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THE CONTRACT

This last chapter in Section Two explores the concept of the contract. In attempting to make sense of the contract between Ben and Dan on digging for gold and how that contrasts with the partnership established between Ben and Lou, I will turn once again to the work of Hegel and his understanding of the contract in the *Philosophy of Right* (1981).

I will argue along with Hegel that, ideally, we can establish the contract on an intersubjective rather than individualistic ground. I will maintain, along with Michael Theunissen (1991), that if we ground the contract in intersubjectivity we arrive at an expression of communal love that gives us access to a living good and a taste of universal life. The fundamental movement in intersubjectivity, I will argue, is the movement from “mine-ness” to “own-ness” where my accomplishments are sublated in their immediacy, and thus shorn of their solipsism, by being presented in external form in the communal contract, where others see themselves through those accomplishments.

My contention will be that Ben’s understanding of the contract occurs through the structure of own-ness and that this understanding

conflicts with Dan's, which occurs through the structure of mine-ness. This sets up the fateful showdown in the Malamute Saloon between Ben and Dan and the final episode in the "Shooting of Dan McGrew."



Having arrived in Dawson City, Ben, Lou, and Peek can see the men heading out to the creeks. Some of them can hardly walk. Peek notes a kind of embarrassment in their walk, despite their attempt to swagger. These men have stumbled into the saloon for one last drink before they head out to get rich. They chase after the gold, but that chase too often is displaced by the glass of whiskey, whiskey that is watered down. Instead of gold, there is whiskey. Instead of a confident swagger, there is an embarrassing stumble. (195)

In the Malamute Saloon, three gallons of whiskey sit beside a pair of gold scales. These scales are made of solid brass and look to Peek like "some kind of crazy huge golden butterfly." (197) A beautiful butterfly, no doubt, but the perception is ambivalent, because Peek also sees a fierce insect, poised and polished, about to "at any second leap, or lunge, or take flight, or attack you head on, or even make some kind of awful mating sound." (197) The scales are thus both ideal and monstrous at the same time, polished and shining, charming to the gaze, but also a creature about to devour you. This is the measure of gold for the stampedeers seeking to get rich. They chase after an impossible creature, "some kind of insect" (197) that is strange, out of this world. This is not an unpleasurable experience. The pleasure that comes from the measure of gold is one that speaks to the demands of the death drive, a pleasure beyond the pleasure principle ruled by ego-constancy.

Dan McGrew enters and so does his piano. This is the first meeting between Dan and Ben, Lou, and Peek. Peek describes Dan as a handsome man with an unnaturally pale face. Dan's paleness could be related to his time spent much earlier in the States hiding in a barrel from gamblers trying to collect a debt. That's how Ben knew Dan, because Ben had risked his life to save him. Dan hid in the barrel in a fetal position, completely in the dark. His infant-like experience has as its complement his present demeanor as the owner of the saloon. Peek tells us that Dan "had a big-man way about him." (200) This swagger is belied however by the fact that while the stampedeers trek out to the creeks to dirty themselves, Dan stays hidden in the

saloon, with polished boots that have no dirt on them. Despite his masquerade of power, Dan is still in the barrel, still locked in infancy. The image of the powerful phallus that marks the outward presence of Dan's masculinity is quickly punctured by Dan's lack.

The saloon is surely an advance over the barrel. It is not so tight or so constricting for activity. Its displacing power is directed toward its status as container-home, and container-homes are necessary grounds for the activity of the subject. In Dan's case, however, there is the lurking suspicion that the saloon as container is fundamentally marked by the demands of the infant to be pleased without returning the pleasure, without recognizing the demands of the other subject.

This is confirmed and made more complex by the arrival of the piano. Dan has bought a piano for the saloon so that Gussie Meadows can dance to it. Yet, he can't seem to give the workers the proper instructions to get the piano down from the wagon. Lou rescues Dan and gives instructions to the men, giving advice that sounds like an order. Dan's inability to give instructions might be due to the fact that his mind is wandering, in a dream-like state. He is waiting for Gussie Meadows. Waiting rather than acting has taken hold of Dan, and Peek observes that he is "the kind of man who stood there expecting to be greeted and embraced and coddled." (203)

This inactive waiting unsettles Ben. Ben remembers that he and Dan had communicated while Dan was hiding in the barrel and that a set of promises had been made at that time. Dan had proposed a partnership concerning a stake in the creeks. Ben expected that when he finally arrived in Dawson City, and he and Dan met face-to-face, this partnership would be consolidated, and what he believed to be an intersubjective agreement between two individuals who recognize each other would be confirmed. Yet, nothing happens. Dan does not communicate with Ben and will not confirm the partnership. He will not return the recognition, and Ben is left waiting. (203)

All the talk is about Gussie Meadows. Dan wants to know if they were able to hook up with Gussie and escort her to Dawson City. Ben explains that she isn't with them, that she decided to return home with her gold. At this point, Dan's face turns from pale to dark, and he turns his back on Ben. (204) Dan's sudden melancholic mood fits with the state of infancy that hides behind his big-man demeanor. He hides in the saloon waiting for his love object to arrive. And even though the saloon appears to be an advance over the barrel in that Dan is making a load of money off the stampede with his

watered-down whiskey and his scales, he expects that this should confirm his relationship with Gussie. He has the money-making saloon to provide for her, and now he has the piano to show her off in all her colours. However, Gussie had set up her own shop, and had made her own money, and decided not to be the showpiece for Dan. She abandons him, turning Dan all dark. Deprived of the one-way recognition from Gussie (he would be the subject, she would be the object), his mirage of confidence suddenly turns to the pouting of the infant.

Peek takes a special pleasure in Dan's melancholy. He hands Dan a message from Gussie that says, "I'm going back to Frisco, Dan. Just as well. I was coming there to kill you." (207) As we have already witnessed, the letter always arrives and the message here that announces the presence of the death drive must be fulfilled. The only question is: In what particular fashion will the death drive unfold, and how will its attendant pleasures be expressed?

The piano is significant in this unfolding and this expression. After Dan finally decides on its placement, both Ben and Peek play. Peek learned how to play in his mother's pawnshop, and now he plays for Dan while Dan reads the letter from Gussie. Really, he plays for Gussie, using the rivalry with Dan to spur on his powers of concentration. He used to play for Lou, his mother, but now he plays for Gussie, his displaced maternal love object. However, at this point, the love for Gussie is mediated by the rivalry with Dan. In effect, the pleasure taken in the death-like downfall of Dan, the rivalrous third, is sublimated into a vigorous and concentrated playing. Somebody in the saloon observes, "Hey, that kid's pretty good." (209)

Dan's response to the letter is unexpected. Peek expects Dan to be dangerous but instead he is generous. He offers Ben, Lou, and Peek the cabin he had built for Gussie. Yet this generosity has a peculiar tone to it. Peek observes that "it was as if the voice that spoke out of his mouth wasn't his to order around." (210) It's almost as if the message of the letter has taken over Dan's subjectivity, speaking for him. The voice, as Žižek (1995) reminds us, can often be a traumatic voice, haunting the scene. There is a death-like spectre that emanates from Dan's voice, conveying a ghostly image. Faced with being abandoned by Gussie, Dan concentrates even more on getting the gold, the *objet a* that might suture the wound that gapes, the lack coming from the real. The offer of the home for Lou, Ben, and Peek is only a means to that end. Ben must go to the creeks to find the gold, and in the meantime Lou and Peek need a home.

This offers a distinctive perspective on home. Dan has no interest in building a home that might serve as a secure maternal-like container for his desire. He skips all mediating structures in the belief that he can obtain the object that will relieve him of the anxiety associated with lack and allow him direct access to the fulfilled desire. Dan has no use for the mother, or for the father's mediating role in relation to the mother.

The contrast with Ben is striking. Ben also plays the piano once it is placed in the saloon. Lou says to him that he never told her that he played the piano. Ben's reply is that his mother made him play, which implies to Peek that his mother pushed him around. Lou is especially intrigued by the introduction of Ben's mother. She asks him if he cared for his mother. An impossible question, thinks Peek, but one that "offered a little lesson in love and responsibility." (213) Dan brought the piano in for Gussie, who he hoped would patch up the hole in his desire. For Ben, and for Peek as well, the piano has something to do with love and responsibility, those conditions associated with mother and home.

Ben mentions that his mother has been very sick for quite some time, that, in fact, he has had to take care of her since he was thirteen, due to the trauma of his father's death. His father died in a train accident. It was, says Ben, "[t]he steam.... He was boiled alive." (214) Peek replies, "Like the opposite of an avalanche." (214) Peek's father had died in the avalanche at the Pass, and the connection to the death of Ben's father is clear to him. Both Ben and Peek are strongly tied to their mothers, and both are in some way trying to replace their fathers in the home, taking on the paternal task of love and responsibility. While in Dan's case, death represents a haunting presence that threatens to send him headlong into the abyss of the real, in Ben and Peek's case death, in particular, paternal death, represents a task of love, to build homes and take care of their mothers. When Lou asks Ben if he misses his mother, Ben replies, "I'll be back there before too long. I hope." (214) Ben's desire for the gold is a desire to return home, to return in fulfillment to the mother.

In a sense, Ben seeks a return to the self through the acquisition of gold. It seems quite clear at this point that this does not conform to Žižek's interpretation of a Hegelian return. That is, Ben's return is not one who passes through the failure of paternal love in order to arrive at the void of the real. Rather, Ben's return is to home, to the love of the home. However, it is also clear that Ben's return is not an

abandonment of paternal love in favour of an exclusive embracing of maternal love. Instead, Ben pursues a unique form of paternal love, one that exists in solidarity with maternal love.

Ben, Lou, and Peek arrive at the cabin Dan has allowed them to use, and they are impressed by its newness, its new logs, new windows, new paint, and new fence. (217) They fall in love with the place and dream of making it their home, just like the rudimentary homes they had built on the shore, in Skagway, at Dyee, and in Bennett City. (218) Dan is waiting for them there, and he is not at all interested in the fashioning of a home. He wants to talk about a partnership with Ben in order to find gold, a partnership defined by a very distinctive form of contract.

Ben tells Dan that he is three thousand dollars short on the amount of money he had promised to bring to the deal. Dan replies that this is bad news, that now Ben will really have to work. In Dan's mind, work constitutes a severe punishment, for Dan's approach to acquiring money is to work as little as possible directly in the material world. Dan is a gambler, and money for him is pure exchange value. To the extent that money depends on material labour, Dan expects others to perform the dirty work, the work in the dirt.

Ben has a different approach. He says, "I'm no stranger to work." (221) Back in Iowa he loved his work as a cooper making the whiskey barrels. He loved pounding on the barrels to shape them properly. To Dan, however, the sound of pounding was deafening, because he was hiding from a gambling debt in a barrel. Ben says he took great pleasure in firing the old cask, whereas for Dan the smoke produced by the firing was suffocating. In the barrel, not working, Dan plays the part of the infant for whom the sounds and smells of the outside world of work are disturbing. There seems to be an intimate relationship between Dan as gambler and Dan as infant in the barrel. Both gambling and infancy avoid the labour of work, hoping for the instant payoff, instant gratification that comes from the labour of others. It is in this sense that Dan seeks to enter the partnership with Ben as master to slave, expecting Ben (like the mother) to perform the material labour that will bring him his fortune.

Dan tells Ben that he has obtained, through gambling, a small claim up on Eldorado Creek. He proposes a partnership with Ben through a contract. Ben will do the work, the mining, and when he finds the gold, they will split the profits 50/50. Ben accepts the offer

and is told by Dan that he must leave right away, in order to hasten the acquisition of gold.

What is the nature of the partnership through a contract that Ben has with Dan and how does it differ from the partnerships Ben has been developing with Lou and Peek? To answer this properly, I want to propose an interpretation of Hegel's understanding of the contract in *The Philosophy of Right* (1981). My interpretation has been aided by a wonderful essay by Michael Theunissen on the concepts of contract and intersubjectivity in Hegel (1991).

Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* attempts to articulate a freedom for which the other is not an obstacle but the path through which freedom is realized. The important question that arises in Hegel's analysis of the foundations of civil society is whether freedom is based in the individual or mediated intersubjectively.

The attempt to ground freedom rests on a consideration of ethical life. For Hegel, any treatment of ethical life must begin with the family, in particular, the civil family. The family is the most basic form of unity in society, a unity that is communal in character and is expressed through love. (§ 158) We encounter here a freedom of the loving community, which is determinate and concrete, but at the same time commits individuals to a universal life through the claims of intersubjectivity. (§ 181) If the partnerships generated between Ben, Lou, and Peek (as well as Gussie) are, as I have argued, intersubjectively based, then, in Hegel's terms, those partnerships are expressions of communal love that bring each of them freedom through their access to a universal life, a universal life that goes beyond the constraints of solipsistic (and thus non-social) individuality.

Hegel has often been criticized for uncritically endorsing existing forms of communal life and familial life as expressions of universal freedom. However, there is a critical attitude that emerges in the *Philosophy of Right*, and that involves the conception of "life." (§ 70) Against the abstract idea of the good, Hegel emphasizes the living good whose concealed intersubjectivity finally reveals itself as "universal life."

The commitment to the living good that is grounded in intersubjectivity brings forward a critique of the contract and private property as the bases for civil society. Here's where the contrast between Ben and Dan comes in. If Ben's partnerships with Lou and Peek are intersubjectively based, they can be viewed as critically

opposed to Dan's proposal of a partnership based on the contract and the acquisition of private property.

The ground for freedom in Hegel is the relation of will to will. (§ 71) This is an essential relation because of the reciprocity implicit in the contract. The contract is an exchange contract where my property is recognized by others. Yet, a fundamental tension quickly arises. In the contract, I am involved with others. At the same time, though, if I assert my right to property and let the other individual have his own, I end up without a relation to the other individual and am indifferent to him. (§ 72) This indifferent relation of partners to the contract affects the consciousness of the subjects who enter the contract, resulting in a consciousness of fundamental non-involvement.

The lack of relatedness stems from the nature of property as such. Hegel conceives of property as both individualistic and solipsistic. An owner of property is someone alone in the world. The contract based on property strips individuals of their sociality. In this sense, the individual owners of property exhibit a form of social deficiency where a positive relation to the will of other individuals is absent.

Isn't this the kind of contract that Dan envisages for the mining of gold on Eldorado Creek? Because Dan has no interest in the bonds of intersubjectivity, because he has no desire for home, his 50/50 proposal effects a relation of indifference, not the sociality of community. As in the barrel, Dan remains in a poor, isolated, solipsistic world that requires him to be the master who profits from the labour of the slave, and thus deprives him of the subjective recognition from the other which he nevertheless so intensely craves. But Dan is a gambler and his craving for recognition comes through the all-or-nothing framework: either I win it all (as in the demands of the infant for the all of the mother's gaze) or I have nothing.

Perhaps, though, Ben's acceptance of the 50/50 contract belies a different orientation. For Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right*, intersubjectivity is achieved through an identity in the exchange contract that proceeds through purchase and sale. In the purchase and sale relationship, where there is a flow of giving and receiving, a contradiction emerges for the subject through the alienation of property. I give up myself as a non-involved and indifferent property owner when I consciously integrate myself into the community of other property owners. This allows me to be one among others at the same time as just myself, a contradictory structure of "is and is not." (§ 73) However,

in order for this to work, I must have the orientation to my own subjectivity that allows my subjectivity to be exchangeable. I can easily exchange things because I know myself to be exchangeable with others, and thus, in a fundamental sense, indiscernible from others. (§ 77)

This establishes, for Hegel, the universality of identical wills who are now abstract persons in civil society. The criticism of Hegel has been that this universality and abstraction of the individual comes to subsume the particular individual, thus subsuming individual freedom under the more abstract freedom of the state. Although this absorption of the individual in the universal is certainly present in the *Philosophy of Right*, there is also another current of thought in Hegel's text that points in a different direction. This is particularly true in the movement from property considered "mine" (where there is a severely limited notion of commonality, which cannot free itself from its source in the egoism of private property) to an intersubjective awareness that is able to hold in place the tension between individuality and universality. My accomplishments are my accomplishments only insofar as I am able to sublimate their immediacy in having them present to me in an external form. This externality is present to others, and others begin to look at themselves in my accomplishments. In this way, my accomplishment is linked to the will of others, where I am, as an accomplishing agent, the other I am for others. (§ 112)

Ben has consistently viewed his accomplishments from the perspective of own-ness or intersubjectivity. He has labored hard to fashion wood into barrels, and his accomplishment is reflected in the barrels of whiskey he hauls on board the ship to Skagway. Yet, his desire was always to give that possession up to the other. First, he seeks Klondike fortune only to return to Iowa to properly take care of his invalid mother. Then, he gives up his possession in order to pay Lou's debt on the boat, and soon desires to establish a familial and communal bond with both Lou and Peek. Within that bonding, the possession of whiskey becomes the lubricant for a series of exchange relations, the three of them forming a community of love based on intersubjective recognition.

Ben wishes to continue that project in submitting himself to the work of mining for gold. His externalized accomplishment there only makes sense through his desire for home, his hoped-for return to the maternal home in Iowa, and his continuing establishment of a home with Lou and Peek, now at the cabin in Dawson City.

My argument has been that Ben desires love, and in desiring love desires home. Yet, as we have seen, it is impossible, when considering Ben's experience, to think about home without, at the same time, thinking about work. Ben has a distinctive relation to work that is highlighted in his digging for gold at Dan's claim.

Dan is pressuring Ben to get right to work. He wants Ben to go fast. This in keeping with Dan's desire to obtain the object of desire quickly, the instantaneous arrival of satisfaction. Peek comments that Ben is not like that. Ben does not move fast. No quick in and out for Ben. He has staying power. He sticks to the job. This speaks to the question of the mediation of work. Dan gambles to go straight to the real of satisfaction, wishing to bypass the mediating activity of labour. He wants to go straight from the barrel-womb to the encompassing and enveloping experience of the real.

At first glance, it might seem that Dan embodies the characteristics of active masculinity. He has a big-man way about him that suggests an assertive confidence. It also seems that Dan is the active agent in the world of business and commerce. He owns the saloon, and also owns the claim on Eldorado Creek that he hopes will yield gold. In short, Dan is the man of capital, and parades about with the forceful aggressiveness so often associated with the successful capitalist.

However, this masquerade of confidence is belied by an anxiety that runs deep. Dan's subjectivity is consumed with the experience of the barrel, and in this way marks a man severely limited and confined in his ability to access the outside world of objects. Like Hegel's master, Dan depends on the work of the other, the slave, to provide that access. In his relationship with Ben, this began in the barrel, when Ben took care of him and allowed him his escape from his pursuers. Now, that relation of dependence continues with Ben heading to the claim to perform the labour of digging for gold. The master wants the gold straight away, while the slave has access to the gold through the mediation of labour.

The reversal goes further. As Judith Butler comments (1997: 39–41), the master might look like he has access to difference because he is able to enjoy the fruits of the slave's labour. In this sense, Dan as master-capitalist is the ultimate consumer, because he is able to devour what others under his command produce, leaving nothing of permanence behind. This seems to provide Dan with an experience of the transitory state of desire, which can be contrasted with Ben's

experience of labour, because Ben slaves away on the material object, providing for him a kind of permanence to desire.

This is illusory, however, because Ben as slave-labourer experiences a unique form of loss in relation to the material object. In his labour, Ben is always giving up himself and the object to others. Ben feels an obligation to provide for his ailing mother. And now he has developed bonds of attachment where his desire is to give himself up in his labour to provide for Lou and Peek. Although Ben displays characteristics of permanence – staying power, sticking to the job – this permanence is linked to a fundamental relationship to lack and loss, the lack and loss of ego.

Thus, Ben's quest for gold is entirely distinct from Dan's. Dan wants unmediated access to the object which will patch up the hole in his desire. What appears as a confident encounter with lack turns out to be an attempt to bypass lack altogether. Ben, in contrast, thrives on mediation. His quest for gold is oriented toward labour on the material object, and because of that labour, he settles in with lack through the structures of work and home.

Peek's relationship with Ben runs entirely on this trajectory, a trajectory that involves the mediation of home and work. Peek has a plan. He decides to go check on Ben out in the mines. His first encounter with the men at work in the mines hardly brings to mind traditional images of heroism. Peek comments that the men "moved around me like scorched old trees that had learned to walk." (231) It looks to Peek like there are thousands of men here who have lost their minds, piling up mounds of muck only to find, after they have run water through the rockers, minimal traces of gold.

At Eldorado Creek, Peek finds Ben "sitting dead still." (233) Peek asks him where the mine is that he is working on. Ben points to a miserable-looking hole, and explains that they are not deep enough yet. As Peek goes on ranting and raving about good luck and fortune, Ben returns to his hole, to his slave work. In contrast to Dan's child-like passivity in the barrel, his non-work, Ben's hole is one of constant, filthy toil with little prospect of gain. Peek observes that Ben looks too old to be digging in the permafrost, like those pictures of elderly coal miners, with their beaten faces and broken-down bodies, still putting in the time to pay the rent. While Dan sits comfortably at the gambling table in the Malamute Saloon, Ben sleeps with his mud-caked clothes on in a dirty, filthy ramshackle cabin. And Peek joins

him, at least for a while, painstakingly tunnelling through the bedrock, with Ben digging and Peek hauling.

After fourteen days of digging, Ben and Peek decide to pay Lou a visit. Lou is now working for Dan at the Saloon, weighing the gold brought in by the miners. Ben and Peek find her all done up with feathers and colours, in sharp contrast to their own filthiness. In a certain sense, Lou is now aligned with Dan. She is clean and all spruced up because she doesn't need to enter the hole of dirty mine labour; her living, like Dan's, is dependent on the miners bringing in their claims and then drinking and gambling away their profits. Lou finds that she can talk to Dan. She believes that they share some common bond because both of them have been in hiding. Hiding "marks you for the rest of your life." (254) It "fills you up with secrets." (254) The common bond of hiding shared with Dan affects her perception: although pleased to see Ben and Peek, she says they are a sight for sore eyes they are in desperate need of new clothes. When Ben and Peek ask Lou if she will join them out at the claim, her response is not at all positive. She doesn't think much of the prospects out in the mines; in fact, not hearing from Ben led her to think that maybe he "fell into a hole. Disappeared." (243) She prefers hiding in the saloon to the disappearance in the hole of filth and dirt. Perhaps the secrets she and Dan are hiding by displaying strong master-egos in the saloon are not so easily concealed if their egos disappear in the slave-labour of the dirty hole. The cleanliness of the barrel-womb is to be preferred to the shitty hole.

Yet, in another sense, Lou is more like Gussie Meadows, using Dan's invitation (to work at the Saloon, to live in the cabin) to profit from the mad attempt by stampeders to strike it rich. Dan and Lou are partners, for now, but Lou has no desire, like Gussie, to get trapped in Dan's infantile barrel. Lou wants to make money to secure a home, either here or elsewhere, with Ben and Peek. And she realizes quite quickly that Dan squanders money just as fast as he makes it, that while she toils fourteen hours a day running the saloon, Dan is in his gambling corner wiping away the profits. So, when Dan offers Lou a 50/50 deal on the saloon, proposing, in effect, that they become partners, Lou replies, "That will be one goddamned frosty Friday in hell." (251) Meanwhile, Ben has quietly travelled back to the mine.

In the middle of December, Lou decides to do up a roast and take it to Ben at Eldorado Creek. Peek tags along. Lou and Peek find the hole Ben is working on and descend down the shaft. When they

find Ben drifting he hardly acknowledges them and says he wants to finish what he is doing. Peek desperately wants Ben to find gold, so that “the dark would glow yellow.” (272) Why are both Peek and Ben so desperate for the gold? Ben has worked hard in the mines, slaved away at the claim, and Peek wants to join him in the labour, wants to become a slave for gold as well. Ben, in contrast to Dan, has performed the work of mediated labour. He has been patient and hard-working along the whole journey; in fact, at each stop along the way, Ben has focused on the building of a secure, containing home. He thus has not rushed headlong for the pleasure of the big payoff which will magically bring happiness. Yet, in the end, Ben hopes that this mediating work will secure the fortune, a fortune of gold that will bring light to the darkness. Is this then the essence of a northern masculinity, that northern men will build and work and toil with a focus on the fortune, the truth that awaits them at the end of the journey?

Lou, on the other hand, says to Ben, “We don’t need this gold.” (272) Why is Lou giving up the quest for gold? Why has she now aligned herself with Gussie Meadows, stepping out of the tracks, no longer focusing on the fabulous fortune at the end of the trail that will bring that long-awaited access to the pleasure of the real? Lou explains that she and Peek have saved a lot of money through their work at the Malamute Saloon. They, like Ben, have laboured hard, and their labour has brought incremental savings, built up over time. Now, because of those savings, they (Ben, Peek, and herself) could go back to Iowa and settle down, just as Gussie has returned to San Francisco with her savings. In her persistent plea to Ben, Lou emphasizes the aspect of home, in particular Ben’s home in Iowa, his desire to settle down and take care of his mother. Lou tells Ben that, before this quest for gold, she has never really had a home, that Peek has never really had a home, nor a father, nor any proper schooling.

Ben will have nothing to do with this. It feels to him like someone has kicked him in the face. Ben’s labour is fixated on the big payoff, enormous and monumental, not small change adding up into savings. With a manly pride, he is bound and determined to get the gold. It’s not that he doesn’t want those things that Lou talks about. Ben isn’t Dan. Yet, Ben is driven by the idea that all the movements along the way that had established the security of home could only be meaningful if the end product was secured, the truth of gold that made everything meaningful, which would include the securing of home that comes afterward.

Herein lies the tragic yet beautiful truth of a northern masculinity. Men like Ben are heroes who slave away (unlike Dan, who remains in infancy). They work hard, they love, they build homes, they father, yet the quest that hardens their gaze and that makes all the other things meaningful is the quest for the pure substance. The tragedy here is that often these male heroes lack the realization that this quest for the pure substance is really a quest for love, a pure love, one that knows no bounds. This is part of the tragedy that befalls Ben.

After a hard winter, Ben finally returns to the Malamute Saloon carrying two heavy bags of gold. Dan is in his corner, playing cards, and once again, losing. In front of the scales where Lou is working, Ben lifts a gold nugget from his pocket, a nugget the size of a small brain – a golden brain. Lou fails at first to recognize Ben. When she does, there are two sacks of gold between them.

This in-betweenness has always been there. Gold has been the object of desire from the beginning. It has organized their quest, given it purpose, meaning. Now that Ben has struck gold, it could be said that he has what he has always been looking for. The impossible object of desire has been found. Lou announces to Ben that he is rich, twice over.

Yet, the sacks of gold are not what orient Ben's desire at this point. It is the nugget of gold that is important. Ben gives the nugget to Lou, "as if for all those weeks and months he had been looking for that one outstanding nugget to present to Lou as a gift." (282) How is this gift as a mediating element different from the fortune brought by the bags of gold? The nugget that is a golden brain can be contrasted to the state of Ben's face and head. Peek tells us that Ben's "face had frozen in spots. I could see the dead whiteness at the tip of his nose, on his cheeks above his whiskers. His eyes had gone back deep inside his skull." (283) We have an image here of a dead man, an empty skull, the life beaten out of it by the struggle of labour. The death drive has performed its emptying work. However, as soon as the skull is emptied, we discover that it has been filled again, now with a golden brain, a golden brain which has the ability to instantaneously transform deadness into life. As Ben offers the nugget to Lou he extends to his partner the gift of life, the golden brain that will overcome the will of death. To Ben, this is a sign of their bond.

Yet, Lou can't touch the nugget. She says to Ben, "keep it until we get to the cabin." (282) Peek's commentary on this is important. He tells us that, in delaying the acceptance of the gift from Ben, Lou

“was talking about home. A homestake. She said cabin but she meant home.” (282) For Lou, the gift of the gold nugget, as a sign of partnership, of bonding, can only be properly accepted in the context of the home that slowly and laboriously she and Ben and Peek have been constructing since they met on the boat. Gold as the ultimate object of desire that promises instantaneous renewal can only work its magic when set within the framework of the home that can contain its power. We could say that death rules unless gold appears, yet gold’s appearance takes different forms of expression. In this instance, gold appears first as the gift of the nugget and second as the bags of gold. If the gift of the nugget confirms the intersubjective bond of Ben and Lou, then what of the bags of gold that Ben has hauled into the saloon and will need to be cashed out in relation to the contractual partnership he has with Dan?

According to the contract between Dan and Ben, half of the profits from the bags of gold will go to Dan. At this moment, sitting in his corner gambling table, Dan is out of debt. Peek tells us that Dan now has the opportunity to walk away from the table, collect his money, and head to San Francisco, to Gussie Meadows. In other words, Dan has the opportunity at this point to see the fruits of the contract go to the confirmation of love, his love for Gussie. Peek thinks love is the important thing, not the gold. The gold, the money, the riches, they mediate the bond, but are not the actual object of desire. The object of desire, in Peek’s eyes, is the connection between the two subjects, not the individual and the gold. Dan thinks that he loves Gussie, yet he never really leaves his place of hiding – the barrel, the saloon, the gambling corner – to confirm his love for her. He remains solipsistically enclosed, thinking that access to the outside world, the world of love, can only come through access to a mysterious object – *das Ding* – which, it is hoped, will magically transform everything. Dan now has enough to get him to San Francisco and to Gussie, but he believes that this is not enough; he needs it all, all of the gold, to give him entry to love. He believes that nothing less than the all will bring him satisfaction.

This then becomes the downfall of the contract between Dan and Ben on Dan’s part. The 50/50 deal is not on, perhaps has never been on for Dan, because Dan is a gambler in hiding. He wants all the gold and is willing to risk everything to get it. In his gambling corner, he plays the big one and loses everything. Hegg, the man he loses to, offers to play again. He loves fish and will bet all that Dan

has just lost for the keg owned by Ben that sits on top of the piano and which both he and Dan believe to be full of fish. Dan says to Lou that Ben can have the whole sack of gold to himself if he gives Dan the barrel. Lou tells him he can have the barrel, but it's not full of fish, but whiskey. Hegg is a teetotaler, and Lou suggests to Dan that Hegg might not be happy with whiskey instead of fish. Dan's only option now is to go for the bag of gold, and to eliminate Ben.

The tragedy of the contract between Dan and Ben extends as well to Ben's desire. Despite the confirmation present through the gift of the nugget, Ben's desire is riddled with doubt. He is still not sure of Lou's love. In particular, he is jealous of the bond he perceives between Lou and Dan, believing their connection to be a sexual connection. Peek informs us that there has never been a sexual connection between Lou and Dan. The connection they did have was due to the fact that they both had been hiding and were, with the quest for gold, hoping that fortune would bring them out of hiding. Peek believes that this brought about a special kind of caring between them, that Lou cared for Dan as one who faced a common plight. Yet, their paths have diverged quite significantly, something that Ben, tragically, cannot recognize. Right from her coming out of hiding on the boat, Lou has established a partnership with Ben that has been continually built up as a loving bond and a loving home. She sees the gift of the nugget as confirmation of this love. But Ben now sustains a tragic misrecognition. Despite all of his past that has allowed him to be a man who works and loves, who labours to love, he falls for the trap of jealousy. Intersubjective mediation fades away for Ben, just as it had for Dan. He wants it all, wants it without question, without any intrusion by the other. Ben believes that Dan has come between him and Lou, and he seeks to get rid of Dan, and by doing so, get rid of the care (a type of love) that Lou has for Dan, the care his beloved other might have for the world apart from her devotion to him.

Ben sits down at the piano and begins to play something no one in the saloon had ever heard before. Peek says that his playing "got hold of all of us, and each of us, our skin and our bones. He got all the way in. And he started to claw and rip." (286) Ben has a hunger, a hunger for love. His playing moves to a crescendo. Peek says you could hear riverboats, arrivals and departures, "departures from home and then the returns." (288)

The expression of love in Ben's playing is all about home and the mother, the love of the mother. Nostalgia for the love of the

mother, a melancholic mood that says that nothing compares to her love, not even the painstakingly established mutual love of Lou. Ben's melancholy finds its ultimate expression when he hits a chord which turns everybody in the saloon inside out and upside down, all of them suddenly confused. Everyone is squirming, becoming unhinged. Moreover, everyone starts holding on to each other, as if by clinging to someone they can face the experience of the abyss without the mother's love. The place becomes deadly still, except for Ben's playing. After the chaos of a motherless world, Ben returns to the mother's love, playing soft, making love the only way he knew, back home in Iowa, back in mommy's world.

Ben then stops playing and speaks: "One of you here is a hound of hell.... And that one is Dan McGrew." (294, 295) Then the shots start flying. Peek is the one who fires the first shot, having taken a six-shooter hidden in a saloon drawer. Peek shoots thinking he can bring peace. He wants to stop all the wanting between the men, between Dan and Ben. He wants them to accept the love they have, rather than have to go for an impossible love in relation to an impossible object. Peek aims at and hits the keg of whiskey sitting on top of the piano. He hopes that everyone will then relax and fill up on the whiskey that would pour out for all, just like the whiskey that had poured out at the big roundup party at Bennett City. As at other points in their trek, whiskey shows itself to be a desired mediating element that works differently from the sacks of gold that are destroying everything. If it is exchanged freely, it can bring people together. The shot Peek fires is a shot for a love that will situate people in the possibilities of satisfaction that lie before them, not a love that demands the impossible.

Peek's shot, however, does not have the desired effect. It only makes Ben hesitate with his gun, losing his rhythm, sending his first shot wide of its mark. At the same time, Dan has started firing his gun. Ben and Dan each fire three shots. The last two of Ben's go straight to Dan's heart, killing him. Two of Dan's shots are wild, but the third strikes. By this time Lou has sensed the disaster and has taken hold of Ben, thinking that Dan would then stop shooting. Dan's third shot goes through both Lou and Ben, killing them both.

Dan and Ben are men who display two different relationships to desire, the mother, and home. The question here is one of how desire accesses the outside world of meaning and fulfillment. In the story, this is figured as the quest for gold, gold being the object that

can bring meaning and fulfillment. Dan is always seeking the magical solution to securing this object, a magical solution that is that of the master who doesn't labour over time for the object, but gambles that one stroke of this or that – the card game, the stake – can do the deed. In short, Dan has never really left the barrel; he remains immobile in the corner of the saloon, getting others to do the dirty work, gambling for the big payoff. His quest for love always leaves him lost for love, because the object of fulfillment is a phantom object, which disappears as easily as it appears. Dan seems to have preferred this quest for the impossible object over any mediated labour in the world outside the barrel, where love is secured through the work of building the home. Dan has no home except the barrel. He represents that type of masculinity that prefers the master-status of the barrel over the intersubjective network of home.

In contrast, Ben, throughout the story, chooses the work of building the home over the solipsism and narcissism of the barrel. From the shore, through Skagway, Dye, Bennett City, and Dawson City, Ben works slowly and patiently for love, winning the trust of Lou and Ben, and each time securing an intersubjective space of recognition for himself. Even at the Eldorado Creek claim, Ben seems to embody a type of masculinity where hard labour in the belly of the earth-mother will, after some time, bring meaning and fulfillment. This is embodied in the discovery of the gold nugget. Ben goes into the belly of the mother, and finds the golden object of desire. He is awarded for his labours by a gift which must be given to the other. He moves from mother to partner and presents the gift-object to Lou as a sign of their intersubjective bond. In contrast to Dan, where there is no movement, no possibility of escape from the enveloping confines of the womb-barrel, Ben seems to be able move from mother to partner through the labour of love. In this movement, he has the possibility of recognition from an outside other who can confirm in love his identity. Dan, on the other hand, is lost in narcissism.

In one sense, Ben's story ends a tragic one, because instead of staying with the gift of the nugget – and leaving with Lou to go home – he allows himself to be consumed with the bags of gold and jealous desire. Ben knows that Lou has a connection with Dan, a caring brought about by a mutual past of hiding, and rather than seeing this as part of the experience of a partnership with an independent other who cares for others, Ben views this other line as a threat. He wants Lou to himself and Dan's intrusion, Dan as mediating element, brings

forth a desire for aggressive attack, an attempt to eliminate the intrusion.

In another sense, however, this tragic element bound up with jealousy is partially overcome, because Ben dies in the arms of Lou and, at that moment, knows that his quest for gold has, in the end, discovered love.

After the long journey of Ben, Lou, and Peek seeking their fortune, Peek is left alone with the bags of gold, the claim out at Eldorado Creek, the house built for Gussie, and the management of the Malamute Saloon. Peek comments that although it might be true that we suffer and die, it is also true that we suffer and live. (299) Peek is the only one who survives unscathed, and it is left to him to bury the loved ones.

The three coffins for Ben, Lou, and Peek are placed side by side in the Dawson graveyard, but because the Klondike River (a tributary of the Yukon) floods in the spring, the whole graveyard washes away, floating down the Yukon.

We could say that this washing away of the coffins of Ben, Lou, and Dan affirms that all things wash away, because of the omnipresence of the death drive. The death drive has been an ever-present force in the Klondike Gold Rush, especially in relation to the building of homes, because homes were built and then taken down as the journey to Dawson proceeded. It could be argued that this final washing away establishes the central quality of impermanence to the quest for fortune. The attempt to grab hold of fortune, to find the bags of gold, is thwarted by the continual flow of the river, which washes away any permanent acquisition of the object of desire. Flowing river beats permanent earth. The flow cannot be contained by the solidity of earth. We might think that the fortune is there, but we are fools. The object of desire, the love we seek so desperately from the earth and from the mother and from home, cannot be acquired. It is an impossible object that is forever down the river, beyond our grasp.

Yet, this seeming triumph of the flowing river and the death drive over the permanence of the earth and the love of mother and home does not have the final say. It turns out that Peek has saved Lou's body from being washed away, from being sent down the flowing river. Peek has insisted throughout the journey that love will prevail, and he now is going to make sure that it will. He had put gravel in the coffin of Lou's that washed away, and while a three-day wake was being held for the dead at the Malamute Saloon (amply

provided for by two leftover kegs of whiskey), Peek finds some private time to bury his mother. And so he begins to laboriously dig a hole under the cabin.

Ben had laboured in the belly of the earth to find the nugget of gold for Lou. This was the fortune that was discovered and confirmed the search for home and the search for love. Peek is now intent on preserving that fortune. As Ben did at the claim, he builds a fire of dried wood and heats the frozen ground so that it can be dug into to make room for the coffin. In the hole he digs, Peek makes a bed of spruce boughs and roses and places Lou's body on the soft bed. In her hands he places the gold nugget, the gift from Ben. He in effect returns the nugget of gold to its place in the earth, its place in the belly of the mother. Yet, this return to the mother is one that confirms and consolidates the love that was established between Ben and Lou, becoming the foundation, the ground, for the home that stands above it, where Ben and Lou were to live, and where Peek will live out his life.

Peek stays true to his mother, and true to the mother's love. And he knows that, in the end, this fidelity is all about holding on to each other and to affirming our partnerships. Peek tells us that we "must learn to hold each other." (307) And he wants to continue "to join two partners who, once they were together, were never really apart again." (307) The constant work of the death drive does not rule. Its insistent unravelling does not have the final say. Rather, the fortune discovered by Ben, Lou, and Peek announces that the victory goes to love, to the abiding work of home and partnership.