapprochement* father, whether male or female, is to enter into a dyadic relationship with the child. This is distinct from the triadic function of the oedipal father who forbids access to the mother. The *rapprochement*

father embodies the desire for the outside world without foreclosing the bonds of attachment associated with the mother. (57) Benjamin is pointing to the importance of a second adult in the child's life with whom he can identify. The importance is not tied to the person forbidding access to the mother and sending the child out into the world, but in creating a "second vector" which points outward.



This is the role that Gussie plays in Peek's development. She is a "second vector" that allows his desire to point outward away from his mother but without repudiating his mother, especially his mother's love. Peek constantly insists on love. He questions Gussie continually as to whether she loves Dan McGrew. Despite Gussie's own disillusionment with romantic love, Peek reveals a persistent idealism that charms Gussie, and excites her identification within which she serves as mentor and guide.

Yet, is not the love that identification spurs hopelessly romantic? Benjamin believes that we may have to revise our conception of identificatory love. In traditional psychoanalytic theory, identificatory love is associated with idealization. It is viewed as a defensive function where loss of control over the mother is overcome through idealization of the figure of identification. It is a way of sustaining the narcissism that would otherwise be challenged. (58)

Although this may in some cases be true, the idealization of identificatory love is not only defensive, but represents symbolically all those ideal aspirations of the child for activity in the exciting outside world. Benjamin contends that this perspective on identificatory love is contrary to the Lacanian perspective where the subject in love becomes trapped and alienated in an imaginary idealized image, where the subject is literally "subjected" to the image of the loved one. In contrast to this Lacanian perspective, Benjamin claims that "the acts of creating the ideal, forming an identificatory bond, and actively pursuing the relationship with the beloved figure, are, in effect, the subject's own." (59) It is the active casting outward that forms desire, one that can potentially move from figure to figure, and thus is not trapped in one figure and one relationship.

In the case of Peek, if the above holds, then Gussie's function for Peek is not to initiate a radical separation from maternal love. She is not a traditional oedipal third that requires the boy to leave behind the idealism associated with the maternal connection. In fact,

the idealism associated with the maternal connection is now transferred, through Peek's own active desire, from its original association with the maternal container – Peek in relation to Lou – to the exciting outside world of love associated with Gussie.