

## ŽIŽEK AVEC LACAN: SPLITTING THE DIALECTICS OF DESIRE

Erin F. Labbie

Slavoj Žižek's scholarship holds a particularly high place within cultural criticism that seeks to account for the intersections between psychoanalysis and Marxism. Žižek's prolific writings about ideology, revealing the relationships between psychoanalysis and Marxism, have altered the way in which literary and cultural criticism is approached and accomplished to the extent that most scholars can no longer hold tightly to the former notion that the two fields are at odds. Invested in demonstrating how both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist theory rely on a similar adherence to a dialectical process, his work has created a bridge between Eastern European and Continental and American scholarship such that the most innovative and radical scholarship in many American Comparative Literature circles is dominated and guided by the project of the Slovene school of which he has taken charge. Along with other notable scholars such as Joan Copjec, Mladen Dolar, Renata Salecl, and Alenka Zupančič, Žižek's high-powered, inter- (or *anti-*) disciplinary<sup>1</sup> approach to cultural, historical, and philosophical texts has succeeded in creating a theoretical intervention that accounts for ethics and politics while focusing on primary texts such as cinema, performance art, prose, and poetry, and which also takes into consideration the way that we must read philosophy (particularly the philosophy of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, and Lacan), as if they too are primary materials ripe with potential literary and theoretical significance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Here I follow John Mowitt's *Text: A Genealogy of an Antidisciplinary Object* (Durham: Duke UP, 1992), which rightly argues for the use of "anti-disciplinarity" rather than "interdisciplinarity" because the former challenges categories while the latter upholds them.

<sup>2</sup> This informal group has done much scholarship together, including *The Gaze and the Voice as Love Objects* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), and *Radical Evil* (New York and London: Verso, 1996). Individually, they establish various other connections between psychoanalysis and Marxism. Žižek is the best known among these scholars, perhaps because he is the most prolific, but his fame or infamy does not mean that his arguments are any more accurate, insightful, or significant than theirs. What *does* seem to be a fair

There are many ways in which Žižek certainly leads the intellectual scenes in the Western world today and there are many ways in which this position of leadership is quite deserved; his commentaries on, and analyses of, recent historical events have initiated and contributed to the prolific discussions within comparative literature and cultural studies on globalization, empire, and the problems of terrorism, ethics and the potential for liberty as they are also bound to the history of psychoanalysis and Marxism.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, there are several ways in which Žižek's attempt to encompass the entire history of the "Western world" and politically to affect the contemporary scene can lead to statements that simplify and reduce the complexity, alternately of Lacanian and Marxist thought, as well as of Medieval Studies.<sup>4</sup> As such, his work also is located in the "low" realm of scholarship and often considered by some critics to be too fast, too loose, and too universalizing in its attempts to contribute to the more "serious" and so diligent of philosophical scholarship, such that "high theory" becomes a coded way of saying "low" philosophical weight.<sup>5</sup> The repetition of many of his arguments and, indeed, the reprinting of some extended formulations in his work is seen by some,

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generalization, is that these figures in dialogue are producing some of the most important work in cultural studies and beyond today, and that the University of Ljubljana is a place where exciting work is being done!

<sup>3</sup> As of late, Žižek has moved from the incipient status of such arguments as displayed in *For They Know Not What They Do* (London: Verso, 1991) to more overt commentaries on the problems of empire and terrorism in his various essays summarized best by *Welcome to The Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002) and within the more particular realm of contributions to psychoanalysis, his gloriously titled, *Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004). "Empire" is the term coined for the imposition of western ideology on the global world in response to post-colonial and post-terrorist problems, and it is explored most explicitly by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Medievalist Sarah Kay has worked with and introduced as well as summarized Žižek, in *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Blackwell, 2003), but she does not engage his medievalism in the manner that I am suggesting it should be considered.

<sup>5</sup> Some of these debates are characterized in Terry Eagleton's collection *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek, and Others* (London: Verso, 2003).

not as a reiteration and self-citation within a new moment that alters and appropriates his own work to put forth a variation on a theme and perform poststructuralism and anti-authorship, but rather, as a lazy and hasty assertion.

In this article I suggest that the coexistence of the high and low within Žižek's work is symptomatic of a more pervasive dialectical theme that reveals his play with Marxism and psychoanalysis and, as a symptom of a new kernel of thinking and approach to ideas and ideology within culture, reflects a particular understanding of dialectics. That is to say, to the extent that Žižek conflates the process of the dialectics of desire in psychoanalysis and Marxism, he follows Lacan's (mis)appropriation of Hegelian structures and effectively alters the movement of the dialectical process of desire such that textual examples and analyses can often appear misleading if taken, as they often are, out of context of his broader project.

Since Žižek publishes so quickly, it is nearly impossible to speak of his "recent" work; since he publishes so voluminously, it is similarly impossible to address the entirety of his constantly-developing and changing philosophical system.<sup>6</sup> For my purposes here, I will focus on *The Metastases of Enjoyment*,<sup>7</sup> to show how Žižek's unique approach to the intersections of Marxism and psychoanalysis contribute to debates about high and low as well as periodicity and a desire on the part of scholars for localizable causality (which is always already absent); this contribution then produces a dialectical approach to reading and knowledge that effects Medieval Studies as much as it does the other fields of inquiry that Žižek engages.

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<sup>6</sup> This organicism should be seen as a positive quality of growth and openness to thought rather than as a deficiency. Throughout this essay if I criticize Žižek or discuss the moments in which he goes awry, it is also because I am interested enough in his work to attempt to be a proper disciple in the Nietzschean and Lacanian senses.

<sup>7</sup> *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (New York and London: Verso, 1994). Another interesting approach would be to take *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001) as a subject that breaks epochal distinctions by way of its investigation of the discourse of medieval Catholicism within the contemporary climate of technological and cyber communication. In this text, Žižek bridges the gap between studies of pre-modern texts and ideologies (as well as theological systems) with those of contemporary post-modern and post-structuralist technological systems.

### Žižek's Dialectical Seduction

Throughout his work, but most evidently in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Žižek enacts a form of a cultural studies approach to medieval texts and ideas that follows Lacan's medievalism,<sup>8</sup> but fails to account for the subtleties of those texts and ideologies that are harvested for their exemplar use in Žižek's cultural critique. All of his texts address the way in which desire works dialectically; yet, his reading of the Hegelian dialectic makes Lacan and Marx equal in their approach to dialectical thinking and its processes. A close reading of Lacan's claim, initially put forth in his "The Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,"<sup>9</sup> that desire is dialectical reveals flaws in his own understanding of the Hegelian system of dialectical desire that result partly from his drive to follow Kojève's reading of Hegel, and partly from his goal to perform a mathematical system of the process of desire. This overdetermined and rhetorical adherence to Hegelian dialectics is disrupted by a description of a process wherein desire ruptures the structure of the dialectic to create a knot (akin to the knot of the unconscious). As I show at length elsewhere, and I will argue briefly here, Lacan claims to adhere to a dialectical system that is subverted by his articulations of his theory of desire.

If Lacan turns Hegel on his head, then it might seem that he does employ the dialectic in a manner similar to that which Marx instituted when he also, famously, turned Hegel on his head; in this case, Lacan and Marx would seem to be employing a similar revision of the dialectic. The difference, however, is that Lacan's revision of Hegel takes the form of a knot, in which once the dialectical process is at work, the discrete elements are difficult to relocate. For Marx, "turning Hegel on his head" appears as a silly way of saying that he is maintaining the

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<sup>8</sup> My forthcoming book *Lacan's Medievalism* (University of Minnesota Press, Spring 2006) outlines specifically the way that Lacanian psychoanalysis forwards a type of medievalist reading and concern with the Middle Ages. For the purposes of this article, understanding that Lacan, and Žižek after him, engage the Middle Ages by way of their study of desire within the phenomenon of courtly love, as well as the contribution to the scholastic quarrel about the universals by way of the concept of the "Real" and its relation to fantasy, is sufficient.

<sup>9</sup> Collected in his *Écrits*, trans. Allan Sheridan (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1977) 292–325.

dialectic but reversing it. Any scholar familiar with the dialectic knows that to reverse it is simply to reiterate it since the elements at stake in the dialectical process become transfigured as soon as they are subject to each other in their difference and mutual interdependence. Rather than find a place in which we might say that Lacan = Marx in terms of their understanding of the dialectic, Žižek employs various elements from both thinkers in order to contrive a theory that is utterly unique. Most often he succeeds. At times, however, he misses the mark, or, to use his own language, goes awry, and he consequently creates aporias and gaps where they do not necessarily exist, such that he remains alienated from the texts and concepts he is discussing.

Žižek's most sustained analysis of courtly love presented in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, is a crucial illustration of the way in which his use and abuse of the dialectical system produces a reading that closes rather than opens space for analysis and significance. Here, he simply follows Lacan's claim to adhere to Hegelian dialectics, thus reaffirming a unilateral reading of the courtly love scenario and the objectification of women that Lacan's more complex reading of desire confounds. Similar to other historians of love, Žižek overdetermines the identification of modern love in the western world with courtly love.<sup>10</sup> He rightly maintains that courtly love is a current topic because our concept of romance is dependent on it for a formula that places distance between the object and the lover, or the lover and the beloved. He rightly claims that between the Lady and the lover there is a mediator, sometimes in the form of language, the screen, or another being. However, he transforms this mediator into a means by which the other becomes purely negated and non-existent.

Conflating the Lady in courtly love with the femme fatale of 1950s Hollywood film, he asks: "Where does that empty surface come from, that cold, neutral screen which opens up the space for possible projection?" (90). Despite his overdetermination to make Lacan's theory of desire fit within the Hegelian dialectic, Žižek accurately recalls

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<sup>10</sup> Although he is quite careful with certain elements of philosophical thought, Žižek's use of courtly love risks generalizing about the phenomenon in a modern articulation of the overarching claims put forth by C.S. Lewis in *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (New York: Oxford UP, 1958) and Denis De Rougemont in *Love in the Western World* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940).

Lacan's thesis regarding the function of the mirror as a limit and as evidence of narcissism. In Lacan's words,

The mirror may on occasion imply the mechanisms of narcissism, and especially the dimension of destruction or aggression that we will encounter subsequently. But it is also fulfilling another role, a role as limit. It is that which cannot be crossed. And the only organization in which it participates is that of the inaccessibility of the object.<sup>11</sup>

That is, the mirror functions not only as an object upon which narcissistic fantasies may be displayed or displaced, but also as a limit marking the impossibility of consummating this fantasy. This is a crucial point in psychoanalytical readings of Narcissus. Is not the trauma of the narcissistic moment precisely located in the elision of the self within its image? Where is desire to go in this *mise-en-scene/abyme*? What occurs in the mirror scene is indeed dialectical with regard to the function of Narcissism as the inner workings of desire; the self asks the self, "What do you want of me?" and functions as an obsessive interior dialectical process. However, the precise *limit* of the mirror also inserts a barrier into the proper circulatory flow of desire, whether internally or externally directed.

When Žižek elides the difference between the mirror and the Lady, as he does in his example of the femme fatale as the ideal object of the courtly love scenario, he forecloses the system by which desire functions dialectically. If the Lady functions as the narcissistic limit, the "cold, neutral screen" then male desire may be projected onto that screen such that "the surface functions as a kind of 'black hole' in reality, as a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible" (91). In this reading, Žižek has imposed a contemporary feminist understanding of courtly love as a scene wherein woman is objectified by being placed upon a pedestal and, simultaneously, made into the radical Other.

Demonstrating the persistence and impossibility of achieving desire, Žižek shows how this radicality of the "real" woman plays with the limit and the 'black hole' to show the conflict and ambivalence between conscious and unconscious desire:

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<sup>11</sup> Lacan in Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment* 90.

...our 'official' desire is that we want to sleep with the Lady; whereas in truth, there is nothing we fear more than a Lady who might generously yield to this wish of ours—what we truly expect and want from the Lady is simply yet another new ordeal, yet one more postponement (96).

Is this an instance of Žižek's participation in Puritanical repression? Or, of the notion that the male must dominate feminine desire? Desire, properly dialectical and psychoanalytical desire, does not need an actual obstacle to it for there to be an obstacle, and this is the precise point of Lacan's explanation of the impossible sexual relation (the *non-rapport* between the sexes), as well as the mathematized expression of love as the square root of negative one.

In *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, as he outlines the process of desire by way of Arnaut Daniel's scatological troubadour poem, Lacan calls attention to the obscene within the divine and ideal. His assertion that courtly love is "not at all platonic," which is perplexing when one considers troubadour poetics as pastoral, makes sense when the agonism of the concurrent sacred and profane aspects of courtly love are addressed. To focus on the fabliau as a genre would place Lacan's discussion within the "low" or bawdy genre and reverse the implications of his argument which finds precisely the necessity of the obscene in the articulation of love for an Other. The conservative historical authority of the "high" mode of poetic expression invests Lacan's argument with the element of seriousness that is necessary to intervene in scholastic debates. Further, Lacan's attempt to usurp the position "knowledge" has played in the history of philosophy and replace it with desire, requires that his discourse participate within that history. Notably, this move is not simply "subversive" as many contemporary arguments that adhere to notions of inside and outside would have it. Rather, Lacan's comment that the state of courtly love itself involves obscenity deploys his notion of the *extimate*—that which is simultaneously intimate to the subject and external to it.

Žižek's argument relies on a reading of courtly love as masochistic and dialectical. Reading the role of the vassal or poet as a masochistic lover attempting to seduce his sadistic Lady, he renders the two precise models of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic. As such, he reduces the role of poet and object, lover and beloved, to a particular trope that certainly is common to one particular interpretation of courtly

love poetics, but is not the complex basis as exhibited by Lacan in his reading of the subject. Aiming to unite psychoanalysis and Marxism, his reading of courtly love as the dialectical basis for Lacan's theory of desire limits the way in which desire reconfigures the dialectic and the ways in which its association with the dialectic limits its conceptual effects, which extend then to the representation of the Lady in the courtly love scenario to an instance of Kant's concept of *radical evil*, "the Lady *qua* Thing can also be designated as the embodiment of radical Evil" (98). By playing with the slippage between obscene and decent, sadist and masochist, as well as Lacan and Marx, and Kant and Sade, Žižek ultimately asserts that desire is the *Law* and that which simultaneously must always seek to violate the Law. What we find in this system, though, is less a dialectical process than it is a knotted process of circulation wherein there never is any synthesis.

### The Lacanian Knot of Desire

At work behind what appears to be a "fast and loose" movement from courtly love to Kantian law and radical evil in Žižek's *The Metastases of Enjoyment* is Lacan's essay "Kant avec Sade," which provides one method of understanding the way in which the folds of desire transform into knots, and illuminates the steps that Žižek has skipped in his assertion that the Lady in courtly love is coterminous with radical evil. Juxtaposing the "high" realm of philosophical investigation and rhetoric with the "low" realm of erotics, Lacan maps out the structural folds of ideal desire by way of the resemblance between the modes of engaging with the noumenal and phenomenal realms in the writings of Kant and Sade (see figures 1 and 2).<sup>12</sup> The juxtaposition of these two superficially and generically different endeavors mimics Lacan's location of the obscene within courtly love poetics (see figure 3). As Lacan equates the practical aspects of Kant's philosophy with the physical struggle of desire, he also implicitly exposes the way in which the overtly somatic vulgarities of the body in some courtly love poetics assert an ethical model of being in the world. The two graphs that Lacan employs in *Écrits* as a means of articulating the connection between

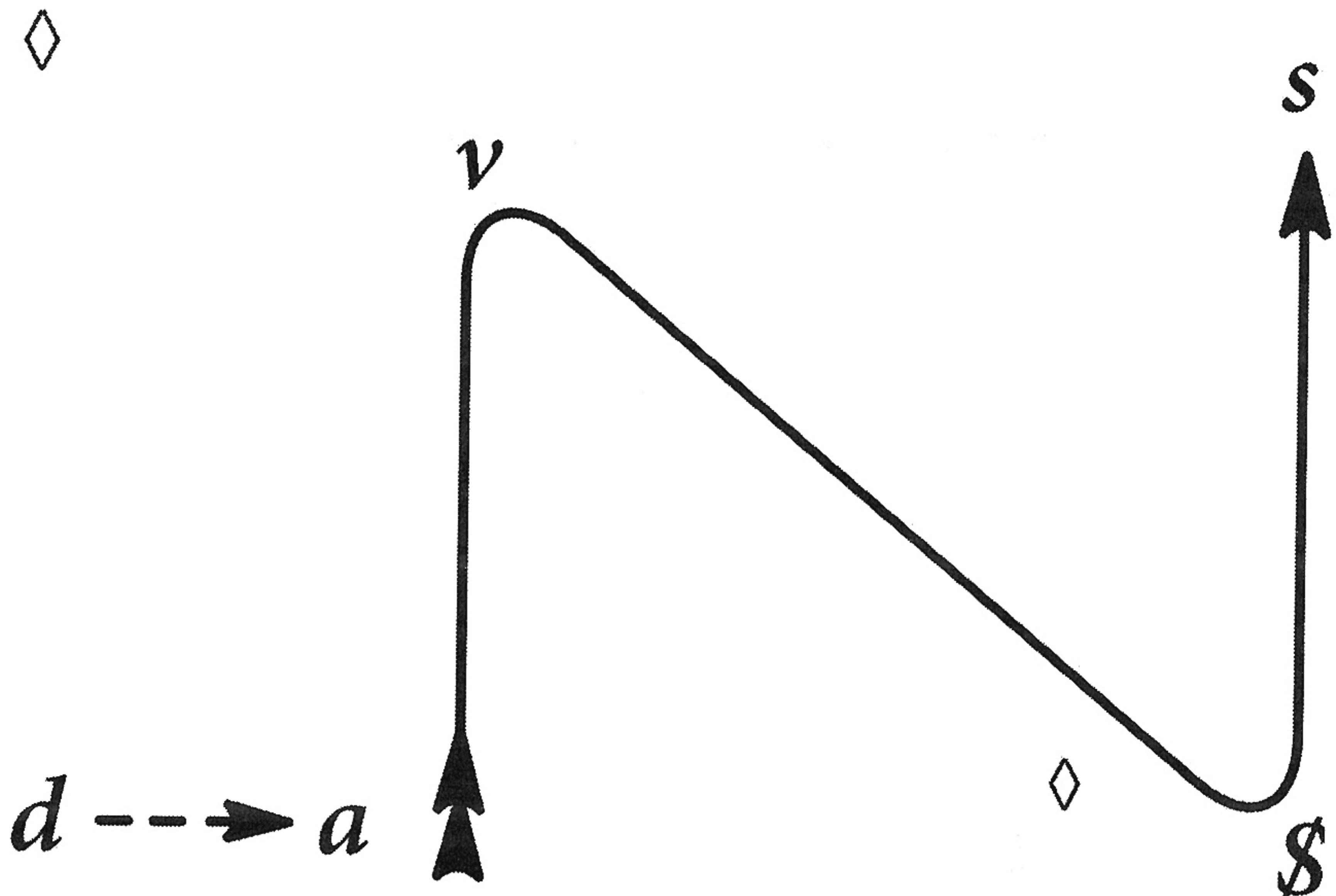
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<sup>12</sup> Jacques Lacan, "Kant Avec Sade," *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966). Figures 1 and 2 are reproduced based on Lacan's representation of them in his essay "Kant Avec Sade." I developed the third figure as a means of approaching the knot of significance within desire. It can be called the "knot of repetition."



desire in Kant and Sade individually perform a mode of dialectical reasoning. Indeed, the invocation of Sade would appear to impose a strictly dialectical system to the forms of desire as they relate to the pleasure principle. The overlay of the two graphs, however, reveals the knot that ruptures this dialectical process as it affects desire.

Lacan's Fig. 1.

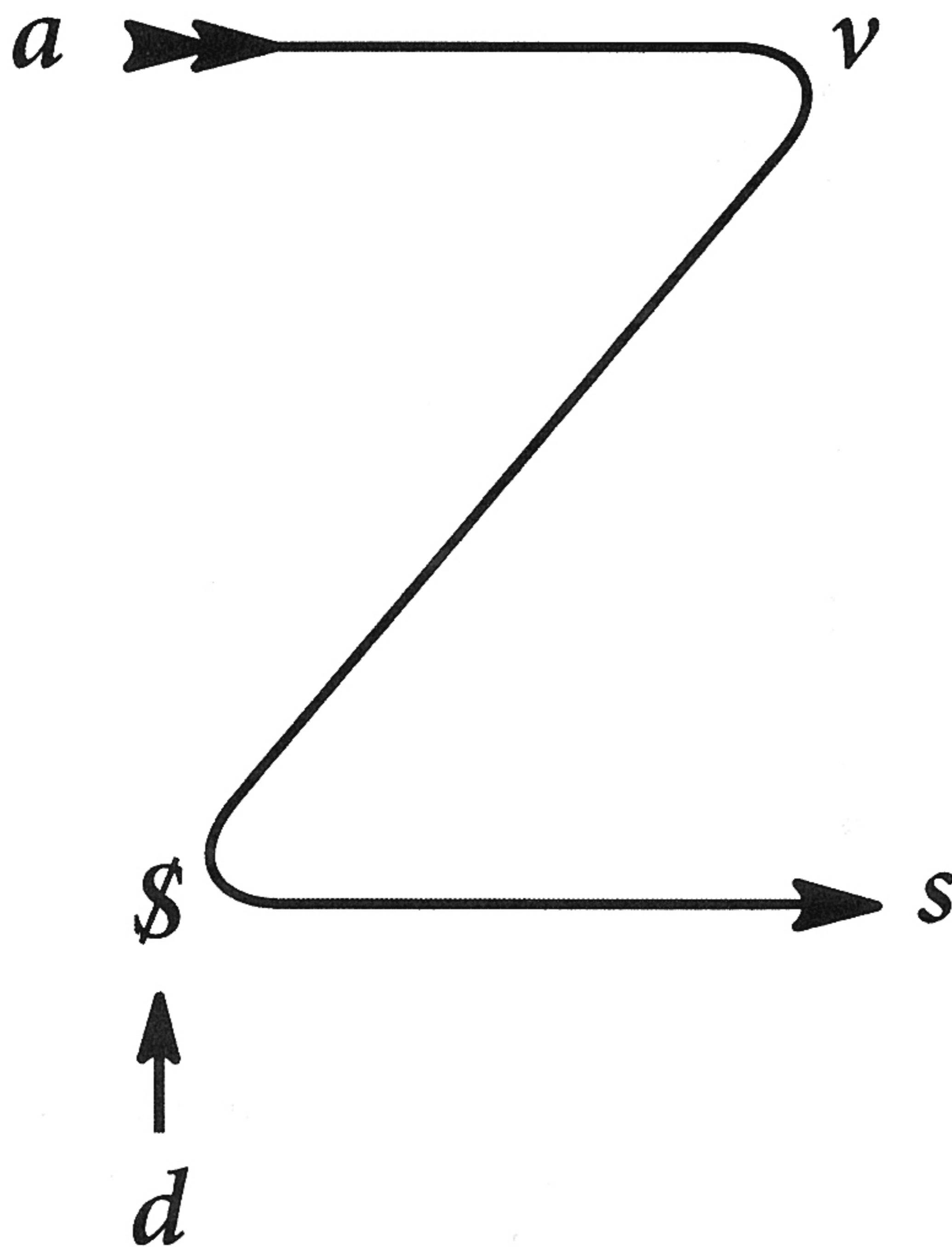


The vertical plane in figure 1 exhibits the Sadian fantasy as it plays out desire and the formation of subjectivity within a particular mode of erotic being. The lower line satisfies the order of the fantasy and supports the ideal/utopia of desire. The winding line inscribes the chain that enables the subject to be measured. This line constitutes the order or the appearance of the *object a* at the place of cause. There, we see that the categories of reason introduced by Kant instantiate the cause of desire (130). As practical reason, the barred S remains a trace within the subject's construction within the system of desire. The verticality of this graph recalls the high and low models of reasoning and being upon which the philosophy of erotics is based. Desire, as a transcendental possibility, vectors up, reaching into the heights of pleasure's path. Such verticality also reinscribes the scheme within the master/slave dialectic associated

with Sadian ethics and play. Desire's ideal and surreal limits proceed in a linear fashion towards the goal as it is cathected onto the *object a*.

The horizontal plane of figure 2 addresses the effect that the dissolution or elimination of the other's existence within the Sadian (dialectical) system has on desire.

Lacan's Fig. 2.

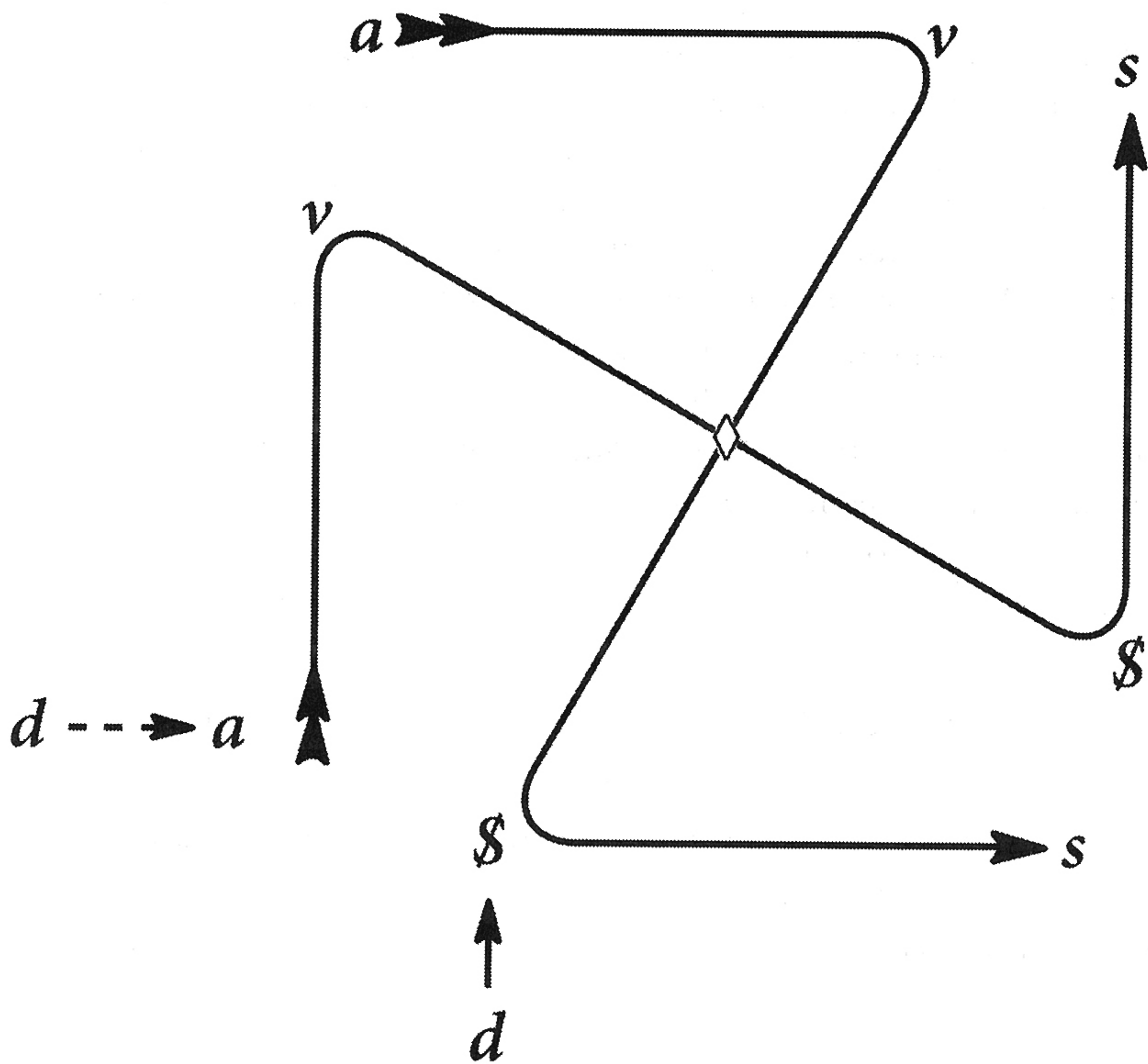


The graph has been turned once on its axis, changing the upward movement of the subject and its search for the object of desire to a horizontally forward vector, therefore eliminating the implicit hierarchy evident within the first graph. The rotation of the graph also exposes the rotation within an ethical approach to desire that eliminates high and low and prefers a more equal view of movement or circulation. Lacan then associates Sade's writings with the "highest" of conventional literature, namely, Shakespeare (135). As if the generic possibilities were not evident enough with the analogy between Kant and Sade, Lacan

compounds the formulation by adding to it the signifier and its history within literature.

The overlapping of the two graphs, seen in figure 3 is a necessary outcome of the discrete representation of the alternate elements of desire. Such a juxtaposition would look like the grid of a knot as it does below.

Fig. 3. "The Knot of Repetition"



The shifting of the planes from foreground to background visually and effectively enacts the process of anamorphosis at work in aesthetic representation. However, the interweaving of the vectors of each fold disable such a dialectical visual perspective, and render the textual fabric of desire.

Lacan's theory of desire as explicated in *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* and *Seminar XX: Encore* relies specifically on the limit-case of courtly love, the model that includes not only transgressive forms of signification, but also scatological rhetoric and parodic notions of sexuality. Lacan's theory of desire exists in a knotted relationship to a reading of courtly love poetics, which are at once dialectical and not-at-all-dialectical.

Playing on the expectations of heteronormativity and the impossibility of the sexual relationship, many Old French romances and fabliaux rely on a common motif in which the seductress who is rejected accuses the object of desire of being homosexual. Such a projection of loss responds to a lack foundational to the heteronormative social realm by interpellating the rejector into a sexual category that is considered to be replete with lack.<sup>13</sup> The trace of lack that remains within views of perversion and queerness directly counter the Lacanian view of normative heterosexual relations as based on a primary lack between subjects of the opposite sex. The textual performance of the fullness in lack and the love that depends on obstructions is precisely forgotten in analyses of sexuality that find only absence and impossibility in queerness. The moment of seduction performatively uttered between two men, two women, or a man and a woman must account for the violence in language that is displayed in the aggressivity of courtly love.

### **A Literary Case Study: The Absent Center and the Imaginary Phallus**

In the following section I explicate further the interactions between Žižek and Lacan as they apply to and have implications for an Old French courtly love romance. The active marginalization of forms of perversion in medieval rhetorical treatises suggests that sexual relations

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Dollimore recognizes this problem of regarding homosexuality as the ultimate lack or absence within a heterosexual matrix.

Pre-sexological theories of perversion, condensation and displacement are strangely enabled by the view of perversion as an inimical threatening absence. What is not often recognized is the extent to which this theological sense of perversion as the negative agency at the heart of privation, hence an inverted positivity, survives in the 'modern' sense of perversion/homosexuality as a profoundly inimical, vitiating lack (*Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* [New York: Oxford UP, 1991] 240).

ostensibly consisting of lack are ultimately representative of dangerous excess and surplus desire. The injustice imposed on the fullness and potential in homosexual relations is most evident in Alain de Lille's homophobic rhetorical claims in *De Planctus Naturae*.<sup>14</sup> For de Lille, the sodomite is threatening precisely because he does not leave room for lack in language. He is "subject and predicate: one and the same term is given a double application. He here extends too far the laws of grammar."<sup>15</sup> Extending the laws of grammar too far reveals the potential for excess that disobeys laws by precisely eliminating lack. Such a surplus desire becomes associated with masochistic desire in Alan's rhetorical treatise and is taken up by philosophers of desire and language throughout history. Lacan's view of the surplus desire in language and its relationship to violence and masochism is derived from Freud's claims that "The masochist must do what is inexpedient, must act against his own interests, must ruin the prospects which open out to him in the real world, and must, perhaps, destroy his own real existence."

The status of female masochism within a psychoanalytic system that relies deeply on linguistic play assumes political implications for a reading of desire as it is rooted in courtly love.<sup>16</sup> In *Le Roman de Silence*, Eufeme, the excessively desirous female who stands in for predication, subverts a grammatical system based on heterosexuality by eliminating the lack between subject and predicate in language and in love. The name "Eufemie,"<sup>17</sup> etymologically derived from euphemism, already ironically

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<sup>14</sup> Alan of Lille, *The Plaint of Nature*, trans. James Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> In Leupin, *Barbolexis: Medieval Writing and Sexuality*, Kate Mason Cooper, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989) 60.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Bronfen's reading of hysteria as the performative symptoms of desire that reflect what she terms the "knotted subject" takes up Lacan's project of knots and their relationship to desire. Her valuable work with the effect that the navel as primal knot has on the subject's formative desire provides a tool by which the knot of desire and the apparent masochism in courtly love may be analyzed. *The Knotted Subject* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Heldris de Cornuälle, *Le Roman de Silence*, ed. Lewis Thorpe (Cambridge: Heffer, 1972). I am citing the translation by Regina Psaki (New York: Garland, 1991). The spelling does not matter in the text, and alternates throughout. I cite the name as it is variously spelled in different moments in the original text. This can be especially confusing when the Queen Eufemie

signifies the play with language and referentiality that enables transgression. Eufeme's name signifies multiplicity, presenting a "good" name that conceals "evil," linguistically paralleling Silence's good mother, also named Euphemie. The doubleness of naming Silence's mother and the seductive Queen by the same designator reveals the hyperbolic tendencies associated with euphemism. The name becomes polymorphously referential to desire and its potential for excess. Similarly, the name plays itself out along the trajectory of the knot of desire. The doubling of characters and their interwoven nature *vis-à-vis* Silence brings them together in a narrative knot.

Since its reception in 1972, *Le Roman de Silence* has been the focus of much study among medievalists who have been excited by the presence of a text that appears to discuss gender issues in a manner previously absent from the medieval canon. Seeking to find a place for the text within this canon, scholarship on the text has been rather respectful and earnest (as scholarship should be). However, such respect has allowed critics (including myself to this point) to neglect to perceive the obscenity involved in a text that so clearly disrupts our previous conception of sexual difference in Old French texts. Indeed, although using high language and a proper narrative structure, there is something obscene about the way in which *Le Roman de Silence* addresses the construction of gender and the scene of seduction. The location and exhibition of this obscenity places the text within the marginal realm of scatological courtly love texts that also have been the source for Lacan's theory of desire. Similarly, we find here a case that complicates Žižek's appropriation of Lacan's investment in courtly love.

In *Le Roman de Silence* Queen Eufeme thinks that she is seducing a man when she approaches Silence. However, the queen's seduction is aimed towards an absent entity; the desire for the Other is explicitly a desire for a lack or for the *objet a*. This desire is augmented since Silence lacks the anatomical phallus that would differentiate her from the female Queen. Focus on this lack implies that Silence's physical impotence within the heterosexual matrix is also reflective of impotence within the Queen's system of power.

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is spelled in a way that is the same as Silence's mother "Euphemie." Of course the supplement and doubling of the Mother and Other or the Mother and the Whore (Žižek, *Metastases* 147) is significant here.

He had not power to do anything with her.  
 She could not take back her love,  
 nor did the boy who was a maiden  
 want to tell the secret  
 of his true nature,  
 for then he would lose his inheritance.  
 The impotence of this boy  
 annoyed the lady greatly. (3869–79)

The Queen's annoyance at Silence's impotence before she discovers her physical "lack" is symptomatic of her excessive sexual desire. The irritation that ensues from a thwarted or foreclosed sexual relationship is strong despite the fact that the Queen believes Silence to have the potential to fulfill her desire for intercourse with a "man." As readers, we know even if her seduction of Silence is successful, Eufeme is likely to find nothing where she expects something; or, in less traditional terminology, she is likely to find something other than she expects and that something will have a hole in the middle. This, of course, does not mean that she will not be fulfilled, but that her sexual fulfillment will appear other than she imagines it to be. However, such a primal discovery is persistently deferred. Eufeme never physically "discovers Silence's lack" until it is announced by Merlin, who only identifies Silence's anatomical identity by logical deduction. If Silence has found Merlin—a presence where we expect none—then he has found her to have nothing where he expects something. Supplementing discourse about Silence's anatomical lack is Eufeme's harangue about Silence's impotence.

Despite her "impotence" Silence does in a sense screw the Queen, as she drives Euphemie's desire to replicate the consequences of both desire and rape. The euphemism, then, does contain other signifying functions, but it does not conceal those functions. In failing physically to fulfill Eufemie's desire Silence displays not impotence but power. The prohibition against a sexual encounter between Eufemie and Silence protects her secret and increases her value as a desired object. As Žižek aptly notes, "the aim of prohibition is not to 'raise the price of an object by rendering access to it more difficult, but to raise this object itself to the level of the Thing, of the 'black hole', around which desire is organized" (*Metastases* 96). The power that is rooted in impotence and absence is incipient in the rape scene that is fictionally constructed by Queen Euphemie.

The violence of Silence's actions towards the Queen remains embedded in her refusal of the latter's advances. This absence or lack of physical violence is foregrounded by the extent to which Queen Euphemie goes in order to prove that Silence attacked her:

She began to tear her hair  
as though a devil made her do it.  
She hit herself painfully in the nose,  
covering herself with her own blood.  
She wept without noise or shrieking. (4075-81)

The imaginary scene of physical violence created by the Queen demonstrates the extent to which desire itself signifies a violent need for an absent object. The queen's self-inflicted wounds externalize the psychological trauma of striving for the object of desire that is never attainable. "Rending cloth, scraping at skin, tearing out hair and beard: all of these are signifiers revealing the denuded, stony face of loss. In this way, *La Vie de Saint Alexis* (and *Le Roman de Silence*) posits a new system of signification, one that euphemism prefigured with the metaphorical inversion it imposed upon the text's language."<sup>18</sup>

The violence associated with the search for lack is also manifested in Silence's search for Merlin, a search that appears to parallel Eufemie's seduction. Eufeme effects revenge on Silence by forcing her to seek out—to seduce—an unattainable, ideal absence. Silence and Eufeme are paralleled in their drive to grasp that which cannot be held—the lack, the phallus, and Merlin. Even the rhetoric of Silence's search for Merlin mimics the rhetoric of seduction:

How could I capture him,  
who has never allowed anyone  
to touch, or to take, or to hold him,  
and whom no one can reach? (5845-48)

As Silence returns with Merlin, the object of desire that seems unattainable has been attained. Where Queen Eufeme failed to gain the imaginary object of her desire, Silence succeeds. Her search for Merlin shifts the game of courtly love away from the homoerotic towards the heteronormative, thus fulfilling the rules of etiquette demanded by the poetic form:

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<sup>18</sup> Leupin, *Barabolexis* 55.



The next crucial feature of courtly love is that it is thoroughly a matter of courtesy and etiquette; it has nothing to do with some elementary passion overflowing all barriers, immune to all social rules. We are dealing with a strict fictional formula, with a social game of ‘as if’, where a man pretends that his sweetheart is the inaccessible Lady. And it is precisely this feature which enables us to establish a link between courtly love and a phenomenon which, at first, seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with it: namely, masochism, as a specific form of perversion articulated for the first time in the middle of the last century in the literary works and life-practice of Sacher-Masoch (*Metastases* 91).

The precise way in which Žižek goes awry in his reading of Lacan’s dialectics enables him to make a crucial point about courtly love and masochism. Silence’s relationship with Merlin, however, is not sexual or romantic in substance and therefore merely imitates the manners of courtly love.

Silence’s interactions with Queen Eufeme present a complex example of courtly love and the polymorphous perversity inherent in its display of desire. Žižek’s connection between courtly love and masochism noted in the passage above signals the way in which the master/slave dialectic of its manners lead to a specific definition of desire. Žižek, however, is too quick to take Lacan’s definition of desire at face value and to assume that it does indeed fit into a dialectical system. Finding obscenity within courtly love leads the poetic form outside of the system of dialectical desire.

As Gilles Deleuze argues in *Coldness and Cruelty*, there is a crucial difference between the process of masochism and that of sadism.<sup>19</sup> According to Deleuze, the true sadist would never get off with a true masochist—and vice-versa, because the trauma associated with thwarted desire that is required in both cases would be absent if the subjects were both willing to participate in the sexual scene. Deleuze also notes the linguistic difference between the narrative of the masochist and that of the sadist; the masochist requires proper language and the sadist requires obscenity.

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<sup>19</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism and Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone Books, 1989).

For instance, the difference between Merlin and Eufeme is the difference between direct speech and euphemistic speech. Merlin is known for his ability to state the truth of a moment when he sees it. He does not beat around the bush when it comes to the description of empirical or epistemological scenes. Euphemie, on the other hand, called by a signifier that etymologically recalls the very word euphemism, never directly states what it is that she desires from Silence. Rather, she expects that in a heteronormative scene (which is not present in the text) Silence will understand her desire and respond to it accordingly (by fucking her). Merlin's direct speech recalls the forms of obscenity that pervade Arnaut Daniel's poem upon which Lacan bases his theory of desire.

Obscenity enables a passage into the articulation of the limits of the dialectical system.

Since the transcendent function in Sade is demonstrative and in Masoch dialectical, the role and the significance of descriptions are very different in each case. Although Sade's descriptions are basically related to the function of demonstration, they are nevertheless relatively independent creations; they are obscene in themselves. Sade cannot do without this provocative element. The same cannot be said of Masoch, for while the greatest obscenity may undoubtedly be present in threats, advertisements or contracts, it is not a necessary condition. Indeed, the work of Masoch is on the whole commendable for its unusual decency (*Coldness and Cruelty* 25).

The obscene and the decent signify the limits of the dialectic in Deleuze's terms. Contrasting demonstrative and dialectical exchanges calls attention to the difference between language that offends and language that can pass as "decent." Language in general, however, remains indecent and offensive in the field of desire where it can never fully satisfy the subject. The ineffability of desire takes on the form, not of a dialectic, but of a knot. Within that knot, Sadism and Masochism circulate as symbolization is attempted. Bronfen calls this struggle omphalic signification, and she locates it within a reading of the symptoms of hysteria and psychosis.

An omphalic signification neither directly satisfies desire by moving from representation to action...nor directly sublimates desire by keeping it unrealized, allowing the

object at stake to remain lost. Rather, it addresses the mortal vulnerability of the subject; it enjoys the trace of this traumatic kernel. Sublimation would require that something be successfully repressed in order to be symbolized. The omphalos, in contrast, commemorating a lost body and the traumatic impact of vulnerability that could only be articulated in its wake, addresses a different knowledge. Since the traumatic kernel was never fully present to the psychic process, it can also never be fully lost. Representation here implies a strategy of conversion that preserves bits of the lost body, which is why the navel scar, index of parturition's incision, appears as such an adequate somatic metaphor for the process (*The Knotted Subject* 20).

The inability to repress is signified by the obscenity present in the articulation of desire. One does not need the presence of hysteria and psychosis to see that in Lacan's theory desire's enunciation betrays itself. Additionally, the omphalos resembles the phallus beyond the level of acoustic similarity; both are the absent central signifier of an impossible singularity and origin.

In "The Signification of the Phallus," Lacan states that

the phallus is a signifier, a signifier whose function, in the intrasubjective economy of the analysis, lifts the veil perhaps from the function it performed in the mysteries. For it is the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier (*Écrits* 285).

According to Lacan's reading the phallus is the Über-signifier, and as such, we must perceive it as "The" sign that could stand in for the sign of love. In fact, the phallus is the unity of signification, desire, and logos: "The phallus is the privileged signifier of the mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire" (*Écrits* 287). Despite the mediating word "mark" in the above passage, the phallus remains that central and immovable focal point around which Lacan theorizes the constellation of desire, language, and knowledge.

A passage from Lacan's analysis of phallic function within language that is typically employed to indict him on account of his anti-feminism reads:

It can be said that this signifier [the phallus] is chosen because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is equivalent there to the (logical) copula. It might also be said that, by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the vital flow as it is transmitted in generation (“Signification of the Phallus,” *Écrits* 287).

When Lacan claims later in *Encore* that there is no sexual relationship, he attempts to undermine the statement in the passage quoted above. If there is no sexual relationship then the “real” of sexual copulation is either eliminated or subjected to a low element within the field of desire. Lacan’s desire to locate a tangible form of signification reveals his need to grasp an element of the theory of desire in a material manner. The abstraction of signification and sexuality becomes encoded in Lacan’s view of the phallus. This abuse of a bodily organ particular to men has a long history of criticism. Lacan’s fetishization of the phallus in his early work surrenders to his desire to define the phallus outside of masculinity in his later writings.

In “Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire” the phallus appears only thrice. First, the phallus appears as the imaginary “bone” that Lacan claims must exist within the systematization of desire (318); second, as the object of the castration complex throughout the essay; and, third, as the object whose presence serves as an indication of *jouissance* (319).

[Failure over the heteroclitite nature of the castration complex] is the only indication of that *jouissance* of its infinitude that brings with it the mark of its prohibition, and, in order to constitute that mark, involves a sacrifice: that which is made in one and the same act with the choice of its symbol, the phallus.

This choice is allowed because the phallus, that is, the image of the penis, is negativity in its place in the specular image. It is what predestines the phallus to embody *jouissance* in the dialectic of desire (*Écrits* 319).

The reduction of the phallus to the embodiment of *jouissance* limits its role within desire since it is clear that *jouissance* is merely an aspect of

desire. One might argue that the integral nature of the phallus remains present since Lacan also states that it is the job of *jouissance* to limit desire. One might also argue that Hegelian negativity maintains as much power within the dialectical process as any aspect of “positivity.” Both arguments have their potency when we consider the role of the phallus within desire. Nonetheless, we must remember that tethered to the discussion of desire is the focus on signification and Lacan’s revision of the role of the phallus in signification—from the central point to the symbolic image—certainly and utterly reduces the power of the signification of the phallus. What once was a core signifying point has become one aspect among the many at play in Lacan’s formulation of desire.

Most critics are not fooled by Lacan’s attempt to alter the way in which the phallic function relies on and produces hyper-masculinity within a heterosexual matrix. Jane Gallop has written,

The Lacanian’s desire clearly to separate phallus from penis, to control the meaning of the signifier phallus, is precisely symptomatic of their desire to have the phallus, that is, their desire to be at the center of language, at its origin. And their inability to control the meaning of the word phallus is evidence of what Lacan calls symbolic castration.<sup>20</sup>

To have the phallus is to place it at a location outside of the self that allows it to fill the role of the fetish. This is precisely what is at stake in a discussion of ideology as it relates to a global notion of empire. Perhaps it sounds strange to say that the phallus, or empire, is a fetish, since the fetish is precisely that which is discovered in order to disavow lack, but in Lacan’s system the use of the phallic function and signification does precisely this and it extends the power to a universal and simultaneously singular dimension. One of the powerful functions of the fetish is that it can expand and contract from universality to singularity as it articulates its ideological force outside of the self.

Judith Butler’s analysis of the “lesbian phallus” calls attention to the implicit fetishization of the phallus by rendering it subject to iteration and by revealing that the phallus itself is always already a prosthesis.

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<sup>20</sup> Gallop, “Beyond the Phallus,” in *Thinking Through the Body*.

If the phallus is an imaginary effect (which is reified as the privileged signifier of the symbolic order), then its structural place is no longer determined by the logical relation of mutual exclusion entailed by a heterosexist version of sexual difference in which men are said to ‘have’ and women to ‘be’ the phallus.<sup>21</sup>

The movement between having and being the phallus signifies the movement between its fetishization and an awareness of its fullness within lack. Butler further states that the phallus is dependent upon a heterosexist matrix for such definition and implies that there is another way of viewing it as signifying function within Lacan’s system.

Inasmuch as the phallus signifies, it is also always in the process of being signified and resignified. In this sense, it is not the incipient moment or origin of a signifying chain, as Lacan would insist, but part of a reiterable signifying practice and, hence, open to resignification....(89)

If the phallus remains a signifier that is subject to iteration and, as Butler continues to explain, “deprivileging,” then it may maintain its status as a symbol, but one that carries less power than it did in Lacan’s earlier work. Rather, by making the phallus into a signifying function Lacan ultimately paves the way for a reading of sexual difference that accounts for the role of language within the construction of desire and sexed identity.

Until recently, no one other than Žižek had successfully articulated the way that Lacan does maintain a difference between the phallus and the penis, (and because Žižek was so coy about it, a direct citation other than the consistent claim that the phallus is a *fantasy* is not viable). However, and surprisingly, it is within a Medieval studies context that the clarification has finally occurred.

In “On the History of the Early Phallus,” Daniel Boyarin clarifies confusion about the phallus as it is distinct from the penis that has abounded and led to much resistance to psychoanalysis for more than thirty years.<sup>22</sup> His essay shows how the history of the phallus informs Lacan’s use of it as an imaginary signifier and prohibits association of the phallus with the penis because the original phallic understanding is

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<sup>21</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 88.

<sup>22</sup> Boyarin in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 3–44.

precisely an Ideal concept: “the phallus is not the penis, but is a disembodied idealization of the penis, a Platonic Ideal of the penis” (9). The focus has undeniably been on the “penis” in this statement, but if we shift that focus, it is actually the Platonic Ideal, that acts as a universal signifier, a real, and an impossible category. Additionally, as Boyarin cites Jacqueline Rose, if the “‘terror of abstract universality’ that is Empire,” is bound to the phallus, then we can see how it is precisely imaginary power and ideology that is feared, and not the male genitals! (16). And, if “no one has that Phallus” then it makes much more sense that ideology is oppressive because we all “lack” (19).

### Conclusion: A Return to *The Crying Game*

The structure of desire in *Le Roman de Silence* prefigures Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game*, which Žižek discusses in *The Metastases of Enjoyment* as a contemporary film that plays on the courtly love trope. As Žižek says, in the case of *The Crying Game*, “the shock is caused when the eye finds *something* where it expected *nothing*” (103). In this reversal of the typical courtly love scenario—finding nothing where one expects something—we find a dialectical opposite, the mirrored structure of the desire that does not want itself. The experience and trauma of finding something where one expects nothing also uncannily resembles the initial poem by Arnaut Daniel that Lacan cites as an instance of courtly love: in this poem the Lady is repulsive because she is real; she has a body, she has odor, she has tangible difference; this horror at potential pleasure resembles Freud’s case of *The Rat Man*, where we find the obsessional neurotic to have secret pleasure behind his expressed horror. The duality and complexity of the combination of attraction and repulsion, something and nothing, high and low, as well as the desire for what one cannot have and the fear of what one could have, might be called a dialectic of desire *if only it were not for the intersection of that desire with narcissism, which creates another element and adds a knot-like complexity to the system*. This phallic emptiness then, refers back to problems of ideological power and control, suggesting that a focus on the apparent interiority of psychoanalysis works with the social ideological structures of Marxism. Additionally, both features challenge linear and epochal changes such that desire, personal and political, functions *extimately* with regard to the self in relation to the self, and the other in relation to the other.

Perhaps this, then, is the key to Žižek's success, as well as the general efficacy of the Slovene school: underlying the connection between psychoanalysis and Marxism is an awareness that the dialectical process must be engaged and challenged with reference to literary and philosophical texts from various geographical and historical locales. When history are in balance, perhaps the only way to address the pleasures and the horrors of contemporary "empire" is to play "fast and loose" with ideology, while accounting for the significant traces of the particular histories of thought that allow the potential for universals.

Bowling Green State University

## POVZETEK

### ŽIŽEK AVEC LACAN

*Esej predstavlja kritično razpravo dela Slavoj Žižka in se osredotoča na njegovo preučevanje dialektike in mazohizma v kontekstu srednjeveškega vedenja o dvorni ljubezni. Kot vodilni na slovenski šoli v Ljubljani (in tudi med razpravami kulturnih študij v Združenih državah Amerike) Žižek najmočneje opozarja na prekrivanje psihoanalize in marksizma. Preučuje tudi njegovo vpletenost v sočasno politiko z upoštevanjem zgodovine. Žižkovo obravnavanje dialektike v marksizmu in psihoanalizi omogoča razčlenitev velikih in majhnih razlik med besedilnostjo in oblikami znanja. Po Lacanovem zgledu popravlja in prilagaja dialektiko poželenja v svojem delu The Metastases of Enjoyment. V tem veličastnem delu lahko hitro opazimo, kako Žižek s teoretičnim posegom vpliva na politično in osebno in kako le-ta združi marksizem in psihoanalizo na tak način, da doživi odzive znotraj področja srednjeveških študij. Esej prikazuje Žižkovo pojmovanje kot del dialektične zbirke znanja, tako da je njegovo lastno delo podvrženo razčlenitvi kategorij velikega in majhnega, ki sta predmet diskusije o mazohizmu, srednjeveških študijah in kritičnih teorijah na splošno.*