

Thanatos Gains the Upper Hand: Sadism, Jouissance, and Libidinal Economy

Li-chun Hsiao
State University of New York at Buffalo

Abstract

This paper explores the connections between sadistic desire and jouissance in the light of Freudian and Lacanian reflections on the psychic apparatuses of the two. Following Freud's metaphoric appropriation of thermodynamics, it conceives of sadistic desire and jouissance in terms of a libidinal economy. Far from being a homeostatic system, however, such an economy is closely linked to Bataille's general economy, which is founded on a heterogeneous element and is dominated by the permanent aggressivity of the death drive. The psychic economy of the sadist is also related to a radical gravitation and manifestation of the death drive. Positing impossible jouissance, as distinct from pleasure, as their ideal, sadistic heroes commit atrocities in their attempt to relentlessly adhere to such an ideal, whose logic is similar to that of the Kantian "categorical imperative" and subscribes to what Lacan calls the Law. Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* will be used as a demonstrative text, as indeed Sade himself thinks of it, to illustrate our theoretical speculation.

Keywords

sadism, jouissance, libidinal economy, negativity, the death drive

Thanks to Sade's daring descriptions of classic sadistic scenes, sadistic desire has been characterized by a frantic, virulent, destructive investment of physical and psychic energies. Since Barthes, *jouissance* does not only emerge as a culmination of emotions as is associated with sexual orgasm, but also declares its vehement, radicalized status which is distinct from the mild, comfortable enjoyment of *plaisir*. The resemblance of sadistic desire and jouissance, however, does not stop at the maximized degree of aggressivity. Sadism and jouissance, in our conception, also demonstrate similar mechanisms of desire, follow the same logic and operation in the libidinal economy, and are both motivated by the death drive.

I. Mechanisms of Sadistic Desire and Jouissance

As Blanchot writes, “De Sade insists that for passion to become energy it has to be compressed, it must function at one remove by passing through a necessary phase of insensibility; then its full potentiality will be realized” (qtd. in Bataille 1977: 172). Such a phase of insensibility is what Sade calls “apathy,” an indifference towards or denial of pleasure that is in some ways “the cause and principle of energy” (ibid. 172). In *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, there is a scene where Dolmance, who orchestrates all the sadistic debaucheries, executes a “preliminary” of intercourse by flogging Eugenie and asks the Chevalier and Augustin to flog him on the buttocks at the same time. When Eugenie cries for help, Dolmance “*halts a minute to contemplate his work; then, starting in again,*” he says, “Another fifty, Eugenie; yes, precisely, fifty more on either cheek will do it.” During the process Madame de Saint-Ange advises the initiator to endure, because “it is always by way of pain one arrives at pleasure” (280-81). We therefore may postulate that the mechanism of sadistic desire necessarily involves a stage of suppression of pleasure, or even imposition of unpleasure, to reach the perverse sensuality and extreme pleasure of sadism. Such a suppressive interim phase does not repress sensuality; paradoxically, it functions to intensify the pleasure to the point of becoming unusual jouissance. As Blanchot explains, sadistic heroes destroy in them all the secondary emotions and their capacity for pleasure so that they can prevent themselves from dispersing their energies with which they concentrate and unleash on perversity. Apathy enables sadistic heroes to sustain the pleasure of normal sexuality by which they are unable to be satisfied, and that is why they “go in for frightful anomalies, for otherwise the mediocrity of ordinary sensuality would be enough for them” (ibid. 173).

This pleasure—apathy—extreme pleasure mechanism and the distinction between the ordinary pleasure and perverse, ferocious sensuality are reminiscent of the jouissance experience Barthes explores in his discourse on plaisir/jouissance. According to Barthes, plaisir and jouissance refer respectively to two reading experiences as well as textual strategies, as he describes: “Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria [...] is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text discomforts [...] unsettles the reader’s historical,

cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values [...]” (14).¹ In short, plaisir is mild, comfortable, consonant with the dominant culture and system of values; jouissance is frantic, extreme, subversive to the status quo, and is preceded by a state of loss that entails unpleasure or discomfort. In fact, Lacanian postulation of jouissance also indicates such a suppression or denial of pleasure made by the superego on the pleasure-seeking ego, which serves as a precondition of the discharge of jouissance,² just as Lacan argues: “Nothing forces anyone to enjoy (*jouir*) except the superego. The super-ego is the imperative of jouissance—Enjoy! (*jouissance—Jouis!*)” (1999: 3; the original French phrase in the second parenthesis added by me). Richard Boothby thus explains this contention: “Far from being the enemy of jouissance, the superego, precisely in its hostile opposition to the ego, is the very thing that makes *jouissance* possible” (171).³ The superego’s hostility against the ego can be regarded as “a primary sadism,” one that, as Freud posits it, “has been turned around upon the subject’s own ego” and predominates in the anal phase (SE XVIII: 54-55). Seen in this light, the primary sadism emerges as a primordial, permanent, and constitutive aggressivity from which we derive our first experience of jouissance in the formation and development of our consciousness. And this happens to attest to our proposition that

¹ Richard Miller, one of Barthes’s primary English translators, uses the word “bliss” to translate “jouissance” in the French original of *The Pleasure of the Text*. Richard Howard points out in his “A Note on the Text,” collected in the English translation (v-viii), the lack of an equivalent of “jouissance” in the English language, as well as the difficulties of translating this term. Stephen Heath, the translator of Barthes’s *Image-Music-Text*, also makes a similar remark in the English edition of this latter text (9). This partly explains the now commonplace practice of keeping the original French term in critical discourses in English. One should note, however, that the French dyad *plaisir/jouissance*, given the two terms’ propinquity on both connotative and conceptual levels, is far more convenient for Barthes to problematize this distinction while attempting to establish it, in a characteristically poststructuralist gesture.

² It is noteworthy that Lacan’s conception of jouissance preceded Barthes’s distinction between plaisir and jouissance in *The Pleasure of the Text*, and even in this highly performative text, Barthes acknowledges his intellectual debt to Lacan (21), though not in a strictly academic fashion.

³ This is not to say, however, that all jouissance comes from the superego. Spurred by his explorations of feminine sexuality in the final stage of his career, Lacan postulates, along with the uncharacteristically “non-skeptical” attitude toward love, a more sophisticated distinction between different “types” of jouissance in his *Encore Seminar* (Seminar XX), where “jouissance of the Other” is distinguished from “phallic jouissance,” the most pervasive idea about jouissance (see for example, 7-9, 23-24, 82-83). Lacan is clearly trying to envision here a conception of jouissance that is not governed nor driven solely by the superego’s imperative “Enjoy!” (See especially 3, 7; I shall discuss this anti-commonsensual notion about the function and nature of the superego in the following). This parallels, and testifies to his move to positing “love beyond law” in the *Encore Seminar*. Drawing on Lacan’s later formulation of jouissance, the Lacanian scholar Joan Copjec’s, in a much less cryptic way, further designates this jouissance of the Other as “feminine jouissance”—as distinct from phallic jouissance—in the final chapter in her book *Read My Desire* (224). For the purpose and scope of this paper, I will focus on a conception of jouissance specifically in relation to the superego and sadism.

the connection between sadistic desire and jouissance is a close one, that jouissance, instead of ordinary pleasure, is what sadistic perversions aspire to.

The seemingly paradoxical role the superego plays here and the discrepancy that the suppression of pleasure imposed by sadist apathy precedes, indeed results in, jouissance can be illuminated by a Lacanian return to, or rather, reconsideration of, Freud's conception of the id, the ego, and the superego. As Boothby points out, there is a "vulgarized version of Freud's theory" that is pervasive even "in the analytical literature," in which things are divided into either side of the barrier of repression, with the Freudian id representing the body's instinctual surges and the superego as the agency of suppression of those drives. The superego therefore is "the Calvinist in all of us [...] that erects impediments to the discharge of impulse and punishes the excesses of a pleasure-seeking ego" (167). From this commonsensical point of view, the contention that the intervention of the superego precedes and stimulates the discharge of the maximized excitations in jouissance certainly sounds bewildering. Although such a perspective does not come from nowhere and can find certain support in some of Freud's ambiguous remarks, Boothby claims that a closer look at *The ego and the Id* will make it "impossible to maintain that the superego functions simply as an obstacle to the fulfillment of wishes" (168). One can find two reasons for this in the relations between the three psychic agencies.

First, far from being in strong opposition to the id, the superego appears to be in alliance with the id. Second, the superego directs its hostile, suppressive imperative not toward the impulsive id but toward the ego. On the relation between the superego and the id, Freud posits that "the superego is always close to the id and can act as its representative *vis a vis* the ego." The superego "reaches deep down into the id and for that reason is farther from consciousness than the ego is" (SE XIX: 48). While situated in close proximity to the id in the realm of the unconscious, the superego emerges at the same time as an ego ideal. Being an ego ideal, the superego "is therefore the heir to the Oedipus Complex, and thus it is also the expression of the most powerful impulses and the most important libidinal vicissitudes of the id" (SE XIX: 36). One good example of the superego's coalition with the id, as Boothby observes, is sublimation, where the superego provides an apparatus that accommodates the libidinal drives of the id and makes the psychological satisfaction possible (169). While the opposition of the superego to the pleasure-seeking ego remains undoubtedly real, Freud suggests that the superego's hostility toward the ego appears to be related less to the licentiousness of the ego than to its suppressive control over the id. For example, in the case of obses-

sion, “the ego, having gained control over the libido by means of identification, is punished for doing so by the superego through the instrumentality of the aggressiveness which was mixed with the libido” (SE XIX: 55). The ego’s repression of instinctual demands launched by the id is due to its adjustment to the constraints of a hostile external world, since it functions not only as an agency of the fulfillment of drives but also as an arbiter that mediates between gratification of pleasure and the avoidance of unpleasure. Therefore, if one sticks to the binary opposition in the popularized Freudian tenets that dramatize the instinctual surges and the repression of them, one would find the anti-ego function of the superego superfluous. A fundamental question can hence be raised here: Why a third psychic agency is introduced into Freud’s scheme at all?

Lacan answers this question by resorting to “the fundamentally alienating character of the ego” (Boothby 170). According to Lacan, the infantile ego can achieve and stabilize its imaginary, primitive identity only by initiating its defensive structure at the expense of excluding the heterogeneity of the pre-Oedipal flux of drives that surge up within the infantile body. Thus relegated to the Real, these primordial impulses can nevertheless be harnessed for good. The genesis of the superego is construed by Lacan as a formation of an agency *economically motivated* to reanimate the heterogeneous drives and thus counterbalance the excluded libidinal forces in the psychological economy. The ultimate impetus of the recurrence of pre-Oedipal, heterogeneous drives can be identified as the death drive, as Lacan argues:

My thesis is that the moral law, the moral commandment, the presence of the moral agency, is that by which, in our activity in so far as it is structured by the symbolic, the real makes itself present—the real as such, the weight of the real [...]. [This] must have some relation with the movement that traverses the whole of Freud’s thought, and which begins from a first opposition between the principle of reality and the principle of pleasure and leads, across a series of vacillations, oscillations, barely perceptible changes in his references, to something [...] which is called the death instinct. (1992: 28-29)

In other words, the superego traverses both the realms of the real and the symbolic, since, on the one hand, its close proximity to the id causes the superego to be bound up with the aggressive impulses that it is able to reanimate and, on the other hand, the emergence of the superego coincides with the intervention of the paternal function of

the symbolic order. In addition, the superego takes up the task of disintegrating the narcissistic identifications of the ego in the imaginary by reactivating the permanent aggressivity of drives leading up, finally, to the death drive. The role of the superego, therefore, is fundamentally paradoxical, just as Lacan claims, “the true function of the Father [...] is fundamentally to unite (and not to set in opposition) a desire and the Law” (1977: 321).

The paradoxical nature of the superego can be best exemplified in its alliance with the Law in announcing imperatives not to suppress *jouissance*, but to *force* *jouissance*, as Lacan puts it in puns: “Indeed, the Law appears to be giving the order, ‘*Jouis!*’, to which the subject can only reply ‘*J’ouis*’ (I hear), the *jouissance* being no more than understood.” Lacan even goes further by saying that “it is not the Law itself that bars the subject’s access to *jouissanc*,” for “it is pleasure itself that sets the limits on *jouissance*” (1977: 319). What is implied here is that the subject itself is intrinsically barred, because *jouissance* is impeded by the ego’s inclination toward pleasure as well as the declination of unpleasure *jouissance* necessarily presupposes. It follows that in order to reach *jouissance* the subject has to become apathetic and deny the pleasure in which the ego is indulged by resorting to the superego’s hostility toward the ego that attacks the ego with the reactivation of the heterogeneous drives the ego seeks to rule out. So far we have analyzed the psychic mechanism and prototype of sadistic desire and *jouissance*. In the following pages, we will focus on the law by which the mechanisms operate, the underlying impetus of the two, and their *economic significance*.

II. The Symbolic Law

In Lacan’s conception, the subject can emerge from the ego’s narcissism and come into being only after the imposition of language. Likewise, desire can be perceived only after the ego’s imaginary identification in the mirror stage is interrupted by the introduction of the symbolic order, especially the signifying order of language. According to Lacan, desire originates from a primordial lack, a *manque-à-être*, in the very process of the formation of the ego, where some libidinal flux is inevitably lost, alienated, or excluded. Such a primordial lack is the very thing that launches the subject’s unceasing attempt to fill up the lack, or his incessant quest for the fulfillment of desire through the unfolding of the chain of signifiers in language, as Boothby remarks: “Excluded and

alienated by the imaginary, desire is retrievable in some measure through the power of language.” In the final analysis, “the retrieval of desire concerns the possibility of what Lacan calls *jouissance*,” and “the emergence of desire in the signifying chain brings with it a promise of *jouissance*” (109). Sadistic desire, as a form of desire aiming at a violent discharge both mentally and physically, thus exemplifies desire’s endless pursuit of *jouissance*. Here we can detect desire’s propinquity with *jouissance* and the intervention of language and/or the symbolic order, which coincides with the functioning of the superego. As Bataille observes, “De Sade’s twisted libertines talk to each other. But they indulge in long speeches to show they are right” (1977: 188). Therefore one must consider the insightful question Deleuze raises: “What is the meaning of the meeting of violence and sexuality in such excessive and abundant language as that of Sade and Masoch?” (17). In our view, their indulgence in eloquent, demonstrative language serves as one of the sadistic heroes’ particular ways to *jouissance*, just as their deliberate arrangements of perverse sexuality or acts of atrocity do, for language and sadistic ceremonies are both symbolic orders through which extra psychic excitations are unleashed in addition to pure sensuality in the imaginary plane. The symbolic, as a system, necessarily involves a law by which the system operates. What, then, is specific to sadistic desire in relation to the symbolic law? If the superego is constitutively sadistic, what role does the superego play in typical scenes of sadism?

As Bataille indicates, “De Sade’s doctrine is nothing more nor less than the logical consequence of these moments that deny reason” (1977: 168). The “reason” in question is in fact instrumental reason—which deems perverse sexuality as a waste of energy, irrelevant to reproduction—rather than reasoning as such, since Sade deploys throughout his writings an uncanny, formidable reasoning against reason itself. Moreover, Sade shows us a sort of morality even in a vicious creature like Dolmance, who indulges himself in all kinds of evils and renounces all morals, in the scene where Dolmance refuses to deflower Eugenie by fucking her in the cunt and finally defends himself with a rhetorical question: “Could I contradict my dogmas?” (295). Even though Sade appears to be opposing all existing morals, ethics, and social norms and attempts to negate rationality and orders, there seems to be a certain logic or law in his relentless transgression. A sadistic hero like Dolmance is not simply a libertine who is driven only by his pleasure-seeking ego; the sadist is more often overwhelmed by the imperatives of his superego, imposing on himself certain “principles” to hold fast to as well as suppression of or indifference toward pleasure. Such a logic or law requires our

reconsideration of the nature of the symbolic law, as Boothby's incisive questions suggest: "If the superego constitutes a relation to the symbolic law that spells the demise of narcissism and grants access to desire, what is the relation of this law to particular social codes and conventions? Can the symbolic law simply be identified with the *status quo* of existing moral and social norms?" (174).

The symbolic law of the sadistic desire does not serve exclusively to establish new conventions, morals, or particular social codes, nor does it emerge just as negations or opposites of particular social norms. "In fact," Boothby continues, "the symbolic law provides the matrix by which particular conventions are given their measure and are subject to a constant possibility of reformation" (174). In other words, the operation of the symbolic law can result in either the establishment or negation of specific rules in a symbolic system, just as Lacan argues: "The superego is at one and the same time the law and its destruction" (1988a: 102). It is precisely in relation to the Law, as distinct from particular laws, that Lacan draws a parallel between Kant's and Sade's systems,⁴ wherein the former is grounded upon the formally empty law of pure reason and the latter revolves around what Deleuze calls "universal negation as an Idea of pure reason" (35). Though diametrically opposite to each other in their moral implications, the ethics of the two share striking similarities because in both systems the superego appeals to the ultimately abstract form of imperatives and desire strives to undermine the homeostasis of the ego. While the Kantian ethic lies in "the categorical imperative," the Sadean ethic, as Boothby contends, "is an imperative of pure transgression," which "exemplifies *in its essential form* the self-transmutation by rule of law that is constitutive of the 'sadism' of the superego" (175). In short, the ethics of Kant and Sade are both based on essentially the same symbolic law, which is neutral itself and develops the two in different directions, two possibilities the Law itself envisions.⁵ The

⁴ Lacan has a lengthy discussion of this topic in an essay titled famously as "Kant avec Sade," collected in the original French edition of *Écrits* (765-69).

⁵ Deleuze considers Kant's formulation of the moral law in *Critique of Practical Reason* "a radically new conception," since the law "no longer has its foundation in some higher principle from which it would derive its authority, but that it is self-grounded and is valid solely by virtue of its form" (82). This radical dimension of Kant's thought on the moral law therefore lies in this formalistic conception of the Law, as Deleuze argues, "Clearly THE LAW, defined by its pure form, without substance or object or any determination whatsoever, is such that no one knows nor can know what it is" (83; original emphasis). It is precisely the empty form of the Law that allows Sade to "fill in" a content diametrically opposite to that of the moral imperatives of his time, and perhaps all time—incest, adultery, theft, etc.—simply by a coherent and compelling inference from the logic of morality. See particularly the section titled "Yet another effort, Frenchmen, if you would become Republicans," presented as a pamphlet Dolmance found by chance (296-339).

Kantian superego imposes an ultimate, innate moral imperative on the ego and rewards the subject with the satisfaction of sublimation; the Sadean superego, by contrast, resorts to pure negation as a means to reactivate the heterogeneity of drives that disrupt the homeostasis of the pleasure-seeking ego and thus engenders jouissance.

What then is Sadean negation as pure negation and pure transgression? As Deleuze points out, we must distinguish two levels of negation: “negation (the negative) as a partial process and pure negation as a totalizing Idea.” The former level of negation “is pervaded by the negative, but not everything in it is negation.” Here various forms of negation—destruction, disorder, or death—end up being represented simply as a partial process of a whole cycle that returns eternally to a homeostasis, for even “the decomposition of death is equally the composition of life.” This is why the sadistic hero is disappointed when he finds it impossible to contrive “the perfect crime,” an absolute evil that will not be subject to or incorporated into an eternal equilibrium after all. The other level of negation is envisaged by Sade as “a primary nature,” as one opposed to “the secondary nature” that encompasses both the positive and the negative forces in a homeostasis. Such a level of negation, however “original” in its inception, cannot be “given” in reality. Therefore it is necessarily “the object of an Idea, and pure negation is a delusion; but it is a delusion of reason itself” (26-27). Deleuze also correlates the distinction between the two levels of negation with the distinction between what Sade calls “the personal element,” which embodies the predominance of the ego, and “the impersonal element,” which “represents the way in which the sadist negates secondary nature *along with his own ego*” (28). In terms of the workings of the psychological apparatus, Sadean negation lies in the superego’s negation of the ego, from which jouissance is derived. As Deleuze says of the sadistic apathy:

This apathy does of course produce intense pleasure, but ultimately it is not a pleasure of an ego participating in secondary nature (even of a criminal ego participating in criminal nature), but on the contrary the pleasure of negating nature within the ego and outside the ego, and negating the ego itself. It is in short the pleasure of demonstrative reason. (29)

The distinctions between the two levels of negation, the two natures, and the two elements, as Deleuze observes, parallel “a further and more profound distinction between the death or destructive instincts and the Death Instinct” (30). It is believed that Freud’s formulation of the death drive emerges as an attempt to resist the triumph

of the vital and homeostatic *economy of life* as well as to reaffirm those activities which have been excluded outside the domain of reason, such as sexuality, *jouissance*, or the negative repetition compulsion. However, as Deleuze argues, the death drive always seems to operate in combination with Eros, so that it “always manifests itself as the other face of construction and unification as governed by the pleasure principle” (30). On the other hand, the Death Instinct, or Thanatos, refers to the absolute negation. As Deleuze describes: “Thanatos as such cannot be *given* in psychic life, even in the unconscious: it is [...] essentially silent. And yet we must speak of it for it is a determinable principle” (30).⁶ Since the Death Instinct is closely connected with the destructive, aggressive drives and is conceived as unrepresentable and indispensable, it appears fit to associate it with the Real in Lacanian sense. In order to have a better grasp of such an elusive entity we will inquire into the Death Instinct in the light of Freudian negation, Kristeva’s notion of rejection, and the concept of negativity.

III. Negativity and the Death Drive

In the essay “On Negation,” Freud contends that negation (*Verneinung*) is a sign of repression, or, put another way, the first sign of the lifting of repression:

Thus the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on the condition that it is *negated*. Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed it is already a lifting of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed. We can see how in this the intellectual function is here separated from the affective process. With the help of negation only one consequence of the

⁶ Such a proclamation of the non-existence of Thanatos in the psychic life here is another highlight of Deleuzian anti-psychoanalytic approach. Slavoj Žižek rightly points out this “*disavowal of the Unconscious*” (366) in Deleuze’s (and Foucault’s too) reading of Kant’s idea of the Law. According to Žižek’s unpacking of this definition of the Law as underlying all specific laws and essentially unknowable, Deleuze’s reconsideration of the Law, despite its disavowal, leads one to think of the Law *qua* unconscious, and even as the unconscious itself (365-66). I am not attempting to entertain the seemingly irreconcilable differences between Deleuzian and psychoanalytic thinking, but suffice it to say that in the context of the discussion here, the two sides are using different vocabularies to theorize the same psychic phenomena (and Deleuze cannot help but have recourse to the psychoanalytic term “the death drive,” though capitalized).

process of repression is undone—the fact, namely, of the ideational content of what is repressed not reaching consciousness. The outcome of this is a kind of intellectual acceptance of the repressed, while at the same time what is essential to the repression persists. (SE XIX: 235-36)

Here Freud suggests that the repressed material can have access to consciousness only if it is negated. Thus “no” means “yes,” and that is why Freud asserts that there is no “no” in the unconscious (239). Kelly Oliver indicates that for Freud negation is the way that consciousness maintains its unity under the threat of the semiotic drives’ attack from the unconscious. Since to say “no” is already a proposition marked by the symbolic function and thethetic sublimation or judgment, Freudian negation serves to unify the subject and is therefore in complicity with Kantian negation, which features a symmetrical, logical, binary opposition (42).

However, Michael Payne points out that Freud implies, as we may discern in the last quotation, that there is a negativity working “beneath” negation, or, at least, “a negation that continues even when negation is negated.” In short, Freud recognizes, perhaps reluctantly, there is a “No” in the unconscious that will not be silenced by the imperative of consciousness (187). This reminds us of Kristeva’s statement: “Negativity is the rejection that the subject represses in saying ‘No’ [...]” (qtd. in Lechte 136). What Kristeva rejects of Freud’s notion of negation is, in fact, the “intellectual acceptance of what is repressed.” Kristeva indicates that according to Freud negation as a lifting of the repression means an “intellectual acceptance of the repressed,” but not its “discharge” or its “consumption.” Even when the analyst, through transference, succeeds “in conquering the negation as well, and in bringing about a full intellectual acceptance of the repressed,” the repressive process itself persists. As Kristeva contends, Freudian negation “constitutes an intellectual sublimation (*Aufhebung*) of only one part of foreclosure (*Verwerfung*)” (162-63). Kristeva’s primary concern thus is what Freud calls “the affective process,” which the “the intellectual function” is not able to sublimate—what remains outside the symbolic order and appears as its “discharge” or “consumption.”

The negativity beneath the negation that we mentioned just now in fact has a great deal to do with Hegelian negativity. Situated in the context of Hegelian dialectic, negativity is construed by Kristeva as “the fourth term” of the dialectic: negativity “constitutes the logical impetus beneath the thesis of negation and that of the negation of negation” (109). It is identical to none of these terms in the dialectic; rather, it emerges

as “the logical functioning of the movement that produces the theses” (109). In other words, negativity is the very movement or “ground” of the Hegelian dialectic (Lechte 133). Philosophically, Hegelian negativity must be distinguished from Kantian negation: negation is a logical operation performed by a judging consciousness, whereas negativity is “the precondition of the judging consciousness and its logic” (135). However, one can detect that Hegelian negativity can be identified with the Law that serves as the basis of both the Kantian and Sadean ethics.

But how can negativity, a term employed by Hegel to expound the operation of logic, be applied to describe the functioning and reactivation of drives that, as our previous analysis shows, the symbolic law and the superego promise? As John Letch points out, Kristeva’s notion of rejection is embedded in the drive basis of the infantile body and can be regarded as an attempt to theorize Freud’s death drive in terms of Hegel’s concept of negativity. Kristeva’s notion of rejection indeed is closely connected with drives’ discharge and consumption, or, more precisely, “expenditure” in the Bataillian sense. John Lechte succinctly argues that the “drive activity of the body is what is *rejected* by, but is present in, the symbolic” (136). Rejection therefore is linked to the domain of drives—perhaps the most dominant one. Working from a materialist reading of Hegel, Kristeva construes negativity as “the trans-subjective, trans-ideal, and trans-symbolic movement found in the *separation of matter*, one of the preconditions of symbolicity” (117). Conceiving the notion of rejection in the light of psychical development of the infantile body, Kristeva associates it with the anal-aggressive drive of the anal phase, when the subject’s fundamental experience of separation occurs and is felt as a pleasurable discharge instead of a sense of lack:

[E]nergy surges and discharges erotize the glottic, urethral, and anal sphincters and arouse pleasure at the very moment substances belonging to the body are separated and rejected from the body. This acute pleasure therefore coincides with a loss, a separation from the body, and the isolating of objects outside it. Before the body itself is posited as a detached alterity, and hence the real object, this expulsion of objects is the subject’s fundamental experience of separation—a separation which is not a lack, but a discharge [...]. (150-51)

Such an experience can be considered a rehearsal of the introduction of the symbolic order of language, whose operation is based on the principle of difference between

signs. Kristeva therefore argues that “*rejection* is precisely the semiotic mode of this permanent aggressivity and the possibility of its being *posited*, and thus *renewed*” (150). One would wonder: how does rejection function in the signifying process of language? How is it posited? As Kristeva indicates, what immediately follows the anal phase, during which the anal-aggressive drive dominates, is an operation of holding this aggressivity in check, where “the rejected object definitely separates and is not simply rejected but suppressed as a material object” (151). Since the expulsion of objects in the anal phase is the subject’s fundamental experience of separation, it forms the basis of establishing the symbolic relation of signs that posits objects outside as separate and signifiable after curbing the aggressive anality. “Rejection,” Kristeva continues, “is thus a step on the way to the object’s becoming-sign, at which the object will be detached from the body and isolated as a real object” (151). Language acquisition, therefore, can be considered to derive from such a founding experience of separation, for it represents “the acquisition of a capacity for symbolization through the definitive detachment of the rejected object, through its repression under the sign” (152).

Just as the acquisition of language is based on both the fundamental experience of separation in the anal phase and the suppression of anality, rejection is at once the precondition of the establishment of the symbolic and its repressed element. But such a repression can never be complete and exclusive: there will be “residues of first symbolization” returning and disturbing, or dismantling the symbolic. That is why Kristeva claims that the law of rejection is that of “returning,” as opposed to that of “becoming”: “it returns only to separate again immediately and thus appears as an impossible forward movement” (147). This law of returning coincides with the law of repetition, which, according to Freud, is characteristic of the death drive, as his discussion of “repetition compulsion” suggests. Rejection in the signifying process of poetic language, a term Kristeva uses to designate the writing of the avant-garde, therefore emerges as one of the forms of the death drive’s transgression against “the imperative of survival” (Land 46). It is not, as Kristeva puts it, “a form of murder” (72) that will annihilate the symbolic function. Rather, the *jouissance* derived from rejection represents “the pleasure underlying the symbolic function of expulsion, a pleasure which this function represses but that can return to it [...] disturb, indeed dismantle, the symbolic function.” Therefore, Kristeva contends, the signifying process of poetic language can be construed as “a reactivation of anality,” which embodies the death drive (149).

Although rejection is fundamental and inherent in every thesis, Kristeva does not mean to posit it as origin. In fact, she argues that rejection “rejects origin since it is

always already the repetition of an impulse that is itself a rejection” (147). These seemingly paradoxical elucidations of rejection may reveal the fact that rejection is experienced by the body as an ambivalence—“the body’s jouissance plus the loss of body parts” (151). Perhaps the articulation of the notion of rejection requires a contrast with its related concepts—Hegelian negativity and Freudian negation—to provide a clearer picture, just as Payne’s conclusion shows:

Whereas Hegelian *negativity* is the retention of a previously conceived definition of consciousness within the developing subject and Freudian *negation* the incomplete repression (or symbolization) of pleasure and the erotic drives that have come to be intellectually but not affectively accepted, *rejection* is a semiotic mode of perpetual aggressivity, of continually renewed disruption that may be thought of as energizing both negativity and negation. (193)

Kristeva’s valorization of the drive basis of desire in her conception of negativity departs from Hegel’s ideas of desire and negativity. We must note that the dialectic between what Kristeva calls the semiotic and the symbolic is not a Hegelian one. In Hegelian dialectic, negativity, which generates negation and the negation of negation, i.e., the contradictions between these terms, always ends up being incorporated by the synthesis that emphasizes reconciliation over crisis, a unity that covers up the unstable process leading up to such a unity (131). Therefore, though the notion of negativity appears in Hegelian dialectic, it is somehow repressed by Hegel (Oliver 42). Kristeva argues that since Hegel insists on positing the subject’s unity and remaining at the level of consciousness (“Self-consciousness Is Desire”), Desire’s basis in drives will inevitably be dismissed and forgotten in his analytical theory of desire (131). Similarly, Hegelian negativity will be incorporated into consciousness, just as the *other* will turn out to be superseded and become part of the expanding consciousness after all (Payne 189).

Such a comment on Hegelian negativity is reminiscent of Bataille’s critique of it. In quite a number of essays, Bataille embarks on a sustained critique of the Hegelian dialectic. The Hegelian master can become a master only because he dares to put his life at stake in the struggle of recognition. However, since the dialectic will always reach a final synthesis, the risk of death can always be prevented and deferred. In other words, death, no matter how impending and threatening it may seem, can be

recuperated in the movement of *Aufhebung*. Hegel's system is a utilitarian one because the "putting at stake of life" is attempted only for further reward in the unavoidable and unchanging process of *Aufhebung*, and only those activities with a definite profitable purpose can be considered reasonable or rational. It is what Derrida terms a "restricted economy" that follows the logic of instrumental reason. Contrary to the process of *Aufhebung* is Bataille's *inconceivable* and *inconvertible* loss in the game of death implied in his notion of unconditional expenditure. Since Bataille argues that sexuality and death are the two primary forces interrupting Hegel's utilitarian system, his general economy can, in a sense, be regarded as an economy of death that rebels against means-ends rationality.

In short, Bataille probes into the concept of negativity in the Hegelian dialectic, to the point at which Hegel would hold himself, and hence somehow radicalizes it to become what Hegel calls "abstract negativity." In the essay "From Restricted to General Economy," Derrida pursues Bataille's critique of Hegel in the light of "laughter" and thus designates the reservation of Hegel's system as "restricted economy": "This economy of life restricts itself to conservation, to circulation and self-production of meaning [...]. Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician; it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity" (255-56). "In naming the without-reserve of absolute expenditure 'abstract negativity,'" Derrida continues, "Hegel, through *precipitation*, blinded himself to that which he had laid bare under the rubric of negativity" (259). Derrida's as well as Bataille's attack against Hegel lies not in the authenticity and validity of Hegelian negativity (it is compellingly right!), but in Hegel's attitude toward the potentiality of negativity (conservativeness vs. radicalization) and his insistence on keeping *Aufhebung* intact (seriousness vs. laughter and circularity vs. interruption). The gist of their criticism is that "Hegel remained with the seriousness of the negative, within the framework of a dialectic chained to the *Aufhebung*, rather than taking up the issue of sovereignty and its laughter with the rejected 'abstract negativity'" (Flay 166). Bataille's project of "laughter"—if it can be called a project—is an attempt to *twist free of dialectic* resulting less from the reformation of the system itself than from a *turn of attitude*. In the final analysis, Bataille and Derrida radicalize Hegelian notion of negativity and celebrate a sort of "negativity without reserve" (Derrida 259) and "absolute risking of death." Therefore they are not just valorizing the death drive, as the master-slave struggle also suggests, but the Death

Instinct, which no longer seeks to be recuperated into the final homeostasis of *Aufhebung*.

IV. Economy of the Drive

For Bataille and Derrida, there is always a heterogeneous remainder or deviant element exiled from the system that *Aufhebung* cannot integrate, and both of them reveal a shared interest in the heterogeneous deviation from the homeostasis of *Aufhebung*. According to Derrida, general economy is related to “*the impossible use of energy*, an expenditure without reserve, and, as in the death instinct, to all appearances, an interruption of all economy” (264). Such an analogy of energy is pervasive throughout Derrida’s discourse on economy and Hegelian dialectic. In fact, Freud’s explorations of libidinal economy are also modeled on thermodynamics, which elucidates physical phenomena in terms of energy. Now we shall investigate the propinquity and nuance between the following terms—negativity without reserve, the death instinct, and Thanatos in the light of Freudian appropriation of thermodynamics.

As Jean Laplanche points out, Freud’s theory of the pleasure principle is a theory of mechanical equilibrium in psychic life and the death drive in his hypothesis is a form of thermodynamic entropy modeled upon the second law of thermodynamics (116-19). The pleasure principle, therefore, appears as a kind of “constancy principle” by which the quantity of psychic excitation maintains at a certain constant level; on the other hand, the death drive, which stimulated Freud’s exploration of what lies “beyond the pleasure principle,” follows the “zero principle,” which tends to reduce the level of psychic energy to the point of zero. The difference between these two consists not in the quantitative difference of the level of libidinal energy. Just as there is always a discrepancy between the death drive and the pleasure principle, the zero principle and constancy principle are not compatible. The discovery of the death drive, as Laplanche argues, brings about a contradiction that renders the pleasure principle at once applicable and insufficient: “From an economic point of view the major contradiction consists in attributing to a single ‘drive’ the tendency towards the radical elimination of all tension, the supreme form of the pleasure [...]” (108). Since unpleasure is interpreted as a rise in the level of quantity of tension or its quantitative increase, pleasure would be the sensation of discharge. Hence the pleasure principle demonstrates a

primary trend toward inertia (116). However, as the reduction of the quantitative level of tension is reduced to the level of zero, it would be an irrevocable reduction of the energy level, which contradicts the constancy principle and disrupts the maintenance of previous homeostasis. This is why Laplanche contends that the death drive, along with the zero principle, embodies the radicalized version of the pleasure principle: “It is ‘its most radical form’ or its ‘*beyond*’ which, as the Nirvana principle, reasserts the priority of the tendency towards absolute zero or the ‘death drive’” (117).

The constancy principle is also associated with the reality principle, which is always in alliance with the pleasure principle and features in a homeostatic system in which the investment and distribution of energy can be reconverted into further work and the energy level of the system remains quantitatively stable. By contrast, the zero principle is applied to Freudian conceptions of free energy, primary process, and the death drive, and coincides with the thermodynamic principle that “what is conserved in a given system—its total internal energy—is not, for all that, able to be indefinitely reconverted into further work” (Laplanche 119). The irrevocable, expelled waste energy here is what exactly Bataille and Derrida mean to valorize in their projects of disintegrating the Hegelian system, for it offers a homology of the heterogeneous elements that deviate from, and cannot be incorporated into the homeostatic system of *Aufhebung*. In its attempt to refuse the recuperation of the *Aufhebung*, such a heterogeneous deviation should be regarded as motivated by a *negativity without reserve*, which is more closely connected with the Death Instinct than with the death instinct because it already turns away from its usual conjunction with the life instinct.

In terms of libidinal economy of the body, the “residues of first symbolization” that Kristeva spots in the articulation of poetic language and the pre-Oedipal, heterogeneous flux of drives that, as our discussion of Lacanian psychoanalysis shows, can be reactivated by the sadistic superego on his way to jouissance, should all be considered the heterogeneous expelled inconvertibly by a homeostatic system. By the same token, such a heterogeneity is launched by a negativity without reserve, and although it originates from the death drive, its ultimate impetus is identified with Thanatos, for the primordial, aggressive drives are summoned up and radicalized deliberately by the sadist superego to transgress against the imperatives of reason and survival in order to gain his jouissance.

In his explication of the concept of unproductive economy, Bataille argues that activities of “so-called unproductive expenditure: luxury, mourning, war [...] games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality)—all these

represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no ends beyond themselves” (1985: 118). Ideally, the pleasure of unconditional expenditure lies in its freedom from teleological efforts, since, as Bataille points out, “our real pleasure is to squander our resources to no purpose” (1977: 168) and real sovereignty is “never more than an effort aimed at freeing human existence from the bonds of necessity” (174). However, just as there is a contradiction insofar as such a pleasure without end has to be achieved by “an effort,” the jouissance of sadistic perversion can only be reached through the evocation of the heterogeneous drives made by the overshadowing super-ego. The teleological move of the sadist superego is the necessary step of radicalizing negativity to abstract negativity and transforming the death drive to the Death Instinct, then and only then can the heterogeneous reveal its subversiveness to the full extent and realize the experience of jouissance.

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About the Author

Li-chun Hsiao is currently a doctoral candidate in comparative literature at SUNY at Buffalo. He is completing his dissertation on a psychoanalytic reconsideration of postcoloniality, postcolonial nationalisms, and their relations to modernity. His work focuses on Edouard Glissant's, C. L. R. James's, and Derek Walcott's representations of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution, conceived as "the primal scene of postcoloniality" in this project, which also addresses new challenges to the issues of nationalism, modernity, and spatiality in paradigmatic postcolonial studies by investigating Joyce's and Yeats's distinct responses to the Irish situation in their time. Hsiao has been working persistently on the

juncture of psychoanalysis and political theory. His conference papers include “In the Name of the Father: A Psychoanalytic Investigation into the (De)formation of Democracy,” Literature and Democracy Conference, Emory University, Georgia, February, 2002; “The Universal Postcolonial?: Colonization, Modernity, and Its Obverse in East and Southeast Asia,” accepted by and to be presented on the Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association 2003, California State San Marco, April 4-6, 2003.

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