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The Cryogenic Signifier: the Ethics of Obsessional Hatred in Henry James's 'The
Bench of Desolation'

Sigi Jöttkandt

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What does it mean to become a creditor in the great book of debt after having been a debtor?

— Moustafa Safouan

When Freud, in *Totem and Taboo*, makes an analogy between the three 'cultural sublimations' (religion, art and science) and the three 'choices of neurosis' (obsessional neurosis, hysteria and psychosis), one cannot help but be struck by a glaring omission (Freud, 1913, p. 73). Which cultural sublimation corresponds to perversion? Despite how counter-intuitive it sounds to contemporary ears, the answer is ethics. The incongruity is immediate for surely ethics is supposed to be the cultural overcoming precisely of one's polymorphous perversity, the morally-charged transformation of one's innate aggressive instincts into a love of one's fellow man. It is difficult to see in what way such love could be perverse.

Contemporary theory's growing interest in love as a seemingly natural off-shoot from the 'ethical turn' of the past twenty odd years seems to confirm the centuries-old Western tradition of connecting love and ethics established by the Christian notion of *agape*. Today, this interest is not confined solely to the humanist tradition represented by

a critic like Martha Nussbaum in her now classic claim for an ethical ‘knowledge’ that is specific to love (Nussbaum, 1990). For love also seems to be taking the wider theoretical world by storm, leading even as unsentimental a critic as Joan Copjec to claim in the context of ethics that ‘love alone is successful, for only in love do we encounter the Other’ (Copjec, 2002, p. 129). Of all the affects making their theoretical come-back in the recent turn toward ‘feeling in theory,’ to recall the title of Rei Terada’s influential book (Terada, 2001), it is clearly the emotion of love that seems to have most powerfully captured the contemporary ethical imagination.¹

Still, before proceeding too far along the ‘way of love’ – to recall another recent title (Irigaray 2003) – we might do well to pause a moment on a curious comment Freud makes in his essay, ‘The Disposition to an Obsessional Neurosis’ (Freud, 1913). For there Freud (following Empedocles) claims that it is hate, not love, that is ‘the primary emotional relation between men’ (Freud, 1913, p. 321), before going on somewhat cryptically to suggest that it is in such hate that ‘the origin of morality’ is to be found (Freud, 1913, p. 325). Here I would like to consider Freud’s claim in the context of an ethics developed in James’s remarkably under-read late tale, ‘The Bench of Desolation’ (James, 1999). My contention will be that any ethics that depends upon an overcoming of hatred by love always remains dependent at a structural level on perversion. Furthermore, despite the prevailing tendency to regard the hysteric as having an especial purchase on ethics and sublimation, if asked what a non-perverse ethical community might look like, we would not be too far off the mark saying it would be made up of that least glamorized figure in the psychoanalytic pantheon, the hateful obsessional neurotic.

‘I shall bring an action for “breach” against you Herbert Dodd as sure as my name’s Kate Cookham’ (James, 1999, p. 1011) – thus Kate threatens her former fiancé, managing to extract the promise of an exorbitant Four Hundred Pounds from the hapless man in lieu of the promised legal action. Raising this sum is evidently more than Herbert Dodd can do and in the course of delivering a mere Two Hundred and Seventy Pounds over to his former lover, Herbert descends into a spiral of poverty and despair that even his marriage to the winsome Nan Drury with the pretty dotty veil (whom he met, significantly, *after* his withdrawal from his engagement with Kate – or at least so he continues to tell himself and her) is unable to alleviate. The ‘quantity of hate’ (p. 1013) Herbert feels towards Kate so blights the rest of Dodd’s life that all he can do is sit passively on the ‘bench of desolation’ on the beachfront of Properley, watching ‘everything impossible and deplorable happen as in an endless prolongation of his nightmare’ (p. 1023) – not helped by Nan’s repeated querulous question, as they sink further and further into penury and to her and their daughters’ ultimate Dickensian deaths, whether ‘you didn’t make sure she could have done anything, that you didn’t make sure and that you were too afraid’ (p. 1027). Many years later, Kate returns – rich, refined, graceful, adorned now with her own ‘pretty dotty becoming veil’ – and offers Herbert his money back, with accrued interest, to the tune of twelve hundred and sixty pounds. In response to Herbert’s incredulous wonder, Kate explains, ‘Everything was possible, under my stress, with my hatred. [. . .]. It made me think of everything. It made me work’ (p. 1059).

Two kinds of hatred, then, are operative in this tale. There is Herbert’s destructive form that eats so deeply into every capacity he had for life and action that all he can do is

watch helplessly from his 'bench of desolation' as each catastrophic event 'regularly cut itself out black, yet of senseless silhouette against the red west' (p. 1023). Herbert's figurative conception of himself as 'stranded by tidal action', 'deposited' by his 'long wave of misfortune' (p. 1026) points to his profound sense of paralysis to which he nevertheless credits a certain distinction, as one who alone possessed 'the secret of the dignity of sitting still with one's fate' (p. 1028). In contrast, Kate's hatred makes her active, representing a *productive* form of hatred, as becomes evident from its results: her hate generates a rebate of 990 pounds.² How can we account for this difference between the two forms of hatred?

Freud suggests an answer in 'The Economic Problem of Masochism' where he hypothesizes that instincts may undergo a transformation from one into another (Freud, 1923-24, p. 163-4).³ In this essay he discusses how, upon encountering the death drive, the libido can call on a certain 'displaceable energy' which, while neutral in itself (a year earlier in 'The Ego and the Id' he called it 'de-sexualised Eros'), is capable of binding the (self-)destructive instinct and redirecting it towards the outside world. Freud calls this fusion of the death drive with the erotic instinct 'sadism proper,' and it seems fairly aptly to describe the logic inherent in Kate's hatred. Wounded by Herbert's slight, her love transforms into hatred. Yet because it continues to be bound to an original erotic instinct, her hate is just another expression of her love that she puts to work in the service of his ultimate enjoyment. All of his suffering is simply proof of the extent of her love for him, as she tries to make him understand: 'I did it *for* you – I did it *for* you!' she tells an incredulous Herbert (p. 1041). Consequently, although its vehicle is the destructive instinct, what really drives Kate's actions is the libido, whose ultimate fealty, as Freud

repeatedly reminds us, is owed to the instinct of self-preservation.⁴ The end result is that for as long as Kate can continue to love Herbert (whether erotically or sadistically), she succeeds in avoiding her own death drive.

From here it is not hard to see how such libidinally-bound hatred may well produce gains. Kate's hatred, in fact, gives a particularly vivid impression of the logic of the pleasure economy that permits temporary losses to be sustained in order to generate a greater quantity of pleasure. This capacity to delay pleasure is the 'reality principle' that works, as Freud takes pains to clarify, ultimately in the *service* of the pleasure principle. Despite our familiarity with this principle, it is worth highlighting one of its most important economic features once more, which Kate's hatred brings conspicuously into view. For the sheer perversity of Miss Cookham's logic (she must destroy Dodd so as to show how much she loves him) returns us to a similar structural perversity at the level of the libidinal economy that rests on the fantasy there are no true losses.⁵ Any investment made within the confines of the pleasure economy can always be recouped, as Kate triumphantly informs Herbert, 'Well then, here it is – it isn't lost!' (p. 1042). One might therefore be justified in describing the pleasure economy as a sort of pyramid scheme through which an initial 'investment' (loss) is put into circulation that generates returns sufficient for the increased satisfaction for the earlier investors. Nevertheless, the continuation of such satisfaction depends on an infinity of investors, each perpetually willing to put in their share. The upshot is that the seeming 'gains' it profits from are really loans, borrowed against future investors who, when their number reaches its inevitable limit, stand to lose all they have put in. In disavowing this numerical limit – in 'cooking' the books, as it were – the pleasure economy thereby discloses its profoundly

perverse structure while simultaneously revealing how we always live to some extent on 'borrowed' time. Each pleasurable 'detour' that delays the ultimate destination of the pleasure principle (death) is thus really a loan against our mortality. Herbert is right, then, to gape at the enormity of Kate's 'hate rebate': 'you've only to draw.' [. . .] 'To draw – to draw?' Yes, he gaped it as if it had no sense' (p. 1054). As Herbert senses, to 'draw' against one's death requires no small amount of audacity.

If we turn now to the other form of hate, in the same essay Freud describes how a portion of the destructive instinct does not take part in the external redirection but remains inside the organism where it becomes libidinally bound to the ego.⁶ This portion he calls 'original, erotogenic masochism' (Freud, 1924, p. 164) or 'primary' masochism, on top of which a secondary form can then become overlaid. This occurs when 'the sadism, or instinct of destruction, which has been directed outwards, projected, can be once more introjected, turned inwards' (p. 164), resulting in a 'secondary masochism' that comes to be added to the original form. It is this multiple layering of the destructive instinct that Ernest Jones takes up and extends in his essay, 'Fear, Guilt and Hate' (Jones, 1929). There Jones observes how each of these three emotions typically emerges as a secondary formation, that is, as a reaction to another affect, which is itself a veil for something else, namely an earlier, primordial version of the topmost layer.

In Jones we read that hate is 'one of the commonest covers for guilt' (Jones, 1929, p. 384) and it is certainly true that in Herbert's case we are given sufficient hints that he and indeed Nan are well aware of the terrible wrong that he originally did to Kate. Despite his self-righteous assurances, seemingly designed to convince himself even more than Nan, Herbert carries a sneaking suspicion that he had in fact probably already seen

Nan prior to dissolving his engagement with Kate, a point on which Nan in the early years seems irritatingly inclined to dwell: 'Well, I'm glad I *am* in your life,' she tells him on their bench of desolation, 'terrible as it is, however or whenever I did come in' (James 1999, p. 1021). One might note, too, how in indirect speech James has Dodd imagine how to a fellow-lounger he might appear 'a man evil, unsociable, possibly engaged in working out the idea of a crime' (p. 1028), suggesting at the very least an unconscious awareness of his lack of 'straightness' with his former fiancée. It seems clear that Herbert's 'immense' quantity of hate for Kate is really a mask for his guilt and, as such, can only result in the auto-destruction he witnesses with such helpless fascination: 'He watched himself, in a cold lucidity, *do* punctually and necessary each of the deplorable things that were inconsistent with his keeping afloat' (p. 1024). Projected as hate onto Kate, Herbert's guilt can only multiply with his awareness of the ongoing wrong he is doing her, producing still more hate in an endless morbid loop until Herbert's 'idiotised surrender' (p. 1022) consumes his very life force itself.

Herbert's 'particular morbid bravery' thus seems to nail him as a classic form of moral masochist whose greatest satisfaction is to watch his own suffering. The fact that this is a profoundly narcissistic form of pleasure is evident from Herbert's pride in his own passivity, which he takes as proof of his own gentility much lacking in the abhorrent Kate. It is her vulgarity he tells himself he cannot stomach, her vulgarity in threatening to drag their relationship into the 'squalor of the law-court, of claimed damages and brazen lies and published kisses, of love-letters read amid obscene guffaws' (p. 1012). James explains how,

Her taking a stand so incredibly 'low,' that was what he couldn't get over. The

particular bitterness of his cup was his having let himself in for a struggle on such terms – the use, on her side, of the vulgarest process known to the law: the vulgarest, the vulgarest, he kept repeating that, clinging to the help rendered him by this imputation to his terrorist of the vice he sincerely believed he had ever, among difficulties (for oh, he recognised the difficulties!) sought to keep most alien to him. (p. 1015)

The sole redeeming aspect in the whole case, he assures himself, is that it could only occur ‘because he was, comparatively, too aristocratic’ (p. 1017). A lesser man would have allowed his name to be dragged through the mud of the scandal papers, as he justifies his passivity to Nan, assured that ‘she couldn’t abide vulgarity much more than he could’ (p. 1020): ‘What would any solicitor have done or wanted to do but drag me just into the hideous public arena [. . .] that it has been at any rate my pride and my honour, the one rag of self-respect covering my nakedness, to have loathed and avoided from every point of view?’ (p. 1023-4).

Pausing for a moment on what seems like Herbert’s oddly unmotivated but suggestive reference to nakedness here, let us consider what is in fact contained in the charge of vulgarity (certainly a favorite insult in James). In addition to signifying typical or ordinary, ‘of the common people’ (all of which possess especial resonance for Dodd who prides himself on being if not actually one, then at least ‘like a gentleman’ (p. 1017)), vulgar is also given by Webster’s as meaning ‘lewdly or profanely indecent’, in other words: *without shame*. If this is the case, the question we must now ask is why Herbert reacts so strongly – if indeed so passively – to Kate’s (unreal, as it later turns out) threat? What shame, in other words, is he so desperately ‘afraid’ of (as Nan intuitively) that

the vulgar Kate, on the other hand, is prepared to risk?

As Dodd has already told Nan, his principal fear is of publicity, of being publicly shamed. But more than this, his shame appears to have something specifically to do with publicizing his *name*. For a large part of the horror Dodd feels at Kate's threat – her 'horrid, brutal, vulgar menace' (p. 1011) – lies in the way she does not hesitate to 'ruthlessly' (p. 1011) form the 'ugly, the awful words' on her lips (p. 1015). Which words does he mean? I would venture the answer is quite literally 'Herbert Dodd'. Let me explain why.

When Herbert reflects on everything he hates about Kate Cookham, he runs through a list of her qualities. He observes her in 'all the grossness of her native indelicacy', 'her excess of will and destitution of scruple', the 'odious, specious presentability' of her 'ignoble threat', her 'disgusting' certainty, her 'sharp and adroit' manner' (p. 1011). He reflects on her 'devilish conception' and 'appalling nature' 'worthy of a vindictive barmaid', her 'hustl[ing] and bully[ing]' (p. 1012) and wonders whether

his face had shown her anything like the quantity of hate he felt. Probably not at all; no man's face could express that immense amount; especially the fair, refined, intellectual, gentleman-like face which had had [. . .] so much to do with the enormous fancy she had originally taken to him. (p. 1013)

But beyond all this, the most striking thing we learn about Kate is the way she persistently addresses him by both his first and last name: 'It's just as much my dream as it ever was, Herbert Dodd, to take up [my life] with you!' she tells him. 'Remember that for me, Herbert Dodd; remember, remember!' (p. 1013). James describes how, 'on this

she left him – left him frankly under a mortal chill’ (p. 1013).

Interestingly, it is just this chill, James tells us, that Dodd experiences whenever he sees the dropped blind of his bookshop window. Although he gains a significant amount of satisfaction from seeing his shop in all the open glory of its window display – ‘he had a fancy for a good show and was master of twenty different schemes of taking arrangement for the old books and prints’ (p. 1014) – the ‘broad, blank, sallow blind’ never fails to make him shudder and the simple reason for this is that on it is printed his name:

‘Herbert Dodd, Successor’, painted on below his uncle’s antique style, the feeble penlike flourishes already quite archaic – this ugly vacant mask, which might so easily be taken for the mask of failure. (p. 1014)

For as long as he can see *through* his window, and regard his artful arrangement of aesthetic property, he can sustain his *amour propre*. It is only when the blind is down and he is confronted with the bald written display of his proper name that the complicated, carefully constructed ‘scheme of taking arrangement’ of Herbert’s narcissistic self-love begins to teeter. As a result, James tells us how

he had never held optical commerce with the drawn blind for a moment longer than he could help. [. . .]. Big and bare, with his name staring at him from the middle, it thus offered in its grimness a term of comparison for Miss Cookham’s ominous visage. (p. 1015)

For neither does Kate ever soften her ‘large, clean, plain brown face’ with the pretty dotty veils that adorn Nan Drury’s countenance and, worse, ‘the words ‘Herbert

Dodd' [. . .] were dreadfully, were permanently, seated on her lips. *She* was grim, no mistake' (p. 1015). The question is why these words should send such shivers of horror up Herbert's spine such that to avoid them he is willing to sit helplessly by and allow Kate to destroy him?

The answer, I believe, lies in a peculiar property of the proper name itself. One's name is the original, primary way one is interpellated by the Other and furnished with a symbolic identity. We thus have a very specific relationship with this earliest group of signifiers. In his presentation to the closed discussion group during Lacan's Twelfth Seminar (1964-65), Jean Oury calls attention to the 'exquisite sensitivity' a child has towards its name, noting how it serves as a kind of 'phonological sieve' that enables us to obtain our earliest bearings in the linguistic system. Forming a kind of personal grid or 'key' in the musical sense of the term, this 'phonematic gestalt' as he calls it, 'would function a little like a resonating system, cutting out in the surrounding language forms of meaning in order to be organized into a message furnished by the personal sieve.' Oury's conception of the name as a phonological 'key' thereby possesses something in common with the unary trait that Lacan discusses in his Ninth Seminar on Identification (1961-62). Lacan takes this concept from Freud's discussion of identification in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* where the idea of the 'Einziger Zug' is introduced as the primary point of identification for the subject-to-be. The 'Einziger Zug' is a 'single trait' of the Other (the examples Freud uses are of a cough, a certain look, etc.) that the subject introjects and which then serves as the little piece of external matter that seeds the subsequent growth of the subject's narcissistic identity. The primary difference between the name and the unary trait lies in the way the former is a symbolic signifier whereas the

latter is linked to the image and to the imaginary register.⁷

Following Oury's presentation, Irigaray makes an interesting intervention. She notes how there is a crucial difference in quality between one's first and last names, using the term 'sound image' to describe the first name which is thus distinguished from the latter by its semi-imaginary nature. Although unquestionably a signifier, the first name is treated in a largely imaginary way – that is, more like a unary trait – and accordingly holds a special place in the identification process. For Irigaray, the result is that the first name comes to embody something of the subject's singularity: 'There always remains [. . .] a difference' she claims, 'notably at the level of identification between the George Philip's or the Jacques's or the Eliany's and Lacan's,' going on to observe how 'the subject does not react in the same way to the death of a George Philip and to the death of an Eliany.' This is why problems can arise, she says, if the child bears the same name as another in the line of descendents, particularly, as she notes, if it has the same name as the father. She says 'the homonymy of the first name [. . .] is often, it seems to me, a handicap in the becoming of the subject.' Although Irigaray doesn't explicitly state why, we can infer that the reason for this is because of the way it interferes in the creation of the son's unique identity, his sense of being an exclusive One (with all of the ontological associations this carries). For this, too, is precisely the function of the unary trait for Lacan: the trait in Lacan comes to be associated with the earliest inscription (the example he uses is of the hunter's notched bone that serves as one of the earliest counting machines) out of which the concept of a 'signifying difference' emerges. This is the 'difference that makes a difference', as it were; it is what enables one to look beyond the qualitative and quantitative similarities and differences of a purely imaginary network

and recognize it as being traversed by another kind of identity, namely, a symbolic one. It is striking, then, that among the number of examples Lacan uses to figure this 'genesis of difference' the proper name makes a frequent appearance:

You will say: Laplanche is Laplanche and Lacan is Lacan.' But it is precisely there that the whole question lies, since precisely in analysis the question is posed whether Laplanche is not the thought of Lacan and if Lacan is not the being of Laplanche or inversely. The question is not sufficiently resolved in the real. It is the signifier which settles it, it is what introduces difference as such into the real, and precisely to the extent that what is involved are not qualitative differences. (Lacan, 1961-62, 6 December 1961)

The proper name marks the subject as a singular One, a bearer of the unary trait, that is, of a difference 'detached from all possible comparison' (Lacan, 1961-62, 28 February 1962).

It is possible, then, that the reason Herbert Dodd recoils so violently from seeing or hearing his name is because he may carry the same name as his father, and such a homonymy between the two names would then force him to confront a deeply disturbing truth, namely, his failure to have become a singular One – a failure that his entire brittle narcissistic structure is a vain attempt to cover over and mask. I suggested already to what extent Herbert's much vaunted 'pride' rested on an 'unconscious sense of guilt' (Freud, 1924, p. 166), but it seems patent, too, how his life-long dwelling on his 'suffered wrong' (James, 1999, p. 1053), his insistence on his 'precious sincerity' (p. 1050) – which represents the entire integrity of his narcissistic self-image – is evidently intended to perform a powerful defensive function as well but which Kate, with her insistent

pronouncing of Herbert Dodd's name, seems to have an uncanny ability to cut through. It does seem as though there is something inherent in the proper name *itself*, beyond and above whether or not one bears one's father's or mother's moniker, that is capable of breaching the ego's carefully constructed bulwarks.

In this case it becomes unnecessary to move to inferences outside James's text to understand why Kate's persistent naming of Herbert Dodd might result in such a strong negative affect as hate. The reason is that one's proper name is inevitably the repository of parental aspirations. One's name is, in a sense, the privileged signifier of their hopes and dreams, their narcissistic fantasies – in short, of their desire. And because of this, the child always feels it imbued with a certain degree of shame – a shame, perhaps, at how one inevitably fails these dreams or, more deeply still, an existential shame that results from being the visible, public, 'naked' medium (as Herbert figures it to himself) through which, as their offspring, we are proof of their desire, strange little walking nubbins of the Other's jouissance that we are. No wonder Herbert recoils at being reminded of this (and in this light, it seems quite remarkable that anyone succeeds in becoming a subject at all). To the extent that it is the semiotic crystallization of parental desire, one's name – 'this radical archaic point that we must necessarily suppose to be at the origin of the unconscious' as Lacan calls it (Lacan, 1961-62, 10 January 1962)– always possesses something intrinsically shameful as children, in their taunting rituals of social humiliation, intuitively sense.

Is it not true, then, that at some level we all hate our names? Doesn't every parent at some point find themselves bitterly reproached, 'Why didn't you call me such-and-such?' (such-and-such invariably being a name the parents in turn viscerally abhor).

Strange as it sounds, however, this hatred of our names is a sign not of the *failure* of identification but rather of its *success*. For when we detest our names, we shift from a passive position, shame, to an active one, hate, with the result that this hate is more genuinely productive than Kate's because it causes us to make something, not of the other as Kate did – 'It was *for* you, it was *for* you!' (1042). '[It was] to do something with your money that you'd never do yourself' (1042) – but of ourselves. It is precisely our hatred of it that drives us to 'make' our name (our own).

However, we would be wrong to think we could stop here since, as Jones has taught us, if there is one thing we can be certain of with hatred, it is that it is a cover for something else.⁸ Beneath the shame we feel at our names lurks another, even deeper hatred whose traces can be found in a strange ambiguity found in the name itself. This ambiguity lies in the tension that exists between the name as the core point of identification through which we gain a primary imaginary, and then later, symbolic identity (with its access to the universe of signifiers), and the peculiarly nonsensical nature of the name itself: its sheer blank unsignifyingness (as Lacan notes – not without betraying a certain ethnocentrism – a name is always the one word that is not translated into other languages; it refers to no other signifier within the system of signs, Lacan 1961-62, 1 October 62). This heavy, blank senseless quality of the name subsequently comes to weigh down the entire symbolic order it gives us entry into, as another favorite children's game attests: repeated enough times, this most cherished, familiar, *heimlich* of signifiers dissolves into a profoundly alienating, bizarre set of syllables that empties all and every sense of self. Every name thus carries an essential 'dead weight' (James, 1999, p. 1024) along with it, a reminder that it (and the universe of signifiers it inaugurates) is

merely a loan against our being (and therefore against our death). Consequently, if a name serves as a plug, a prop against the death/Tod/Dodd that is inscribed on everybody's balance sheet, it is also simultaneously a debit memorandum of that original deficit that no paper gains in the Symbolic ledger suffice to recompense. As such, the name carries the traces of the original destructive instinct, a hate that is 'older than love' as Freud has called it (Freud 1915, p. 139). When we hate our names, we give voice to the primordial hatred that, as the 'primary emotional relation between men' is the true origin of morality for Freud as we shall now see (Freud, 1913, p. 325).

We saw how the pleasure economy is an essentially perverse economy that was founded on an original loan against which we continually borrow as if there were no need to ever pay it back again. Typically, then, one regards the renunciation of pleasure characteristic of the overcoming of Oedipus as the surmounting of such polymorph perversity. The signifier for lack (the phallus) introduces a limit into the pleasure economy, which the subject deals with through a now familiar economic ruse: if we give up one piece of our jouissance now, we are assured of recouping it with interest later on by way of what Lacan calls the 'inverted ladder of the Law of desire' (Lacan, 1977, p. 324). This is what castration promises when it dangles the lure of a symbolic identity before the subject: you must give up 'being' (the phallus, i.e. the Other's total satisfaction) for the greater profit of 'having' the phallus in the form of a place in the symbolic order as a subject of desire. Nevertheless, it is worth noting how, from an 'economic' perspective, the Oedipal renunciation and the accompanying acquisition of a sense of morality remain in fact no less perverse, if we understand by this a

fundamentally *closed* economy. The basic structure of the Oedipal subterfuge follows that of secondary masochism. As indicated above, this form of masochism is a reaction formation that emerges when the sadistic drive has been redirected from its outward path and turned back upon the ego. The agency that becomes invested with this drive is the super-ego, the portion of the ego that, as Freud puts it in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, ‘sets itself over against the rest of the ego [. . .] and which now, in the form of ‘conscience,’ is ready to put into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon other, extraneous individuals’ (Freud, 1930, p. 123).

The peculiarity of the super-ego’s strength lies in what Freud, in a charming understatement, calls the ‘economic disadvantage’ that comes with forming a conscience. For the super-ego not only demands instinctual renunciations with which the subject must comply but, because they are accompanied with the ‘wish’ that persists and which cannot be hidden from the super-ego, each renunciation produces not the anticipated feeling of virtue but rather guilt, resulting in the need for further renunciations. In the case of the aggressive instinct – the privileged affective renunciation in the formation of a moral conscience – Freud observes how a peculiar transfer takes effect whereby every piece of aggression the subject gives up mysteriously reappears in the ledger of the super-ego, heightening its strength. It is not hard to see how this is simply the inverse of Kate’s sadistic pleasure economy, dealing in losses this time rather than gains.

Now, in the following chapter of *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Freud makes an explicit link between the individual formation of the super-ego and its cultural form which he names ‘ethics.’ Ethics, he writes ‘is to be regarded as a therapeutic attempt – as

an endeavour to achieve, by means of a command of the super-ego, something which has so far not been achieved by means of any other cultural activities' (Freud, 1930, p. 142). What ethics attempts to 'cure' is of course nothing other than the aggressive instinct in man, which Freud calls 'the greatest hindrance to civilization' (Freud, 1930, p. 142), and it accomplishes this through the cultural command of the super-ego to 'love one's neighbour as oneself' (Freud, 1930, p. 142). However, from everything we know about the super-ego, we can predict that such transformation of hatred into love can only lead to greater and greater renunciations on which the cultural super-ego thrives, leading one to conclude that the love of one's neighbor that ethics holds up as an ideal for the basis of community is a profoundly masochistic form of love whose logic is no less perverse than the pleasure economy it was supposed to supplant.⁹ The more we love our neighbor, the guiltier we feel, and the guiltier we feel, the more we destroy ourselves in our unconscious desire for punishment. The degree of 'discontent' in any culture lies precisely in the extent to which the majority of its people are not masochists, unable to derive libidinal enjoyment from the inherently perverse structure they inhabit.

Yet it would be a clear mistake to imagine that the perverse answer to the forced choice that confronts us in the form of ethics – should we love or hate? (do I protect my being or the other's being?) – is the only possible one. As we have seen, the pervert's answer has shown this question up to be a false one: no matter which we choose, we will inevitably wind up in the same economic position, that is, with fundamentally unbalanced accounts. At this point, the obsessional neurotic might be able to help us make better economic sense of our resources. The obsessional, after all, is well-known for his careful accounting, where every piece of jouissance must be conscientiously paid for. Payment is

what the obsessional specializes in: the strange repeated rituals, the forbidden thoughts, the compulsive hand-washing (to which list we might now add a penchant for occupying, year in, year out, the same identical bench at the end of the boardwalk such that an old friend might reliably expect to find you on it when she comes looking for you many years later¹⁰). Aimed at pacifying the Other, or better yet, at ‘mortifying’ it, such payments are always intended as compensation for an original feeling of pleasure that the obsessional experienced as excessive and, hence, traumatic. By paying the Other off, the obsessional imagines he has successfully balanced his books. For every pro there is a con, for every forbidden thought, an act of penance or, more precisely, each act of penance is designed to ward off an obsessional thought *before* it even arrives. Prepaying for his jouissance, the obsessional will never be caught short for even if he dies unexpectedly, it will be in the calm knowledge that his books are already in order.

Hence the obsessional’s response to the forced choice of ethics, ‘my being or the other’s being?’ – which we might note is simply the cultural version of the forced choice of castration and whose preferred formula in Lacan is doubtless one with which Herbert Dodd would feel very familiar: ‘Your money or your life’ – is to read it in this way: ‘your money *and* your life’. Forced to choose, the obsessional opts out, preferring to sacrifice himself rather than lose either.¹¹ There are, thus, certain striking similarities between the masochistic and obsessional positions, leading Jacques-Alain Miller to warn that they are frequently mistaken for one another (which makes me feel a little better about having first erroneously seen Herbert Dodd as a typical masochistic, i.e. perverse personality, particularly given his penchant for ‘pretty dotty veils’ – although it seems evident now that these are simply ‘blinds’ for his true passion, *keeping books*). In both masochism and

obsession, we encounter a repeated scenario centered on the scopic drive whose enjoyment lies in watching oneself suffer from a privileged spectator seat on the ‘bench of desolation.’¹² Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between the stagings of auto-destruction that both masochists and obsessionals take such delight in, namely, in the status of the one at whom the tableau is aimed. For the masochist, the scenario is staged for the big Other, the one whose enjoyment is guaranteed by the perverse play – as Kate protests, it was all done *for* him, secure in her belief that she knows better than the other what his desire really is.

When the obsessional, on the other hand, gets around the forced choice by sacrificing himself, he enters what Miller calls ‘an otherworldly realm’. There the subject wagers that the Other will be content with the subject’s self-sacrifice, whose additional effect will thus be to effectively kill off Other’s desire – and, by the same token, the Other as well. Consequently, for the obsessional, the Other is fundamentally a *dead* Other, and everything the obsessional does is designed to fool that Other into thinking the subject is dead too.¹³ By ‘playing dead’ (a typical obsessional strategy observed and commented on by many theoreticians including Lacan, 1994; Leclaire, 1980; and Miller, 2003), the obsessional finds a way of cheating death and, hence, a means of avoiding making the impossible choice between being (jouissance) and having (desire).

What this means for the obsessional in practical terms is that the phallus, the signifier of lack – the *Nom du pere* – that represents the limit of the pleasure economy, must remain permanently interred. It must not be allowed to circulate freely in the symbolic (i.e. dragged ‘into the hideous public arena’ (James, 1999, p. 1023)) for this would mean a definitive loss of jouissance: a choice in favor of having, i.e. castration.

Note how this is very different from the perverse structure that successfully disavows the signifier of lack, splitting the subject between two contradictory but economically equivalent scenarios, masochism and sadism. For the obsessional, on the other hand, the signifier is indisputably present (the obsessional is a neurotic structure, remember) but is so purely in suspension. It thus occupies what Lacan calls the ‘space between-two-deaths,’ and all of the obsessional rituals, ceremonies, prohibitions are designed expressly to prevent this sepulchral signifier from *coming back to life*.

The difference between the masochistic and the obsessional sacrifice might thus be expressed in this way: the masochist seeks punishment from an all-powerful Other because, in a ploy typical of the reversals of the pleasure economy, he obtains his jouissance through that Other. This is the gamble he takes when confronted with the forced choice, hence it matters little whether he ethically chooses himself or the other (sadism or masochism) – in either case he cannot ‘lose.’ Facing the same choice, on the other hand, the obsessional enters into a game with the Other, promising that if the Other cannot have any jouissance, neither will the subject. All jouissance is thus accounted for; the obsessional has ‘squared’ his balance sheet with the Other.

Playing dead, the obsessional thus gives rein to that most archaic of our drives, the one that lies ‘beyond the pleasure principle.’ For the death drive, as it frequently needs to be repeated, is not a forward drive into actual death but a backwards push towards ‘an earlier state of things,’ a condition of stasis and inertia prior to the division into pleasure and unpleasure inaugurated by the pleasure economy. The condition the death drive aspires to is thus a *pre-judgmental* condition, where the boundaries between the organism and the external world have not yet been drawn up into categories (of love

and hate). For the organism, in fact, there is nothing but hate, that is to say, it hates everything that interferes with the condition of stasis. This is the hate Freud calls ‘older than love.’¹⁴

My conviction is that it is to this archaic form that the obsessional’s much-noted hatred belongs.¹⁵ For, like the organism’s primordial repudiation of all external stimuli, his is a hatred of everything that disturbs his death-play. It is a hatred, moreover, whose principal function is to envelop the signifier, to freeze it – and thereby also to shield it from anything that might reawaken it. It is in this precise sense that the obsessional hates his name – not as a form of narcissistic defense against the Other’s desire, that is, an Imaginary hatred (although at the top-most layer it certainly is that too). Rather this hatred, which we might now wish to call Real serves, in a remarkable and up till now scarcely thinkable turn-around, as a form of protective armor for the signifier itself.¹⁶ Envenomed in a ferocious, deterrent hatred, the obsessional shields the signifier from any harm that might accidentally reanimate it.

However, most crucial from an ethical perspective is this: although I earlier described the destination that lies beyond the pleasure principle as a ‘pre-judgmental’ state, this does not mean the obsessional is without any morality at all. As any clinical picture can tell us, the obsessional in fact is frequently plagued by an extremely highly developed sense of morality. Freud calls this obsessional morality a ‘super-morality’ but to avoid any misconception that it has any connection with the super-ego let me propose the term ‘hyper-morality.’ Unlike the morality imposed by the super-ego, the hyper-morality of the obsessional has nothing to do with guilt and renunciation, and even less to do with love. Instead, obsessional hyper-morality acts as a kind of protective buckler, a

carefully designed escutcheon whose purpose is to do everything in its power to maintain the signifier in its ideal inert, interred form. The obsessional's well-known over-protectiveness of others, his need to save them from the terrible things that may befall them (caused, naturally, by the obsessional's own thoughts) is thus in actuality a curious kind of ethical side-effect – an unexpected by-product – of this primary wish to keep anything that might interfere with the death drive at bay.

If we had to give this ethical 'side-effect' of obsessional hatred a name, we might do worse than follow the lead of the woman in James's tale and call it 'care': 'But I can take care of you' (p. 1060), Kate tells Herbert Dodd at the end of the story. Care in this sense – if we could divorce it from its Heideggerian and, even, feminist connotations – would describe a relation to an other founded not on the fusional capacities of Eros (an ethics of masochistic love) but in a defense of the other against one's own incurable death drive. The final scene has Kate putting one arm around Herbert on the bench of desolation in what might be just such a gesture of care.¹⁷ Theirs seems a compact rather than a marriage, an agreement to treat each other with sufficient solicitude to enable the other to pursue his or her own solitary path towards death: desolation, after all, comes from *solus*, alone. It is, naturally, not a particularly happy ending – when would we ever expect one from James? – yet it does perhaps suggest a workable vision of an ethical way of being all alone *with* an other, side by side on the bench of de-isolation.

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¹ A brief glance over recent titles confirms this current ethical steeping in love, see for example, Kristeva, 1989; Sandford, 2001; Burggraeve, 2002. Derrida's recent work on mourning, John Protevi argues, can be regarded as one long meditation on love as the experience of originary difference. See his essay, 'Love,' in Patton and Protevi (2003). Note, too, the recent reprint of Luhmann's, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (1998). It seems telling that the first event of Research Group on Formations of the Clinic in the Lacanian Field's 'Lacan in English' seminar in 2003 was devoted to the transference, while the second, in 2005, was devoted to the Ethics Seminar.

² There is admittedly a certain ambiguity in Kate's admission of hatred where, upon Herbert's further interrogation, she seems to imply it was a hatred not of Herbert himself but of what she was doing to him. The exchange is as follows: 'Everything was possible, under my stress, with my hatred.'

'Your hatred –?' For she had paused as if it were after all too difficult.

'Of what I should for so long have been doing to you,' p. 1059.

My own inclination is to read Kate's secondary clarification as a sort of aesthetic relapse from her earlier admission of her hatred for him which 'after all [is] too difficult.'

³ Freud's most extended discussion of this transformation is in the earlier essay, 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes' (Freud, 1915).

⁴ Recall how for Freud love is a 'protection against falling ill' caused by a damning up of ego-libido in narcissism. One's original libidinal attachment to objects is thus a form of defense against a tension (that may turn inward at the ego's expense). See Freud (1914), pp. 84-86.

⁵ The absence of lack is the main characteristic of perversion. See, for example, Paul Verhaeghe, 'in the pervert's own world, there is no lack' (Verhaeghe, 2004, p. 412).

⁶ See also Freud's discussion of this in his chapter, 'The Two Classes of Instincts' in 'The Ego

and the Id': 'By [. . .] getting hold of the libido from the object-cathexes, setting itself up as sole love-object, and desexualizing or sublimating the libido of the id, the ego is working in opposition to the purposes of Eros and placing itself at the service of the opposing instinctual impulses' (Freud, 1923, p. 46).

⁷ In Seminar XIX, Lacan explains how 'the unary trait is the support of what I started from under the name of the mirror stage, namely, imaginary identification' (Lacan, 1971-72, 10 May 1972). However, the link between the unary trait and the letter he develops ten years previously in the Identification seminar seems to suggest a privileged relation to the symbolic register. See, for example, his discussion of the unary trait and the emergence of the signifier in the first two sessions of December 1961 (Lacan, 1961-62, 6 December 1961; 13 December 1961). This seems to imply that a signifier (such as one's first name) can be approached in an imaginary way, as I suggest below.

⁸ Recall how for Jones, fear, guilt and hate operate in triple layers where the top-most emotion replicates another, more archaic form on the bottom between which is sandwiched a reaction formation. Regarding hate, Jones writes, 'various manifestations of the Hate impulse can cover both anxiety and guilt, but [. . .] there is reason to suppose that in all such cases there is present below these a still deeper layer of hate,' (Jones, 1929, p. 385).

⁹ In Seminar XIV, Lacan observes how it is a mistake to imagine masochism is the reverse of sadism. Bearing out my point here, Lacan says 'it is quite clear that both operate in the same fashion, except that the sadist operates in a more naïve fashion.' See his lesson of 14 June 1967 (Lacan, 1966-76).

¹⁰ James tells us 'For him, his seat, the term of his walk, was consecrated; it had figured to him for years as the last (though there were others, not immediately near it, and differently disposed, that

might have aspired to the title); so that he could invidiously distinguish as he approached, make out from a distance any accident of occupation, and never draw nearer while that unpleasantness lasted. What he disliked was to compromise on his tradition, whether for a man, a woman, or a canoodling couple,' (James, 1999, p. 1028).

¹¹ See Jacques-Alain Miller, 'H20: Suture in Obsessionality,' *The Symptom* 4 (2003).

<<http://lutecium.fr/mirror/www.lacan.com/suturef.htm>> [accessed 28.8.05]. 'Forced to choose, the one or the other, the obsessional does not want to lose either. [. . .] But despite all efforts to deny it, the obsessional cannot escape the forced choice. The necessity of loss hits the subject with particular virulence: rather than lose something, the subject sacrifices itself.'

¹² For a useful short description of the principal features of the obsessional subjective structure, see Verhaeghe (2004), pp. 351-95. Like most obsessives, Herbert was his mother's favorite child, 'the youngest and most interesting, the 'delicate' one and the literary of her five scattered and struggling children' (James, 1999, p. 1014). Herbert's description of how his mother 'screwed' the bookshop out of her uncle for him suggests a particularly dominating personality (her maiden name, incidentally, was Geddes, 'get his'). Verhaeghe tells us this is common among mothers of obsessives who typically send a message to the child that the father is inadequate, (Verhaeghe, 2004, p. 384). Like Herbert, the child grows up with an inflated narcissism as a result of finding himself the ideal object of his mother's desire. Most importantly, however, the obsessional fears the Other's desire because of the threat it represents of totally engulfing him, leading him to shower the Other with what Verhaeghe calls 'anal objects,' none of which will ever be enough to satisfy it (in this context we might usefully recall Freud's famous association of money and shit in 'Character and Anal Eroticism,' Freud, 1908). The obsessional fear of the Other's desire offers one reason for why Herbert withdrew from his engagement with Kate. Along these lines, Joseph Milicia wonders whether 'the younger Kate's more open

dominance – or what seemed that to Dodd – was a cause of his original rejection of her.’ For Milicia, then, Herbert’s act of resisting Kate ‘becomes a kind of primal event, a son’s break from a mother’s force.’ (Milicia, 1978, p.152). All of these characteristics are, however, merely ‘accidental’ features, none of which are guaranteed to produce an obsessional structure which, one must emphasize with Verhaeghe, has to do with the way the subject relates to the phallic signifier.

¹³ Miller writes, ‘Already the early Lacan emphasized that the obsessional makes do with a dead [sic] in the place of the Other. ‘A dead man feels no pain’... It should be added that a dead man feels no pleasure either, and that is why the Other of the obsessional is dead.’ ‘H2O: Suture in Obsessionality.’

¹⁴ ‘Hate, as a relation to objects, is older than love. It derives from the narcissistic ego’s primordial repudiation of the external world with its outpouring of stimuli’ (Freud, 1915, p. 139). See also his comment in ‘The Ego and the Id’ how this hate is the sole phenomenal representation we have of the ‘elusive’ death drive: ‘There is no difficulty in finding a representative of Eros; but we must be grateful that we can find a representative of the elusive death [drive] in the [drive] of destruction, to which hate points the way’ (Freud, 1923, p. 42).

¹⁵ In ‘The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis,’ Freud comments on ‘the extraordinary part played by impulses of hatred and anal eroticism in the symptomatology of obsessional neurosis’ (Freud, 1913, p. 321).

¹⁶ This turn-around is thus the diametric opposite of an ethical sublimation which employs symbolic signifiers in defense against the real. See Lacan’s discussion of sublimation in Seminar IV (Lacan, 1994, pp. 87-164).

¹⁷ I acknowledge a certain paradox here that sees the pervert, Kate, teach the obsessional

something about the ethics of his desiring structure. But perhaps the pervert is right: she really does 'know' something about the Other's enjoyment.