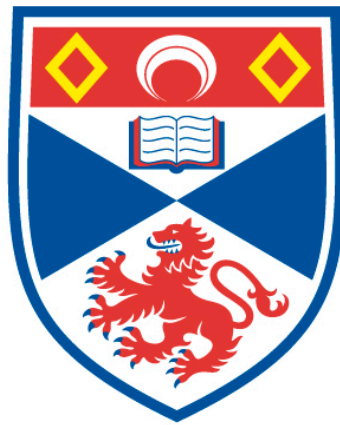


Exceptional intercourse: sex, time and space in contemporary novels  
by male British and American writers

Ben Davies

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



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## ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a theory of exceptional sex through close readings of contemporary novels by male British and American writers. I take as my overriding methodological approach Giorgio Agamben's theory of the state of exception, which is a juridico-political state in which the law has been suspended and the difference between rule and transgression is indistinguishable. Within this state, the spatiotemporal markers inside and outside also become indeterminable, making it impossible to tell whether one is inside or outside time and space. Using this framework, I work through narratives of sexual interaction – *On Chesil Beach*, *Gertrude and Claudius*, *Sabbath's Theater*, and *The Act of Love* – to conceptualise categories of sexual exceptionality. My study is not a survey, and the texts have been chosen as they focus on different sexual behaviours, thereby opening up a variety of sexual exceptionalities. I concentrate on male writers and narratives of heterosexual sex as most work on sex, time and space is comprised of feminist readings of literature by women and queer work on gay, lesbian or trans writers and narratives. However, in the Coda I expand my argument by turning to Emma Donoghue's *Room*, which, as the protagonist has been trapped for the first five years of his life, provides a *tabula rasa*'s perspective of exceptionality. Through my analysis of exceptionality, I provide spatiotemporal readings of the hymen, incest, adultery, sexual listening and the arranged affair. I also conceptualise textual exceptionalities – the incestuous prequel, auricular reading and the positionality of the narrator, the reader and literary characters. Exceptional sex challenges the assumption in recent queer theory that to be out of time is 'queer' and to be in time is 'straight'. Furthermore, exceptionality complicates the

concepts of perversion and transgression as the norm and its transgression become indistinct in the state of exception. In contrast, exceptionality offers a new, more determinate way to analyse narratives of sex.

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## I. INTRODUCTION: EXCEPTIONALITY

In Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), the protagonist Coleman Silk tells his neighbour Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's perennial writer figure and the narrator of the text, that he is using Viagra. By taking this drug, the seventy-one-year-old Silk is able to have sex with a woman less than half his age, but, as Silk explains to Zuckerman, his renewed sex life creates an unstable and intoxicating situation, which he characterises by drawing out a series of tensions:

‘I'm taking Viagra, Nathan. *There's* La Belle Dame sans Merci. I owe all of this turbulence and happiness to Viagra. Without Viagra none of this would be happening. Without Viagra I would have a picture of the world appropriate to my age and wholly different aims. Without Viagra I would have the dignity of an elderly gentleman free from desire who behaves correctly. I would not be doing something that makes no sense. I would not be doing something unseemly, rash, ill considered, and potentially disastrous for all involved. Without Viagra, I could continue, in my declining years, to develop the broad impersonal perspective of an experienced and educated honorably discharged man who has long ago given up the sensual enjoyment of life. I could continue to draw profound philosophical conclusions and have a steadying moral influence on the young, instead of having put myself back into the perpetual state of emergency that is sexual intoxication. Thanks to Viagra I've come to understand Zeus's amorous transformations. That's what they should have called Viagra. They should have called it Zeus.’ (Roth, 2000, p. 32)

For Silk, Viagra is the maddening La Belle Dame sans Merci, who, in John Keats's eponymously titled ballad of 1820, is described as ‘Full beautiful, a fairy's child’ (1978, l. 14). Similar to Silk's relationship with Viagra, the subject of the poem – a meeting between La Belle and a knight – is marked by the related and conflicting experience of passion and loss. The lady and the knight share a momentary but intimate encounter – ‘She look'd at me as she did love, / And made sweet moan’ (ll. 19-20) – but the lady vanishes

and the knight is left ‘Alone and palely loitering’ (l. 46), ‘So haggard and so woe-begone’ (l. 6). Through this allusion and his use of anaphora, Silk expresses his ambivalent condemnation of the drug, his perturbation and satisfaction, his turbulence and happiness. Specifically, he judges his chemically reinvigorated sex life against a series of norms for his age – appropriate perspective, correct behaviour and a reflective approach to life – and he presents his current situation as a dichotomy between what he *is* doing and what he *could* or *would* be doing, between actuality and possibility, between the exceptional situation and the norm. Without Viagra, Silk could not act on his desires and he could not have sex. Without Viagra, Silk would, he believes, more properly fulfil the role of a man his age, more properly conform to the norm of a retired, respectable classics professor. Furthermore, Silk thinks that without the sex drug he could provide the young with a positive moral influence. For Silk, however, Viagra, and the sex it enables him to have, ruin his ability to think philosophically and place him instead in ‘the perpetual state of emergency that is sexual intoxication’ – a state of emergency he has, however, freely chosen to be in.

Silk’s situation and his way of explaining that situation open up the complex relationality between inclusion and exclusion, norm and exception, that characterise the condition of exceptionality, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s exchangeable term for a state of emergency.<sup>1</sup> In his biopolitical theory of the state of exception, Agamben argues that the exception cannot simply be categorised as an external element; rather, as Silk’s

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<sup>1</sup> In his work on the state of exception, Agamben uses the terms ‘state of exception’ and ‘state of emergency’ interchangeably. For example, in a discussion of modern sovereign power in *State of Exception* (2003), he argues that the second ‘President Bush’s decision to refer to himself constantly as the “Commander in Chief of the Army” after September 11, 2001, must be considered in the context of this presidential claim to sovereign powers in emergency situations. If, as we have seen, the assumption of this title entails a direct reference to the state of exception, then Bush is attempting to produce a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war (and between foreign and civil war) becomes impossible’ (2005, p. 22).

revelation about his renewed sex life compellingly shows, there exists an intricate relationality between norm and exception, inclusion and exclusion. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), his first major work on the state of exception, Agamben argues:

The exception is a kind of exclusion. . . . the most proper characteristic of the exception is that what is excluded in it is not, on account of being excluded, absolutely without relation to the rule. On the contrary, what is excluded in the exception maintains itself in relation to the rule in the form of the rule's suspension. *The rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it.* (1998, pp. 17-18)

In his explication, Agamben articulates how the exception retains a relation to the rule and the legal sphere despite having seemingly been placed outside the law. In *The Human Stain*, the figure of Achilles interestingly functions as a symbol for this type of exceptional relationality. As he narrates Silk's story, Zuckerman dramatises the professor's opening lecture of his 'Gods, Heroes, and Myth' (Roth, 2000, p. 4) course and, taking the lead role, Silk powerfully declaims:

'Celebrated Achilles: alienated and estranged by a slight to his honor. Great heroic Achilles, who, through the strength of his rage at an insult—the insult of not getting the girl—isolates himself, positions himself defiantly outside the very society whose glorious protector he is and whose need of him is enormous. A quarrel, then, a brutal quarrel over a young girl and her young body and the delights of sexual rapacity'. (p. 5)

In Silk's lecture, Achilles is presented as the self-exceptioned hero. The Phithian protector places himself outside the *polis*, outside the rule of law, but he retains a relation to it as he is its great defender. In less epic fashion, Silk also establishes himself as the local 'pariah' (p. 25). As a result of being unfairly charged with racism, Silk retires from – abandons – the college at which he has worked for most of his life. Two years after his retirement and the death of his wife, he places himself in a sexually charged and 'potentially disastrous'

(p. 32) state of exception. In Zuckerman's interpretation, Silk does this as he possesses 'the wish to let the brute out, let that force out—for half an hour, for two hours, for whatever, to be freed into the natural thing' (p. 32). Furthermore, Zuckerman explains,

at seventy-one you're not the high-spirited, horny brute you were at twenty-six, of course. But the remnants of the brute, the remnants of the natural thing—he's in touch now with the remnants. And he's happy as a result, he's grateful to be in touch with the remnants. He's more than happy—he's thrilled, and he's bound, deeply bound to her already, because of the thrill. (p. 33)

Where Achilles removes himself from the *polis* due to a sexual quarrel, however, Silk rejuvenates his sex life once he becomes an exceptionally displaced man. Moreover, his exceptional situation is intensified as Faunia, the young woman with whom Silk has renewed his sex life, is also positioned as an abandoned figure. As Silk tells Zuckerman, Faunia came from a prosperous family, was abused by her step-father, ran away from home during her adolescence, became married to a man who used to beat her, and lost her two children in a house fire. Due to her horrific life story, Silk claims that "'Faunia's been exiled from the entitlement that should have been hers'" (p. 28). The young woman, he says to Zuckerman, "'has absolutely nothing'" (p. 28). Faunia's own exceptional condition is symbolised by her illiteracy, which, as Silk tells Zuckerman, the lovers discuss ardently:

"'You're not up to fucking somebody who can't read," she said. "You're going to drop me because I'm not a worthy, legitimate person who *reads*. You're going to say to me, "Learn to read or go." [sic] "No," I told her, "I'm going to fuck you all the harder because you can't read." "Good," she said, "we understand each other. I don't do it like those literate girls and I don't want to be done to like them." "I'm going to fuck you," I said, "for just what you are." "That's the ticket," she says. We were both laughing by then.' (pp. 34-5)

Faunia is set aside – excepted – from 'those literate girls' and the legitimate society they represent. Her illiteracy figuratively reduces her to her animal primitiveness, which, as I shall show in the following section of this introduction, Agamben argues is a necessary

outcome of being placed in the state of exception. The couple indulge in Faunia's animalisation, disclosing their desire to enjoy an intense, almost primal, sex life. They will fuck harder and more satisfyingly as they are, momentarily at least, freed from the social norms literacy represents.

Due to his self-retirement and his love affair with Faunia, Silk's new life is marked as being intensely exceptional: he removes himself from the norm that was his intellectual society; he is caught up in the intoxication that is sex, which excepts him from the norms appropriate to a retired man of his age and station in life; he finds a lover who is also excepted; and both Silk and Faunia show a desire for animalistic fucking. Furthermore, as we have seen in his conversation with Zuckerman, Silk declares sex a state of emergency. As I analyse in detail in the following section of this introduction, Agamben argues that the state of exception also makes indeterminable the distinctions between the law and its transgression, and being inside and outside of time and space, as well as that between inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, Silk's designation of sex as a state of emergency marks the way in which sex can create numerous exceptional transformations. For Silk himself, sex is a continuous state of emergency, which he personally enters by taking Viagra and re-erecting his ability to have intercourse.

Silk's sexually exceptional existence opens up the focus of this present study on novels by contemporary male British and American writers. In this thesis, I provide sustained close readings of Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007), John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater* (1995) and Howard Jacobson's *The Act of Love* (2008) in order to analyse the exceptionality of narratives of sex and how the narratives are themselves exceptional. Therefore, I focus on both the portrayals of characters' sexual behaviours as well as the various textual relations these narratives put into play. Rather than argue with Silk that sex itself is a state of exception, in

each chapter I categorise types of exceptional sex that either take place ‘in’ an interim, a between, where ‘in’ and ‘out’ become indistinguishable, or themselves confuse the in/out binary, thereby being neither in nor out of time and space. Through my development of the theory of sexual exceptionality, this thesis argues for new ways to think about sex in relation to time and space. As I argue in the third section of this introduction, sexual exceptionality specifically challenges queer theory’s division of ‘straight’ and ‘queer’ subjects into being ‘in’ and ‘out’ of time and space. My rejection of queer theory’s exclusive claim to exciting or unusual spatiotemporality also offers a political dimension to this study, as I argue that the reduction of man to animal that occurs in the state of exception is more significant than any reduction to gender or sexual orientation. Furthermore, in section 4 I contend that the theory of exceptional sex also complicates the critical tradition of analysing narratives of sex in terms of transgression or perversion, as the norm and the transgression of the norm become indistinguishable in the state of exception. Therefore, exceptionality makes a significant intervention in the study of literary representations of sex. Before turning to my exceptional methodology in the final section of this introduction, in section 5 I argue for exceptionality to be seen as a critically productive way to analyse textual relations, especially those between the narrative and the narrator, and the narrative and the reader. Moreover, through this focus on textual spatiotemporality and relationality, I propose that reading itself should be understood as a form of exceptionality.

## **1. Agamben’s State of Exception**

Predominantly in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1998), and *State of Exception* (2003), Giorgio Agamben theorises his juridical and biopolitical concept of the state of exception, which is a sphere in which the law has been suspended. The state of exception, whose paradigm Agamben argues is the concentration camp, is ‘a kenomatic state, an emptiness of law’ (2005, p. 6), ‘anomic’ (p. 39), alegal. As Agamben argues with reference to an early form of the state of exception, the Roman *iustitium*, which ‘literally means “standstill” or “suspension of the law”’ (p. 41), a person acting within this sphere

neither executes nor transgress [sic] the law, but *inexecutes* [*inesegue*] it. His actions, in this sense, are mere facts, the appraisal of which, once the *iustitium* is expired, will depend on circumstances. But, as long as the *iustitium* lasts, they will be absolutely undecidable, and the definition of their nature—whether executive or transgressive, and, in the extreme case, whether human, bestial, or divine—will lie beyond the sphere of law. (p. 50)

As his analysis of the Roman *iustitium* indicates, Agamben’s conceptualisation of the state of exception is characterised by a focus on the complex relations he discerns between oppositional terms and their possible indistinction. In his theory of the state of exception – which is informed by a close reading of the work of the political theorist Carl Schmitt – Agamben is particularly interested in limit concepts, in the way that ‘every limit concept is always the limit between two concepts’ (1998, p. 11), how they relate, problematise and confuse one another.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this exegesis of Agamben’s thought on exceptionality, I

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<sup>2</sup> In *Blind Date: Sex and Philosophy* (2003), Anne Dufourmantelle lyrically claims that sex and philosophy are brought together by their fascination with borders and limits, writing: ‘here is where philosophy and sex are in harmony, on the shores of birth and death, waiting and forgetting, patience and rage. In the hunger that philosophy distracts and deflects toward the ideal, the hunger nourished by the desire for a body that would be foreign to the self and yet its likeness, in this hunger there is time’ (p. 100). As Avital Ronell writes in her introduction to *Blind Date*, ‘The Stealth Pulse of Philosophy’, Dufourmantelle is interested in ‘the state of exception that philosophy harbors within itself, over which it divides its most crucially diverted properties, ceaselessly in dispute. According to the work before us, the fate of thinking is bound up in the impossible relation

shall trace a series of his limit concepts and thresholds – those of norm and exception, the figures of the sovereign and the *homo sacer*, and spatiotemporal indeterminability.

In Schmitt's theory, the state of exception is established by the sovereign, who is defined by his very ability to create this sphere – “Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception” (p. 11, quoted in Agamben). However, as Agamben explains, the sovereign ‘decision is not the expression of the will of a subject hierarchically superior to all others, but rather represents the inscription within the body of the *nomos* of the exteriority that animates it and gives it meaning’ (pp. 25-6). Sovereignty, then, is not specifically related to the person who occupies the role of sovereign authority at a particular moment. Rather, it is the very inclusion of the exception to the law within the law, which thereby makes the law possible. Agamben elaborates this reciprocal relation between law and exception in Schmitt's theory when he writes:

the sovereign exception is the fundamental localization (*Ortung*), which does not limit itself to distinguishing what is inside from what is outside but instead traces a threshold (the state of exception) between the two, on the basis of which outside and inside, the normal situation and chaos, enter into those complex topological relations that make the validity of the juridical order possible. (p. 19)

In this conceptualisation, the two spheres – the legal and the alegal state – are complementary and defined in relation to one another. By establishing a state of exception, the sovereign makes possible a state of law, legitimising it and marking it as distinct from the exceptional, anomic sphere. This relationship between norm and exception is,

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to “sex” that philosophy, in its own dispossessing way, maintains’ (p. xiv). In her introduction, Ronell notes the exceptional presence – being there and not there simultaneously – of sex in philosophy, writing: ‘for the most part, sex annuls as it presents itself as exposition, scheme, or theme, leaving an unreadable residue as its calling card. “It” arrives as the place of an incessant vanishing point. . . . Still and again’ (p. xx). Dufourmantelle's exploration of philosophy's state of exception – sex – provides many insights and theories of sex, philosophy and thought. Consequently, *Blind Date* can be seen as an intertext to this thesis and, where relevant, I touch upon and make evident the relations between my study of exceptional sex and literature and Dufourmantelle's work on the exceptional relation between sex and philosophy.

Agamben argues, ‘the originary juridico-political structure on the basis of which what is included in the juridical order and what is excluded from it acquire their meaning’ (p. 19).

As his reading of sovereignty shows, and as I explored in my opening analysis of *The Human Stain*, Agamben emphasises the complexity of the concept of the exception and its intricate relation to the norm. In fact, he argues that the exception’s relation to the law is created through the very act of its being placed outside the law. In his analysis, Agamben argues that this complex form of relationality is inherent in the etymology of the word ‘exception’, which means ‘*taken outside (ex-capere)*, and not simply excluded’ (p. 18). Thus, making an exception, taking something outside, is not the same as excluding it, as a relation between exception and norm always remains in place. Continuing his problematisation of the concept of exceptionality, Agamben argues that as the state of exception is the foundation for all juridical spheres, it itself must be ‘essentially unlocalizable (even if definite spatiotemporal limits can be assigned to it from time to time)’ (p. 19). Through this argument, Agamben splits the Schmittian connection between localisation and order in the latter’s concept of the law and the legal sphere, contending that ‘the link between localization (*Ortung*) and ordering (*Ordnung*) constitutive of the “*nomos* of the earth” . . . is therefore even more complex than Schmitt maintains and, at its center, contains a fundamental ambiguity, an unlocalizable zone of indistinction or exception that, in the last analysis, necessarily acts against it as a principle of its infinite dislocation’ (pp. 19-20, citing Schmitt). From this initial problematisation of localisation and order, Agamben argues that Schmitt’s dyad contains a fundamental ambiguity. As the exception is infinitely locatable, it irreparably breaks apart the structure of localisation and order. Thus, the state of law and the state of exception become spatially indistinct. Having dismantled the Schmittian construction of localisation and order, and norm and exception,

Agamben contends that modernity is defined by the increasing indecipherability between exception and norm, which I shall turn to later in this exegesis.

In Agamben's reading of Schmitt, two figures play significant, related and parallel roles – the sovereign and the *homo sacer*. Both figures take on exceptional relations to the law and are connected through the role of violence in the state of exception. Concerning the sovereign, Agamben argues:

The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order. If the sovereign is truly the one to whom the juridical order grants the power of proclaiming a state of exception and, therefore, of suspending the order's own validity, then 'the sovereign stands outside the juridical order and, nevertheless, belongs to it, since it is up to him to decide if the constitution is to be suspended *in toto*' . . . the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law. This means that the paradox can also be formulated this way: 'the law is outside itself,' or: 'I, the sovereign, who am outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law [*che non c'è un fuori legge*].' (p. 15, citing Schmitt)

By being able to suspend the law, the sovereign must necessarily be outside it, whilst also creating and embodying the law itself. Therefore, the sovereign is both inside and outside the law simultaneously. For Agamben, 'sovereignty thus presents itself as an incorporation of the state of nature in society, or, if one prefers, as a state of indistinction between nature and culture, between violence and law, and this very indistinction constitutes specifically sovereign violence. The state of nature is therefore not truly external to *nomos* but rather contains its virtuality' (p. 35). The sovereign's parallel figure, the *homo sacer* – the sacred man – also exists in a threshold position with respect to the law, as 'he who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order' (pp. 28-9). Having been abandoned and placed in the state of exception, the *homo sacer* is reduced to bare, sacred

life. He is utterly naked and vulnerable. Indeed, the *homo sacer* is ‘*not simple natural life, but life exposed to death (bare life or sacred life)*’, which Agamben argues ‘*is the originary political element*’ (p. 88). The *homo sacer* has no political subjectivity and no recourse to the law. He is life only and collapses the classical distinction between ‘*zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings . . . and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group’ (p. 1). In the *homo sacer*, ‘*the biological given is as such immediately political, and the political is as such immediately the biological given*’ (p. 148). That is, one’s existence is political and one’s politics is grounded in his or her biological existence, which is the basic meaning of the term ‘biopolitics’. The indetermination – that is, the way in which concepts or qualities become mutually implicated and made indistinct – of *zoē* and *bios* results from the fact that ‘the sovereign decides not the licit and the illicit but the originary inclusion of the living in the sphere of the law’ (p. 26).<sup>3</sup> Put outside the *polis*, excepted from the sphere of the law by the law itself, the *homo sacer* is made completely vulnerable, whilst those inside the political sphere are protected by the law. As the excepted figure, the *homo sacer*’s life ‘is . . . a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither’ (p. 105). Neither fully human nor fully animal, the excepted figure is, like the illiterate Faunia in *The Human Stain*, reduced to a form of bare life.

In his theory of the *homo sacer*, Agamben compares the excepted figure to the excluded person in early German law, who is ‘*friedlos*, without peace, and whom anyone [is] permitted to kill without committing homicide’ (p. 104). The *homo sacer*’s ability to

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<sup>3</sup> In his essay ‘Beyond Human Rights’ in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (1996), Agamben hyphenates the verb ‘in-determine’ (1996, p. 25), but he retains the more conventional noun form ‘indetermination’ in *Homo Sacer* (1998, p. 164). For the sake of consistency, I have retained these two separate forms throughout this thesis.

be killed marks his very relation to the law that has abandoned him, and he ‘is included in the political order in being exposed to an unconditional capacity to be killed’ (p. 85). In conjunction with his juridico-political conditionality, the *homo sacer* embodies sacredness, as ‘*the sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill . . . without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life—that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed—is the life that has been captured in this sphere*’ (p. 83). Here, Agamben makes a distinction between the concepts of the sacred and sacrifice. The exposed man who can be killed but not murdered can also not be sacrificed. That is, his life cannot be offered as a peace offering, as a means to restore order. With this distinction in mind, Agamben argues that ‘the sacredness of life, which is invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expresses precisely both life’s subjection to a power over death and life’s irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment’ (p. 83).

The relation between the sovereign and the abandoned *homo sacer* is complementary as well as parallel. The *homo sacer* is completely in thrall to the sovereign power that excepts him and remains related to it as ‘the ban is the force of simultaneous attraction and repulsion that ties together the two poles of the sovereign exception: bare life and power, *homo sacer* and the sovereign’ (p. 110). Furthermore, sovereign and *homo sacer* are relational figures as their existence defines the people around them. As Agamben explains, ‘the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereign’ (p. 84). Therefore, whenever a sovereign or a *homo sacer* is present, multiple instances of the *homo sacer*-sovereign relationship are made possible.

The state of exception also in-determines various spatiotemporal relations, which forms a principal aspect of Agamben’s theory. For Agamben, the state of exception is

characterised by its distinct topological structure. He explains and illustrates this situation by drawing upon a series of spatial figures, as is evident in his examination of the relation between the state of nature and the state of exception, where he argues:

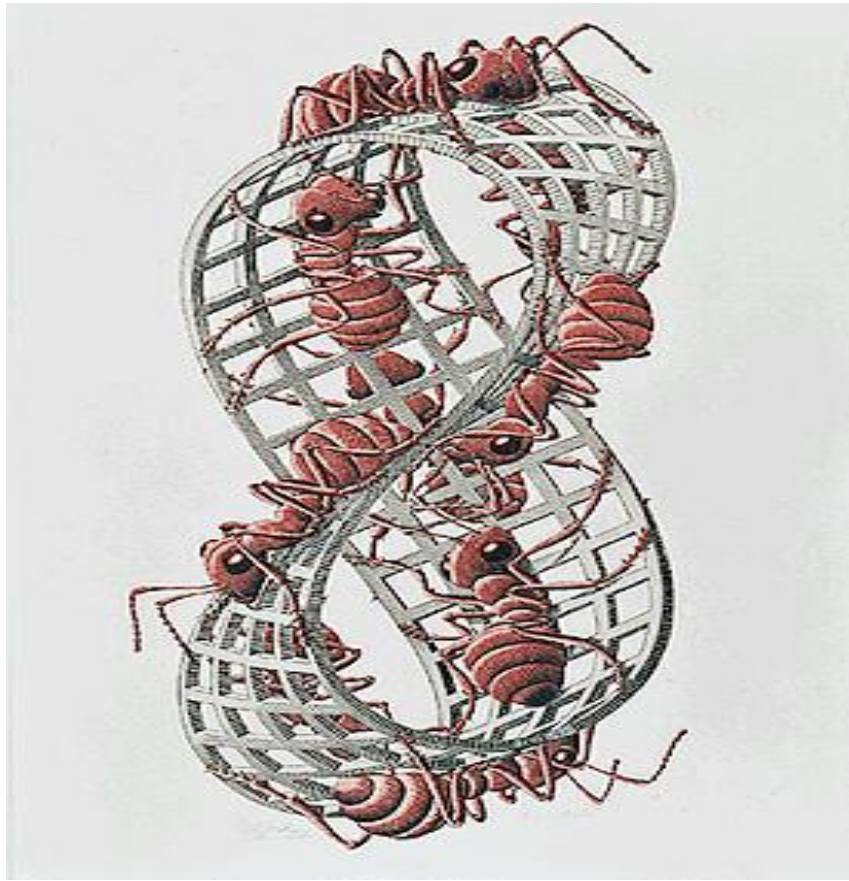
The state of nature and the state of exception are nothing but two sides of a single topological process in which what was presupposed as external (the state of nature) now reappears, as in a Möbius strip or a Leyden jar, in the inside (as state of exception), and the sovereign power is this very impossibility of distinguishing between outside and inside, nature and exception, *physis* and *nomos*. The state of exception is thus not so much a spatiotemporal suspension as a complex topological figure in which not only the exception and the rule but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside, pass through one another. (p. 37)

The Möbius strip (Figure 1) and the Leyden jar are figures in which the inside and outside surfaces are one and the same.<sup>4</sup> With particular reference to the Möbius strip (and the Klein bottle), Agamben argues that in these figures the ‘exterior and interior in-determine each other’ (2000, p. 25). In the above discussion, Agamben uses the Möbius strip and the Leyden jar to explain the way in which the state of exception in-determines the supposedly external state of nature and the internal state of law. Furthermore, he uses these figures to effect a theoretical shift from arguing that the state of exception is a form of spatiotemporal suspension to proposing that it is topologically complex. Despite this manoeuvre, however, Agamben is somewhat inconsistent about the concept of suspension. Throughout his work, he repeatedly returns to the concept of juridical suspension to explain the alegal quality of the state of exception.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the way in which inside and outside pass through one another in the state of exception would result in a suspension of temporal and spatial determinations, if not of spatiotemporality itself.

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<sup>4</sup> Agamben’s use of the Leyden jar is somewhat less obvious than his reference to the Möbius strip, but it would seem that spatial indetermination is created in the Leyden jar either by the way in which a metal rod goes into and through the jar, thus being both inside and outside, or by the near-connection of the foil that lines the inside and the outside of the jar.

<sup>5</sup> The reader may wish to see the following references to suspension, in *Homo Sacer* (pp. 168, 169 and 175), and in *State of Exception* (pp. 3, 33, 41, 60 and 64).



(Figure 1. M.C. Escher, 'Moebius Strip II 1963 woodcut in red, black and grey-green, printed from 3 blocks'. All M.C. Escher works (c) 2011 The M.C. Escher Company - the Netherlands. All rights reserved. Used by permission. [www.mcescher.com](http://www.mcescher.com))

In addition to theorising the complex topological relation between the state of exception and the state of nature, Agamben also conceptualises the spatiotemporal qualities of the state of exception itself. For example, and again with reference to the Roman *iustitium*, he argues that the suspension of the law created by the state of exception 'seems to call into question the very consistency of the public space; yet, conversely, the consistency of the private space is also immediately neutralized to the same degree' (2005, p. 49). In his reading of Livy and Cicero in this section of the text, Agamben implies that this 'paradoxical coincidence of private and public' (p. 49) results from the lack of a juridical hierarchy that would differentiate public officials from private citizens.

Underlying both the confusion of the private and public spheres and the interrelationship of states of law and exception is the implication in Agamben's theory that the inside and outside of time and space themselves pass through and in-determine one another. Indeed, when discussing the paradigmatic state of exception, the concentration camp, Agamben overtly claims that the camp's 'fence . . . delimits an extratemporal and extraterritorial threshold' (1998, p. 159), and that 'whoever entered the camp moved in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit' (p. 170). Thus, the concentration camp fence marks the ultimate point at which time and space become indeterminate, and those who enter this extra-spatiotemporality experience exceptionality in its most intense form. They exist within a threshold, within an indetermination of the inside and the outside of time and space.

Agamben provides his most detailed characterisation of the spatiotemporal conditionality of existing within the state of exception in *Remnants of Auschwitz*. Through an analysis of the psychiatrist Kimura Bin's psychological development of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), Agamben argues that the state of exception decisively problematises our understanding, and in-determines our experience, of – or, indeed, suspends – temporal structures, sequences and the correlative divisions of past, present and future. Specifically, Agamben brings spatial and temporal indetermination together, and, with reference to his paradigm, he contends:

The camp, the absolute situation, is the end of every possibility of an originary temporality, that is, of the temporal foundation of a singular position in space, of a *Da*. In the camp, the irreparability of the past takes the form of an absolute imminence; *post festum* and *ante festum*, anticipation and succession are parodically flattened on each other. Waking is now forever drawn into the inside of the dream: 'Soon we will again hear / the foreign command: / *Wstawac!*' (2008, p. 128)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The quotation at the end of this passage is from Primo Levi's Auschwitz writings. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben refers to two versions of this passage. In the first, Levi writes: "it is a dream within other dreams. . . . I'm alone at the center of a gray, cloudy

Adopting Bin's psychological terms, *post festum* and *ante festum* (before and after the celebration), Agamben argues that in the concentration camp it is impossible to separate the past from the future as one cannot locate oneself in a specific time in space, in a *Da*. This reasoning also implies the inverse impossibility of locating oneself in a specific space in time. In this exceptional situation, Agamben argues, the past is absolute imminence – it is always approaching – and both after and before, anticipation (of the to-come) and succession (sequence and progression from one thing to the next) are made indistinct. Thus, the standard temporal demarcations of past, present and future are superimposed one onto the other and are made indeterminable. Without a *Da*, temporal positions and the concept of sequence become unrealisable. In his final analysis, Agamben emphasises the experiential effect of this spatiotemporality by portraying a situation in which waking up to the outside world is forever folded into the inside of the dream.<sup>7</sup> Correlatively, then, sleeping must be forever folded into the outside of reality. Thus, the excepted person is figuratively living in a Möbius strip, unable to distinguish between reality and dreams, the outside from his inside world. He cannot distinguish whether he is inside or outside time

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emptiness, and at once I *know* what it means, I know that I've always known it: I am once again in the camp, and nothing outside the camp was true. The rest – family, flowering nature, home – was a brief respite, a trick of the senses. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over; and in the outer dream, which continues relentlessly, I hear the sound of a voice I know well: the sound of one word, not a command, but a brief, submissive word. It is the order at dawn in Auschwitz, a foreign word, a word that is feared and expected: "Get up," *Wstawac*" (2008, p. 101). The second version is from Levi's poem, 'At an Uncertain Hour' (1984). For Agamben, this poetic rendering 'has the form not of a dream, but of prophetic certainty' (p. 102), and he quotes Levi as follows:

In savage nights, we dreamt teeming, violent dreams with our body and soul: to go back, to eat – to tell. Until we heard the brief and submissive order of dawn: *Wstawac*. And our hearts were broken in our chests.

Now we have found our homes again; our bellies are full; we have finished telling our tales. It's time. Soon we will once again hear the foreign order: *Wstawac*. (p. 102)

<sup>7</sup> For Agamben's full analysis of Bin's theory, see *Remnants of Auschwitz* (2008, pp. 125-8).

and space, and 'in' and 'out', 'inside' and 'outside', in-determine one another and can, therefore, no longer operate as binary pairs. Indeed, the excepted figure is neither fully in nor out of time and space.

Beyond the various indeterminate relations that form, or are put into play in, the state of exception, Agamben argues that in the modern world the very difference between the norm and the exception has become indecipherable. To support his argument concerning this overriding indetermination, Agamben turns to Germany's use of exceptional rule in the period following the First World War, contending:

when the Nazis took power and proclaimed the 'decree for the protection of the people and the State' . . . on February 28, 1933, indefinitely suspending the articles of the constitution concerning personal liberty, the freedom of expression and of assembly, and the inviolability of the home and of postal and telephone privacy, they merely followed a practice consolidated by previous governments.

Yet there was an important novelty. No mention was made of the expression *Ausnahmezustand* ('state of exception'). (1998, p. 168)

Due to the anomalous inclusion of the exception within the law, Agamben argues that in the Third Reich '*the state of exception thus ceases to be referred to as an external and provisional state of factual danger and comes to be confused with juridical rule itself*' (p. 168). Thus, the original distinction between norm and exception – which Agamben sees as problematic in Schmitt's theory from the beginning – has in this case completely collapsed. From the evidence offered by such historical case studies, Agamben argues that 'the "juridically empty" space of the state of exception . . . has transgressed its spatiotemporal boundaries and now, overflowing outside them, is starting to coincide with the normal order, in which everything again becomes possible' (p. 38, citing Schmitt).

Agamben supports his theory about the exceptional quality of modern politics by drawing a parallel between the suspension of the law in the Third Reich and the second

President Bush's "military order" of 13 November, 2001 (2005, p. 3). Concerning the latter, he argues:

What is new about President Bush's order is that it radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnamable and unclassifiable being. Not only do the Taliban captured in Afghanistan not enjoy the status of POWs as defined by the Geneva Convention, they do not even have the status of persons charged with a crime according to American laws. Neither prisoners nor persons accused, but simply 'detainees,' they are the object of a pure *de facto* rule, of a detention that is indefinite not only in the temporal sense but in its very nature as well, since it is entirely removed from the law and from juridical oversight. (pp. 3-4)

Agamben substantiates his comparison of the Third Reich and the US's treatment of terrorist suspects by arguing that 'the only thing to which it [the situation faced by these terrorist suspects] could possibly be compared is the legal situation of the Jews in the Nazi *Lager* [camps], who, along with their citizenship, had lost every legal identity, but at least retained their identity as Jews' (p. 4). Far from being an historical or a remote occurrence, then, Agamben shows how states of exception exist within the *polis* today, how 'faced with the unstoppable progression of what has been called a "global civil war," the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics' (p. 2). Moreover, Agamben argues, states of exception do not only exist at the level of national and global politics. As he contends in his essay 'What is a Camp?' in *Means Without End*,

if the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the consequent creation of a space for naked life as such, we will then have to admit to be facing a camp virtually every time that such a structure is created, regardless of the nature of the crimes committed in it and regardless of the denomination and specific topography it might have. (2000, pp. 41-2)

Indeed, Agamben argues that 'even certain outskirts of the great postindustrial cities as well as the gated communities of the United States are beginning today to look like camps,

in which naked life and political life, at least in determinate moments, enter a zone of absolute indeterminacy' (p. 42). Thus, part of the forceful quality of Agamben's theory is his prophetic warning of the ever-present possibility of states of exception. Indeed, he argues that the concentration camp is 'in some way the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we are still living' (1998, p. 166).

## 2. Exceptional Sex

Throughout his three major works on the state of exception, Agamben considers sex only briefly.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in *Homo Sacer* he argues that 'the conceptual apparatus of sacrifice and eroticism cannot grasp' (1998, p. 113) 'the bare life of *homo sacer*' (p. 113). However, this dismissal forms part of Agamben's direct criticism of Georges Bataille's work and the latter's recourse to the idea of sacrifice as opposed to that of the sacred. Discussing the difference between these two concepts, Agamben writes: 'Bataille immediately exchanges the political body of the sacred man, which can be killed but not sacrificed and which is inscribed in the logic of exception, for the prestige of the sacrificial body, which is defined instead by the logic of transgression' (p. 113). Thus, Bataille's use of sacrifice relies on transgression, which, as I have shown and shall treat more fully in section 4, cannot be determined in the state of exception. For Agamben, Bataille 'failed to consider the link that binds that [sacred] life to sovereign power' (p. 112), and

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<sup>8</sup> In 'The Abandonment of Sex: Giorgio Agamben, Psychoanalysis and Melancholia' (2010), Justin Clemens argues: 'for Agamben . . . sex is only rarely explicitly thematized. Nonetheless, a kind of desexualized eroticism is at the heart of his philosophical project' (para. 4). The reader may wish to see this essay for a psychoanalytic account of sex in Agamben's work, in which Clemens analyses the interesting temporality of melancholy, arguing: 'melancholy is not, paradoxically, a backward-looking phenomenon, but rather authentically forward-looking, or, more precisely, subsists in a temporality skewed between *already-over* and *not-yet*' (para. 26).

instead of recognizing bare life's eminently political (or rather biopolitical) nature, he inscribes the experience of this life both in the sphere of the sacred—which he understands . . . as originarily ambivalent: pure and filthy, repugnant and fascinating—and in the interiority of the subject, to which the experience of this life is always given in privileged or miraculous moments. In the case of both ritual sacrifice and individual excess, sovereign life is defined for Bataille through the instantaneous transgression of the prohibition on killing. (pp. 112-3)<sup>9</sup>

Distinct from his dismissal of Bataille's theory of eroticism and its transgressive and sacrificial underpinnings, in *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben examines sex and its relation to dignity and shame.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, throughout his work on the state of exception Agamben privileges the sexual practice of sadomasochism, which, in *Homo Sacer*, he argues 'is precisely the technique of sexuality by which the bare life of a sexual partner is brought to light' (1998, p. 134). In this analysis of sadomasochism, Agamben considers the way in which '[the marquis de] Sade stages (in his entire work, and in particular in *120 Days of Sodom*) the *theatrum politicum* as a theater of bare life, in which the very physiological life of bodies appears, through sexuality, as the pure political element' (p. 134). Giving de Sade prominence in his discussion of sadomasochism, Agamben also argues that 'not only does Sade consciously invoke the analogy with sovereign power . . . but we also find here the symmetry between *homo sacer* and sovereign, in the complicity that ties the masochist to the sadist, the victim to the executioner' (pp. 134-5).<sup>11</sup>

Agamben's most succinct, and at the same time open-ended, remark on sex occurs in *Homo Sacer*, where he declares: 'until we become aware of the political nature of bare

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<sup>9</sup> In *Blind Date*, Dufourmantelle also relates sex to sacrifice, arguing that 'sex is the space of sacrifice par excellence' (p. 80). Within this framework, Dufourmantelle touches upon violence, exposure and the mutual relationship between sacrificer and sacrificial object, and the interested reader may wish to see Dufourmantelle (2007, pp. 79-81) to follow up the differences and similarities between Agamben's work and hers.

<sup>10</sup> For Agamben's discussion of sex and dignity, see *Remnants of Auschwitz* (2008, pp. 68-9), and (pp. 107-9) for his analysis of sex and shame.

<sup>11</sup> See *Homo Sacer* (1998, pp. 134-5) and the discussion of sex and shame in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (2008, pp. 107-9) for Agamben's analyses of sadomasochism more fully. I return briefly to Agamben's invocation of de Sade in Chapter V of this thesis.

life and its modern avatars (biological life, sexuality, etc.), we will not succeed in clarifying the opacity at their center' (p. 120). Describing sex as an avatar of bare life, Agamben specifically emphasises the biopolitical aspect of sex, as evident in his discussions of sadomasochism. Implicit in this parenthetical aside, however, is the wider concept of exceptionality itself and its relation to sexuality, which I take here to mean sexual behaviour rather than gender. As bare life only manifests itself in the state of exception, Agamben specifically brings sex – a modern avatar of bare life – and exceptionality together, as well as introducing to the analysis of sex the various indeterminate relations the exception puts into operation – spatiotemporal, that between norm and exception, inclusion and exclusion, the law and its transgression, as well as the complex relation between sovereign and *homo sacer*.<sup>12</sup>

Agamben's incredibly brief parenthetical comment in *Homo Sacer* opens up the fascinating relationship between exceptionality and sex that provides the impetus for my study. Indeed, in *Homo Sacer* Agamben also claims that 'the thought of our time finds itself confronted with the structure of the exception in every area' (p. 25), but whereas he largely passes over sex in his work on the state of exception, in this thesis I extend the theory of exceptionality by bringing this structure into confrontation with sexual desire and behaviour. Specifically, I examine the relationship between sex and exceptionality through my analysis of representations of sex in literary texts.<sup>13</sup> Rather than provide a universal

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<sup>12</sup> In *Blind Date*, Dufourmantelle argues that sex and exceptional animalisation are intrinsically connected, writing: 'sexuality, to the extent that it signified excess, the nonhumanized, brought back into view, in the characteristics of animals, that which casts us out of bounds, outside the civilized sphere, the human compact, the *polis*. Sex was not originally interpreted as an evil, then, but as one of the appetites through which our always latent inhumanity comes to be engulfed' (2007, p. 29). See (pp. 45-6) for her invocation of Dionysus and the Bacchanalia in relation to indetermination and sex, and (pp. xiii-xiv) for Ronell's discussion of Dionysus.

<sup>13</sup> Previous critical analyses of sex in literature that make use of Agamben's theoretical work have not focused on exceptional sex as I define it in this thesis. They include, however, a particularly insightful essay on Agamben, sex and the state of exception by

theory of what sex is or propose that all sex is exceptional, in each chapter I analyse different types of sex and develop theories of their various exceptionalities. Through this approach, I argue that 'sex' can take on and embody many forms. Indeed, as

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Andrew Asibong: 'Mulier Sacra: Marie Chauvet, Marie Darrieussecq and the Sexual Metamorphoses of "Bare Life"' (2003). In this essay, Asibong notes Agamben's limited treatment of sex and argues: 'the question of sex and its interaction with systems of power should be considered as a crucial point of entry into the very concept of bare life and, even more importantly, emerges as a key to the issue of its survival and revolutionary manipulation by the sacred, or potentially sacred, subject' (p. 171). In his analysis of the work of two French women writers, Asibong brings the question of sex and bare life together through a specific focus on women characters in the state of exception, and proposes: 'when bare life is filtered through sex, the figure to emerge is not Agamben's neutered *homo sacer* but his obscenely sexualized counterpart *mulier sacra*', which is 'marked as feminine, able to be raped, *and* irredeemably illegal, she exists to be eradicated, yes, but first violated in ever more extreme ways' (p. 172). Central to his essay, Asibong stresses the 'link between everyday, legal practices of sexual objectification, and the sudden, "exceptional" creation of sacred man or woman that occurs in the fascistic State of Emergency. . . . [and] the essentially obscene nature of the Law, the fact that the Law itself is, from the very start, thoroughly, perversely, sexualized, and thus itself unable to be seriously threatened by the transgressions or perversions of any of its outlaws' (pp. 172-3). Ultimately, Asibong argues for the possibilities that result from surviving sacred life, possibilities he extends to the reader as well. Another interesting work on sex in the state of exception is James Kuzner's 'Unbuilding the City: Coriolanus and the Birth of Republican Rome' (2007). In his essay, Kuzner argues that Coriolanus exists in a sexual state of exception, which Kuzner explores primarily through the work of queer theorists Leo Bersani and Jonathan Goldberg, arguing that sodomy provides a way to escape both the state of exception and bare life, and that it offers the means to a new form of unbounded politics. The reader might also wish to see Aida A. Hozic's 'Forbidden Places, Tempting Spaces, And the Politics of Desire' (2003), in which Hozic examines the science fiction film *Stalker* (1979) and develops a theory of the 'The Zone' as a place of desire in part through a reading of Agamben's state of exception. In her final analysis, Hozic focuses on sublime love and the way in which sublimity opens the subject up to an exceptional relation to the law, as well as to the event they are viewing. For a non-exceptional analysis of sex and time that engages with Agamben's work, see: Matthew Wolf-Meyer, "'The Event" and "The Woman", or Notes on the Temporality of Sex' (2005). Wolf-Meyer's main focus in this essay is the nexus of sex, time and subjectivity, which he examines by analysing heterosexual sex in the work of science fiction writer Christopher Priest. In his essay, Wolf-Meyer turns to Agamben's theory of pleasure and the instant in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (1978) and argues that 'by engaging in sexual encounters and by partaking of the fleeting moments of sexual excitement and engagement, time works upon the body and makes subjects of us all. But, simultaneously, it is in the event of sex that we might begin to reposition the poststructuralist subject' (p. 66). Ultimately, Wolf-Meyer argues, 'it is in the non-apprehendability of pleasure, linguistically and discursively, that we may begin the project of a temporal revolution' (p. 76).

Dufourmantelle illustrates in her discussion of the sexual liaison between Friedrich Nietzsche and Lou Andréas-Salomé, ‘sex’ can even include non-physical relations:

sex, that is, not what ‘is done’ between two beings, but the universe that pulsates between them like blood, lodged in the space of language, of fantasies and dreams, made of the slightest of touches rather than cries, made of sobs never heard, of a whole constellation of gestures never made, of desire put into words ‘before’ and ‘after,’ of the star-spangled time that surrounds desire.

In the encounter that took place in the summer of 1882, there was love, friendship, and betrayal; no sex, at least in appearance, but an encounter, yes, shared bodies and thoughts, yes, carnal speech, yes, all this at once, and music, and landscapes, and beauty, and solitude. (2007, p. 88)

Like Dufourmantelle, my understanding of sex encompasses various non-physical, non-coital relations, and, as I shall argue, it includes the sexual pleasure of reading.<sup>14</sup> With this

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<sup>14</sup> In addition to his analyses of dignity, shame and sadomasochism, another area of sexuality in which Agamben is interested is pornography. In his essay ‘The Idea of Communism’ in *Idea of Prose* (1995 [1985], pp. 73-5), Agamben analyses pornography in terms of commodification, profanation and as a possible means through which to form a new politics. Whilst it is entirely possible to consider the representations of sex that I treat in this thesis as pornographic, my interest in them is in their exceptionality, not their commodification. For an interesting discussion of pornography and Agamben’s theory of the temporality of the *cairós*, see Cesare Casarino, ‘Pornocaiology: Or, The Communist Clinamen of Pornography’ (2002). The reader might also wish to see J.M. Bernstein, ‘Bare Life, Bearing Witness: Auschwitz and the Pornography of Horror’ (2004), in which Bernstein argues that Agamben’s theory of witnessing in *Remnants of Auschwitz* is pornographic in its methodology and in its effects. Interestingly, Bernstein examines the intricate interplay between nature and culture that takes place during sexual activity. In his analysis, he contends that ‘all human sexual practices worthy of the name are transgressive, broaching or breaking the boundaries of culture (*bios*) and performatively revealing the interchange between culture and nature (*zoe*), between our animal embodiment and its thorough-going cultural articulation; all human sexual practices worthy of the name contain moments of objectification, aggression, dismemberment and animal solitariness, and it is now via those moments alone that our animal bodies can routinely receive an emphatic moment of independence from cultural norms, or, what is the same, it is now only through those moments, through the elliptical practices of dismemberment that we call “making love” with its caressing and its biting, its focus on now this or that body part, it [sic] wild abandon and ecstatic jouissance, that embodiment itself can be non-transitively experienced as the source of a claim’ (p. 9). However, Bernstein argues, ‘we only experience the claim of our living body on the cusp of its mortal dismemberment. Like tragedy, the sublime and horror, pornography brings us to the limit of culture where our undignified animality, the natural beneath the cultural, is isolated, displayed and remembered’ (p. 9). For Bernstein, then, ‘worthy’ sex always involves and in-determines – transgresses as he sees it – the dichotomy of culture and

pulsating universe in mind, the types of sex I analyse throughout the thesis are characterised by the ways in which they occur in exceptional states or by how they suspend or in-determine time and space themselves. Furthermore, my analysis also considers the relationship between sex, the suspension of the law and exceptional abandonment.

In my theory of exceptional sex, I employ Agamben's terms 'bare', 'naked' and 'sacred' life to articulate a subject's sexual exposure and vulnerability, or to express the reduction of a subject to his or her sexually animalistic existence, as portrayed through a repeated chain of animal imagery in the novels analysed in this thesis. Correlatively, I use 'sovereign' and '*homo sacer*' to articulate the power relations between characters as they are manifested in sexually exceptional situations. By using these terms, I am not referring to life-and-death situations. Rather, I use them to show the dynamic between characters as played out in their sexual interactions, with the sovereign possessing power over the *homo sacer*'s sex(ual) life. Somewhat fittingly, Chapter III marks an exception to this trend, as *Gertrude and Claudius* includes a literalised form of sovereign power in the form of the king, old Hamlet. Even with this included exception, however, the sexual experiences, situations and relations portrayed in the novels I analyse are not comparable to the horrors of the concentration camp, which is, as Agamben himself makes clear, a paradigm only. Whilst the situations portrayed in the novels I have chosen do not narrate socio-political horrors, some do entail sexual torment and subjection, as well as the spatiotemporal qualities of the state of exception, its various relations and the indistinction between law and transgression. Moreover, exceptionality can create positive sexual experiences. Indeed,

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nature. Sex is a privileged site in which the interrelationship between *bios* and *zoē* is exposed, and we must understand this, he claims, 'if we are to make sense of why human beings so utterly and uncontrollably care about sex, invest in it, make its often predictable, routine even boring pleasures and pains something for which all else . . . might be sacrificed' (pp. 8-9).

when it is detached from the horrors of the state of exception, the understanding of exceptionality can enable new conceptualisations of time, space and sex for the better, and many of the narratives I analyse show how an indetermination of time and space can lead to sexual pleasure.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, many of the characters in these narratives also embrace their reduction to sexual, bare life. As much as it can create a politically dangerous and disturbing situation, I argue, exceptionality allows for exciting and innovative portrayals of sex in literature and, as I shall turn to in section 5, it makes possible new understandings of textual relations and the act of reading.

### 3. An Exceptional Challenge to Queer Theory

Through its focus on exceptional sex in contemporary novels by male British and American writers, my study can be seen as a working through and problematisation of Michel Foucault's tentative claim in *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-6* (1997) that 'there is probably an essential kinship between the novel and the problem of the norm' (2004, p. 175). Specifically, exceptional sex challenges queer theory's use of time and space, which, through its constant opposition to the norm, however intricate and non-oppositional that opposition may wish to appear, also displays a

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<sup>15</sup> In 'Beyond Human Rights' in *Means Without End*, Agamben provides an interesting example of how the concept of exceptionality might be used for positive ends. Discussing the Israel-Palestine conflict, he reflects: 'one of the options taken into consideration for solving the problem of Jerusalem is that it become—simultaneously and without any territorial partition—the capital of two different states. The paradoxical condition of reciprocal extraterritoriality (or, better yet, aterritoriality) that would thus be implied could be generalized as a model of new international relations' (2000, p. 24). For Agamben, such 'space[s] would coincide neither with any of the homogeneous national territories nor with their *topographical* sum, but would rather act on them by articulating and perforating them *topologically* as in the Klein bottle or in the Möbius strip' (p. 25).

form of essential kinship with the norm.<sup>16</sup> Since its inception, queer theory has proven itself a crucially important field for re-evaluating the concept of norms, with a particular focus on gender and sexuality. By focusing on time, space and sex, it might appear that my study participates in the relatively recent temporal turn evidenced in queer theory.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, queer theory has been productive in drawing attention to the relationship between time, space, sex and the body, and some of this thought has informed my study. However, my thesis specifically examines the spatiotemporality of literary portrayals of sex – sexual desires, fantasies, and behaviours, both solitary and shared – as well as the time and space of textual relations, not sexual identity or gender. Furthermore, as the difference between norm and exception becomes indeterminable in the state of exception, queer theory's opposition to the norm would be an inappropriate and logically inconsistent approach to exceptional sex. Specifically, exceptionality in-determines and deconstructs the division of time into 'straight' (sequential, linear, routine) and 'queer' (nonlinear, intricate, asynchronic), the division of being 'in' (straight) or 'out' (queer) of time by conceptualising sex as occurring simultaneously, and therefore indistinguishably, inside and outside time and space. Thus, my theory of exceptional sex moves beyond recent work on time and space in queer theory and the arguments played out therein about which subjects are 'in' or 'out' of time and space, or about the configurations of straight/queer

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<sup>16</sup> To give just one example of the shifting articulations used to posit queer theory's (non-)oppositional relation to the norm, in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) Lee Edelman writes about 'the impossible project of a queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the structural determinations of politics as such, which is also to say, that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition. This paradoxical formulation suggests a refusal — the appropriately perverse refusal that characterizes queer theory — of every substantialization of identity, which is always oppositionally defined' (2007, pp. 3-4).

<sup>17</sup> On temporality and to some extent space in queer theory, see, for example: Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005); Elizabeth Freeman's introduction to the special edition of *GLQ* (2007) on queer temporality; Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, et al., 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities' (2007); Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2007); and Ben Davies and Jana Funke (eds), *Sex, Gender and Time in Fiction and Culture* (2011).

and in/out themselves. Indeed, I provide a method and language through which understandings of sexual relations, and conceptualisations of time and space, as well as instances of textual exceptionality – generic, formal and structural – can be rethought and considered anew without focusing on gender or borrowing from queer theory. Therefore, my study contributes to a new field of investigation – sex studies – that is distinct from sexualities and gender studies, both of which are concerned with the connection between sexual behaviour and identity, however evasive and non-oppositional that concern might be.

In his work on the state of exception, Agamben himself does not analyse gender.<sup>18</sup> But rather than see this as a failing or an oversight on his behalf, this lack of attention gives due emphasis to the spatiotemporal and relational aspects of exceptionality. Indeed, I do not make gender arguments in this thesis as exceptional sex does not depend on a specific gendered experience but rather on a particular configuration and experience of time and space and the relations the state of exception puts into operation. Moreover, the transformation from person to animal brought about by the state of exception is, I argue, more significant than any gender differences between excepted subjects. Therefore, even where there are inclusions of possible non-heterosexual behaviour in the novels I discuss, I do not analyse them in terms of gender identity, but instead focus on their exceptionality. Thus, in this thesis I challenge queer theory's claim that 'queer' somehow has a privileged relationship to exciting and fascinating spatiotemporalities, and I thereby provide a political dimension to the study of exceptional sex. By emphatically marking the animalisation of man and woman, exceptional sex removes analyses of sex from a concern

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<sup>18</sup> See Penelope Deutscher, 'The Inversion of Exceptionality: Foucault, Agamben, and "Reproductive Rights"' (2008), for her discussion of biopolitics and abortion, in which she critiques the dearth of women's bodies and reproductivity in Agamben's work on the state of exception.

with political subjects, subjectivity, identity and sexual proclivities and addresses instead the bare life that is brought out in sex.

As part of my problematisation of the in/out binary as it is often used in queer theorisations of time and space, and my challenge to gender studies, sexualities studies and queer studies itself through my turn to exceptional sexual animalisation, my thesis does not focus on lesbian, gay, trans or queer narratives. Nor do I look at women's writing, which has been an incredibly productive and therefore greatly explored literary site for analyses of nonnormative sexuality and gender studies.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, I do not queer the narratives presented in this thesis. The work carried out by queer readings of supposedly 'straight' texts, as well as efforts such as Richard Fantina's to 'make queer heterosexuality culturally legible' (2006b, p. 9), is immensely valuable, but both are still ultimately tied to questions of gender and identity, as is evident in Fantina's discussion of his collection, *Straight Writ Queer: Non-Normative Expressions of Heterosexuality in Literature* (2006), where he writes:

These essays focus on those 'mismatches between sex, gender and desire' that [Annamarie] Jagose refers to. The authors here focus on works that register a 'disconnect' between the gender of the subject and his or her desire, or the sex of the subject and the 'proper' performance of his or her gender. While not all of the authors profiled in these essays represent politically progressive views, all of them, some perhaps unconsciously, depict examples of what we can call, if only anachronistically, a queer heterosexuality. (2006a, p. 16)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities From Frankenstein to the New Man* (2000), Berthold Schoene-Harwood rightly warns: 'no matter how well-intentioned, it does not appear to be enough for men simply to adopt and start ventriloquising feminist perspectives, aims and resolutions. In order to tackle the specific dilemma of their patriarchal condition, men must develop their own counterdiscourse against ideological remote control and systemic pressure. Feminist thought has exerted an invaluable catalytic impact on contemporary men who have begun to re-imagine and re-authenticate themselves beyond traditional gender formations; it must not now become a convenient substitute for radically self-conscious masculine change' (p. ix).

<sup>20</sup> For work on queer readings of heterosexual narratives, see, for example, Thomas Calvin (ed.), *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality* (2000).

In contrast, I have specifically chosen four white mainstream male writers (two of whose narrative voices are male and the other two non-gender specific) whose narratives predominately portray heterosexual sex in order to argue that intricate, compelling narratives of the nexus of sex, time and space are not the exclusive domain of gay, lesbian, queer or women writers, or ‘queered’ heterosexual narratives.<sup>21</sup> Given their mainstream appeal, their male authorship and their focus on heterosexual sex, the narratives I analyse in this thesis would be placed at the other end of the spectrum from so-called ‘queer’ narratives. At the level of the writer, then, I offer an alternative to the dominance of gay and lesbian discourses of sex in queer theory, women’s writing in feminist studies and the need to somehow ‘queer’ heterosexual narratives in order to make them exciting or different from the norm. Consequently, my project can be seen as contributing to ‘*écriture masculine*’ (Schoene-Harwood, 2000, p. xiii) and the relatively new discipline of Masculinities and Male Studies.<sup>22</sup>

Distinct from the arguments I have given above (which relate to the scholarly disciplines of literary studies, particularly those guided by issues of sex and gender), with

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<sup>21</sup> Despite attempts to broaden the meaning of ‘queer’ beyond gay and lesbian sexualities and to challenge the configuration of the in/out, straight/queer configuration – in relation to time, see, for example, Dinshaw, Edelman, et al., ‘Theorizing Queer Temporalities’ (2007, pp. 186-7) – there can be a critical tendency to make an overly straightforward alignment between textual space, writing and queerness. See, for example, Calvin Thomas, ‘Foreword: Crossing the Streets, Queering the Sheets, or: “Do You Want to Save the Changes to Queer Heterosexuality?”’ (2006, pp. 4-5). In *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), Judith Halberstam offers a more sophisticated Foucauldian approach to her discussion of sexuality, proposing that ‘the novel, indeed, is the discursive arena in which identity is constructed as sexual identity; the novel transforms metaphors of otherness into technologies of sex, into machinic texts, in other words, that produce identities’ (p. 89). In *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam also recognises the privilege of gay men in discussions of sexuality and space, but then (understandably given her focus) turns her attention to queer communities (2005, pp. 12-3). For a speculative consideration of the relationship between queer spatiotemporality (especially futurity) and the erotics of reading, see Elizabeth Freeman’s introduction to the queer temporalities special edition of *GLQ* (2007, p. 168).

<sup>22</sup> For an informative discussion of Male Studies, see Schoene-Harwood’s preface to *Writing Men* (2000, pp. viii-xiv).

regard to the structure of the texts themselves I agree philosophically with Jacques Derrida's argument in 'Choreographies' (interview with Christie V. McDonald, 1982) that 'no monological discourse – and by that I mean here mono-sexual discourse – can dominate with a single voice – a single tone, the space of this half-light, even if the "proffered discourse" is then signed by a sexually marked patronymic' (pp. 75-6). As Derrida contends, the gender of the writer – the gendered mark of his or her signature – does not necessarily bear a relation to the gender of the text. In this discussion of writing, Derrida also shows his wariness of the so-called neutrality of the textual voice, reflecting:

I have felt the necessity for a chorus, for a choreographic text with polysexual signatures. I felt this every time that a legitimacy of the neuter, the apparently least suspect sexual neutrality of 'phallogentric or gynocentric' mastery, threatened to immobilize (in silence), colonize, stop or unilateralize in a subtle or sublime manner what remains no doubt irreducibly dissymmetrical. More directly: a certain dissymmetry is no doubt the law both of sexual difference and the relationship to the other in general. (p. 76)

Far from presenting male literature as paradigmatic, or as a neutering and neutralising discourse, I provide an analysis of the interaction of sex, time and space in narratives by heterosexual male writers as such analyses are often reserved for women writers in feminism, and gay, lesbian or queer writers and narratives in queer theory.<sup>23</sup> Thus, my rationale for choosing all male writers is related to the discipline of literary studies and, in particular, feminist, gender, sexualities and queer studies. It is not a theoretical proposition about the gender of texts, which, with Derrida, I would argue are choreographic.

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<sup>23</sup> In a socio-political context, Schoene-Harwood also highlights the need for straight males' representation, arguing: 'as a distinct social grouping of their own, heterosexual men especially have so far failed to emancipate themselves from the persistent grip of traditional masculine ideals and imperatives. There is no straight male counterdiscourse that would compare with those of the gay and feminist liberation movements which originally emerged from a communal alliance across and beyond the restrictive boundaries of race, class and nation' (2000, p. xi).

#### 4. Abandoning Transgression

Foucault's articulation of the relationship between the novel and the problem of the norm also calls into question the role of transgression and perversion in narratives of sex, which have long been standard features of erotic literature. For instance, we need only think of writings by Ariosto, the Earl of Rochester, the marquis de Sade, and more recently James Joyce, Georges Bataille and J.G. Ballard. Correlatively, the related ideas of transgression and perversion have often been used to analyse sex and representations of sex, especially in psychoanalytic approaches to literature. However, transgression, which in *Homo Sacer* Agamben defines as '*the determination of the licit and the illicit*' (1998, p. 27), would have to be rethought, and a new form of transgressional reading conceptualised in an exceptional analysis of literature, as the state of exception is a threshold in which norm and exception, and the law and its contravention, are simultaneously implicated and made indeterminate.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, exceptionality offers an alternative approach to the use of transgression and perversion in analyses of sexual narratives. Thus, I use 'exception' in Agamben's sense of the word to mark the indistinction between the norm and the exception, and the law and its transgression within the exceptional sphere, not something defined as different from, or transgressive of, the norm.

By not relying on transgression and perversion, my study avoids the epistemological problems that beset these two categories. In *Sabbath's Theater*, Sabbath

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<sup>24</sup> In *Blind Date*, Dufourmantelle makes a similar argument with regard to sex and indetermination, casting it in terms of love and violence. She contends: 'this horizon of violence is unthinkable without the idea of what we call love. No form of perversion or distortion, none of the most degraded forms of sexuality such as are offered in the worldwide marketplace of Internet images, for example, has any meaning if it is not related to what we think of as "love." That is, a form of bond exempt from any perversion, any instrumentalization of others' (2007, pp. 98-9).

succinctly expresses the fundamental problem of analysing narratives about sex in terms of transgression or perversion or excessive behaviour when he thinks: ‘the unknown about any excess is how excessive it’s been’ (Roth, 1995, p. 348). As Sabbath indicates, transgressions, perversions and excessive behaviours ultimately defy quantification or assessment. As a result of this problem, analyses of transgression and perversion can become unclear and paralysed by questions concerning degrees of ‘abnormality’, as if sexual behaviour could be mapped on a scale from normal to perverse or freakish, with one act or another going beyond a supposed norm of behaviour.

As well as posing an epistemological problem, transgression is intimately linked to boredom, a relationship which leads to a potentially never-ending desire to be more and more sexually transgressive. In *The Act of Love*, Felix Quinn reflects upon the relationship between transgression and boredom during a trip to a fetish club, and claims:

*There is a monotony in flogging, for the viewer at least, no matter how outlandish the flogger, or how exquisite the flogged. Such beauty, such lewdness in the exposure, and yet how quickly the lewdness runs out of ways to express itself. In the end, only so much you can do with an anus or a vagina opened by an instrument of torture to the scrutiny of men and women who are beyond surprise or shock.* (2008, p. 242)

As he describes his reactions to this scene, Felix’s focus moves from his individual boredom to those in the fetish club more generally, and he subsequently asserts that the pleasures of voyeurism are limited, due to the way in which ‘*lewdness runs out of ways to express itself*’. This is especially true, Felix argues, when those watching are used to what may at first seem to be transgressive acts. In *Blind Date*, Dufourmantelle also sees transgression and boredom, or *ennui*, as counterparts, stating:

transgression is sometimes one of the faces of ennui. A way to keep moving, to forge ahead when death is at one’s heels. If ennui seeps through all the pores of our lives, transgression is its faithful double. It punctures the emptiness of those lives in which excitement is immediately tamped down by ennui—lives in which ennui

gains ground against death in its proximity, in which death is once again deferred. (2007, p. 58)

For Dufourmantelle, sex itself is central to the relationship between transgression and *ennui*, as ‘sex repeats that “once and for all” against death endlessly, like a bad “remake” that no longer transgresses anything more than the image it gives itself. A last resort. A final limit continually readjusted’ (p. 59). Given the boredom of sex, Dufourmantelle claims, ‘we spend our time inventing multiple antechambers of transgression in order to circumvent the void. . . . Nonthought, sex becomes pornography as an infinite repetition of the same, frigidity in a closed loop’ (p. 59).

With Felix’s remarks about monotony and boredom, as well as Dufourmantelle’s coupling of transgression and *ennui* in mind, I would argue that ultimately there are only so many ways a writer can shock his reader with portrayals of transgressive sex; there are only so many ways one can transgress considered norms and narrate such acts.<sup>25</sup> To circumvent the limitation and possible boredom narratives of sex might entail, novelistic portrayals repetitively vie to be more transgressive than their predecessors and counterparts. In a discussion of sexual communities, Judith Halberstam labels such a desire to out-transgress one another “transgressive exceptionalism” [which] refers to the practice

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<sup>25</sup> In ‘Among the Dark Satanic Wheels: Transgressing Transgression’ (2005), Ashley Tauchert argues that ‘it is not enough to seek out new forms of transgression once we noticed that nobody makes much fuss about the older forms any more: that way further madness lies, and – without being unnecessarily alarmist – we do not seem to have the time for random explorations or wilful actions. Transgressive practices, critical or others, cannot be justified *as* transgressive; they must finally grow towards new and sustainable modes of relationship between individuals, between the dyad and the community, and between the individual and the collective; and ones that can withstand the inevitable onslaught of ordinariness’ (pp. 4-5). In her essay, Tauchert contends that transgression would not be possible without the law or the idea of sin. Of the former, she writes: ‘transgression might not only depend on the existence of law; it might also be the act that produces the law. No law: no transgression possible. Or is it rather that when we stop transgressing that thing we call “the law”, it reveals itself as something other than simply a mode of oppression?’ (p. 4) For Tauchert, transgression is ineluctably related to desire, and she argues that ‘we should also celebrate the overcoming of transgressive desires, or of desire itself if that makes the point easier to swallow’ (p. 4).

of taking the moral high ground by claiming to be more oppressed and more extraordinary than others' (2005, p. 20). Writers have also long been engaged in a battle to take the sexual and aesthetic high ground by attempting to portray the most transgressive sex, to be seen as more extraordinary, progressive, daringly open and sexually liberated than both their predecessors and their contemporaries. But, expanding on both Felix and Dufourmantelle's reflections on sex and boredom, I would argue that eventually those familiar with narratives of excessive sex can be shocked no more.

Implied in both Felix's assessment of flogging and in aesthetic struggles to out-transgress one another is the effect time itself has on the idea of acceptability. Felix marks this effect more clearly when he talks to his secretary about her husband's wish to market her as sexually available with an ankle chain. Somewhat pretentiously, Felix claims: "Time chips away at what we think is or isn't sick. In a hundred years' time the husband who wants his wife to wear an ankle chain will be considered the picture of health. And with a bit of luck they'll be locking up all those husbands who think their wives should cook the supper and love only them" (Jacobson, 2008, p. 131). As Felix asserts, part of the problem when analysing transgression and perversion is the way opinions change over time, retroactively making more acceptable what were once seen as unacceptable sexual behaviours. In a study of sex, time and space in which time is problematised, therefore, it would be problematic to analyse transgression and perversion. In distinction, and perhaps somewhat oxymoronic given the indeterminable relations opened up by exceptionality, exceptional sex is more stable by definition: sex is exceptional if it in-determines the spatiotemporal markers inside and outside or if sex occurs in an indeterminate spatiotemporality where inside and outside cannot be distinguished. Therefore, exceptionality provides a more determinate analytical method through which to study narratives of sex.

## 5. Textual Exceptionalities

In ‘*Hors Livre: Outwork*’, his preface to *Dissemination* (1972), Derrida analyses literature’s exceptionality, which I see as a way to engage with Foucault’s argument concerning the relationship between the novel and the norm. In this preface about prefaces, Derrida states: “‘Yes, Literature exists and, if you will, alone, excepting everything [*à l’exception de tout*]. An accomplishment, at least, for which no name could be better chosen’” (2008, p. 42). Derrida continues his conceptualisation of literature’s exceptional relation to everything, proposing:

No doubt literature, too, seems to aim toward the filling of a lack (a hole) in a whole that should not itself in its essence be missing (to) itself. But literature is also the *exception to everything*: at once the exception in the whole, the want-of-wholeness in the whole, and the exception to everything, that which exists by itself, alone, with nothing else, in exception to all. A part that, within *and* without the whole, marks the wholly other, the other incommensurate with the whole.

Which cuts literature short: it doesn’t exist, since there is nothing outside the whole. It does exist, since there is an ‘exception to everything,’ an outside of the whole, that is, a sort of subtraction without lack. And since it exists, all alone, the all is nothing, the nothing is all (‘nothing was any more, in fact, real’). (p. 42)<sup>26</sup>

Playing upon the homophones ‘whole’ and ‘hole’, Derrida articulates the exceptionality of literature’s ontology, arguing that literature both does and does not exist simultaneously. Literature is at once inside and outside time and space. Given its ambiguous existence, Derrida argues that literature is at once outside and within the (w)hole, and his consideration of literature’s position as part and (w)hole – ‘within *and* without the whole’ – corresponds to the relationship between exception and norm: both part and whole,

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<sup>26</sup> For other considerations of inclusion and exclusion in Derrida’s work, see, for example, ‘*Hors Livre: Outwork*’ (p. 36), and *Of Grammatology* (1997, [1967], p. 163).

exception and norm, are constitutively relational, marking and *making the wholly other*. Furthermore, part and whole, exception and norm, are dyads that when brought together inhere the possibility of their mutual indistinction, which Derrida expresses through his chiasmic construction ‘the all is nothing, the nothing is all’.

Through his analysis of literature’s ontology and its relation to the (w)hole, Derrida presents literature as a state of exception. But rather than see literature as an – or indeed, *the* – exception, in this thesis I provide an interconnected investigation of representations of exceptional sex and exceptional textual relations, which include those brought into play by the prequel genre, the indetermination of genre in reading sexual literature, and the narrator’s exceptional relation to his narrative. Turning to the act of reading more specifically in Chapter IV, I argue that reading is a form of listening in which the sounds of the text and the reader’s subvocal sounds intermingle. When the reader reads, he listens to the sounds of the text as they are made audible by his own subvocalization. As a consequence of the indetermination of textual and subvocal sounds, reading is, I contend, an exceptional activity. Therefore, if arousal occurs when one reads, it results from the pleasure of listening. Having argued for the auricularity of reading, in Chapter V I develop my theory of exceptional textual relations by proposing that the reader has an exceptional relation to the text. The reader is at once included and excluded by the narrative as the narrative presupposes his existence and therefore includes him but simultaneously excludes him as he is unable to be fully part of its spatiotemporality. Therefore, the reader exists in a threshold relation to the text, being neither fully included nor totally excluded from it. Rather, he is textually excepted.<sup>27</sup> The reader’s position as an exceptional textual

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<sup>27</sup> The reader may wish to see Paolo Bartoloni’s essay ‘The Stanza of the Self: on Agamben’s Potentiality’ (2004) for a further consideration of modern and contemporary literary time and space that engages with Agamben’s concepts of the interim and potentiality in particular. Analysing Agamben’s theory of pleasure and its temporality in *The Coming Community* (1990), Bartolini poses a series of questions, including: ‘is it

element is substantiated by the way in which he is controlled by the narrator. Similar to the *homo sacer*, the reader is abandoned to the law, that is, the law of narrative. Consequently, the narrator can be seen as the parallel figure of the sovereign power that controls the abandoned reader.

My analysis of exceptional textual relations and the exceptionality of reading therefore extends and enriches Foucault's claim about the novel and the problem of the norm. Furthermore, throughout my textual analyses I argue for exceptionality as a productive way to examine narratives, texts and the process of reading. As I shall demonstrate throughout the thesis, exceptionality offers an effective spatiotemporal and relational method through which to think about and investigate form, genre, structure and narrative relations. Significantly, it provides a new way to think about the reader and the act of reading, offering a critical language that enables a greater understanding of texts and how we read them.

## 6. Exceptional Textuality

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possible for humankind to regain this unlinear and unchronological, uncalendrical time?' (p. 12); and 'is it possible for language to be the pure pleasure of in-betweenness [sic], where its potentiality of not-being is celebrated, where "possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality," authenticity and inauthenticity, "become indistinguishable"?' (p. 12, citing Agamben). Through an analysis of Maurice Blanchot's theory of writing, Italo Svevo's *Further Confessions of Zeno* (1969), James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and the work of Ezra Pound, Bartolini's answer to such questions is that modern and contemporary literature offers the pleasure of being in the interim. Bringing together authenticity and inauthenticity, absence and presence, copy and original, and the co-existence of multiple languages, Bartolini argues: 'this living together of opposite principles is the body and the flesh of art, its fascination but also its irredeemable sin. Never was the hybridity and amphibiousness of art so clearly stated and exposed, its supposed originality problematized as in modern and contemporary art' (p. 14).

Throughout his seminal work *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972), Gérard Genette elaborates his theory of narrative primarily through close readings of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27). With his main literary text in mind, Genette concludes his chapter on narrative frequency by claiming:

We know with what ambiguity—to all appearances unbearable—the Proustian hero devotes himself to the search for and the ‘adoration’ of both the ‘extra-temporal’ and ‘time in its pure state’; how he wants himself, and with him his future work, to be both together ‘outside time’ and ‘in Time.’ Whatever the key to this ontological mystery may be, perhaps we see better now how this contradictory aim functions in and takes possession of Proust’s work: interpolations, distortions, condensations—the Proustian novel is undoubtedly, as it proclaims, a novel of Time lost and found again, but it is also, more secretly perhaps, a novel of Time ruled, captured, bewitched, surreptitiously subverted, or better: *perversed*. (1983, p. 160)

In this analysis, Genette draws out the protagonist Marcel’s desire to experience both a temporality beyond time (the extra-temporal) and an obscure ‘pure’ time. Furthermore, Genette argues that Marcel wishes himself and his work to be both in and out of time. Thus, it is clear that Genette’s interpretation of Marcel’s temporal wishes to be “‘outside time” and “in Time”” intersects with the concept of exceptionality. But rather than develop a theory about these so-called contradictory temporalities, Genette instead turns to the way in which the protagonist’s temporal wishes inform Proust’s ‘novel of Time’.

Despite – or indeed because of – the way in which Genette does not pursue a philosophical investigation of Marcel’s temporal wishes, *Narrative Discourse* does inform my study. In place of a philosophical analysis of time, Genette’s work provides a sustained, theoretical focus on narrative, and narrative temporality in particular, and consequently it offers a sophisticated framework and vocabulary through which to analyse narrative voice, structure, levels and time. Specifically, it provides a more nuanced conceptualisation of the narrator, as the ‘psychological connotations are a little less pronounced’ (p. 31) in Genette’s term ‘voice’ than in the more usual ‘person’. Given my

focus on spatiotemporality and the diminishment of subjectivity in the state of exception, as well as the way in which sovereign power is not specifically related to an actual person at any given moment, the lessened psychological force of Genette's narratological theory is apposite. Indeed, Genette's narratology specifically emphasises time and relationality over person, as his rationale for his use of the term 'voice' indicates: 'voice, since it is dealing with the narrating, will refer to a relation with the subject (and more generally with the instance) of the enunciating' (pp. 31-2). Consequently, I employ the term 'autodiegetic' voice or narrator rather than the more familiar term 'first-person' narrator to designate a narrator who is the protagonist of his own story.<sup>28</sup> For a non-character narrator, I use Genette's term 'heterodiegetic' voice or narrator rather than 'third-person' narrator.

In conjunction with my use of Genette's terminology regarding narrative voice, I also adopt his concept of 'focalisation' to analyse what is usually referred to as a character's 'point of view'. Furthermore, I employ Genette's designations of narrative levels, which he introduces by turning to a multilayered section of l'Abbé Antoine-François Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1731). During this sequence in *Manon Lescaut*, a character within the overall narrative tells a story to his companions who are gathered together in an inn. In Genette's analysis,

the distance between episodes and inn lies neither in time nor in space, but in the difference between the relations which both the episodes and the inn maintain at that point with Des Grieux's narrative. We will distinguish those relations in a rough and necessarily inadequate way by saying that the episodes of the Chevalier's loves are inside (meaning inside the narrative) and the inn with its

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<sup>28</sup> In Genette's analysis of narrative voice, he divides character-narrators into 'autodiegetic' and 'homodiegetic' narrators. In contrast to the autodiegetic protagonist-narrator, the homodiegetic narrator is a character in the story, but he is not the hero of that story. For example, throughout Arthur Conan Doyle's crime series Dr Watson acts as the narrator but he is not the main focus of his narrative. Rather, his primary role is to record the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. Similarly, in *The Human Stain* Zuckerman's principal duty is to narrate Silk's life story. On narrators like Dr Watson and Zuckerman, see Genette (1983, p. 245).

occupants is outside. What separates them is less a distance than a sort of threshold represented by the narrating itself, a difference of the *level*. (pp. 227-8)

As Genette makes clear, there are two narrative levels in this sequence: the characters within the primary narrative who listen to the story-within-the-story but are themselves outside that internal story are positioned in the first narrative level; and the narrative events of the story-within-the-story are in the second level. Genette explains this narrative layering with recourse to the concept of the threshold, by which, he argues, the two levels are separated. Distinct from my interpretation of Agamben's exceptional thresholds, Genette implies that the threshold is neither spatial nor temporal. Furthermore, he sees the threshold only as a means of separation, whereas an exceptional threshold separates and joins – confuses – those entities or concepts it touches. Bearing these differences in mind, throughout this thesis I employ Genette's tripartite categorisation of levels to describe narrative structures. Consequently, the 'extradiegetic' narrative level refers to the act or level of narration; 'diegetic' (which Genette also refers to as 'intradiegetic'), refers to the events within that narrative; and the 'metadiegetic' narrative level designates those stories contained within a principal narrative, like the story-within-the-story in *Manon Lescaut*.<sup>29</sup>

As might be inferred from my use of Genette's narratological study, my literary-critical methodology in this thesis combines close analyses of literary and theoretical texts, in order that they mutually – symbiotically – create new readings of each other. Working with both literature and theory, my approach can be seen in relation to Agamben's limit

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<sup>29</sup> In an effort to limit confusion, Genette explains his use of the words 'metanarrative' and 'metadiegetic' as follows: 'the prefix *meta*- obviously connotes here, as in "metalanguage," the transition to the second degree: the *metanarrative* is a narrative within the narrative, the *metadiegesis* is the universe of this second narrative. . . . We must admit, however, that this term functions in a way opposite to that of its model in logic and linguistics: metalanguage is a language in which one speaks of another language' (p. 228, n. 41). To simplify matters, I use the term 'metanarrative' to designate a narrative that refers to its own status or quality, and I use the term 'metadiegetic' to refer to a narrative within a narrative.

concepts and exceptional thresholds – my readings are always on the borders between literature and theory, in-determining the two and making them reciprocally influential. Through this exceptional approach, neither theory nor literature is imposed upon the other, but each stimulates, infects and surprises the other, akin to bodies in sexual intercourse. The theoretical texts I choose to couple with the novels are not all explicitly concerned with examining sex – be that fantasy, desire, intercourse or masturbation, for example – but are chosen as they analyse forms of exceptionality. Sometimes the symbiosis is between two texts (one theoretical, one literary); at other times, the relationship involves several texts interacting and interrelating with one another. My exceptional methodology – coupling literature and theory, working in and with both one and the other simultaneously and bringing them together – frames the thesis neither as a survey nor as an historical study of contemporary literature. Rather, each chapter offers a reading of a specific literary text and a theory of a particular categorisation of exceptional sex. As with human sexual interaction, satisfaction can only be temporary and the readings here aim to be neither exhaustive nor final; new textual relations can always be proposed and different texts added to and taken out of the orgy.

I commence my reading of exceptional sex in contemporary fiction in Chapter II by conceptualising what I call the ‘heterotopic hymen’. Reading Foucault’s essay ‘Of Other Spaces’ (1984) and Derrida’s ‘The Double Session’ in *Dissemination* together with Ian McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach*, I analyse the exceptionality of the hymen, which entails the spatiotemporal indetermination of inside and outside. In relation to the hymen, I examine the exceptional time of the protagonists’ honeymoon night and its coextensive space, the honeymoon suite. In my reading of the narrative, I argue that the young couple’s preoccupation with history thwarts their chance of experiencing exceptionality. My theory of the heterotopic hymen offers an exceptional way to read this membrane and rethink

first-time sexual experiences as well as the spatiotemporality of the honeymoon and the disruption of exceptionality caused by historical time.

As the prequel can only come after what (narratively) follows it, Chapter III continues rather than begins my analysis of exceptional, first-time, virginal sex. Reading John Updike's prequel to *Hamlet* (c. 1602), *Gertrude and Claudius*, I argue that a pattern of parent-child incest weaves its way through the narrative. Incest, I contend, complicates the relationship between inside and outside, the spatiotemporality of the self and an already related other. Examining the effects of the incestuous affair between Gertrude and her husband's brother, I also conceptualise the pleasure of 'adulterous parallelism', which is the sexual excitement of being in two times and spaces simultaneously, one inside and one outside of marriage. Furthermore, I argue, the affair creates an intense form of sexual abandonment, as the couple except themselves from the king's legal sphere and delight in their sexual animalisation. Due to the presence of a literal sovereign, however, this situation becomes particularly complicated and creates a tension between sexual and political abandonment. In the final section of the chapter, I examine the text's formal qualities and develop a theory of the 'incestuous prequel'. Through a close reading of Agamben's theory of unwritten texts in *Infancy and History*, I argue that the prequel genre is an exceptional textual form, which must first of all not exist until its successor narrative has been written. Once it exists and is brought into time and space, the prequel and its narrative successor create a threshold, which problematises the distinction between the two texts' spatiotemporal boundaries. Placed in this threshold, the reader of the prequel is consequently in two times and spaces simultaneously, in between the prequel and its narrative successor. My theory of the incestuous prequel forms part of the thesis's overall argument concerning the exceptionality of literature and reading. Where Chapter II provides a reading of the diegesis of *On Chesil Beach* and a theoretical reflection on the

hymen, Chapters III, IV, and V offer theories of textual exceptionalities alongside their diegetic analyses. Chapter III focuses specifically on a particular literary genre, whereas Chapters IV and V provide theories of textual relations and reading more generally.

In Chapter IV, I bring together Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening* (2002) and Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater* in order to elaborate the concept of auricular sex. This form of sex, I argue, involves both the sexual pleasure of listening and the auditory aspects of sex. In my reading of Roth's text, I argue that Sabbath's sexual pleasures derive from the exceptionality of listening, and I subsequently formulate categories of auricular sex, including, for example, auricular dogging, auricular fantasy and the exceptionality of silence. Based upon the time and space of listening, and the potential erotic pleasure listening can create, I argue that reading can offer a form of exceptional auricular sex. As I touched upon in section 4 of this introduction, the reader's subvocalization intermingles with the voice of the text, creating an auricular indetermination of inside and outside. Therefore, readerly arousal is effected through auricular exceptionality.

In Chapter V, I turn specifically to Agamben's interpretation of set theory in *Homo Sacer*. Reading this together with Howard Jacobson's *The Act of Love*, I argue that Felix Quinn's desire to be cuckolded by his wife results in the creation of a sexual set, which is comprised of husband, wife, and wife's lover. In relation to this sexual set, Felix is an exceptional element: he is included in his wife's affairs as he establishes them and makes them possible, but he is excluded from them as he cannot be with the adulterers during their liaisons. Desiring to be the exclusively included member of a sexual set, Felix finds himself in a state of exception in which he experiences spatiotemporal indeterminability, the indistinction between law and transgression, and forms of sexual abandonment. Felix's position as an exceptional element offers an alternative interpretation of the wronged partner, one in which the indetermination of time and space eventually replaces physical

contact and intercourse in an effort to achieve sexual pleasure. Through an analysis of the textual relations brought out by my reading of this narrative, I argue that the narrator controls the reader as if the narrator were a sovereign power. Furthermore, I contend that both reader and narrator have exceptional relations to the text, that they are both neither fully inside nor completely outside it. I close the chapter by arguing that the combination of auricular pleasure experienced in reading and the exclusively included position of the reader in relation to the text constitute reading itself as an exceptional form of sexual interaction.

## II. HYMENALITY

In Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), the piercing of Cecilia's hymen marks a decisive break, a snap in the narrative. When Robbie and she have sex for the first time, they are described as having 'held their breath before the membrane parted' (p. 137). This rupture marks what Jacques Derrida describes in 'The Double Session' (1972) as 'the confusion between two' (in *Dissemination*, 2008, p. 219): Robbie and Cecilia are 'stilled not by the astonishing fact of arrival, but by an awed sense of return – they were face to face in the gloom, staring into what little they could see of each other's eyes, and now it was the impersonal that dropped away' (McEwan, 2001, p. 137). In this scene, '*between* the two, there is no longer difference but identity' (Derrida, 2008, p. 219), and Cecilia and Robbie are said to exist in timelessness: 'they were beyond the present, outside time, with no memories and no future' (McEwan, 2001, p. 136).

In contrast to the overt presence and breaking of the hymen in *Atonement*, McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007) focuses on failed wedding-night intercourse. Set in England in the early 1960s, the five-part narrative tells the story of Edward and Florence's honeymoon night and their attempt at first-time sex. Narrated in the heterodiegetic voice, the text portrays the young couple's wedding-night anxieties and, with a series of analeptically narrated sequences, delineates their personal histories and the period of their courtship. Edward is a recent history graduate, Florence a talented musician. He is the son of a village school headmaster and mentally ill mother; she is the daughter of an Oxford don mother and businessman father. In and at the centre of the diegesis, is Florence's untouched, intact hymen. When the couple are on the honeymoon bed together, Florence

draws Edward's penis towards her, but it never goes beyond 'just touching her labia' (McEwan, 2007, p. 104). It never enters her and the couple do not have penetrative sex. Instead, Edward is overly aroused and 'emptie[s] himself over her in gouts, in vigorous but diminishing quantities, filling her navel, coating her belly, thighs, and even a portion of her chin and kneecap in tepid, viscous fluid' (p. 105). Neither Florence nor Edward is sexually satisfied and Florence is left 'doused in fluid, in slime' (p. 105). After Edward's premature ejaculation and the couple's subsequent confrontation on Chesil Beach, the narrative resembles little more than a summary of their later lives. This highly elliptical ending focuses on Edward's life and perspective, with only minor brief references to Florence.

In this chapter, I shall read *On Chesil Beach* alongside Michel Foucault's 'Of Other Spaces' (1986) and Derrida's 'The Double Session' to conceptualise what I call the heterotopic hymen. In section 1, I bring Derrida and Foucault together to provide a theory of the hymen's exceptionality, arguing that the hymen is a threshold between interiority and exteriority, desire and satisfaction, childhood and adulthood, the past and the future. It is neither fully in nor out of time and space. As part of my theory of this membrane, I shall argue that the hymen's exceptionality is also rendered textually, as a tension exists between its significance and its non-representation, positioning it at once inside and outside the narrative. Furthermore, I argue, the very unbroken and intact state of Florence's hymen represents the couple's possibility of experiencing exceptional sex. In sections 2 and 4, I analyse first the hymenal spaces in *On Chesil Beach* and then its hymenal times. In section 3, I turn to the couple's post-ejaculation ejection from their honeymoon suite and propose that Chesil Beach is a non-heterotopic, non-exceptional space. In the final section, I contend that Edward and Florence's preoccupation with history places them in time, which is a fundamental factor in their inability to experience hymenal exceptionality. My theory of the heterotopic hymen offers an exceptional

interpretation of this membrane and provides a spatiotemporal metaphor through which to interpret literary time and space, distinct from traditional metaphors of the female vagina, womb, and, more recently, the clitoris.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. The Heterotopic Hymen

In his essay 'Of Other Spaces', Foucault conceptualises a spatial category he names 'heterotopia'. He defines heterotopias as 'counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (1986, p. 24). Asserting that 'places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality' (p. 24), that they have 'the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect' (p. 24), and that they 'contradict all the other sites' (p. 24), Foucault's heterotopias possess some of the same qualities that characterise Agamben's dislocated state of exception. Foucault's concept of heterotopias also corresponds with Derrida's theory of the hymen, which Derrida characterises as a spatiotemporally indeterminate membrane. In 'The Double Session', Derrida argues that the hymen is 'the consummation of differends, the continuity and confusion of the coitus' (2008, p. 223), and he stresses the spatial importance of the hymen by describing it as a 'protective screen, the jewel box of virginity, the vaginal partition, the fine, invisible veil which, in front of the hystera, stands *between* the inside and the outside of a woman' (p.

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<sup>1</sup> For an insightful account of the legal, social and biopolitical effects of the clitoris and the practice of clitoridectomy, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'French Feminism in an International Frame' (1981).

223). Derrida returns to the spatiality of the hymen in 'Choreographies' (1982), where he says of a 'constellation of terms' including 'hymen' that they 'could *perhaps* be considered . . . a kind of transformation of [sic] deformation of space' (p. 74). This 'filmy membrane' (2008, p. 223) is a spatiotemporal barrier that problematises difference, in particular making inside and outside indeterminable. In Derrida's analysis, the hymen's exceptionality challenges spatial demarcations and, therefore, our understanding of space. The hymen can, then, be understood as a type of heterotopia. But far from mythologising the hymen for regulative or restrictive purposes, both Derrida's theory of the hymen and the one I put forward here open up its spatiotemporality to rework the relationship between sex, space and time. Indeed, Foucault explicitly draws attention to the way in which the concept of heterotopias enables us to rethink spatiotemporality. For him,

either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory (perhaps that is the role that was played by those famous brothels of which we are now deprived). Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation. (1986, p. 27)

In a description that offers a partial parallel to the hymen, Foucault claims that 'heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable' (p. 26). Moreover, he complicates this system by arguing that such places are 'not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory . . . or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications' (p. 26). As I contend in section 2, Edward and Florence are divided by the way in which they each think about compulsory entry and marital submission. Like Foucault, Derrida also focuses on the idea of cleavage. However, he marks the way in which the threshold unites as well as separates people by drawing upon multiple meanings of the French '*entre*', such as 'between',

‘within’, ‘among’, ‘in’, ‘into’ and ‘through’ (Beryl T. Atkins, Alain Duval, et al., [eds] 1996 [1995], p. 304). In *On Chesil Beach*, there is a lack of penetration and hymenal rupture, as a result of which this imperfect barrier remains ‘between’ and ‘among’ Edward and Florence.

Both Foucault’s theory of heterotopias and Derrida’s reading of the hymen stress the interrelationship of time and space. Foucault emphasises this relationship when he claims that ‘it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space’ (1986, p. 22). Moreover, he argues that ‘heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies’ (p. 26). Connected to this idea, Foucault contends: ‘the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time’ (p. 26). Foucault’s use of the word ‘men’ here does not exclude women from the concept of heterotopias. As I shall show in section 2, Foucault often draws directly upon women and their experiences to provide examples of heterotopias, and Derrida’s theory distinctly implies that confrontation with the membranous, undecidable hymen represents such a temporal break for women as well as men. In his theory, Foucault distinguishes two types of heterochronies, the first of which are ‘heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time, for example museums and libraries’ (p. 26). For Foucault, ‘museums and libraries have become heterotopias in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit’ (p. 26). Furthermore, he argues, they demonstrate ‘the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs’ (p. 26). Foucault’s depiction of these spaces marks their specific temporality and, moreover, their exceptional quality is made evident when he describes a place of this type as ‘constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages’ (p. 26). These places, he argues, are part of ‘the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of

time in an immobile place' (p. 26). The second type of heterotopia is linked to 'time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival' (p. 26). This latter type is 'not oriented toward the eternal, [it is] absolutely temporal [*chroniques*]. Such, for example, are the fairgrounds, these marvelous empty sites on the outskirts of cities that teem once or twice a year with stands, displays, heteroclit objects, wrestlers, snakewomen, fortune-tellers, and so forth' (p. 26). Having delineated these separate temporalities, Foucault ultimately proposes a type of heterotopia that brings these distinct temporalities together. In his analysis of certain holiday complexes, he argues:

Quite recently, a new kind of temporal heterotopia has been invented: vacation villages, such as those Polynesian villages that offer a compact three weeks of primitive and eternal nudity to the inhabitants of the cities. You see, moreover, that through the two forms of heterotopias that come together here, the heterotopia of the festival and that of the eternity of accumulating time, the huts of Djerba are in a sense relatives of libraries and museums. For the rediscovery of Polynesian life abolishes time; yet the experience is just as much the rediscovery of time, it is as if the entire history of humanity reaching back to its origin were accessible in a sort of immediate knowledge. (p. 26)

By incorporating both temporalities, this third type of heterotopia is explicitly exceptional, involving both temporal accumulation and negation. As I argue in section 4, the hymen likewise incorporates temporal accrual and cancellation at the single moment of its rupture.

In his conceptualisation of the hymen, Derrida also brings time and space together, which he does by problematising temporal and spatial difference. For instance, he argues:

the hymen, the confusion between the present and the nonpresent, along with all the differences it entails within the whole series of opposites . . . produces the effect of a medium (a medium as element enveloping both terms at once; a medium located between the two terms). It is an operation that *both* sews confusion *between* opposites *and* stands *between* the opposites 'at once.' What counts here is the *between*, the in-betweenness of the hymen. The hymen 'takes place' in the 'inter-,' in the spacing between desire and fulfilment, between perpetration and its recollection. (2008, p. 222)

Derrida's theory of the hymen focuses on the way in which this membrane in-determines interior and exterior, anterior and posterior, and, specifically drawing attention to the hymen's temporality, he claims that 'within this fusion, there is no longer any distance between desire (the awaiting of a full presence designed to fulfil it, to carry it out) and the fulfilment of presence' (p. 219). Furthermore, Derrida describes the hymen as being between the past, present and future, outside sequential and historical time, claiming: 'what is marked in this hymen between the future (desire) and the present (fulfilment), between the past (remembrance) and the present (perpetration), between the capacity and the act, etc., is only a series of temporal differences without any central present, without a present of which the past and future would be but modification' (p. 220). In this explication, it becomes clear that Derrida's theory marks the hymen as at once temporal and non-temporal. It is an inter-presence between past, present and future, between desire and fulfilment, remembrance and perpetration, without sequential or historical relation. Indeed, the inter-, the between, characterises the hymen, and Derrida argues that 'what takes place is only the *entre*, the place, the spacing, which is nothing, the ideality (as nothingness) of the idea. No act, then, is *perpetrated* ("*Hymen . . . between perpetration and remembrance*")' (2008, p. 224). In 'Choreographies', Derrida explicitly turns to the hymen's (non-)existence, its ideality and its conceptuality, arguing:

'hymen' and 'invagination,' at least in the context into which these words have been swept, no longer simply designate figures for the feminine body. They no longer do so, that is, assuming that one knows for certain what a feminine or masculine body is, and assuming that anatomy is in this instance the final recourse. What remains undecidable concerns not only but also the line of cleavage between the two sexes. . . . One could say quite accurately that the hymen *does not exist*. Anything constituting the value of existence is foreign to the 'hymen.' And if there were hymen – I am not saying if the hymen existed – property value would be no more appropriate to it for reasons that I have stressed in the texts to which you refer. How can one then attribute the *existence* of the hymen *properly* to woman?

Not that it is any more the distinguishing feature of man or, for that matter, of the human creature. (p. 75)<sup>2</sup>

Through his analysis, Derrida deconstructs the concept of the hymen by reconfiguring its (non)ontological status – its lack of existence – and its (non)relation to property and propriety. Through this deconstructive move, Derrida opens up the possibility of interpreting the hymen beyond biology and outside of women's bodies. This deconstruction of the hymen's ontology and property value therefore makes possible the temporal and spatial reading I carry out in this chapter. As I shall show, hymenal times and spaces influence both Edward and Florence. The hymen exists between them – even if only metaphorically – between their desires, anxieties and frustration, and they are caught up in hymenal spatiotemporality.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2009, RFSU [the Swedish National Association for Sexuality Education] published a pamphlet entitled 'Vaginal Corona: Myths Surrounding Virginity – Your Questions Answered'. They argue that instead of a hymen every woman possesses a vaginal corona. However, despite criticising the use of phrases such as "breaking the hymen" and "deflowering" (p. 12), the text still employs mythologising language when describing the corona. For instance, 'petals of a rose' (p. 6) and 'carnation-shaped' (p. 6) are used alongside 'jigsaw piece' (p. 6) and 'half-moon' (p. 6). Furthermore, whilst RFSU stresses that 'the vaginal corona isn't a brittle membrane' (p. 9), it still admits the possibility of 'minor ruptures in the mucous folds that hurt, and sometimes . . . a little bleeding' (p. 9). Most significantly, RFSU claims that 'what's actually there, is the vaginal corona, consisting of elastic folds of mucous tissue, which can't be ruptured by a penis or by any other object inserted into the vagina. When the mucous tissue is stretched, minor ruptures sometimes develop and may smart a little. These soon heal, usually within 24 hours' (pp. 12-13). In relation to my argument, the concept of the vaginal corona could possibly be seen to alter the significance of first-time sex, but it would also allow multiple and repeated 'hymenic' or 'coronic' spatiotemporal moments through repeated ruptures. Far from undermining the concept of hymenic exceptionality, then, this breakthrough in female biology opens up the possibility of a freshly nuanced spatiotemporality. In contrast to the possibility of repeated coronic moments, the American television series *True Blood* recently featured a storyline focusing on the pain and anguish caused by hymenal re-growth. In the eighth episode of series two – 'Timebomb' (directed by John Dahl, 2009) – two virgins experience sex for the first time. Whilst the male human experiences the pleasure this entails, the female vampire is made to feel the pain often associated with first-time vaginal intercourse. Worse still, as a vampire, she repeatedly heals. In the storyline, she can never go beyond this painful experience and she is destined to be repeatedly subject to the physical pain that can accompany virginal intercourse.

Interrelated with the hymen's ontology, Derrida argues that this membrane is marked by non-happening, writing: 'with all the undecidability of its meaning, the hymen only takes place when it doesn't take place, when nothing *really* happens, when there is an all-consuming consummation without violence, or a violence without blows, or a blow without marks, a mark without a mark (a margin), etc., when the veil is, *without being*, torn' (2008, p. 223). The absence of happening Derrida describes here is fascinatingly played out in *On Chesil Beach*. In contrast to Cecilia's ruptured hymen in *Atonement*, the 'presence' of Florence's hymen is accentuated through failed penetration. Rather than being pierced, effaced and destroyed, Florence's hymen remains; her 'hymen . . . is located between present acts that don't take place' (Derrida, 2008, p. 224). Indeed, in the diegesis of the couple's wedding night the act of penetrative sex is absent; despite Edward and Florence's anticipation as well as readerly expectation, penetration does not occur. However, both Edward's desire to achieve sexual consummation, and Florence's growing sexual awareness, repeatedly emphasise the hymen's significance. Distinct from the explicit parting of Cecilia's hymen in *Atonement*, the presence of Florence's hymen is made apparent by the absence of any overt reference to it. Thus, an exceptional tension is created between the hymen's textual significance but non-representation, its simultaneous inclusion and exclusion in the narrative.

The exceptionality of Florence's hymen is further complicated by several implications in the narrative that she has been abused by her father. Whilst there is no explicit textual evidence that Florence has been raped – and penetrated – by her father, the relationship between the two is characterised by an awkward tension, which can be seen to imply some form of inappropriate intimacy. Indeed, the narrator tells us how 'as often happened when she had been away, her father aroused in her conflicting emotions. There were times when she found him physically repellent and she could hardly bear the sight of

him – his gleaming baldness, his tiny white hands, his restless schemes for improving his business and making even more money’ (McEwan, 2007, pp. 49-50). A greater sense of this difficult father-daughter relationship is conveyed when Florence thinks about their earlier sailing excursions together, which are unmentioned and potentially unmentionable: ‘they never talked about those trips. He had never asked her again, and she was glad. But sometimes, in a surge of protective feeling and guilty love, she would come up behind him where he sat and entwine her arms around his neck and kiss the top of his head and nuzzle him, liking his clean scent. She would do all this, then loathe herself for it later’ (p. 50). If Florence has been raped by her father, her hymen will have already been ruptured and destroyed. Despite this possibility, however, Edward assumes Florence is a virgin, and for Florence herself sex with Edward will be a first time; it will be her first consensual and – possibly – happy sexual experience. Therefore, Florence’s hymen has great symbolic significance whether it actually exists or not.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Hymenal Space

In ‘Of Other Spaces’, Foucault names “‘the honeymoon trip’” (1986, p. 24) as an example of ‘crisis heterotopias’ (p. 24). He defines these heterotopias as ‘privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.’ (p. 24). The crises Foucault lists here are all linked to bodily time – becoming adult, menstruation, reproduction, and aging or dying. By

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<sup>3</sup> In Chapter III, I turn to the exceptional temporality of incest in my reading of John Updike’s *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000).

emphasising the biological body, the sacred and the forbidden, Foucault's characterisation of this space makes even more pronounced the relationship between heterotopias and Agamben's state of exception. Within his list of crisis heterotopias, Foucault includes the nineteenth-century boarding school and military service, 'as the first manifestations of sexual virility were in fact supposed to take place "elsewhere" than at home' (p. 24). In relation to women, Foucault asserts that 'the young woman's deflowering could take place "nowhere" and, at the moment of its occurrence the train or honeymoon hotel was indeed the place of this nowhere, this heterotopia without geographical markers' (pp. 24-5). This 'nowhere' signifies the un-located and dis-located heterotopia, its separateness from 'real' societal places. In *On Chesil Beach*, the married couple are in a sense abandoned by society, which sends them away to consummate their relationship by and within the law of marriage before allowing them to return to the social sphere. The specific space of the couple's honeymoon suite, its importance and significance, is emphasised through its demarcation as a quasi-self-contained, separate space, with its isolation contested by the outside world, the waiting staff and the noise from the other guests. The honeymoon suite is a heterotopic 'elsewhere' and 'nowhere', a societally created exceptional place, neither fully in nor out of time and space.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The spatial and temporal significance of the honeymoon is depicted in Michèle Roberts's recently published short story, 'Honeymoon Blues' (2010). Told in poetic, fragmentary prose, the narrative focuses on the protagonist Maud's return trip to her honeymoon hotel bedroom. It is many years after the honeymoon, and the reader later learns that Maud's husband is now dead. In a trancelike, agitated state, Maud experiences both the anguish of her loss and the recollected moments from her honeymoon. In a passage that metanarratively characterises the story's style, the reader is told how Maud 'holds a thousand words inside her, all dancing up and down. Disorderly sentences. All the words ever spoken. All the words of her past long as a corridor big as a hotel. Inside her outside her. Bits of lost time flow back to her, envelop her. Wrap her up. The hotel feels abandoned, hushed. Held in a trance of silence. As though swathed in gauze' (p. 83). Maud's relationship to words is exceptional, and the spatiotemporal metaphor of the corridor of her past accentuates the significant interrelationship of time and space in relation to the honeymoon. Sensitivity to sexual time is further evident in the narrator's vignette of the traditional European siesta, a temporal break, here occurring within the

A Foucauldian elsewhere, the honeymoon bedroom can be seen as an exaggerated form of the Victorian parental bedroom that Foucault characterises in *The Will to Knowledge* (1976). At the beginning of this work, Foucault describes how ‘a single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents’ bedroom. The rest had only to remain vague; proper demeanour avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitized one’s speech’ (1998, p. 3). In contrast to the utilitarian space of the parental bedroom, in ‘Of Other Spaces’ Foucault describes a further type of sexual space, ‘the famous American motel rooms where a man goes with his car and mistress and where illicit sex is both absolutely sheltered and absolutely hidden, kept isolated without however being allowed out in the open’ (1986, p. 27). Despite their differences, the parental bedroom, motel and honeymoon bedroom are all connected by their sexual functions. Moreover, their position within societal space is designed to exclude people, to separate, however momentarily, their inhabitants from the rest of society. Correspondingly, society is aware of their sexual purpose and politely ignores them. Therefore, these spaces are excluded from society by their inclusion, and included by their exclusion.<sup>5</sup> This form of exceptionality is particularly

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exceptional time of the honeymoon: ‘after-lunch siestas are euphemisms for sex. Sweat-perfumed sex, bump of the headboard against the wall, creak creak of the springs, crying out into the pillow so as not to disturb the guests next door’ (p. 90).

<sup>5</sup> In “*Society Must Be Defended*”, Foucault touches upon the concept of exclusive inclusion when he argues ‘that there was no such thing as a bourgeoisie that thought that madness should be excluded or that infantile sexuality had to be repressed; but there were mechanisms to exclude madness and techniques to keep infantile sexuality under surveillance. . . . If we concentrate on the techniques of power and show the economic profit or political utility that can be derived from them, in a certain context and for certain reasons, then we can understand how these mechanisms actually and eventually became part of the whole. . . . from the nineteenth century onward and subject to certain transformations, the procedures used to exclude the mad produced or generated a political profit, or even a certain economic utility. They consolidated the system and helped it to function as a whole. The bourgeoisie is not interested in the mad, but it is interested in power over the mad; the bourgeoisie is not interested in the sexuality of children, but it is interested in the system of power that controls the sexuality of children’ (2004, pp. 32-3). See also, Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge* (1998, p. 72).

pronounced with the motel and the honeymoon suite as both are physically set apart from domestic and societal life. But, unlike the motel room that houses illicit and illegitimate sex, the honeymoon bedroom is a heterotopia specifically designed and designated for first-time, socially sanctioned sex. In the honeymoon bedroom, newly-weds (are supposed to) consummate their relationship, which inaugurates their joint societal function and will lead them into the utilitarian parental bedroom.

In *On Chesil Beach*, the entire action of the principal diegesis takes place within the two rooms that comprise the couple's suite or outside on the beach, with the move from suite to beach marking a shift from the heterotopia to a named, societal space. Moreover, the honeymoon suite is a hymenal locus with its own specific thresholds. It has an outer threshold separating it from Chesil Beach as well as two internal thresholds. The first of these internal thresholds separates the couple from the rest of the hotel and, metonymically, society. The second one lies between the living room and the bedroom, between pre-marital immaturity and sexual maturity. With its specific thresholds, the suite is a twofold space dedicated to the ceremonial rupturing of the hymen for newly-weds. In the narrative, however, it is the site of the couple's failed intercourse. In addition to these internal thresholds, the major threshold between the honeymoon suite and the beach represents the division between the heterotopia and a strictly societal place. Despite being characterised as remote, at the edge and isolated 'between the sea and the lagoon known as the Fleet' (McEwan, 2007, p. 5), the beach outside the hotel is presented as a particular region, as somewhere specific: 'so they were eating in their rooms before the partially open French windows that gave onto a balcony and a view of a portion of the English Channel, and Chesil Beach with its infinite shingle' (p. 4). As becomes evident, the division between the beach and the honeymoon suite is imperfect, and the exceptionality of the latter is compromised as it is drawn into the particular, named space of the beach:

the couple look out and the outside enters through the breeze. This two-way movement illustrates the imperfect separation of the suite from the world outside and disrupts the dichotomy between in and out, as with the hymen and the state of exception:

They could see a luminous grey smoothness that may have been the silky surface of the sea itself, or the lagoon, or the sky – it was difficult to tell. The altered breeze carried through the parted French windows an enticement, a salty oxygen and open space that seemed at odds with the starched table linen, the corn-flour stiffened gravy, and the heavy polished silver they were taking in their hands. (p. 18)

Through this seductive breeze, the external world becomes internal and affects the couple's interior space: 'the rising mist continued to unveil the nearby trees, the bare green cliffs behind the lagoon and portions of a silver sea, and the smooth evening air poured in around the table, and they continued their pretence of eating, trapped in the moment by private anxieties' (pp. 25-6). Within the honeymoon bedroom, the invasion of the sea breeze makes Florence fully aware of her entrapment, and the reader is told how 'she felt the summery air through the open window tickling her exposed pubic hair. She was already far gone into new territory, too far to come back' (pp. 101-2). Moreover, when she is covered in Edward's sperm the breeze metaphorically cements her horror, as 'in seconds it had turned icy on her skin in the sea breeze, and yet, just as she knew it would, it seemed to scald her' (p. 105). Whilst states of exception are characterised by an indetermination of inside and outside, in the narrative the invasion of the external into the honeymoon suite eventually breaks this complexity and roots the characters fully in time and space, not indeterminately inside or out. They end up outside on Chesil Beach, the 'real' named space of the principal diegesis. Interestingly, then, the suite is itself a failed hymenal space and the unsuccessful attempt to rupture Florence's hymen causes the failure of a more general hymenal achievement.

The first interior threshold between hotel and honeymoon suite is marked by the annoying penetration of the two waiters who serve the couple their dinner. The demarcation of the suite as a ritualistic site for sex, and consequently the designation of Edward and Florence as rightful occupants of this space, is accentuated by the unwanted presence of these waiters – ‘two youths in dinner jackets served them from a trolley parked outside in the corridor, and their comings and goings through what was generally known as the honeymoon suite made the waxed oak boards squeak comically against the silence’ (p. 4). Being both active and noisy, the waiters disrupt this enclosure and create a sense of awkwardness. In addition, the waiters’ position close to the threshold that marks the inside and outside of the honeymoon suite adds to the couple’s unease, and the teasing prose prefigures physical intimacy: ‘the lads, instead of waiting out in the corridor, stood well back, near the door, *fingering* their bow ties and tight collars and *fiddling* with their cuffs’ (p. 11, my emphases). As Florence makes evident, whenever the waiters return, Edward and she have to conform to societal rules: “‘Here it comes,” she whispered as she squeezed his hand, warning him off another sudden intimacy’ (p. 17). Metonymically representing society, the boys’ comings and goings emphasise the impact space and society have on sexual desire. The couple can be intimate only when the waiters are absent and the room returns to being an ‘elsewhere’.

In an interview with Paul Rabinow entitled ‘Space, Knowledge and Power’ (1982), Foucault specifically connects the impact space has on bodily interaction and architecture to interpersonal relations. Moreover, he describes a vagina-like channelling, saying:

It is true that for me, architecture, in the very vague analyses of it that I have been able to conduct, is only taken as an element of support, to insure a certain allocation of people in space, a *canalization* of their circulation, as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations. So it is not only considered as an element in space, but is especially thought of as a plunge into a field of social relations in which it brings about some specific effects. (1996, p. 345)

In *On Chesil Beach*, the architecture and space of the honeymoon living room accentuate the concept of the suite as a place physically – yet imperfectly – separated from the rest of the hotel. The narrator explains how ‘it was not possible to wheel the trolley into the honeymoon suite for the proper silver service on account of a two-step difference in level between it and the corridor’ (McEwan, 2007, p. 12). This seemingly small detail metonymically marks the honeymoon suite’s spatial qualities. Specifically, it substantiates the room’s status as a heterotopia without easy access and prefigures the spatial manoeuvrability required by sex, as the steps represent a threshold, a hymenal barrier between a non-sexual and sexual space, between childhood and adulthood, between the outside of the woman and the entry to the vagina. Moreover, the room overwhelms Edward, who thinks: ‘trudging along the beach would have been better than sitting here. The ceiling, low enough already, appeared nearer to his head, and closing in. Rising from his plate, mingling with the sea breeze, was a clammy odour, like the breath of the family dog’ (p. 19). Thus, the room supposedly set aside for marital bliss is not the envisaged utopia, but a heterotopia, at once both (supposedly) liberating and constraining, even oppressive.

A corresponding relationship to that between space and sex can be seen in the interconnection between the hymen and marriage. In ‘The Double Session’, Derrida provides a semantic analysis of the hymen, arguing: “‘hymen’ (a word, indeed the only word, that reminds us that what is in question is a “supreme spasm”) is first of all a sign of fusion, the consummation of a marriage, the identification of two beings’ (2008, p. 219). Specifically, the relationship between the hymen and marriage is etymological, as the Greek ‘Ἦμῆν’ and Latin ‘Hymen’ refer to the god of marriage, and the Greek ‘ὑμέναιος’

means wedding hymn (*The Oxford English Dictionary*).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in addition to the two-step division, which is both a physical and metaphorical break from the rest of the hotel and those not partaking in the ritual of wedding-night sex, the separation of the dining room and the bedroom within the honeymoon suite represents a further threshold, the barrier between pre-nuptial civilities and inaugural marital sex. Within the bedroom itself, the ‘four-poster bed, rather narrow’ (McEwan, 2007, p. 3) emphasises the sexual character of this space, the significance of which is further marked by the seeming otherness of the ‘bedcover [which] was pure white and stretched startlingly smooth as though by no human hand’ (p. 3).

When Florence crosses into the bedroom and Edward is left behind, they are momentarily divided by a hymenal membrane. This separation is emphasised through narrative focalisation, which turns exclusively to Florence inside the bedroom before Edward enters and struggles to undo her dress. The division between Edward and Florence is further marked by their different reactions to the bedroom. Both see the entrance to the bedroom – metonymically, the entrance to the vagina and the piercing of the hymen – as compulsory and as a submission to rites and purifications. Therefore, the bedroom entrance problematises Foucault’s categorisation of heterotopias into those that require compulsory entry and those in which entry involves certain forms of submission as this entrance demands both. For Edward, entering the vagina is compulsory for satisfying his desire. When he enters the bedroom, he feels uneasy – ‘the air in the room seemed thin, insubstantial, and it was a conscious effort to breathe’ (pp. 90-1) – but he views the marital bed as a site of ritual, a space in which he can claim his sexual prize, and he purposefully undresses ‘over by the window, leaving a precious zone around the bed free of all such banality’ (p. 98). Correlatively, Florence believes that it is compulsory to submit to the

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<sup>6</sup> On the etymology of ‘hymen’, also see Derrida and McDonald, ‘Choreographies’ (1982, p. 71).

ritual of first-time marital sex in order to please Edward and fulfil her duty as a wife. In the specific space of the honeymoon bedroom, she feels pressured and pressurised: ‘entering the bedroom, she had plunged into an uncomfortable, dreamlike condition that encumbered her like an old-fashioned diving suit in deep water. Her thoughts did not seem her own – they were piped down to her, thoughts instead of oxygen’ (p. 79). Florence’s unease attests to her perception of the honeymoon bedroom as a microcosmic and ritualistic site constructed by society for her compulsory submission to marital sex.

As a result of the combination of her new legal position within the marriage and her physical location in the honeymoon suite, Florence perceives the law of marriage as an act in which forces of societal, and particularly male, power and coercion are endorsed and made legitimate:

Florence realised she had stumbled across an empty truth, self-evident enough in retrospect, as primal and ancient as *danegeld* or *droit de seigneur*, and almost too elemental to define: in deciding to be married, she had agreed to exactly this. She had agreed it was right to do this, and have this done to her. When she and Edward and their parents filed back to the gloomy sacristy after the ceremony to sign the register, it was this they had put their names to, and all the rest – the supposed maturity, the confetti and cake – was a polite distraction. (p. 30)

The language and terminology used to describe Florence’s introspection show how she sees sex as an established male right, thinking of it as ‘primal’, ‘ancient’ and, specifically, as the ‘*droit de seigneur*’. For Florence, this male right to her violation is legitimised in and by the space of the honeymoon suite, and she finds herself trapped ‘in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer made any sense’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 170). Furthermore, the very way in which she refuses to be reduced to an animalistic existence – ‘she was no lamb to be uncomplainingly knifed. Or penetrated’ (McEwan, 2007, p. 81) – in fact emphasises her fear of being unwillingly turned into

sexual, bare life. Due to her new legal status as a wife – her sense of which is heightened by her location in the honeymoon suite – Florence rationalises Edward's demanding behaviour and her lack of resistance, thinking: 'his hand was there because he was her husband; she let it stay because she was his wife' (p. 86). Emphasised by its syntactical structure, Florence's rationale conveys her belief that as the wife she must answer to the logic of the husband. Correlatively, Edward is also aware of his seeming right to sex, believing: 'here was a boundless sensual freedom, theirs for the taking, even blessed by the vicar – *with thy body I thee worship*' (p. 96). However, Edward is 'sceptical that a forty-minute wedding ceremony could make so profound a difference' (p. 90) and in order to have what he sees as rightfully his – sex – he will use force if necessary.

Edward and Florence's different interpretations of their sexual roles imply that they both see marital sex as a form of alegal rape: for them, the law of marriage permits consummation, even if by force.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, they experience a situation in which carrying out the law and transgressing it become indistinct. The alegal act of rape, which the couple see as being allowed and enforced by marriage, and seemingly made possible by the exceptional space of the honeymoon suite, creates a related double effect: Edward becomes more forceful, whilst Florence's agency is challenged. This double effect is acutely portrayed when the couple kiss after they have finished with their honeymoon dinner:

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<sup>7</sup> Much critical attention has been paid to the effect the marriage has upon the couple. For instance, in *Ian McEwan* (2010) Lynn Wells argues: 'overwhelmed by desire and emboldened by his new married status, [Edward] loses his sensitivity to Florence's responses' (p. 90). She also sees Edward's faults in terms of inexperience and selfishness, stating: 'knowing nothing about female arousal, he leaves off any further foreplay and moves directly to his own needs' (p. 95). In her essay, 'Not Wanting Things' (2009), Jane Miller contends: 'there have been other Florences in fiction, usually pathologized as frigid or potentially homosexual, but mostly shown to be tameable—and even finally—tamed by the right man' (p. 153). See Jonathan Lethem's 'Edward's End' (2007) for a reading of the novel – in particular the difference between Edward and Florence's perspectives of their sexual encounter – in terms of horror and comedy.

When *he* heard *her* moan, Edward knew that *his* happiness was almost complete. *He* had the impression of delightful weightlessness, of standing several inches clear of the ground, so that he towered pleasingly over *her*. There was pain-pleasure in the way *his* heart seemed to rise to thud at the base of *his* throat. *He* was thrilled by the light touch of *her* hands, not so very far from his groin, and by the compliance of *her* lovely body enfolded in *his* arms, and the passionate sound of *her* breathing rapidly through *her* nostrils. It brought *him* to a point of unfamiliar ecstasy, cold and sharp just below the ribs, the way *her* tongue gently enveloped *his* as *he* pushed against it. (pp. 30-1, my emphases)

Predominantly the grammatical and sexual object, Florence and her emotions are ignored and misinterpreted by Edward. He is overcome by his control of her and views her as compliant. He thereby negates her as a person with a body capable of pleasure for itself. Florence possesses what will satisfy him and Edward sees it as his male right to ‘*shake her awake, or slap her out of her straight-backed music-stand poise, her North Oxford proprieties, and make her see how really simple it was*’ (pp. 95-6, my emphases). In this double proprietorial move, Edward wishes to strip Florence of her own proprieties and he mistakenly thinks of her hymen as his possession. He wants more from her and continually sees coercion as a route to satisfaction, thinking that ‘perhaps he could persuade her one day soon – perhaps this evening, and she might need no persuading – to take his cock into her soft and beautiful mouth’ (p. 31). For Edward, success would be entering Florence’s body, and his ultimate failure to penetrate her vagina undermines his self-image as the forceful husband with legal rights. Thus, Edward is divided between being the powerful, dominating husband and the fully exposed sexual flop. The complication of his position is intimately connected to the way in which certain heterotopias ‘seem to be pure and simple openings, but . . . generally hide curious exclusions. Everyone can enter into these heterotopic sites, but in fact that is only an illusion: we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded’ (Foucault, 1986, p. 26). In his own experience of a complex heterotopia, Edward enters the bedroom but is unable to enter Florence’s body.

He is, therefore, included in the sexual space of the bedroom yet excluded from sexual satisfaction.

As a counterpart to Edward's forceful desire for sex, Florence's diminished agency is marked by her selfless hope and lack of physical pleasure. When Edward is above her on the bed, we are told that Florence 'was without any other desire but to please him and make this night a success, and without any other sensation beyond an awareness of the end of his penis, strangely cool, repeatedly jabbing and bumping into and around her urethra' (McEwan, 2007, p. 103). Florence's limited agency is compounded by the space of the honeymoon suite, as within the suite she is 'trapped in a game whose rules she could not question. She could not escape the logic that had her leading, or towing, Edward across the room towards the open door of the bedroom' (p. 33). Florence's entrapment is most emphatically and poignantly conveyed by the way in which she also blames herself for the seemingly inevitable marital rape. Caught within the law of marriage and the honeymoon suite, Florence believes that 'if she didn't like it, she alone was responsible, for all her choices over the past year were always narrowing to this, and it was all her fault, and now she really did think she was going to be sick' (p. 30).

The significant effect the honeymoon suite has on the couple is intimately connected to bodily space. Drawing attention to the couple's different relationships with their own bodies, the narrator describes how during their post-dinner kiss 'Edward's thoughts dissolved, and he became once more his tongue, the very tip of it, at the same moment that Florence decided she could take no more. She felt pinioned and smothered, she was suffocating, she was nauseous' (p. 32). Moreover, when they are on the bed together Florence is tormented by horror and embarrassment, and she has 'a dry physical sensation of tight shrinking, general revulsion at what she might be asked to do, shame at the prospect of disappointing him, and of being revealed as a fraud' (p. 84). Even prior to

the wedding, Florence considers her bodily submission in spatial images, wondering: ‘was she obliged on the night to transform herself for Edward into a kind of portal or drawing room through which he might process?’ (p. 8). In this moment of curiosity, Florence transforms her body into an architectural space, specifically seeing it as both a portal, which, like the hymen, is a ‘door, gate, doorway, or gateway of stately or elaborate construction’ (*The Oxford English Dictionary*), and as a drawing room, which is ‘a room to withdraw to, a private chamber attached to a more public room’ (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). Furthermore, a drawing room is ‘a room reserved for the reception of company, and to which the ladies withdraw from the dining-room after dinner’ (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). Through her architectural interpretation, Florence therefore characterises her body as a space that is simultaneously private and public, open to all and then, when the man is finished, a specifically female space. Moreover, the portal and the drawing room can be seen as hymenal structures, as the hymen is a threshold that sits inside the vagina between the inside and outside of the woman. It is an entryway to, and an inter-space before, the cervix and the womb, before sexual maturity and adulthood. During Edward and Florence’s after-dinner kiss, the pre-temporality associated with a portal and a drawing room – one passes through a portal to get elsewhere and is received in a drawing room – is transfigured into dramatic terminology, as we are told that Florence ‘understood perfectly well that this business with tongues, this penetration, was a small scale enactment, a ritual *tableau vivant*, of what was still to come, like a prologue before an old play that tells you everything that must happen’ (McEwan, 2007, p. 30). As they kiss, Edward’s imposing tongue prefigures the seemingly inevitable vaginal penetration and the sexualisation of Florence’s bodily space. Moreover, the narrator describes how Florence sees the kiss as an invasion of her personal, bodily space: ‘he probed the fleshy floor of her mouth, then moved round inside the teeth of her lower jaw to the empty place. . . . This

cavity was where her own tongue usually strayed when she was lost in thought' (p. 29). Florence's sense of being invaded is accentuated by the way in which she interprets her cavity as being 'more like an idea than a location, a private, imaginary place rather than a hollow in her gum, and it seemed peculiar to her that another tongue should be able to go there too. It was the hard tapering tip of this alien muscle, quiveringly alive, that repelled her' (p. 29). In addition to the way in which the kiss anticipates the inevitable sexual moment, Florence's understanding of the cavity as an idea prefigures the hymen as a space of non-acts, a space in which only 'the ideality (as nothingness) of the idea' (Derrida, 2008, p. 224) occurs.

### 3. Ejaculatory Ejection

In contrast to the ideality and nothingness of the hymen, the realisation of being covered in sperm following Edward's premature ejaculation drives Florence to escape the hymenal space of the honeymoon bedroom, this 'elsewhere', to run 'through the sitting room, past the ruin of their meal' (McEwan, 2007, p. 106), out of the hotel and onto the beach. She wants to be in that 'real' space, a space free from ritualistic sex, free from the possibility of a legal rape and the violent threat of (en)forced hymenal rupture. Significantly, the specific space of Chesil Beach in Dorset is portrayed as being external to Edward and Florence's honeymoon suite, that 'elsewhere', and it is this outside location that provides Florence with a place of escape.<sup>8</sup> Symbolising the division between sexual hope and

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<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly, many critics see the setting of the beach as significant. For instance, in 'On Chesil Beach: Another "Overrated" Novella?' (2009) Dominic Head argues: 'in common with the way many short stories and novellas depend upon a single strong symbolic setting or motif, *On Chesil Beach* uses the idea of the seaside as a liminal space to embed, symbolically, its central idea: that one failed wedding night in 1962 can be taken

disappointment, pre- and post-ejaculation, the hotel and the beach, the narrator describes how ‘the matter lay between them, as solid as a geographical feature, a mountain, a headland’ (pp. 139-40). Alone on the beach, Florence sits ‘wedged comfortably in the angle of a branch, feeling in the small of her back, through the massive girth of the trunk, residual warmth of the day. This was how an infant might be, securely nestling in the crook of its mother’s arm’ (p. 141). For Florence, then, the beach offers freedom and protection, a kind of maternal comfort she has never experienced as well as the physical closeness she expected to receive from Edward in the honeymoon bedroom. Moreover, the beach allows her – albeit momentarily – to be alone, and Edward’s penetration of her time and space annoys her, serving as a reminder of his attempt to rupture her hymen: ‘it irritated her, the way he pursued her so quickly along the beach, when he should have given her time to herself’ (p. 146). When the two confront one another on the beach, Florence tells Edward: “‘You’re always pushing me, pushing me, wanting something out of me. We can never just be. We can never just be happy. There’s this constant pressure. There’s always something more that you want out of me. This endless wheedling”’ (p. 145). Misinterpreting her, Edward believes that Florence is talking about money, but, as the narrator explains,

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as emblematic of the dividing line between the liberation of the 1960s and the repression that preceded it. Specifically, Chesil Beach, that long stretch of pebbles that separates the English Channel from the Fleet Lagoon, is made to symbolize this epochal change. As the scene of confrontation on the wedding night, after the disastrous sexual encounter of newly-weds Edward and Florence, the beach – immensely difficult to walk on, like all pebble beaches – embodies their separation and failure to communicate’ (p. 118). In her analysis, Lynn Wells compares *On Chesil Beach* to John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), and contends: ‘Fowles’s seaside setting of Lyme Regis, with its harbour wall The Cobb extending into the sea, along with the lover’s promontory in Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach [1867],” is echoed in McEwan’s choice of Chesil Beach as the locale for his characters’ solitary confrontation. This remote 22-mile long spit . . . and the couple’s room in the nearby Georgian inn serve as isolated stages on which Edward and Florence play out their difficulties in talking freely about sex. . . . McEwan says that “it’s as if they stand on a kind of shore, as it were, a beach, a beachhead of change”’ (2010, p. 93).

what she was referring to was more fundamental than money, but she did not know how to say it. . . . It was the brooding expectation of her giving more, and because she didn't, she was a disappointment for slowing everything down. Whatever new frontier she crossed, there was always another waiting for her. Every concession she made increased the demand, and then the disappointment. (p. 146)

Florence's concerns provide a specific example of the larger problem of transgressive behaviour I discussed in Chapter I: every concession she makes, every frontier crossed, leads to yet another, seemingly *ad infinitum*. On Chesil Beach, Florence finds the courage to challenge Edward's repetitiously transgressive desires. Specifically, the space of the beach gives her the self-assurance to propose a semi-open relationship in which Edward would be able to have sex with other women rather than with her. Florence believes that this arrangement would save her from having to experience further sexual ordeals. Furthermore, it would open up the exceptional temporality of adultery, which I turn to in both Chapter III and V. Thus, outside and beyond the exceptionality of the honeymoon suite, Florence is the one who is more daring. Freed from societal abandonment, diminished agency and the possibility of a legal rape, Florence resolves to break a socially determined contract and propose her own. She becomes a law-making sovereign, declaring to Edward: "we can make our own rules too" (p. 155).

In contrast to Florence, Edward believes that his exit from the honeymoon suite will result in an unwelcome relocation to society and his powerless place within it. As he gets dressed after his premature ejaculation, 'his trousers felt heavy and ridiculous in his hand, these parallel tubes of cloth joined at one end, an arbitrary fashion of recent centuries. Putting them on, it seemed to him, would return him to the social world, to his obligations and to the true measure of his shame. Once dressed, he would have to go and find her. And so he delayed' (p. 131). Once outside, Edward finds the night-time beach to be another confusing border or frontier, and as the couple confront one another we are told

how 'he turned and walked away from her, towards the shoreline, and after a few steps came back, kicking at the shingle with unashamed violence, sending up a spray of small stones, some of which landed near her feet' (p. 148). As if to mock Edward's failed attempt to transgress both a physical and figurative threshold, the narrator describes how Edward's stone throwing is also unsuccessful: 'it landed, just short of the water's edge' (p. 156), just as his sperm lands short of Florence's womb. Where Edward believed he had a right to have sex with Florence in the bedroom, outside he becomes aware of his impotence, realising that 'the relentless laws and processes of the physical world, of moon and tides, in which he generally took little interest, were not remotely altered by his situation' (p. 131). Indeed, Edward thinks specifically about the moon and the tides, which are traditionally associated with women's bodies, menstruation and their reproductive ability. However, in an effort to (re)claim some sense of authority Edward holds to his belief in his right to marital sex:

He walked up and down on the exhausting shingle, hurling stones at the sea and shouting obscenities. Then he slumped by the tree and fell into a daydream of self-pity until he could fire up his rage again. He stood at the water's edge thinking about her, and in his distraction let the waves wash over his shoes. Finally he trudged slowly back along the beach, stopping often to address in his mind a stern impartial judge who understood his case completely. (p. 158)

Given Edward's belief in the legitimisation of marital rape, it is unsurprising that his imaginary judge understands his situation. But, where Florence uses the space of the beach to be bold, Edward will remember it as a place of frustration, anger and loss of power. This powerful sense of miscommunication, mistake and impotence characterises Edward's recollection of the beach in the final sequence of the narrative:

On Chesil Beach he could have called out to Florence, he could have gone after her. He did not know, or would not have cared to know, that as she ran away from him, certain in her distress that she was about to lose him, she had never loved him more, or more hopelessly, and that the sound of his voice would have been a

deliverance, and she would have turned back. Instead, he stood in cold and righteous silence in the summer's dusk, watching her hurry along the shore, the sound of her difficult progress lost to the breaking of small waves, until she was a blurred, receding point against the immense straight road of shingle gleaming in the pallid light. (p. 166)<sup>9</sup>

The sense of loss conveyed in the narrative's closing words is intensified when compared with the way in which the couple originally envisioned the beach as a place of promise and happiness. As the reader is told in an earlier analeptically narrated moment during the final part of the narrative, 'it was what they had decided, their after-dinner plan, a stroll on the famous shingle spit with a bottle of wine' (p. 142).

#### 4. Hymenal Time

In *On Chesil Beach*, the temporality of the hymen is inextricably connected to the exceptional time of the honeymoon night, which provides the major focus of the principal diegesis. Interrelated with the way in which the honeymoon is a construction that removes the couple temporally – albeit temporarily – from society to consummate their marriage, the honeymoon night is an exceptional time situated between the past, the present and the future, between desire and fulfilment. During this time, Florence seemingly becomes aware of, and Edward desires, hymenal spatiotemporality, that other 'inter-' time, the in-

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<sup>9</sup> In her review of *On Chesil Beach*, 'Young Love, Old Angst' (2007), Natasha Walter sees communication as the cause of the marital breakdown in general and relates this specifically to the beach, arguing: 'the "infinite shingle" of Chesil Beach has become the backdrop to solitude rather than communion' (para. 4). Walter also notes the importance of the couple's hope to the narrative, and contends that 'this plot may sound inconsequential . . . but McEwan manages to give it almost tragic impact. This is partly because we come to sympathise so intensely with Edward and Florence's idealistic expectations of intimacy' (para. 4).

between, as Derrida argues, of past, present and future. Due to Edward's premature ejaculation, however, the couple are denied this particular hymenal temporality.

The exceptional temporality of the honeymoon night is anticipated in the narrative's opening words, 'they were young, educated, and both virgins on this, their wedding night' (McEwan, 2007, p. 3). In this opening, the specificity of the night is marked by the juxtaposition of the demonstrative and possessive pronouns, and the caesura – between 'this' and 'their' – syntactically and figuratively marks it as being temporally distinct.<sup>10</sup> The honeymoon night brings together the two seemingly contradictory temporalities Foucault says constitute heterotopias – 'the accumulation of time' (1986, p. 26) and 'time in its most fleeting' (p. 26) – and Edward's anticipation conjoins the night's temporal and sexual significance. As we are told, 'all he wanted, all he could think of, was himself and Florence lying naked together on or in the bed next door, confronting at last that awesome experience that seemed as remote from daily life as a vision of religious

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<sup>10</sup> The caesura plays a significant and pervasive role throughout Agamben's work. In his essay 'The Idea of Caesura' in *Idea of Prose* (1985) he specifically looks at this type of poetic pause in relation to the following lines by Sandro Penna:

Io vado verso il fiume su un cavallo  
che quando io penso un poco un poco egli si ferma.

I go towards the river on a horse  
which when I think a little a little stops. (Agamben, 1995, p. 43)

Agamben characteristically reads Penna's lines in terms of a spatial break and temporal suspension, arguing: 'the parallelism between sense and metre is again reconfirmed by the repetition of the same word on either side of the caesura, almost as if to give to the pause the epic density of an atemporal interstice between two moments, which suspends the gesture halfway in an extravagant goose-step' (p. 44). Agamben reemphasises temporal suspension towards the end of the essay, claiming: 'the rhythmic transport that gives the verse its impetus is empty, is only the transport of itself. And it is this emptiness which, as *pure word*, the caesura—for a little—thinks, holds in suspense, while for an instant the horse of poetry is stopped' (p. 44). More generally, Agamben turns to the caesura in his theorisation of thresholds and biopolitics. See, for example: *State of Exception* (2005 [2003], pp. 35 and 42); and *Remnants of Auschwitz* (2008 [2000], pp. 84-5 and 133). For Agamben's use of the caesura in a discussion of the divine, the profane and capitalism, see *Profanations* (2007b [2005], pp. 74 and 81).

ecstasy, or even death itself' (McEwan, 2007, pp. 19-20). Edward expects sex to be temporally distinct, and his desire to rupture Florence's hymen illustrates his belief that this moment will be a break in time or, as he envisages it, a 'dividing line of experience' (p. 28). Despite being something of a cliché, this metaphor draws together the membranous hymen's spatial and temporal qualities, as – at least culturally – the filmy membrane is related to the significance of first-time sex. Due to the significance of virginal sex, the honeymoon night is a type of heterochronic time, which entails both the transitory, the momentary present and, as Edward sees it, 'quasi-eternity' (Foucault, 1986, p. 26). For Edward, quasi-eternity represents both endless waiting and a post time, the imagined ever after of sexual happiness: 'for a whole year he had suffered in passive torment, wanting her till he ached, and wanting small things too, pathetic innocent things like a real full kiss, and her touching him and letting him touch her. The promise of marriage was his only relief' (McEwan, 2007, p. 134). In the hymenal moment, the accumulation of time (the years of sexual desire and anticipation before sex is experienced) is ruptured; a build-up of time – marked by the significance of virginity – is destroyed in a fleeting second. The rupture occurs at the inter-, the between of before, now and after, without sequential temporal relation, and as with Agamben's theory of the instant in *Homo Sacer* (1995), the hymenal moment 'is at the same time a chronological interval and a nontemporal moment' (1998, p. 109). The hymenal moment happens and does not happen and is, therefore, in and out of time. In contrast to the exceptional time of rupture, Edward attributes his failure to achieve sexual fulfilment to having to wait, to a surplus of time, thinking that 'if, at the end of a year of straining to contain himself, he was not able to hold himself back and had failed at the crucial moment, then he refused to take the blame' (McEwan, 2007, p. 134).

In the narrative, both the anticipation and significance of hymenal rupture are marked by the repetition and manipulation of the words 'moment' and 'momentous': the

reader is told how Edward and Florence ‘separately worried about the moment, some time soon after dinner, when their new maturity would be tested, when they would lie down together on the four-poster bed and reveal themselves fully to one another’ (p. 6); Edward experiences a ‘momentary swooning’ at the prospect of sex (p. 20); he is also happy that ‘they faced this momentous occasion . . . together’ (p. 28); Florence tries to conceal her ‘momentous sensory discovery’ (p. 88). The repetition of ‘momentous’ and ‘moment’ registers both hymenal exceptionality and the interplay of Foucault’s two heterochronies. A ‘moment’ is ‘an indefinite (usually short) period of time’ (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). It can be ‘too brief for its duration to be significant; a point in time, an instant’, but it is also ‘marked by a particular quality of experience or by a memorable event’ (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). As a combination of the instant and the memorable, or the particular, the moment is a form of temporal indeterminability: the instant is freed from temporal connection, whereas the memorable and particular are demarcated through these very connections.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the ‘momentous’ is ‘of a thing

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<sup>11</sup> In *Blind Date* (2003), Anne Dufourmantelle conceptualises a time that shares some of the same qualities that characterise the moment. In the first of three sections on jealousy, she analyses a ‘time that behaves as if it did not exist at all, time that has been given the lovely name *instant*. Between an instant and eternity, there is grace. Sex wants it, right away, now. Maximum intensity in “no time at all.” Eternity procured by an instant of grace. Time canceled out or wholly given over. At once instant and *aion*, full time, accomplished time. Considered in this light, sex answers to our anguish at being in time through the rediscovered grace of instants miraculously spared from any duration’ (2007, pp. 37-8). For Dufourmantelle, sex is a response to our being in time, which gives the impression that sex can take us out of time. Indeed, she argues that ‘the realized instant stops time, as trauma freezes time for all the descendancy to come’ (p. 41). Dufourmantelle then explicitly argues that ‘sex is not outside of time. No more than thought is. Sex is in time, caught up in time’s glue from the outset: expectation, desire, delay, regret, avoidance, failure, pleasure, difference, caress, absence—everything speaks to us of time that passes too quickly or too slowly but that does pass; everything speaks of the lag that accentuates and figures the very space there is between you and me. Sex is caught up in human time in all its forms, yes, and it is also the *kairos*. Sex is another name for the *kairos*, for that event of a pure present, of pure presence, which takes place only once and does not begin again, whose very pleasure lies in not ceasing to want to begin again, in being the repetition of the same gestures, the same rituals, the same minuscule words lodged in that place of desire where they encounter terror and surmount it, every time,

or an event: of moment; of great weight, consequence, or importance' (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). At once too brief, of great importance, simultaneously transitory, non-sequential and indeterminable, together the moment and the momentous register the exceptionality of the honeymoon night as well as hymenal rupture.

The couple's anticipation of and anxiety about sex are both portrayed through the temporality of the moment. For instance, during their honeymoon dinner 'they continued their pretence of eating, trapped in the moment by private anxieties' (McEwan, 2007, p. 26). Fearing (en)forced hymenal rupture, Florence reasons that 'to survive, to escape one hideous moment, she had to raise the stakes and commit herself to the next, and give the unhelpful impression that she longed for it herself' (p. 33). Ultimately, Florence does not believe that she can escape by endlessly postponing sex, and her entrapment is emphasised by the reciprocal movement of confrontation: 'the final act could not be endlessly deferred. The moment was rising to meet her, just as she was foolishly moving towards it' (p. 33). In addition to its inclusion of the image of an erect, agitated and agitating penis, this two-way movement reinforces the pressure created by the coming moment and the speed of its arrival: Florence moves towards time as it comes towards her. She is trapped by her anticipation of the moment and perceives sex as a temporal series of advances, submissions and failures, which, as we are told, Florence is unable to intercept or halt: 'the bride was not hurried in her movements – this was yet another of those delaying tactics that also committed her further' (p. 79).

Whilst Edward desires hymenal rupture but is unable to experience it, in the honeymoon bedroom Florence becomes conscious of her own hymenally exceptional temporality, and for the first time in the narrative she is aware of her sexuality. As Edward

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imperceptibly. The other name for *kairos* is that precise moment when desire ceases to be desire and comes undone as it becomes embodied' (p. 42).

strokes a 'disturbed follicle' (p. 87) of pubic hair, Florence is sensitive to 'the beginnings of desire, precise and alien, but clearly her own; and beyond, as though suspended above and behind her, just out of sight, was relief that she was just like everyone else' (pp. 87-8). Becoming more comfortable with sexual pleasure, Florence later experiences 'disappointment that he had not lingered to stroke her pubic area again and set off that strange and spreading thrill' (p. 103), and her growing sexual awareness is characterised by a sensitivity to the temporality of the moment:

Behind Edward's head extended a partial view of a distant past – the open door and the dining table by the French window and the debris around their uneaten supper – but she did not let her gaze shift to take it in. Despite the pleasing sensation and her relief, there remained her apprehension, a high wall, not so easily demolished. Nor did she want it to be. For all the novelty, she was not in a state of wild abandonment, nor did she want to be hurried towards one. She wanted to linger in this spacious moment, in these fully clothed conditions, with the soft brown-eyed gaze and the tender caress and the spreading thrill. But she knew that this was impossible, and that, as everyone said, one thing would have to lead to another. (pp. 88-9)

On the bed with Edward, Florence momentarily experiences both pleasure and relief, but she does not wish to break down her 'high wall' of apprehension as it preserves the moment in which she does not have to think about the past or be hurried into the future. She wants to linger in the time of foreplay, a temporal and, for her, spatial moment before sex but one which unfortunately for her is ultimately defined by its relation to a time-to-come with its function to prepare people for intercourse and climax. Florence takes pleasure in this moment but she feels unready to move beyond it, spatially and temporally, into the time and space of sex with its wild state of animalistic abandonment. Thus, at this present time, Florence would rather retain the spatiotemporality of her hymen for herself. The hymen is within her body and cannot be accessed without her consent, or, if this is not given, only by forced entry – rape. Florence is unable to abandon herself in the idiomatically sexual sense, but she is abandoned to Edward and the law of marriage. She is

reduced by Edward to a form of sexual, bare life, as he believes that she is ready to have sex and will pursue his own sexual satisfaction. Indeed, as Edward sees it, ‘she was the one who had led him to the bedroom, removed her shoes with such abandon, let him place his hand so close’ (p. 90). However, Florence wishes to escape exceptional abandonment, the conditionality of which appears to allow her to be raped without recrimination, and she is anxious to preserve the moment of foreplay in which she finds herself: ‘she was trying not to think of the immediate future, or of the past, and she imagined herself clinging to this moment, the precious present, like an unroped climber on a cliff, pressing her face tight against the rock, not daring to move’ (p. 99).

In distinction to Florence’s wish to preserve the particular moment of foreplay, Edward desires only to break (through) her hymen. His desire accentuates the hymen’s symbolic significance and his failure to penetrate it provides a literal – and somewhat humorous – reconfiguration of Derrida’s claim that ‘nothing happens and the hymen remains suspended *entre*, outside and inside the *entre*. Nothing is more vicious than this suspense, this distance played at; nothing is more perverse than this rending penetration that leaves a virgin womb intact. But nothing is more marked by the sacred . . . more folded, intangible, sealed, untouched’ (2008, pp. 226-7). Despite – or indeed because of – Edward’s desires and his belief in using force, he ejaculates prematurely and thereby ultimately fails to reach and penetrate this topologically exceptional structure. Edward therefore misses his chance to rupture this sacred membrane, the sacredness of which marks how both Florence and he believe that the law of marriage allows for the hymen to be destroyed without recrimination. Unsuccessful in his attempt to rupture the hymenal membrane itself, Edward’s untimely arrival also ruptures the exceptional moment, the time between desire and satisfaction, presence and nonpresence. Thus, Edward and Florence fall short of the momentous temporality of the hymen, which contrasts markedly with the

way in which in *Atonement* Robbie and Cecilia, ‘the son of Grace and Ernest Turner, the daughter of Emily and Jack Tallis, the childhood friends, the university acquaintances, in a state of expansive, tranquil joy, confronted the momentous change they had achieved’ (McEwan, 2001, p. 137). For Robbie and Cecilia ‘the moment itself was easy’ (p. 137), but Edward and Florence experience only frustration and hurt.<sup>12</sup> Florence retains possession of her hymen. It remains between the couple, and her exit from the honeymoon suite figuratively removes both of them from the possibility of this hymenal moment, from their particular heterotopia with its exceptional spatiotemporality.

The lack of penetration and rupture also signifies the failure to consummate the marriage, which will be given as the reason for the couple’s divorce. The ruptured moment – and not the hymen – is reflected in, and enhanced by, the narrative structure, as the end of the couple’s marriage signals the end of the principal diegesis. In ‘Not Wanting Things’, Jane Miller correctly says of the ending: ‘we know nothing, though, of [Florence’s] sexual life’ (2009, p. 153). In an early review of the text, Natasha Walter takes a similar position and criticises the narrative’s swift ending. She invokes the classic literary distinction between telling and showing, and argues: ‘I felt that the last passages of the novel suffered from their brevity. We are told, rather than shown, how Edward’s life progressed, or regressed, after their stay on Chesil Beach’ (2007, para. 12). Rather than being a detraction from the narrative structure, the lack of detail – an instance of telling and not showing – keeps open the possibility that Florence retains her hymen or, indeed, loses it away from the oppressive spatiotemporality of the honeymoon. Furthermore, the brevity of the final section of the narrative works comparatively to emphasise the significance of the wedding night, as that storyline is allocated much more narrative time and space. During the

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<sup>12</sup> In his review of McEwan’s recent fiction (*Amsterdam* [1998], *Atonement*, *Saturday* [2005] and *On Chesil Beach*), Patrick Henry sees moments as being particularly significant, arguing: ‘the novels capture characters in moments from which they are unlikely to escape’ (2008, p. 78).

elliptical and truncated ending of the narrative, the reader does learn, however, that Edward goes on to have a series of love affairs. Therefore, it is possible that Edward himself experiences hymenal exceptionality, but there is no actual narrative evidence to support such a reading. Rather, the brevity of the final section of the narrative implies that his sex life is transitory and unexceptional. Indeed, we are told that he goes on ‘to live snugly *in the present*’ (McEwan, 2007, p. 161, my emphasis). Living in time himself, Edward wishes to fix Florence in the past and pre-hymenal time for ever: ‘he did not want to see her photograph and discover what the years had wrought her, or hear about the details of her life. He preferred to preserve her as she was in his memories, with the dandelion in her buttonhole and the piece of velvet in her hair, the canvas bag across her shoulder, and the beautiful strong-boned face with its wide and artless smile’ (p. 165).

## 5. Historical Time, Exceptional Rupture

In his review of *On Chesil Beach*, ‘Dissecting the Body’, Colm Tóibín (2007) contrasts the narrative with McEwan’s earlier work by looking at the use of history, arguing:

Both works [*The Ploughman’s Lunch* (1983) and *On Chesil Beach*] exude a sense, alive in McEwan’s work since *The Child in Time* (1987), of Britain itself, its recent history and its public life, as an anchor in the narrative. Carefully researched moments in real time help to rescue the novels for seriousness, at times for earnestness, to move them away from the timeless and delicious cruelties of McEwan’s first four books, which were wonderful explorations of what he called in his introduction to the published script of *The Ploughman’s Lunch* ‘the dangers, to an individual as well as to a nation, of living without a sense of history’. (p. 28)

Tóibín’s comments can be seen within the larger critical convention of analysing *On Chesil Beach* in terms of its portrayal of the historical period – the impact of supposed mid-twentieth-century repression, the so-called 1960s ‘sexual revolution’ – and the

couple's psychological makeup in relation to this historical setting.<sup>13</sup> In distinction to this convention generally, and *Tóibín* specifically, I propose that the couple suffer from the opposite danger to the one he indicates – they have an overly heightened historical awareness. Indeed, Edward and Florence both occupy themselves with interests shot through with time. Edward is a history graduate who wishes to write a series of historical books, and Florence is a musician.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, both show a detailed knowledge of, and sensitivity to, the historical importance of the moment in which they find themselves.<sup>15</sup> The couple's historical sensitivity is in part portrayed by the difference Edward and Florence see between themselves and an older generation. Florence, for instance, 'revered the ancient types, who took minutes to emerge from their taxis, the last of the Victorians, hobbling on their sticks' (McEwan, 2007, p. 41). Moreover, when Edward confronts Florence on the beach about her sexual reticence, he accuses her: "'You carry on as if it's *eighteen sixty-two*'" (p. 144). In addition, both are 'keen on the idea of a labour landslide as great as the famous victory of 1945' (p. 25), and they identify themselves with the magnitude of the epoch and even connect their own relationship to the importance of the historical moment: 'Edward and Florence's shared sense that one day soon the country

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example: Al Alvarez, 'It happened One Night' (2007); Peter Kemp, 'Review: On Chesil Beach [sic] by Ian McEwan' (2007); Lionel Shriver, 'Marriage Was the Beginning of a Cure' (2007); Natasha Walter (2007); Patrick Henry (2008); Dominic Head (2009); Jane Miller (2009); and Lynn Wells (2010). Making a generic comment about the novel's presentation of sex in his review 'Sex with Consequences' (2007), Randy Kennedy argues: 'many reviewers of Mr. McEwan's book have noted that to put sex back in its old perch among literature's most momentous plot elements (alongside truth, money, family, honor and God) the author set his story in 1962. Of course this is the year just before the one that the poet Philip Larkin established sarcastically (but with some reason) in his oft-quoted "*Annus Mirabilis*" as the all-important dividing line' (para. 5).

<sup>14</sup> In his review of the novel, Peter Kemp sees the couple's timely occupations as offering a specific set of significations. He contends: 'a history graduate, Edward has learnt about how people can be victims of the *zeitgeist*. A music graduate, Florence knows the difficulties of achieving harmony' (2007, para. 11).

<sup>15</sup> Kemp compares the novel with McEwan's earlier work, *Saturday* (2005), writing: 'On Chesil Beach [sic], also portraying a couple in a room overlooking the English Channel, is likewise concerned with individuals' relationship to their times' (para. 4).

would be transformed for the better, that youthful energies were pushing to escape, like steam under pressure, merged with the excitement of their own adventure together. The sixties was the first decade of adult life, and it surely belonged to them' (p. 25).

The influence of history in *On Chesil Beach* is also conveyed narratorially, as the heterodiegetic narrator is positioned in a futural moment and presents Edward and Florence's story retrospectively. Furthermore, the narrator stresses the importance of the particular time of the diegesis – the early 1960s – its social and political upheavals, and thereby fully places the narrative within its historical period. Connected to the narrator's position, the principal diegesis of Edward and Florence's wedding night is punctuated by numerous analeptically narrated sequences that portray how the couple meet, their different upbringings and their courtship. Consequently, the structure of the narrative opposes itself to hymenal temporality, which has no relation to the past or the future. Indeed, the analeptically narrated moments interrupt the narrative of the wedding night, just as the past disrupts Edward and Florence's pursuit of hymenal exceptionality. The repetitive, eruptive and disruptive impact of history is itself the subject matter of a conversation between Edward and Florence's mother, which can therefore be seen as a form of metanarrative commentary. As Edward drives her to a talk, Violet Ponting questions him about his historical interests, asking: 'wasn't nuclear war the modern equivalent to the Apocalypse of the Book of Revelation, and were we not always bound by our history and our guilty natures to dream of our annihilation?' (p. 117). Edward himself believes that happiness is dependent on a certain unhistoricity, and when the couple are in the honeymoon suite he mentally rebukes Florence and himself for listening to a radio news broadcast coming from the hotel sitting room below. Echoing Violet's wording, Edward believes that Florence and he are 'bound to world events [such as nuclear armament and communist refugees] by their own stupidity!' (p. 26), which links them to

history as it is played out and reported, being made. Edward's attitude is distinctly Nietzschean. In 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' (1874), Friedrich Nietzsche writes:

it is always the same thing that makes happiness happiness: the ability to forget or, expressed in more scholarly fashion, the capacity to feel *unhistorically* during its duration. He who cannot sink down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past, who cannot stand balanced like a goddess of victory without growing dizzy and afraid, will never know what happiness is – worse, he will never do anything to make others happy. (2007, p. 62)

In this argument about one's relationship with the past, Nietzsche proposes that to adopt an unhistorical attitude one must block out time whilst being in time, experiencing the temporal threshold of the moment. Unfortunately, as the couple approach the threshold of the hymenic moment they are unable to experience unhistoricity. For instance, as Florence readies herself for sex, the sea air brings in unpleasant recollections of her father:

It was the smell of the sea that summoned it. She was twelve years old, lying still like this, waiting, shivering in the narrow bunk with polished mahogany sides. Her mind was blank, she felt she was in disgrace. After a two-day crossing, they were once more in the calm of Carteret harbour, south of Cherbourg. It was late in the evening, and her father was moving about the dim cramped cabin, undressing, like Edward now. She remembered the rustle of the clothes, the clink of a belt unfastened or of keys or loose change. (McEwan, 2007, p. 99)

Beyond the implication of father-daughter abuse, this moment illustrates how Edward and Florence's thoroughly historicised natures place them in time, ruining the possibility of hymenal exceptionality.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Florence actively desires unhistoricity, wishing to regain the feeling she had during foreplay:

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<sup>16</sup> In his reading of the novel, Dominic Head argues: 'because the memory comes unbidden, as she is bracing herself for the unwanted sexual encounter with Edward, we cannot help but imagine that this is, for her, the repetition of an earlier horror' (2010, p. 121).

Nor could she avoid contemplating her immediate future. Her hope was that in whatever was to come, she would regain some version of that spreading, pleasurable sensation, that it would grow and overwhelm her and be an anaesthetic to her fears, and deliver her from disgrace. It appeared unlikely. The true memory of the feeling, of being inside it, of truly knowing what it was like, had already diminished to a dry historical fact. It had happened once, like the Battle of Hastings. Still, it was her one chance, and so it was precious, like delicate antique crystal, easily dropped, and another good reason not to move. (p. 100)

Unfortunately, as she anticipates sex with Edward, Florence feels bound by the imminent future and is, therefore, fully in time. In order to escape this temporality, Florence desires – somewhat oxymoronically – to remember and relive a past moment that was itself unhistorical. However, she is unable to regain the sensation of foreplay, that unhistorical temporality, and her inability to do so is symbolised by the reference to dry history. Florence is unexcited sexually, dry like an historical fact.

The incompatibility of history and sexual pleasure is made more overt in a description of Edward's masturbatory habits. In this depiction, the relationship in which the couple's preoccupation with history ruins their chance of sex is inverted as Edward's sexual thoughts obstruct his ability to do history. As the narrator explains, 'pleasure was really an incidental benefit. The goal was release – from urgent, thought-confining desire for what could not be immediately had. How extraordinary it was, that a self-made spoonful, leaping clear of his body, should instantly free his mind to confront afresh Nelson's decisiveness at Aboukir Bay' (p. 20). Given the relationship between history and sexual happiness, it is, then, somewhat ironic when in later life Edward reflects that 'perhaps if he had stayed with her, he would have been more focused and ambitious about his own life, he might even have written those history books' (p. 165).

Distinct from the historical consciousness that characterises the couple during their courtship and failed marriage night, Edward becomes less historically aware as he enjoys

the sexual freedoms offered to him following his breakup with Florence. During the elliptical ending of the narrative, the reader is told that

Edward wandered through those brief years like a confused and happy child reprieved from a prolonged punishment, not quite able to believe his luck. The series of short history books and all thoughts of serious scholarship were behind him, though there was never any particular point when he made a firm decision about his future. Like poor Sir Robert Carey, he simply fell away from history. (p. 161)

As the narrator implies, both Carey and Edward fall away from history. Carey, ‘the man who rode from London to Edinburgh in seventy hours to deliver the news of Elizabeth I’s death to her successor, James VI of Scotland’ (p. 45), is now little remembered, and the childlike Edward loses his historical interest. Had Edward and Florence themselves been able to fall away from history and been less aware of their historical moment, less historically preoccupied – but, the narrator writes, ‘being childlike was not yet honourable, or in fashion’ (p. 18) – they might have been able to experience hymenal exceptionality. However, their opportunity for exceptional sex is ultimately ruined as they are unable to escape being fully in time and space, unable to escape historical relationality. Furthermore, Edward also dismisses Florence’s untimely offer of a semi-open relationship, which would have opened up the exceptionality offered by consensual adultery. I analyse consensual adultery and willing cuckoldry in Chapter V, but it is to the exceptionality of non-consensual adultery in *Gertrude and Claudius* that I turn next.

### III. INCESTUOUS IMPLICATIONS

In *The Will To Knowledge* (1976), Michel Foucault argues that incest is a central and all-pervasive aspect of sexuality. With a focus on modern western society, he contends that:

Since the eighteenth century the family has become an obligatory locus of affects, feelings, love; that sexuality has its privileged point of development in the family; that for this reason sexuality is ‘incestuous’ from that start. It may be that in societies where the mechanisms of alliance predominate, prohibition of incest is a functionally indispensable rule. But in a society such as ours, where the family is the most active site of sexuality, and where it is doubtless the exigencies of the latter which maintain and prolong its existence, incest—for different reasons altogether and in a completely different way—occupies a central place; it is constantly being solicited and refused; it is an object of obsession and attraction, a dreadful secret and an indispensable pivot. It is manifested as a thing that is strictly forbidden in the family insofar as the latter functions as a deployment of alliance; but it is also a thing that is continuously demanded in order for the family to be a hotbed of constant sexual incitement. (1998, pp. 108-9)

In this analysis of sexuality, Foucault argues for the incestuous origins of all sexual relations. For him, sex begins in the home and with the family. Indeed, in ‘Schizo-Culture: Infantile Sexuality’, a paper delivered in 1975, Foucault even argues that there exists ‘the obligation of incestuous intention on the part of the parents towards their child’ (1996 p. 166). Within the sexually saturated space of the family home, incest is characterised by a series of tensions. It is solicited yet refused, at once a secret and an essential point of departure, an obsession and an attraction. By drawing out these competing pressures, Foucault characterises incest as a form of exceptionality. It is something the family includes by endeavouring to exclude it, and excludes by including it. Incest is there and not there in the familial space. It is something acknowledged and denied. In this chapter, rather than propose with Foucault that incest underlies all sexuality, in my reading of John

Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000) I shall argue that incest is a particular form of exceptional sex in which related bodies come together and confuse the spatiotemporal boundaries of the self and an already related other. Told by a heterodiegetic narrator, the three-part narrative of *Gertrude and Claudius* portrays the story of Gerutha/Geruthe/Gertrude before and up to the beginning of Shakespeare's play. In each part of the narrative, the names of the characters change, from those of Saxo Grammaticus's twelfth-century *Historia Danica* in Part I, to François de Belleforest's sixteenth-century *Histoires tragiques* in Part II, and finally to those made universally familiar by Shakespeare in Part III.<sup>1</sup> Part I depicts Gerutha's childhood in her father Rorik/Rodericke/Roderick's court and her marriage to Horwendil/Horvendile/Hamlet, Part II her adultery with Feng/Fengon/Claudius, and Part III Gertrude and Claudius's marriage after old Hamlet's death, as well as the difficult and intimate relationship Gertrude has with her son Amleth/Hamblet/Hamlet. The narrative ends at the court gathering with Claudius's speech from *Hamlet* (c. 1602) in Act One, Scene Two.

I begin this chapter by arguing that the figurative language used to describe Rorik's interest in his daughter implies his sexual desires and establishes a pattern of parent-child incest, which Gerutha/Geruthe/Gertrude replicates with Horwendil/Horvendile, Feng/Fengon/Claudius and, as I argue in section 4, vicariously with her son Hamlet. Turning briefly to Jacques Derrida's theory of iteration – repetition that is never the same – in 'Signature Event Context' (1972), I argue that incest and iteration are connected by the way in which both create complications of sameness and difference, and that the incestuous diegesis of *Gertrude and Claudius* is, therefore, emphasised through the iterative nature of the narrative and the use of the modified names for the principal

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter, I shall refer to the characters by the version of their names relevant to the part of the narrative I am discussing. Where I wish to draw attention to connections across the various parts of the narrative, I shall refer to two or all three variations of the characters' names.

characters. Furthermore, the iterative nature of the narrative and the change of names create a series of exceptional thresholds that at once join and separate the three parts of the diegesis, and the reader is placed in this threshold-like structure, being in and out of at least two parts of the narrative at any one time. Therefore, on a textual level, the reader experiences an exceptionality similar to that experienced by bodies in incestuous sex.

In sections 2 and 3, I turn to the effects of Gerutha/Geruthe's incestuous affair with her husband's brother, analysing the exceptionality of what I call 'adulterous parallelism'. By having an affair, Geruthe initially suspends the spatiotemporality of marriage, and, as I argue with reference to the work of the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, the affair also entails its own form of suspension through the lovers' flirtatious behaviour. Moreover, the couple's flirtation momentarily suspends the diegetic connection between *Gertrude and Claudius* and *Hamlet* as it seemingly delays the progression from the former to the latter. Following her suspension of married time and space, Geruthe then interweaves her marriage with the time and space of adultery, which enables her to experience dual spatiotemporalities simultaneously. Through this manoeuvre, Geruthe is inside and outside of her two sexual lives at the same time, passing through both and experiencing a doubled sexual pleasure. In section 3, I turn to the second aspect of the lovers' adultery, abandonment. In their attempt to find a hideaway for their sexual trysts, I argue, the adulterous couple except themselves from the legal sphere of Horvendile's court and consequently reduce themselves to their animalistic sexual primitiveness, a bareness both desire and enjoy. However, their sexual abandonment is made particularly complex by their relation to a literal sovereign, who plans to punish their incestuous affair by exiling his brother and re-abandoning his wife to her unexceptional sex life with himself.

In the final section of the chapter, I move from diegetic concerns to formal ones, examining the spatiotemporality of the prequel genre. Reading Giorgio Agamben's brief

analysis of written and unwritten texts in *Infancy and History* (1978), I analyse the relationship between novel and play in order to develop a theory of the prequel and its spatiotemporal relationship to its narrative successor. In order to provide a critical taxonomy to describe this relationship, I shall refer to the prequel and its successor narrative as ante-text and text respectively. Like related bodies during incestuous sex, these two texts in-determine their spatiotemporal boundaries and, as a result of this indetermination, the reader passes through the ante-text and the text simultaneously.

## 1. Iterations

The narrative of *Gertrude and Claudius* begins with Rorik and Gerutha's discussion of her potential marriage to Horwendil. Throughout this opening section, the language used to describe Rorik's relationship with his daughter is overtly sexual. It overwhelms this section of the narrative and powerfully implies Rorik's incestuous desires. For instance, Gerutha wonders whether Rorik aims 'to *soften* her, so she could be *bent* more easily to his command' (Updike, 2000, p. 7, my emphases), and as she listens to him, 'her bones vibrated to the familiar rumble of his voice's rote endearments, and her skull felt the paternal pressure of his other hand cupped on her head in blessing' (p. 10). In addition to the vibrations, pressure and cupping hand, 'Gerutha found herself, as if cuffed from behind, kneeling before him in a spasm of filial feeling' (p. 10). Thus, Gerutha has been forced, as if hit or bound – 'cuffed' – into the (stereotypically) submissive position adopted by the woman to perform fellatio. Above his daughter, 'on his side, Rorik, leaning over to kiss the neat gash of the bone-white scalp where her hair was centrally parted, was conscious of a tingle on his face as of tiny snowflakes; stray individual hairs, too fine to be

seen, had rebelled against the brushed order of his daughter's coiffure' (p. 10). In addition to Gerutha's submissive pose, then, the sexual *tableau* is intensified by the way in which Gerutha's head is figuratively transformed into a vagina with its pubic hair and central parting, and the stray, rebellious hairs recall Florence's 'disturbed follicle' (McEwan, 2007, p. 87) of pubic hair in *On Chesil Beach*. The depiction of Gerutha's hair, however, also registers a limit to Rorik's attendances, as the whiteness of her parting symbolises sexual purity. Furthermore, she wears it 'unbound as became a virgin' (Updike, 2000, p. 6). Despite his failure to actualise them, Rorik's incestuous desires are not diminished. Indeed, after he kisses her head, 'he pulled back his face from the sensation of her excessively vigorous hair and experienced a start of guilt, her pose before him was *demurely slavish – that of a captured slave, drugged with hellebore, about to be sacrificed*' (p. 10, my emphasis). The combined force of Gerutha's vigorous hair, her pose and Rorik's guilt again imply that this encounter is sexual. Indeed, Gerutha appears to be an intoxicated slave, subservient to her father's sexual desires. She will not be sacrificed, but she does adopt the role of the *homo sacer*, as she is utterly subject to her father's sovereign power, his own sexual desires and his wish that she marry Horwendil.

The implications – by which I here mean the effects and repercussions – of incest are made apparent from the opening of the narrative. Indeed, the first words spoken in the diegesis establish its incestuous theme and the consequences of this type of sexual interaction: "“To disobey the King is treason,” Rorik admonished his child, the roses in whose thick-skinned cheeks flared with defiance and distress. “When the culprit is the realm's only princess,” he went on, “the crime becomes incestuous and self-injuring”” (p. 3). As Rorik argues, a princess who commits treason commits an incestuous act due to the fact that she is related to the sovereign, and, in Gerutha's case, is the sovereign-in-waiting: king and princess, father and daughter, are politically, as well as biologically, related.

Furthermore, Rorik's metaphorical warning implies that actual incest is dangerous and corrupting. Indeed, incest can be self-injurious due to the way in which one's own genes mix with another body that already contains those genes.<sup>2</sup> Gerutha herself senses her biological connection to her father, as 'she became aware, long before puberty had awoken any urge to mate, of her father's blood regal within her' (pp. 6-7), and after Rorik's death, she is 'the only surviving vessel of his presiding spirit' (p. 32). Gerutha carries his genes, and through her capacity to reproduce can perpetuate those genes. Therefore, in wanting to have sex with his daughter – as I argue the language of the narrative distinctly implies Rorik does – the king wishes to have sex with a continuation and variant of himself. He wants to have sex with the daughter who carries his genes, his blood. This indetermination of already shared genetic material – a confusion of self and related other, of the blood Gerutha already senses inside her – renders incest exceptional. It in-determines the separation of related bodies – which are, we could say, already genetically inside and outside each other – and therefore creates a particularly complex genetic 'topological zone of indistinction' (Agamben, 1998, p. 37), in which self and related other once more pass through one another.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Royal Society of Medicine Health Encyclopedia*, Dr R.M. Youngson explains the possible harm of incest, writing: 'genetically, incest becomes undesirable only when there are recessive traits for disease in the family so that breeding carriers are more likely to produce offspring homozygous for the condition. The same genetic implication applies to marriages between first cousins, which are almost universally thought acceptable' (2000, para. 4).

<sup>3</sup> Previous theoretical accounts of incest have focused on its untimely nature. For example, in *The Use of Pleasure* (1984) Foucault provides an insightful discussion of the Greek attitude toward the dangers of parent-child incest, explaining: 'the punishment consists in this: regardless of the intrinsic qualities that the incestuous parents might possess, their offspring will come to no good. And why is this? Because the parents failed to respect that principle of the "right time," mixing their seed unseasonably, since one of them was necessarily much older than the other: for people to procreate when they were no longer "in full vigor" was always "to beget badly." Xenophon and Socrates do not say that incest is reprehensible only in the form of an "inopportune" action; but it is remarkable that the evil of incest is manifested in the same way and with the same consequences as the lack of regard for the proper time' (1992, p. 59, citing Xenophon). For the complete discussion of

In *Gertrude and Claudius*, Rorik intensifies incestuous exceptionality by adding a temporal dimension to his sexual desires. During his incestuous longings, he in-determines his out-of-time wife ‘Ona, [who] had died on the farthest verge of memory’ (Updike, 2000, p. 6) with his in-time daughter. For instance, shortly after he kisses Gerutha’s hair during their marriage discussions he remembers Ona’s ‘abundance of untamed raven hair between parted white thighs having tickled his lips’ (p. 11). Furthermore, at Gerutha and Horwendil’s wedding, the narrator wonders: ‘did Rorik see *her*, his child now wed as he had demanded, or did he see fading from him the last living remembrance of Ona?’ (p. 21). Even when Rorik notices the two women’s differences – ‘Ona’s fingertips had been chilly, he remembered, and yet even Gerutha’s scalp, chalk-white in its parting, tasted of warmth’ (p. 12) – he still brings the two together and, moreover, sexualises his daughter through the repeated imagery of hair and the consequent metonymic allusion to her vagina. Combined, the warm taste of Gerutha’s scalp and the image of her parting hair metaphorically imply father-daughter cunnilingus, or at least Rorik’s desire to ‘go down’ on his daughter. The temporal aspect of Rorik’s desires is accentuated as he also looks to Gerutha’s future relations and connects her husband-to-be with himself, telling his daughter: “‘You cannot help but enamor your husband, as you since your infancy have enamored me’” (p. 9). Thus, Rorik establishes a chain of incestuous desires, which has Gerutha in the centre and stretches to the past and future alike.

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timeliness, see Foucault (1992, pp. 57-9). In her introduction to the special edition of *GLQ* on queer temporalities, Elizabeth Freeman also notes the untimely aspect of incest, claiming: ‘the most arresting figure for familial time out of joint is, of course, cross-generational incest’ (p. 172). In contrast to such analyses, a genetic consideration of incest provides an empirical model for older notions of coincidence or boundary confusion in sex, such as that expressed in the mythological story of loss and reunification in Plato’s *Symposium*. For a commentary on this story and a modern inflection involving the placenta, see Anne Dufourmantelle’s *Blind Date* (2007 [2003], pp. 57-8). For a psychoanalytic account of the dangers of incest and the Oedipus complex, the reader might wish to see Adam Phillips, ‘Bored with Sex?’ (2003).

The pattern of parent-child incest is repeated by Gerutha's own sexual inclinations. An early sign of her incestuous desires comes when Horwendil attempts to persuade Gerutha to marry him and she finds Horwendil's fatherly behaviour exciting: 'he had to laugh at that, as Rorik had laughed at her impudence earlier—a confident laugh, already possessive, exposing short, neat, efficient teeth. His rough pleasure quickened her blood with a pulse anticipatory of her being, her qualms crushed, thoroughly his' (p. 16). In addition to the excitement Gerutha finds in the similarity between father and husband, she displays an explicit desire to create the possibility of incestuous sex. Indeed, when she thinks about her husband-to-be, she desires to transform him into the image of her father: 'Gerutha wondered whether she, when they were wed, might tease him into growing a beard, such as her father wore' (p. 18). Thus, Gerutha endeavours to in-determine husband and father, replicating the way in which Rorik superimposed wife and daughter onto one another. Gerutha's incestuous desires even form part of her affair with her husband's brother Feng. Their relationship is not strict incest between persons biologically related, but sex with Fengon/Claudius does offer a permutation of this sexual arrangement. As Gerutha tells Feng, "The brother of one's husband is a figure of interest, providing another version of him—him recast, as it were, by another throw of the dice" (p. 48).<sup>4</sup> Fengon likewise interprets the affair as incestuous and, as he tells his brother, he sees Horvendile and himself as Laius and Oedipus respectively: "The son's world differs from the father's if only by the dominating presence of the father in it. The same might be said of younger brothers and elder. You see clear to your objectives; I see always you ahead of me, intervening" (p. 140). For Gerutha/Geruthe, her affair with Fengon is doubly

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<sup>4</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* indicates how biological connection is not a necessary condition of incest, defining this sexual practice as 'the crime of sexual intercourse or cohabitation between persons related within the degrees within which marriage is prohibited; sexual commerce of near kindred.' Of course, Geruthe's two lovers are themselves genetically related.

incestuous as her lover also reminds her of her father. Indeed, Geruthe is comforted by the fact that ‘this man, for all the devious unknowns about him, brought her home to herself. No failing she displayed to him would meet the distracted frown her husband wore when she claimed his notice. Rodericke’s paternal approval had been reborn’ (p. 109). Throughout Geruthe and Fengon’s affair, the pattern of incest is given a somewhat paedophilic inflection as both wish Geruthe to be once more Rorik’s young daughter. Geruthe tells Fengon: “‘My father and future husband together bargained me away, and you have given me back my essential value, the value of that little girl you so belatedly dote upon’” (p. 138), and the reader is told how ‘Fengon especially wished to possess her girlhood, to penetrate to the image of his full-fleshed mistress as a sturdy female child making her benign, broad-browed, solemn way through the confusions of Rodericke’s court in the bereft years after her mother’s death. He doted upon this little girl’ (pp. 136-7). The sexual aspect of Geruthe’s early life, the father-like position Fengon adopts in relation to Geruthe, and the pointedly erotic and paedophilic language used to describe Fengon’s desires, combine to create a relationship emphatically marked as incestuous. Rather than a simple nostalgic return to a past state, Geruthe and Fengon’s desires reveal their wish to create an imitative form of father-daughter incest, which contributes to the incestuously iterative diegesis and structure of the narrative.

Gerutha and Feng are both aware of the iterative nature of Gerutha/Geruthe/Gertrude’s life story, and Feng specifically thinks about her ‘passive lax streak that had allowed her father and then her husband to have their way’ (p. 76). Moreover, he believes that ‘she would surrender to him, too, if pressed. He felt that’ (p. 76). Feng’s observations serve as a metanarrative summary of the text’s incestuously

iterative structure.<sup>5</sup> As Derrida explains in ‘Signature Event Context’, ‘*iter*, again, probably comes from *itara*, *other* in Sanskrit’ (1988, p. 7), and his concern in this essay is ‘the working out of the logic that ties repetition to alterity’ (p. 7), that is, the quality of iteration. Like incest, iteration is marked by its combination and complication of sameness and difference, and both form limit concepts of ‘repetition/alterity’ (p. 9). Therefore, the iterative structure of *Gertrude and Claudius* functions as a further implication of the narrative’s incestuous theme. It both replicates and enhances this theme, and the incestuous story coupled with its iterative narrative provides a textual example of how ‘iterability . . . structures the mark of writing itself’ (p. 7), here the writing that is *Gertrude and Claudius*.

The incestuous iterations that work across the narrative are emphasised by the different names assigned to the principal characters in each part. Their names function as the characters’ signatures, which Derrida argues are marked by ‘the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity. In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production. It is its sameness which, by corrupting its identity and its singularity, divides its seal [*sceau*]’ (p. 20). As with the impurity of a signature and related bodies in incest, the characters’ names are marked at once by sameness and difference: they are iterative in nature. Even when the change of name does not create an obvious connection – for instance, from ‘Fengon’ to ‘Claudius’ – the continuation of the incestuous diegesis implies the names’ relation across the parts of the narrative. As a result, the characters’ names are detached from their present

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<sup>5</sup> In his essay, ‘Conclusion: U(PDIKE) & P(OSTMODERNISM)’ (2006), John Duvall notes that the novel’s tripartite structure begins with three separate kings admonishing Gertrude (p. 172).

and singular intention in each part. Their singularity is corrupted as are the spatiotemporal boundaries of persons during incestuous sex.<sup>6</sup>

Through the iterative cycle of incest and the iterations of the characters' names, the divisions between Parts I and II and between Parts II and III of the narrative operate as thresholds that separate and join the iterative diegesis. Consequently, the reader is placed in a textual exceptionality. Once beyond Part I, the reader is, like the incestuous partner, indeterminately in two spatiotemporalities – two parts – simultaneously, as the change of the characters' names means that he is in and out of the previous part and the part he is reading, aware of both the differences and the continuations across the narrative. Furthermore, as each part is divided by a threshold that continues the diegesis but marks the difference between one part and the next through the change in names, the text can be seen to be made up of three states of exception, which pass through one another, at once separate and joined together. Therefore, the reader is at any one time inside and outside an overall narrative construction and, like related persons having incestuous sex, he experiences a (textual) form of exceptionality.

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<sup>6</sup> In an interview with Charley Reilly, Updike himself offers an explanation of the characters' changing names, saying: 'my inquiries into the uncertainty principle, quantum physics, and quantum mechanics reminded me of a riddle which has always perplexed me: why is our external world so solid and consistent? Why is there a little nick in this plate, and why does it retain its nick-ness day after day? . . . why am I *me* instead of somebody else? Then how did it happen that I wasn't, oh, a monk slaughtered a thousand years ago? So it seemed a reasonable narrative experiment—I did something similar [to his use of quantum science in *Toward the End of Time* (1997)] in *Gertrude and Claudius* with name changes' (Updike and Reilly, 2002, p. 230). Aside from Updike's own analysis, only limited critical attention has been paid to the different names of characters. Most notably, in his review of the novel 'Spoiled Rotten in Denmark' (2000), Richard Eder discusses the main characters in relation to Shakespeare's play, arguing: 'each of the three – Gerutha/Geruthe/Gertrude and her two husbands, that is – is drawn with an intriguing doubleness and with unexpected ruptures. It is as if the stage characters had drifted from their roles to reflect other possibilities, becoming figures of appealingly layered intention' (para. 7). For other critical discussions of the characters' names, see, for example: James Hopkin's review of the novel 'Bard Times' (2000, paras. 3-5); and Laura Savu, 'In Desire's Grip: Gender, Politics, and Intertextual Games in Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius*' (2003, p. 24).

## 2. Adulterous Parallelism

Reminiscent of Edward and Florence's anti-climatic honeymoon night in *On Chesil Beach*, Gerutha and Horwendil's marriage night is a sexual disappointment. Exposing herself and exposed to her own sexuality, much like Florence, Gerutha prepares for her conjugal moment of first-time sex:

By the snapping firelight her nakedness felt like a film of thin metal, an ultimate angelic costume. From throat to ankles her skin had never seen the sun. Gerutha was as white as an onion, as smooth as a root fresh-pulled from the earth. She was intact. This beautiful intactness, her life's treasure, she roused herself—betranced before the leaping fire, the tips of her falling hair reflecting its hearthbound fury—to bestow, as decreed by man and God, upon her husband. She was aroused. She turned to show Horwendil her pure front. (Updike, 2000, pp. 24-5)

In a moment of comic bathos, Gerutha's unveiling is met by the reality that Horwendil 'was asleep' (p. 25). This sexual flop is rectified the following day, and Gerutha's virginity is dutifully acknowledged by the Lord Chamberlain, Corambus/Corambis/Polonius. For the young wife, 'days healed the hurt of the deflowering, and the nights brought her a slowly learned delight, but Gerutha could not rid herself of the memory of that first snub' (p. 26). Thus, despite coming to experience some sexual pleasure with her husband, Gerutha's marital sex life is vitiated by her inability to ignore the past. Indeed, she even reflects on Horwendil's past life before her: 'she felt something abstract in his passion: it was but an aspect of his general vigor. He would have been lusty with any woman, and of course had been with a number before her' (p. 26). Gerutha's fixation with the past therefore gives credence to Corambis's warning that "'Without forgetfulness, milady, life would be intolerable'" (p. 121). But the repetitive and monotonous quality of Gerutha's

(sex) life with Horwendil is caused as much by her preoccupation with the future as it is by her inability to forget the past. When she is pregnant with Amleth, Gerutha specifically brings sex and the future together as she is aware of the fact that ‘as the creature within her grew, displacing organs of which she had never before been conscious, and generating inconvenient surges of distemper and yearning, nausea and faintness, her father was failing’ (p. 28). For Gerutha, then, the gestation of one life temporally coincides with the demise of another, the death of a present king with the birth of an heir. Consequently, Gerutha’s fixation with the past and the future marks her sex life with Horwendil as being fully in time, rather than being temporally exceptional. In, and completely preoccupied with, time, Gerutha’s married life is characterised as a temporal cycle of non-events, and the narrator replicates the repetitive nature of her ‘betranced days of married boredom’ (p. 169) in an elliptical summary of her existence:

O the days, the days in their all but unnoticed beauty and variety—days of hurtling sun and shade like the dapples of an exhilarated beast, days of steady strong cold and a blood-red dusk, tawny autumn days smelling of hay and grapes, spring days tasting of salty wave-froth . . . days of ceremony . . . days when she and he had made love the night before . . . menstrual days, saints’ days—the days passed, and Gerutha felt them stealing away with her life, all the while that she moved through such activities and engagements as befitted a Scandinavian queen, helpmate to a handsome blond king who with the years grew ever more admirable and remote, as if enlarging as he receded from her. (pp. 45-7)

Despite Geruthe’s attempts to make her husband look like her father, then, she fails to find fulfilment with Horvendile and interprets her married existence as a loss of time, or, rather, as an overly temporal experience. Indeed, she directly blames her husband for her situation, emphatically telling Fengon: “‘in that he has taken from me the days of my life, and encouraged in me a mummifying royal propriety, I do hate him’” (p. 132). Furthermore, as Geruthe explains to Corambis, her sense of temporal loss is combined with a feeling of spatial captivity: “‘Elsinore has been a dungeon to me ever since I

watched my father die within it. He had pledged me to continue as its mistress. It is not natural to live where we have lived since birth: our spreading roots must snake through heaps of old debris” (p. 94). The dullness of Geruthe’s married life is corroborated by Fengon when, confronted by his brother about the attention he pays the queen, he withholds the sexual nature of their relationship, and explains: “My tales of exotic travel give some relief to her monotonous days. She has an adventurous mind, but is much pent-up in royal routine” (p. 140). Ultimately, Geruthe escapes ‘the established order’ (p. 185) of her life with Horvendile not through stories but through the incestuous sexual relationship with her brother-in-law, which opens up to her the excitement of living between and passing through parallel spatiotemporalities.<sup>7</sup>

To exploit the exceptional possibilities of their relationship, the adulterous couple “must find a better stage—one not borrowed from our king” (p. 92), and Geruthe successfully secures such a stage when she deceives Corambis into letting her use his personal lodge. The use of the lodge allows Geruthe to move away from – outside – married time and space. It is an ‘intermediate station’ (p. 204), geographically equidistant from both Horvendil and Fengon’s private households, and thereby symbolises Geruthe’s position between her two partners. Geruthe herself characterises the temporal dimension of this hideaway when she instructs Fengon to “Let Corambis’s haven be ours for the odd

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<sup>7</sup> Many critics have argued for the positive effects of Gertrude and Claudius’s affair. For instance, in ‘In Desire’s Grip’ Laura Savu argues: ‘the erotic reveals to Gertrude another world of power and depth on the other side of her royal routines. By carrying on an affair with Claudius, she temporarily escapes the trap of marriage to King Hamlet, a marriage she comes to see as a death-in-life’ (2003, p. 35). In Savu’s analysis, the affair offers Gertrude the ‘hectic gratification of belonging to two men at once’ (p. 39), and it allows her to experience a “coherent self” (p. 36), a self not constricted by the label ‘wife’ (p. 36). In ‘Conclusion: U(PDIKE) & P(OSTMODERNISM)’ (2006), John Duvall argues that ‘it is [Gertrude’s] ability to act duplicitously toward both men that is the final mark of her renewal’ (p. 172). In ‘With Dirge in Marriage’ (2000), Stephen Greenblatt discusses the positive effects of adultery for Claudius, claiming: ‘lying and deceit . . . signal some resistance to the smug, provincial conventionality that rules in Denmark’ (p. 37). See also, James Schiff, ‘Hamlet Predux’ (2000), and Kathleen Verduin, ‘Updike, Women, and Mythologized Sexuality’ (2006).

hour” (p. 112). The ‘odd’ hours she seeks are both limited in duration and are outside of marriage, providing her with a momentary escape from her life with Horvendil. When Geruthe tells Fengon about Corambis’s hideaway, the exceptionality of their incestuous affair is anticipated by the way in which ‘they hesitated at the edge of the incestuous crime yawning at their feet’ (p. 105). At this moment, the couple are at a threshold; a spatiotemporal nexus opens up before them.

Initially, the affair allows Geruthe to suspend her married life, and, as part of this suspension of married time, she is successful in ‘remembering her grievances against father, husband, and son as if they were all episodes of an amusing history belonging to another woman’ (p. 115). Despite her efforts, however, Geruthe’s ability to forget her married life is not absolute, as evident when she undresses for Fengon and is ‘reminded of something from a far corner of her life—a wifely memory faintly tasting of humiliation’ (p. 127). But, such temporary remembrances notwithstanding, Geruthe is able to achieve odd moments of Nietzschean unhistoricity and its correlative happiness (see Chapter II, p. 82). In particular, the single act of fellatio in the narrative symbolises Geruthe’s ability to experience unhistorical happiness. As the reader is told,

like a big fish she slithered down in the bed, to revive his manhood with a Byzantine technique he had taught her. She liked it, this blind suckling, this grubbing at nature’s root. She fought gagging, and tugged at his balls. There was no need to think. Let be. His responsive needy swelling ousted every scruple from her head. Like maggots they would fatten, then fly. (p. 134)

In her fish-like reduction, Geruthe focuses on the root, a base and natural life-producing organ. She is blind to everything apart from her ‘suckling’ and her attitude to Fengon’s likely ejaculation – not thinking and letting be – symbolises the way in which the affair more generally allows her to experience unhistorical moments. Like both maggots and Fengon’s sperm, Geruthe’s scruples will escape and fly away, metonymically marking her

freedom from temporal thoughts.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the affair provides Geruthe with a form of temporal release, as she admits when Fengon worries about the couple's situation: "I have been heedless. . . . I was more indignant than I knew. Thirty years of lofty restriction gave intensity to my appetites and released them without a proper thought of consequences. Or if there was a thought, it paled before a queen's habituated belief in her entitlements" (p. 133).

As well as suspending the time of marriage, the affair itself is marked by temporal abeyance, which results from the couple's mutual flirtation once they have secured the use of Corambis's lodge. During this flirtatious period, the couple 'kissed, but not as avidly, as moistly, as they had in Elsinore. Here, in their own, more modest castle, they advanced with more caution, without the King's paternal protection, attempting to domesticate the outrage their bodies were plotting' (p. 114). In his introduction to *On Flirtation* (1994), the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips argues: 'if our descriptions of sexuality are tyrannized by

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<sup>8</sup> In *Blind Date*, Dufourmantelle argues that sex and philosophy both help us to forget, and particularly to forget death. She contends: 'our finite nature is a prop for both sex and philosophy. Sex responds to death by canceling out time; so does philosophy. The one uses desire, and so does the other. But sex suspends time for as long as the conjunction of bodies lasts, for as long as we are obsessed by desire for a skin, a face, a name, as long as we remain caught up in the sway of the moment and the act. Jouissance can be construed as a moment provisionally outside of time and without duration, in Bergson's sense, a space of pure letting-go on the subject's part, in which forgetting time prefigures forgetting death, forgetting the mortal body. A blackout via the senses, a flash without a future' (2007, pp. 16-17). Within this discussion, Dufourmantelle notes that 'nowhere do we find a forgetting of death, but philosophy, like sex, will have lived a long time with the illusion that it entertains an ultimately privileged and serene relation with eternity. And it is hard to intervene and disturb that understanding, as it is hard to wake a sleeping child. The idea that thought has the privilege of establishing itself in a kingdom from which all effractions of time are banished is equaled only, perhaps, by the obscure certainty of two persons who are making love that they have, at that instant, no more accounts to render to time' (pp. 17-18). Furthermore, in her analysis of the *kairos* Dufourmantelle reflectively argues: 'does sex realize *kairos*? The right moment, the perfect instant? Does sex grant us plenitude in the instant? Our desire to merge, to become one, to forget everything with the other finds its ideal in this experience of the *kairos*. It is the desire for one's very self to dissolve into something else that would be the world itself, its whiteness, a blind space in which you and I have disappeared from the scene, together' (p. 41). On the relationship between sex and forgetting, also see Dufourmantelle (p. 36).

various stories of committed purpose – sex as reproduction, sex as heterosexual intercourse, sex as intimacy – flirtation puts in disarray our sense of an ending’ (1995, pp. xviii-xix). In *Gertrude and Claudius*, the couple’s flirtations temporarily undermine the usual trajectory of sex, which ends in (male) orgasm and, possibly, offspring. Through the affair, Gertrude suspends the time and space of marriage, and the couple themselves delay the future-to-come. The temporal effects of flirtation are replicated in the narrative, as it approaches the couple’s first moment of sexual intercourse only to withdraw from it. For instance, during one *rendezvous* at Corambis’s lodge, the narrator describes how Fengon’s

hands sought her loins, her breasts through the embroidered bliaut, with its welts of thread, that sheathed her from neck to heels. A ridge of dew appeared on Geruthe’s upper lip, which bore a transparent down he had never noticed before; her hand sought below his belted velvet tunic the baubly stalk. . . . But for all this compulsive ardor, these swathed caresses and stifled groans, the hissing and broken murmurs, the spiritual undertaking was too great to be consummated today. The weight of fatality was too heavy for their mere flesh. (Updike, 2000, pp. 118-19)

Through this technique of anticipation and deferral, the narrator prolongs the reader’s anticipation of the couple’s delayed sexual climax, thereby creating a sense of the suspension at play in the affair itself.

The narrative iteration of flirtation also affects the intertextual relationship between *Gertrude and Claudius* and *Hamlet*. As Phillips argues more generally,

in flirtation you never know whether the beginning of the story – the story of the relationship – will be the end; flirtation, that is to say, exploits the idea of surprise. From a sadistic point of view it is as though the known and the wished-for end is being refused, deferred or even denied. But from a pragmatic point of view one could say that a space is being created in which aims or ends can be worked out; the assumed wish for the more or less obvious sexual combinations, or commitments, may be a way of pre-empting the elaboration of, making time for, less familiar possibilities. Flirtation, if it can be sustained, is a way of cultivating wishes, of playing for time. Deferral can make room. (1995, p. xix)

In *Gertrude and Claudius*, the couple's flirtations momentarily suspend the end of their relationship as portrayed in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Their flirtatious behaviour creates the illusion of possibility and consequently produces a narrative, textual space, which defers the future pull of *Hamlet* and at least gives the illusion of forestalling Gertrude and Claudius's literary demise. Thus, their relationship provides a narrative dimension to Phillips's argument that 'flirtation was the relationship for those who were too fearful of death, those who must agree to make nothing happen' (p. xxiii). Indeed, their 'flirtation keeps the consequences going' (p. xxiii). But, despite the possibilities flirtation offers, the protagonists of a prequel are ultimately trapped by their predetermined narrative future and can only make a failed 'attempt to re-open, to rework, the plot' (p. xxv).<sup>9</sup> Thus, the narrative of flirtation in *Gertrude and Claudius* only momentarily delays the future-to-come, the necessary diegetic progression from ante-text to text.<sup>10</sup>

As if aware that temporal suspension cannot ultimately provide her with satisfaction, Gertrude eventually adopts a positionality in which she is inside and outside married and adulterous time and space simultaneously. This tactical development is similar to Agamben's theoretical shift in *Homo Sacer* (1995) where he argues that 'the state of

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<sup>9</sup> In a lecture entitled 'Why Can't Time Run Backwards?' (given at The University of St Andrews on 27 November 2009), Sir Anthony Legget argued that future science will be dramatically shaped by new investigations into how time works and what effects it has on the fundamental laws of physics. As part of his speculative lecture, Legget argued that the idea that the past causes the future might have to be rejected. On a textual level, the ante-text/text relationship provides an example of the way in which the future can cause the past as the past narrative of the ante-text is controlled – and to some extent – caused by the future narrative of the text. The ante-text does not cause the events of that future narrative. For Dufourmantelle, a similar relationship between the past and the future characterises some encounters. Quoting Nietzsche, she writes: "Our destined vocation disposes of us, even when we do not yet know it; it is the future that regulates our today." The same thing can be said of certain encounters. One does not decide on an encounter, it is the encounter that is destined for you' (2007, p. 96).

<sup>10</sup> In his discussion of the relationship between *Gertrude and Claudius* and *Hamlet* in 'With Dirge in Marriage' (2000), Stephen Greenblatt argues: 'the novel sees that end coming – there is no escaping the most famous tragic plot in world literature – but it asks us to hold the endgame at bay, or rather to reach back before the endgame has begun' (p. 36).

exception is thus not so much a spatiotemporal suspension as a complex topological figure in which not only the exception and the rule but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside, pass through one another' (1998, p. 37). In the narrative, the change from suspension to topological complexity is marked by the way in which the lovers no longer always remove themselves to their secret retreat. Rather, Geruthe

and Fengon seized what mattresses there were, at times too impatient for the convenience of the mock court they had established in Corambis's lodge: a grassy bramble not a league beyond Elsinore's moat, or a stone niche in a little-used gallery where hiked skirts and lowered breeches created sufficient access for their souls' emissaries, those lower parts so rich in angelic sensation. (Updike, 2000, p. 129)

By bringing their sexual affair into Elsinore, the couple provide a literal example of the way in which Geruthe passes through the inside and outside of marriage and adultery. By being in two times and spaces at once, Geruthe can be seen to be neither fully in nor out of time and space at all. Her spatiotemporal location is indeterminate and, in addition to incestuous exceptionality, she thereby experiences the exceptional quality of adulterous parallelism. This complex situation is anticipated early in the narrative when Gerutha rides a horse to Feng's estate and 'felt herself inside this skull, seeing in two directions at once, the two views failing to meld' (p. 55). At times worried by her dual existence – 'two of her, for two brothers—the fancy gave rise to the unease, the foreboding, that she sought each day to keep down, like a surge of nausea' (p. 117) – Geruthe ultimately enjoys it. Indeed, the 'two views' do not meld, but Geruthe passes through affair and marriage and twists the two spatiotemporalities around her, working through both as if travelling along a Möbius strip. Due to her ability to move through both relationships, Geruthe is able to rediscover pleasure in marital sex. As the narrator tells us, 'Geruthe found she relished even the deception, the rank duplicity of having two men. Horvendile was pleased by how quickly he aroused her now' (p. 130). As a result of its intricate topology, Geruthe delights

in ‘her quickened duplicitous state; she felt the thrill of deception between her legs, where two men contended, one the world’s anointed and the other her own anointed. She knew them, and neither wholly knew her’ (p. 131).

In his analysis of the affair, Fengon tells Geruthe: “‘We have been wallowing, these summer months, in the blithe interim’” (p. 134). But whilst he exists diachronically within a period of suspension – stuck with a form of flirtation between event and outcome – his comment more accurately reflects Geruthe’s position as the affair enables her to live synchronically between two parallel times as well as diachronically between event and outcome. Indeed, Geruthe is a producer of duplicity, simultaneity and parallelism – of the possibility of exceptional sex.<sup>11</sup> After she has sex with Fengon for the first time, Geruthe’s doubled, indeterminate position is characterised in narrative terms, as the reader is told that Geruthe ‘felt this would happen but once, this unfolding of herself, and so she was luxuriously attentive to it, as if she were both storyteller and heroine’ (p. 129). However, the description of Geruthe’s sexual joy more appositely characterises the delight she finds in adulterous exceptionality than in this particular sexual moment with Fengon. As if a topologically complex figure herself, Geruthe folds and unfolds herself around marriage and adultery, enjoying the sexual pleasures both spatiotemporalities offer her.

### 3. Abandonment

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<sup>11</sup> In his essay ‘Bored with Sex?’ (2003), Phillips argues that duplicity is essential to Freudian aesthetics, claiming: ‘[Freud] is encouraging us to be connoisseurs of the cover story. For him our lives literally depend on the aesthetics of duplicity. If we are not the artists of our own pleasure there will be no pleasure (and no art). . . . After Freud, being consistent is something that one might be accused of’ (p. 7). In *Gertrude and Claudius*, the inconsistency – the cover story of sexuality – of which Phillips speaks is translated into an aesthetics of spatiotemporal indeterminability. (‘Bored with Sex?’ is the written version of Phillips’s October 2002 British Academy lecture entitled ‘Freud?’. It was published in the *London Review of Books* in 2003 as ‘Bored with Sex?’, and it is to this essay that I refer.)

Throughout their adulterous relationship, Fengon gives Geruthe a series of presents and eventually overwhelms her with the third, a silk dress.<sup>12</sup> As the narrator tells us, ‘Geruthe touched the shimmering cloth, and in that touch was her undoing’ (Updike, p. 126). By trying on the dress, Geruthe foretastes the pleasure of exceptional sex, which the narrator expresses in terms of abandonment: “‘I should put it on now, for its giver to appraise. Stand there.’” She wondered at her tone of command. She had mounted to an eminence of abandon’ (p. 126). Despite using ‘abandon’ here in its seemingly everyday use, through their incestuous affair Geruthe and Fengon experience a form of exceptional abandonment, that is, the way in which the *homo sacer* is placed outside, but retains a relation to, the legal sphere. Indeed, when Geruthe tries to secure Corambis’s personal lodge, she tells him: “‘If I cannot have it, then I may be galled to hate this entire polity that hems me in’” (p. 96). Geruthe thereby illustrates the marked difference she sees between Corambis’s lodge and the lawful *polis*. Correlatively, she has an acute sense of the division between nature and the law, *physis* and *nomos*, which is made evident when she tells Fengon: “‘There are sins against the Church, and sins against nature, which is God’s older and purer handiwork. Our sin has been these many years one of denying our natures’” (p. 90). In opposition to lawful, political life, Geruthe/Gertrude’s ‘own sense was of tides, natural and supernatural, to which wisdom submits, seeking victory in surrender’ (p. 189), and she specifically sees the relationship between people and the natural world as exceptional, as, she claims, “‘nature remains without and within us’” (p. 100).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen Greenblatt is correct, I believe, when he argues: ‘up to this point, they have only been heavily flirting. It is the silk that brings the long erotic dance to its climax’ (2000, p. 37).

<sup>13</sup> Much critical attention has been paid to the tension between Gertrude’s religion and her natural sensibility. For example, in ‘Updike, Women, and Mythologized Sexuality’ (2006), Kathleen Verduin argues: ‘their indifference to mortality a tacit negation of Christian supernaturalism, the women in Updike’s fiction betray an equally untroubled acceptance

By removing themselves to Corambis's lodge, Geruthe and Fengon literally take themselves away from Horvendile, the sovereign power, and the centre of his realm, Elsinore castle. They therefore abandon themselves from the juridico-political state, and the sense of their abandonment is marked by the "inhuman lake and woods" (p. 98) that surround Corambis's lodge. The couple have left the *polis* and its human laws, and Geruthe herself senses the suspension of the law when they are together in Corambis's lodge: 'the rain outside, the heat at her back, the silk on her skin immersed her in nature, where there was no sin, no turning back' (p. 127). Transposed into the language of theology, Geruthe sees her state of exception as alegal, which renders transgression impossible and, to her mind at least, therefore removes the possibility that her incestuous affair be considered a crime. For Geruthe, this sense of abandonment is not restricted to specific spatial or geographical limitations. For instance, when the lovers have sex in Elsinore castle, Geruthe feels her abandonment as a form of challenge, as a 'protest [that] had been lurking in her, and recklessness, and treachery, and these emerged in the sweat and contention of adulterous coupling' (p. 129). Specifically, Gertrude's protest is against legality and having to endure unexceptional sex, which she acutely senses when she is in the marital bed, physically close to her sovereign husband: 'at night, reliving the afternoon's embraces, she would lick her pillow in hunger to be with her lover again—her redeemer from lawful life's deadening emptiness, her own self turned inside out and given a man's bearish, boyish form. Her father's court held no more eager slut than she' (p. 130).

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of Nature's second "organic imperative," sex. . . . Even as late as *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), Hamlet's adulterous mother exalts Nature as "God's older and purer handiwork". . . . Cast as ancillary to a devouring earth goddess, women in Updike's work transmogrify into adversaries of a patriarchal religion that presumably demeans their natural prerogatives' (2006, pp. 64-5). Verduin further argues: 'in what seems a transparently self-serving paradox, then, Updike's Christian protagonists repeatedly flee "Nature's fatality" by gratification of natural instinct; religious orthodoxy and the temptation to adultery writhe in symbiotic tension' (p. 66). See also, Greenblatt (2000, p. 37), and Ron Rosenbaum, 'Updike's Gertrude and Claudius [sic]: It's His Valentine to Eve' (2000, para. 2).

Unlike Florence's negative experience of her abandonment to Edward in *On Chesil Beach*, Geruthe sees abandonment as a positive experience, as it reduces her to her bare, animalistic sexual existence. Her desire for this form of exceptional sex is emphasised by the way in which 'she would have lain down in warm mud for [Fengon], even the mud of the pigsty, to enter the exaltation she found in his brute love' (p. 129). Moreover, Fengon also relishes sexual animalisation:

Unlike Horvendile, Fengon was at home in the pit of the flesh. His soul did not dart looks about for an exit to some safer, more public chamber, lit by social chatter and churchly candles. When done, the King was anxious to sulk off to his own closet; a nature-hating piety learned in Jutland unmanned him. Love's gratifications, violent and uncaring when part of his pirate raids, bordered in his mind on the Devil's domains. Whereas Fengon was content to loiter in a twinned concupiscence, telling Geruthe over and over, with his tongue and eyes and rethickened horn, all the truth about herself that she could hold. (pp. 129-30)

In contrast to Horwendil who laments how people are "Sent from the abode of angels to live on this earth among beasts and filth" (p. 18), Fengon enjoys the primal baseness of sex. He is able to linger in animal coupling and he himself is portrayed as being animalistic. His penis is described as a thick horn and when he enters Corambis's lodge through the window Geruthe sees him as the excepted animal, 'erect and mussed in the room, his wolfish teeth sheepishly grinning in his speckled oval beard' (p. 105). The combination of his wolfish teeth and sheepish grin gives Fengon the appearance of a cunning animal, and through their mutual self-abandonment and subsequent animalisation, both lovers live in a 'threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither' (Agamben, 1998, p. 105).

Within their abandoned state, Geruthe and Fengon complicate their animalisation further by the way in which they both at times adopt the qualities of sovereign-like figures

and *homines sacri* alike. Fengon himself acknowledges Geruthe's own sovereignty – “‘The Queen must save herself; her whim is justice, her word is my law’” (Updike, 2000, p. 125), he declares – but when he is angry about her renewed sexual relations with Horvendile, he threatens her: “‘But you *do* submit. Like the lowest trull, you spread your legs for a repulsive customer. I should beat you. I should pound the pale slime of that spouting cock from your gut’” (p. 131). Thus, the sexual intensity of the adulterers' relationship complicates any literal hierarchy between the two lovers. Sexually, they can be human and animal, sovereign and *homo sacer*, and Geruthe delightedly acknowledges that Fengon ‘uncovered in her not just the warrior but the slave. Had he bid her lie down in pigshit she would have squeezed her buttocks together in the clench and rejoiced to be thus befouled’ (p. 130). With Fengon, then, Geruthe is simultaneously a sovereign-like warrior and the subjected slave, revelling in her sexual bare life, rolling in shit.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to their sexual abandonment and their own complication of the sovereign-*homo sacer* dynamic, Geruthe and Fengon are ultimately at the mercy of a literal sovereign, Horvendile. Fengon specifically sees the crime of adultery in relation to the sovereign's sacredness, thinking: ‘she was thirty-five, at her peak of ripeness. As long as she could bear the King another heir, it would be extreme treason and an affront to Heaven were any other Dane to lie with her. The royal blood was sacred, God's blood on earth’ (p. 75). Fengon is made fully aware of his political subjugation and animalisation when he is eventually confronted about the affair by Horvendile. As he declares to Fengon, Horvendile plans to punish both wife and brother by abandoning them:

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<sup>14</sup> In ‘In Desire's Grip’, Laura Savu discusses the narrative's complication of conceived gender binaries, arguing: ‘in positing the erotic drive as an empowering element in the dynamics of gender relations, Updike implicitly takes a critical aim at the male fantasy through which woman is either objectified or idealized and which denies her both agency and voice. The narrative resists identifying the masculine as simply active and creative and the feminine as passive and receptive: by the same token, it subverts Freud's claims, according to which the subject of desire is male and the object of desire is female’ (2003, p. 30).

‘The wicked brother . . . deserves obliteration but would be granted permanent exile. The execution of one whose same blood beats in the King might disrupt the plain minds of those who take us as divinity. Banishment is more grand than execution, suspending the sinner prolongedly in his regret and envy; it could even be construed a mercy, to one long self-exiled and one who would, like Satan, prefer retreat in the earth’s bowels to having his eyes tormented by the radiance of his conqueror, his rightful lord.’ (pp. 147-8)

The sentence Horvendile places upon his brother emphasises the sacredness of the sovereign as well as abandonment’s quality of suspension. Far from being a mercy, however, Fengon’s abandonment is a sexual punishment, removing him – banning him – from his lover Geruthe. As Horvendile gleefully tells his brother, Fengon’s literal abandonment will mark him as the *homo sacer* who can be killed without bringing punishment upon his killer:

‘You will wander as a pauper, Fengon, and the mark of shame and malice my hired tongues set upon you will make your murderer a hero. You will be less than dirt, for dirt has no name to dishonor. Burn, if you will burn, in the knowledge that beautiful Geruthe still sits wived to me, however chastened and grieved by such thorns of remorse in her bosom as will help her sacrificial soul to sing in Heaven, at the end of all our squalid trials.’ (p. 149)

Conscious of his punishment, ‘Fengon felt himself in his brother’s long icy eyes no more than a gnat to be crushed—already crushed, already a small smear on this page of history’ (p. 149). As the sovereign, Horvendile reduces Fengon to an insect and puts him back into time, into the past time of history. For Geruthe, sovereign abandonment will also be an intimately torturous punishment. As Horvendile explains to Fengon, “‘her fate is what it has been these thirty years, to be immutably my wife. You have misjudged me, my incestuous, covetous brother, if you think that I am second to you even in love of Geruthe’” (p. 149). Sovereign abandonment will separate Fengon and Geruthe, thereby suspending – if not ending – their own pleasure of abandoned, animalistic sex. Fengon will

be reduced to the life of the *homo sacer* and Geruthe returned to the time and space of her marriage, to unexceptional sex with her husband, the king.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. Re-iterations

During the affair, Fengon considers the possibility that the adulterers might be exposed, and as a result of his concerns Geruthe senses ‘the ratchet of desire in him slip, displaced by other, more thoughtful machinations: his brown eyes darkened—his black pupils expanded—looking into the future’s cave’ (Updike, 2000, p. 132). Subsequently, ‘a cool shadow of forethought had fallen across their bodies; their rapture was chilled’ (p. 132), and for Geruthe the future’s arrival diminishes the possibility of exceptional sex, undoing the pleasure she found in adulterous parallelism: ‘she closed her eyes. He was tipping her, sliding her off their raft, making her think toward their fathomless doom’ (p. 133). As a result of Fengon’s worries about the future, Geruthe begins to be pulled back into time and her two spatiotemporalities start to meet and thereby cancel out her ability to pass through and between them.

Gertrude’s fears of returning to an unexceptional temporality are partly realised after Horwendil/Horvendile/Hamlet’s murder and with it the end of adulterous

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<sup>15</sup> In a radio interview about *Gertrude and Claudius* with Juan Williams, Updike considers the dangers of adultery in the medieval period, claiming: ‘sleeping with another man, for a queen, meant death in those days, and so she knew she was playing for big stakes’ (2000, para. 106). Updike elaborates on this idea by arguing: ‘I think their behaviour was correspondingly reckless, often, because they thought they’d better live intensely now; there might not be a tomorrow’ (2000, para. 108). In his interview with Reilly, Updike specifically reflects upon Gertrude’s precarious position, commenting: ‘the role of a woman in that world was certainly off to the side of the circles where power resides. Even a queen was very much at the mercy of the men in her world’ (2000, p. 224).

parallelism.<sup>16</sup> She is aware of this danger when Claudius proposes to her, believing that it will take effort not to become fully present to him: ‘she could hardly deny him; he had adored her from afar and, come closer to flesh out his fantastic image of her, had proven entertaining and responsive to the realities of her person. She would train him out of his overestimation gently, day by day, keeping alive the cherished little princess he had revived’ (pp. 174-5). With her marriage to Claudius, however, Gertrude senses a certain finality, believing that ‘his courting of her, his impossible romantic love, had been carried through to this triumphant nuptial conclusion’ (p. 172), and the unexceptional nature of the marriage becomes evident during the wedding celebrations themselves:

She had loved, when they had met dangerously in Gurre Forest, his relaxation into lawlessness, his abandon to the moment once he had achieved his goal – conquest of her, regardless of the consequences. Now they were living into an aftermath of consequences, treading in time to the timbrel, trying to survive the extinction of the adulterous, rapturous couple who had existed outside Elsinore’s walls. The seducer had become a public man, his far-off beloved a daily presence. (p. 171)<sup>17</sup>

‘Treading in time’, Gertrude no longer experiences exceptionality. Rather, the married couple now live in a time of consequences and Gertrude is fully present to her lover. The legal bond of marriage pulls Gertrude out of the state of exception and back into the *polis*, and Gertrude herself is aware ‘that the crime of adultery and the fever of duplicity were alike receded, buried within her consecrated bridal status’ (p. 193). In addition to being her lawful husband, Claudius himself is now also the sovereign monarch – the embodiment of

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<sup>16</sup> In her reading of the novel, Laura Savu argues: ‘by committing adultery, Gertrude removes herself from “established commerce,” [marriage] but only temporarily, for soon (when she re-marries) the history starts repeating itself, and Gertrude finds herself confined in a new prison, built of her own accord’ (2003, p. 31, citing Luce Irigaray). Furthermore, Savu argues that once the affair is over ‘objectification has replaced idealization’ (p. 40).

<sup>17</sup> Gertrude’s acceptance of the marriage proposal can be seen as a form of decision, as, according to Phillips in *On Flirtation*, “‘Every conclusive decision brings flirtation to an end.’ Perhaps for people who can’t make choices, death is the exemplary decision. In flirtation one does not take risks, one only sustains their possibility’ (1995, p. xxi, citing Georg Simmel).

the law – and Gertrude expresses her disappointment about her husband's transformation in terms of gestation and future responsibility: 'Claudius in his old guise had spoken to her with the careless freedom of one with nothing to hide; now there was a certain formality, a pregnant circumspection' (p. 169). As in her first marriage, Gertrude now thinks about the past as well as the future and believes that '*Claudius just wants things all to go smoothly, now that he is king, the past sealed off, history. But history isn't dead like that; it lives in us, it got us here*' (p. 166). Where Gertrude earlier projected her history onto another in an effort to experience temporal exceptionality, Claudius wishes to forget the past in order to live fully in time now that he is king.

Within this second marriage, however, Gertrude does experience moments of sexual pleasure as Claudius 'still maintained all the shows of love, defying her prejudice that it weakens a man's devotion when that devotion becomes lawful' (p. 196). Furthermore,

she had feared, of herself and Claudius, that their passion might not survive the transition from adultery's fearful wilderness to the security of proclaimed marriage; but it had. In that way they had both proven sturdy, and worthy of the trouble and labor of mating. Being with Claudius in bed was meeting herself come from afar, a forthright and unforced reunion. (p. 202)

Gertrude's second marriage is, then, characterised by a tension between existing within the strictures of legal, court life and experiencing moments of sexual exceptionality. She has given up 'adultery's fearful wildness' and the duplicity offered by adulterous parallelism for 'security'. However, Claudius and she are still able to experience sexual pleasure, and during sex the couple's bare, animal life is rejuvenated. They are 'sturdy' and enjoy the primal nature of 'mating'. Moreover, when Gertrude has sex with Claudius she is at one with herself, which potentially returns her to her younger self and the incestuous relationships she shared with her father, her first husband and her adulterous partner,

Feng/Fengon. The way in which marital sex with Claudius rekindles Gertrude's incestuous desires becomes more apparent when, having had wedding-night intercourse, the couple cannot sleep. Despite the annoyance of still being awake, Gertrude 'felt as she had when a girl, on a freezing winter night, laid in her cot in a tumble of furs, that tingled and tickled and were tucked tight around her, so her body revelled in a warmth stolen from these other creatures' (p. 176). However, this enjoyable sensation is almost immediately lost as Claudius then makes Gertrude feel like her old nurse Marlgar: 'he turned his back, and seemed at last to sleep, now that he had stirred her up. She resented it. He was making her into Marlgar, awake while he drifted off' (p. 177). This quick transformation epitomises the dichotomous situation in which Gertrude now finds herself. When Gertrude has sex with Claudius, she momentarily rediscovers her bare life and sexual pleasure. But, as Claudius's turning-away from her symbolises, the marriage also returns her to her dutiful, adult life.

During this complex marriage – the problematic nature of which is also implied throughout the final part of the narrative by Gertrude's unease at seeing the ghost of her dead husband and Claudius's secrecy over, and subsequent anxiety about, old Hamlet's murder – Gertrude turns her erotic attentions towards her son, with whom she has an extremely awkward relationship. As Gerutha tells Horwendile in the first part of the narrative, Amleth "'is tormented by the half of him that belongs to his mother'" (p. 53). Later on, Claudius substantiates such doubts, telling Gertrude: "'you are too much woman for him, my dear, too warm for his comfort'" (p. 199). Moreover, Claudius specifically links old Hamlet's death to young Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude, claiming: "'He feels he willed it, in desiring you'" (p. 199). Like Claudius, Gerutha herself gives a somewhat Oedipal interpretation of her relationship with her son, explaining how Amleth "'can be one moment affectionate, as though he understands me better than any man ever

has, and the next moment be just a boy, turning his back as if I am of no more account than a wet nurse to the weaned”” (p. 41).<sup>18</sup> As Gertrude tells Claudius, she also believes that both old and young Hamlet judge her sexually: ““Now little Hamlet has it, that same gift. Of making me feel dirty and ashamed and unworthy”” (p. 165). The sexual nature of this intensely intimate mother-son relationship is emphatically marked by the way in which Gertrude interprets Hamlet’s gaze during her wedding celebrations. As she looks at her son, Gertrude thinks: ‘always between them, mother and son, stood her failure to feel herself loved enough by his father—a transparent, unsayable obstruction through which he gazed at her as if through the caul in which he had been born. He had hurt her so much, being born. No person had ever hurt her as Hamlet had’ (p. 172). Through her allusion to the caul, Gertrude infantilises her son and sees him as if still *in utero*.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the membrane marks a paradoxically intimate distance between mother and son, working as a threshold that joins and separates them simultaneously. In giving birth to her son, Gertrude experienced a physically intimate pain, and the continuation of that hurt is marked by the caul, which even implies a possibly sexual tension between the two.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Many critics have noted the echoes of Freudian criticism in the novel. In his discussion of this theme, John Duvall writes: ‘Updike’s purpose in *Gertrude and Claudius* is not to rewrite history but to rewrite literary history, and this is actually aided by the playful textual anachronisms; not satisfied to borrow only images and lines from *Hamlet*, Updike alludes to the history of *Hamlet* criticism. . . . By writing a prequel to *Hamlet*, Updike is also writing an interpretation of Shakespeare’s play’ (2006, p. 171). For Duvall, *Gertrude and Claudius* ‘works simultaneously as a novel and as a piece of literary criticism’ (p. 172). See also, Greenblatt (2000, p. 36), and Adam Mars-Jones, ‘That Hamlet is Full of Clichés’ (2000, para. 10).

<sup>19</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘caul’ as ‘the amnion or inner membrane inclosing the foetus before birth; *esp.* this or a portion of it sometimes enveloping the head of the child at birth’.

<sup>20</sup> In *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949), Ernest Jones turns to Gertrude’s sensuality as support for Hamlet’s own desires, arguing: ‘as a child Hamlet had experienced the warmest affection for his mother, and this, as is always so, had contained elements of a disguised erotic quality, still more in infancy. The presence of two traits in the Queen’s character accord with this assumption, namely her markedly sensual nature and her passionate fondness for her son’ (1976, p. 80).

The intimacy between Gertrude and Hamlet is intensified through the imagery of hair, which reiterates Rorik's fascination with Gerutha's youthful head of hair at the beginning of the narrative. During both the wedding celebrations and the formal court gathering at the end of the narrative, Gertrude reveals a particular fascination with Hamlet's "spicy-red beard" (p. 200). Specifically, she sees Hamlet's beard as a facial rendering of her vaginal pubic hair, believing that 'its redness was a version of the pale coppery tint of her own luxuriant head, and of her tufts elsewhere. The gauzy beard repelled her; it seemed an intimate aspect of herself lodged within him, which he had decided to flaunt' (pp. 171-2).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Gertrude perceives her son's 'disturbing beard' (p. 172) as sexually menacing because it is 'still so sparse the pallor of his cheeks glanced through' (p. 172). Like pubic hair, Hamlet's beard offers a disquieting glimpse of what it fails to cover fully, his skin and, metonymically, Gertrude's vagina. Through her imaginative interpretation of her son's beard, Gertrude offers a visual figuration of the spatiotemporal arrangement and confusion of self and other, inside and outside, at play in incest. Moreover, she reads her son's exposure of her pubic hair as an invitation to dominate him, thinking: 'he was daring her, in the fullness of his thirty years, to assert

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<sup>21</sup> In Part IV of Allen Ginsberg's 'Kaddish: Proem, narrative, hymmn, lament, litany & fugue' (1961), a similar, albeit inverted, facial/pubic hair relationship is portrayed with the mother's pubic hair being seen as a beard:

O mother  
 what have I left out  
 O mother  
 what have I forgotten  
 O mother  
 farewell  
 with a long black shoe  
 farewell  
 with Communist Party and a broken stocking  
 farewell  
 with six dark hairs on the wen of your breast  
 farewell  
 with your old dress and a long black beard around the vagina. (1999, ll. 1-13)

maternal control over his face' (p. 172). Given her sexual interpretation of Hamlet's beard, Gertrude can be seen to read his daring as an invitation to control him by way of cunnilingus, to initiate sex with her son and thereby satisfy her desires for parent-child incest and the exceptionality it offers.

In the narrative, Gertrude pursues her incestuous desires by attempting to reach her son vicariously through his love interest, Ophelia. Towards the end of Part III, Gertrude speaks to the young woman as she is concerned about the relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet, specifically wondering: 'had Ophelia already yielded that which could not be bartered back? Had she not the womanly wit to set her lover some trials, enhancing her worth in his eyes? Or in her heated innocence had she given him her body's ultimate pledge?' (p. 184). Despite the ostensible show of care for the young woman, Gertrude positions herself more as a seductress than a mother, and her sexual infatuation with her son is made apparent when she advises Ophelia: "'You and he have long lives to spend. It is good to love, good enough to stretch its stages out and hold its climax in long anticipation'" (p. 186). Gertrude's instruction focuses on the relationship between time and sex and is marked by its phallic imagery of an erect – stretched – penis being held until climax. Beyond allowing her to be sexually provocative, the interview enables Gertrude to become vicariously intimate with her son, courting him through his lover 'as if in plotting his marriage she were carrying him again within her – *below my heart*, she had said' (p. 201).<sup>22</sup> The sexual nature of Gertrude's inquisition is marked by the intimacy of bodily contact, and her belief that 'through this prospective wife she could touch him yet' (p. 182) unveils her desire to be physical with her son, which would thereby open up the possibility of exceptional incest.

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<sup>22</sup> In 'In Desire's Grip', Laura Savu argues that Gertrude has a 'vicarious identification with Ophelia' (2003, p. 44), and that she 'uses [Ophelia] as an extension of herself' (p. 44). For Savu, Gertrude shows 'concern for Ophelia's sexual vulnerability as well as her willingness to assist Ophelia in her struggle toward self-understanding' (pp. 44-5).

## 5. The Incestuous Prequel

In his afterword to *Gertrude and Claudius*, Updike offers a simplistic interpretation of the relationship between his text and *Hamlet*, telling the reader: ‘the action of Shakespeare’s play is, *of course*, to follow’ (2000, p. 211, my emphasis). Despite this assertiveness, Updike’s subsequent comments undermine his straightforward explanation. In acknowledgement, he refers beyond the text to the medium of film, explaining: ‘to Kenneth Branagh’s four-hour film of *Hamlet* in 1996 the author owed a revived image of the play and of certain off-stage characters’ (p. 211). Furthermore, Updike also makes reference to academic studies of the play by Salvador de Madariaga, William Kerrigan and G. Wilson Knight. Thus, due to Updike’s allusions to a specific version of Shakespeare’s tragedy in another medium as well as to critical studies of the play, the relationship between novel and play, ante-text and text, now appears more complex. The intricacy of this relationship is metanarratively depicted in Part III of *Gertrude and Claudius* when Gertrude senses her dead husband’s ghost and the narrator provides an analysis of her sensibilities, telling the reader:

Gertrude had always been able to turn toward the natural, trusting in what was obvious, what she could touch—the dyed threads of her embroidery, the feathery seed-bearing heads of the grasses—leaving to the Church the great scraggy superstructure of which nature is but the face, the visible fraction, the forestage holding an evanescent drama. Confidently and universally the priests proclaim this sad and gaudy earth to be but the prelude to an everlasting afterlife. (p. 195)

In the narrator’s examination of Gertrude’s natural tendencies – most evident in her pleasurable experience of animalistic sex – the superstructure of earth and heaven works as a cosmological analogy representing the formal relationship between novel and play, ante-

text and text. Nature is a face, a ‘prelude’ to a spiritual drama, just as *Gertrude and Claudius* narratively precedes *Hamlet*. Furthermore, *Hamlet* is the eternal afterlife. It precedes *Gertrude and Claudius*’s existence yet follows – comes after – its narrative (life).

The type of intricate textual relationality that exists between ante-text and text, which is ignored by Updike but teased out in the analysis of Gertrude’s worldview, is briefly explored by Agamben in ‘Experimentum Linguae’, his preface to *Infancy and History*. Agamben begins the preface:

Every written work can be regarded as the prologue (or rather, the broken cast) of a work never penned, and destined to remain so, because later works, which in turn will be the prologues or the moulds for other absent works, represent only sketches or death masks. The absent work, although it is unplaceable in any precise chronology, thereby constitutes the written works as *prolegomena* or *paralipomena* of a non-existent text; or, in a more general sense, as *parerga* which find their true meaning only in the context of an illegible *ergon*. To take Montaigne’s fine image, these are the frieze of grotesques around an unpainted portrait, or, in the spirit of the pseudo-Platonic letter, the counterfeit of a book which cannot be written. (2007a, p. 3)

For Agamben, then, all texts are prologues of unwritten works. The written texts are ‘*paralipomena*’ and ‘*parerga*’, additions and supplements to those that are unwritten, and this theory of the relation between written and unwritten texts opens up the relationality of ante-text and text. Specifically, Agamben addresses the spatiotemporal qualities of presence and absence. In his theory, the present work (the prologue) is predicated on – or at least results from – the absence of the unwritten work. Furthermore, the absent work cannot be accurately located in chronological time; it is a text-to-come, a text held in abeyance and introduced by the text actually written. Like Agamben’s unwritten work, the ante-text must also first of all be non-present, non-existent, out of time and space. To come into existence, the ante-text must first be spatiotemporally suspended as its future presence is predicated on its initial and necessary absence. However, the ante-text differs from Agamben’s potential work as the ante-text comes into existence after the text but precedes

it narratively. As Derrida writes of the preface in *'Hors Livre: Outwork'*, his preface to *Dissemination* (1972) in which the concept of the preface is deconstructed, the prequel also 'can rightfully have been written only after the fact' (2008, p. 12), only after the narrative it comes before.

As Agamben argues in his analysis of the unwritten work, intertextual relations operate by a logic of supplementarity. In *Gertrude and Claudius*, the concept of the supplement pervades Gerutha/Geruthe/Gertrude's incestuous relationships, and its significance is established early on during the opening marriage discussion between Rorik and Gerutha when Gerutha bluntly tells her father: "'I am told that a wife completes a man. Horwendil feels himself complete already'" (Updike, 2000, p. 7). Whilst Gerutha fears that the first marriage will deny her the play and opportunity afforded by supplementarity, her affair with Feng/Fengon is marked by the very qualities of disorder and addition that characterise Agamben's theory of supplementarity. Indeed, Horvendile himself sees his brother as an incestuous supplement to his marriage, telling him: "'Even my own instincts, which I know you and Geruthe think are hopelessly dulled by my ponderous crown, told me something was amiss—or, rather, something had been added'" (p. 144). A similar logic is repeated at the end of the narrative when Gertrude tries to appease her own guilt about the incestuous affair. Rather awkwardly, she tells Claudius: "'“Betrayed’ seems harsh—augmented him, was how I felt it. Augmented him with you'" (p. 199). Whilst Gertrude's diction belies an insecurity concerning her role as a supplement, it is one Claudius celebrates, and he praises his wife by telling her: "'All my life I have been gnawed, feeling but half a man, or a real man's shadow. No more: you flesh me out'" (p. 201).

The logic of supplementarity that characterises Gerutha/Geruthe/Gertrude's sex life also marks the formal nature of the prequel. In both cases, the supplement is incestuous: Gertrude supplements her marriage with her husband's brother; and the prequel

supplements an already related text.<sup>23</sup> The prequel cannot be considered a metaphorical offspring of its narrative successor as it problematises generational chronology, narratively preceding its related text.<sup>24</sup> Rather, as with bodies in incest, the ante-text/text relationship causes an indetermination of self and other, inside and outside, and an exceptional threshold between the two is created. *Gertrude and Claudius* in particular emphasises the importance of the threshold to the ante-text/text relationship through its clearly divided but linked parts. In addition to the two thresholds of the narrative – between Parts I and II, and Parts II and III – two further thresholds are created through Updike's quasi-academic apparatus of foreword and afterword. This division of the text into foreword, narrative and afterword positions the narrative itself in, or even as, an interval between two paratexts.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> My conceptualisation of the incestuous prequel can be seen as an alternative to Derrida's masturbatory supplement in *Of Grammatology* (1967), and the interested reader may wish to see the section in *Of Grammatology* entitled “. . . That Dangerous Supplement . . .” (1997, pp. 141-64) to trace the similarities and differences between the two readings of supplementarity. Furthermore, in Derrida's account of the preface and dissemination in ‘*Hors Livre: Outwork*’, there is, I would argue, at least a minor implication of incestuous intertextuality, as he argues that ‘as the preface to a book, it is the word of a father assisting and admiring his work, answering for his son, losing his breath in sustaining, retaining, idealizing, internalizing, and mastering his seed’ (2008, pp. 33-4). Derrida then contends: ‘the scene would be acted out, if such were possible, between father and son alone: autoinsemination, homoinsemination, reinsemination. Narcissism is the law, is on a par with the law’ (p. 34). My work on the ante-text/text relationship is in part influenced by Derrida's theory of the preface, its temporality and the thresholds between pre-texts and texts, especially as played out in G.W.F. Hegel's philosophical works and the comte de Lautréamont's *Songs of Maladoror* (1868). For Derrida's complete discussion, see ‘*Hors Livre: Outwork*’ (2008, pp. 3-65).

<sup>24</sup> In ‘Donald Barthelme and the Postmodern Sequel’ (1998), Michael Zeitlin makes the historical argument that ‘in the modernist attempt to invent more “real” realities, the very idea of orderly sequence – of beginnings, middles, and ends – could not be expected to survive untransformed’ (p. 161). He also discusses how it is ‘often impossible to tell which end is up: a text conventionally defined as a “sequel” can work a transformative effect upon its precursor, which thereby becomes derivative, secondary, subsequent’ (p. 162).

<sup>25</sup> In his interview with Reilly (2002), Updike explains that ‘the afterword and foreword were originally one and same; that is, they were both included as an afterword. But my editor and others found the name changes confusing, and after some reflection . . . I thought some kind of foreword was appropriate’ (p. 225). In “‘Master Eustace’ and *Gertrude and Claudius*: Henry James and John Updike Rewrite *Hamlet*’ (2003), Henry Janowitz extends the paratextuality of Updike's text to include the inside of the jacket cover. Discussing what he sees as the novel's ironically hopeful ending, which ‘Updike

It is situated between the foreword that explains the sources of the names used in each part and the afterword, which, as I have already discussed, superficially considers the relation between novel and play as well as pointing to some critical insights on *Hamlet*. In addition to these internal thresholds, a major threshold exists between *Gertrude and Claudius* and *Hamlet*. In his interview with Charley Reilly, Updike himself gestures towards this exceptionality, stating: ‘I knew I was going to end the novel at the threshold of the Shakespearean play, with the optimistic speech Claudius gives. . . . I knew my action would move toward that happy moment of equipoise, which the play would then deconstruct’ (Updike and Reilly, 2002, p. 224). The equipoise – the balance of the two texts – or, more appropriately, the exceptional threshold through which the two texts are joined and separated simultaneously, is marked in Part III of *Gertrude and Claudius* by the use of the names from *Hamlet*, the portrayal of the court gathering that takes place in Act One, Scene Two of the play, and the reference to the way in which Claudius speaks with ‘one iambic cadence smoothly succeeding another’ (Updike, 2000, p. 209) towards the end of this third and final part (or, indeed, at the beginning of Shakespeare’s play). Thus, ante-text and text explicitly begin to ‘pass through one another’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 37), and the indetermination of the two is metanarratively registered by the narrator’s declaration in the very final section of the narrative, ‘the era of Claudius had dawned; it would shine in Denmark’s annals’ (Updike, 2000, p. 210). The narrator’s announcement marks the

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underlines . . . in his *Afterword*’ (p. 196), Janowitz argues: ‘the reader had been already warned of this outcome in the flyleaf of the volume: “Gertrude and Claudius are seen afresh against a background of fond intentions and familial dysfunction, on a stage darkened by the ominous shadow of a sullen, disaffected prince,” which Updike might well have written himself’ (p. 196). Janowitz refers to the first edition of *Gertrude and Claudius*, as do I. See Edward Vargo, ‘Updike, American History, and Historical Methodology’ (2006, pp. 110-12) for a discussion of Updike’s narrative structure, his use of a footnote and ellipsis in *Memories of the Ford Administration: A Novel* (1992). For another discussion of this text and Updike’s foreword in *Gertrude and Claudius*, see John Duvall, ‘Conclusion: U(PDIKE) & P(OSTMODERNISM)’ (2006, pp. 169-70).

supposed end of the ante-text and consequently the beginning – the dawn – of Shakespeare's text.

The reader of an ante-text is situated in this threshold between ante-text and text, and he consequently passes through two textual spatiotemporalities. His exceptional positionality is partly created by the way in which the ante-text is always already proleptic. As the description of Claudius's speech pattern implies, the prequel is always in a mode of anticipation, of the to-come. Like Corambis, the ante-text is characterised by the way in which it is 'blinking at the future' (pp. 101-2). Through numerous allusions and its diegetic connection, the ante-text refers to the past future of its narrative successor, and in so doing simultaneously anticipates and defers this past future. Furthermore, as part of this temporal complexity, prolepsis and analepsis are in operation simultaneously in one's reading of the ante-text, as every allusion to, and every invocation of, the text is a proleptic leap forward, which in turn results in an analeptic flashback to the ante-text itself.<sup>26</sup> The reader's response to this complex situation – distinct from his actual positionality between the two

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<sup>26</sup> In his psychoanalytic account of the *Batman* films, 'Prequel: The "Afterwardsness" of the Sequel' (2010), Paul Sutton argues that the genre 'is structured by the logic of "afterwardsness," that it possesses a peculiar dual temporality that enables it to both precede and follow the film or films to which it is a prequel. The prequel, then, despite its precedence, is able to effectively remake the film or films to which it is in fact structurally and narratively anterior' (pp. 141-2). In his argument concerning the way in which the prequel can affect its related texts, Sutton contends that the prequel possesses 'the bidirectionality of the temporality of "afterwardsness"' (p. 150), and about the *Batman* films he argues: 'these films ultimately complicate the textual relation that exists between the various incarnations of Batman, whether between the graphic novels and their film adaptations, the singular adaptation and its sequel, the filmic "original" and its remake, or the prequel and its sequel, while at the same time foregrounding the fundamentally intertextual nature of the film. The mutability of these texts and their shifting relations produces for the spectator an encounter that is marked by temporal confusion and instability but which requires of that spectator a level of engagement that is productively reconstitutive in its effects' (2010, p. 150). In 'Donald Barthelme and the Postmodern Sequel', Zeitlin offers a different perspective, arguing: 'one experiences narrative as nostalgic even as it anticipates its own inevitable progress towards a conclusion. Arriving at the sequel's last sentence, one generally looks back upon a single, self-sufficient fictional world, the borders between two discrete though contiguous books having been virtually dissolved' (1998, p. 160).

texts – is conditioned by his knowledge of the ante-text's narrative successor. The reader who has knowledge of the text will be more aware of his indeterminate position than the reader who does not. He will be aware – at least to some degree – of the way in which the ante-text effects a double glance, forward and backward, and that he is moving in an intricate textual topology. In *Gertrude and Claudius*, this exceptional experience is particularly intense, as the reader also passes through two genres, two forms and two media at once. He is in the textual spatiotemporality of *Gertrude and Claudius*, which is essentially a comedy with its ostensibly happy resolution, and he is in *Hamlet*, one of western literature's best known tragedies. Furthermore, the reader is in both a novel and a drama, and at least two different media – one, a modern printed text, which is most commonly read to oneself, and the other a performance, meant to be seen and listened to, enjoyed visually and auricularly. But, befitting the way in which exceptional relations pass through one another, reading to oneself also entails the pleasure of listening, and it is this pleasure that I analyse next.

#### IV. AURICULAR SEX

Philip Roth's short novel *The Humbling* (2009) tells the story of Simon Axler, a onetime great actor who can no longer act. Due to his dramatic failure, the sixty-five-year-old Axler contemplates suicide, which he eventually commits at the end of the narrative. Before this last successful act, the narrative focuses on Axler's vigorous sexual relationship with Pegeen, a daughter of his friends some twenty-five years younger than him. The narrative begins with the succinct, direct words, 'he'd lost his magic' (Roth, 2009, p. 1), which lead to a description of Axler's plight:

It had started with people speaking to him. He couldn't have been more than three or four when he was already mesmerized by speaking and being spoken to. He had felt he was in a play from the outset. He could use intensity of listening, concentration, as lesser actors used fireworks. He had that power offstage, too, particularly, when younger, with women who did not realize that they had a story until he revealed to them that they had a story, a voice, and style belonging to no other. They became actresses with Axler, they became the heroines of their own lives. Few stage actors could speak and be spoken to the way he could, yet he could do neither anymore. The sound that used to go into his ear felt as though it were going out, and every word he uttered seemed acted instead of spoken. The initial source in his acting was in what he heard, his response to what he heard was at the core of it, and if he couldn't listen, couldn't hear, he had nothing to go on. (pp. 3-4)

In this synoptic account of Axler's dramatic story, the opening 'it' refers to his relationship with language, with listening and speaking, his ability with which launches his theatrical career. It is an all-consuming, all-important 'it', an 'it' that refers to Axler's very *raison d'être*. Starting at the beginning, the narrator explains how the boy Axler was unusually sensitive to language's mesmeric power, hypnotised by speaking and listening. As a result of his powers of listening and speaking, the young boy feels always already an actor,

always on stage. Distinct from other actors, Axler did not rely upon display or spectacles; his ability to listen set him apart and turned him into a theatrical master. As the narrator tells us, Axler's ability to listen extends beyond the stage: he uses it to seduce women, which transforms them from quotidian people into people with stories to tell, into their own narrators and heroines.<sup>1</sup> Despite his incredible ability to listen, now, at the narrative's outset, Axler is without his unique gifts. Having suffered a dramatic breakdown playing Macbeth and Prospero, Axler cannot speak or listen as he once did. Sound no longer enters his ears; it escapes them. Axler's theatrical tragedy – not being able to listen to or speak the lines of the western world's most celebrated poet – leaves him with nothing. He cannot listen, cannot hear, cannot act on stage, but is oxymoronically left with the sense that he is always acting and never speaking. Where his unusually mesmeric relationship to speaking and listening – his ability to perform – seemed to be the essence of his youthful existence, Axler can now no longer act naturally. For Axler, 'acting' now connotes his inescapable inability to listen as well as his unnatural use of speech.

Despite the loss of his ability to listen, speak and act, the description of Axler's boyhood and career gives a distinct impression of the pleasure to be experienced through auricular sensation. Wishing to pursue this further, in this chapter I shall read Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of listening alongside another of Roth's novels, *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), to conceptualise 'auricular sex', that is, the sexual pleasure of listening and the auricular aspects of sex. Where the description of Axler's life and career opens up the possible sensuality of listening and also touches upon the difference between listening and hearing, *Sabbath's Theater* portrays Sabbath's intense sexual fascination with listening and offers a sustained and vivid narrative of auricular erotics. Through my reading of Nancy's somatic

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<sup>1</sup> As I argue more fully at the end of the chapter, Axler's technique of auricular seduction – seduction by listening not talking – inverts the cultural precedent of the 'smooth talker', the Romeo or Lothario who arouses women with words. Rather than playing the man with the charming, alluring speech, Axler listens.

and exceptional auricular theory, I shall argue that the sex in *Sabbath's Theater* is predominantly auricular in nature. Analysing this overlooked aspect of the text, I formulate the categories of auricular sex that are found in the narrative. These are: accented, telephonic, remembered, dogged, auto-affective, fantastic and reincarnated, ventriloquial, musical, and silent. By developing these categories of auricular sex, this chapter moves away from the dominant critical focus on the role of the voice and the so-called auditory (for which, read rhetorical) effects of Roth's prose style.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, I pay attention to the exceptional auricular mechanics of sexual listening in Sabbath's life and in reading the text. Indeed, my reading argues for Sabbath's 'theatre' – the text itself – to be appreciated not as a 'place for viewing' (*The Oxford English Dictionary*) but as a place for and of listening.

## 1. Listening to Nancy

In *Listening* (2002), Nancy formulates a theory of the auricular based upon a vital distinction between hearing and listening.<sup>3</sup> He characterises listening as a 'tense, attentive,

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<sup>2</sup> For critical readings of Sabbath's voice, Roth's prose style and its rhetorical effect, see, for example: Debra Shostak, 'Roth/CounterRoth: Postmodernism, the Masculine Subject, and *Sabbath's Theater*' (1998), *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives* (2004), and 'Roth and Gender' (2007); Sanford Pinsker, 'Art as Excess: The "Voices" of Charlie Parker and Philip Roth' (2002); Mark Schechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper* (2003); David Gooblar, "'Oh Freud, do I know!": Philip Roth, Freud, and Narrative Therapy' (2005); David Greenham, 'The Concept of Irony: Jane Austen's *Emma* and Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater*' (2005); Ranen Omer-Sherman, "'A Little Stranger in the House": Madness and Identity in *Sabbath's Theater*' (2005); Ross Posnock, 'All's Well that Ends' (2006a), and *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* (2006b, in particular pp. 155-92); and Elaine B. Safer, *Mocking the Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth* (2006, pp. 67, 70, 71-2, 76-8, 167).

<sup>3</sup> Nancy's preferred term is 'auricular' as opposed to the more usual 'aural'. Therefore, I shall employ the term 'auricular', whilst also coining derivatives such as 'auricularity' and 'auricularly' where appropriate.

or anxious state' (2007, p. 5), which is compared to the 'simple nature' (p. 5) of hearing. For Nancy, hearing is receptive, passive, and aims simply 'to understand the sense' (p. 6). It is concerned with comprehension. In contrast, listening is a 'straining toward a possible meaning' (p. 6), and this active straining is more essential to its condition than the acquisition of semantic meaning. Having made this distinction between hearing and listening, however, Nancy argues that 'in hearing itself, at the very bottom of it, [there is] a listening' (p. 6). Despite this contradictory reduction of hearing to listening in Nancy's theory, his initial division between hearing and listening provides a useful analytical distinction through which to think about the auricular. Furthermore, throughout *Listening* Nancy maintains the characterisation of listening as an active, and as I shall show bodily, experience concerned with sense and sensation.

Nancy articulates his auricular theory through a series of exploratory turns around oppositional pairs. As with hearing and listening, another distinction Nancy draws, that between meaning and sensation, is not absolute. In her note to the English translation of *Listening*, Charlotte Mandell writes: '*sens* means meaning, and it means sense—in all the meanings of that word in English, as in the senses five, feeling, intuition—as well as direction' (pp. xi-xii). The numerous connotations of the French '*sens*' problematise any clear categorisation of meaning and sense, comprehension and sensation. Therefore, it is not possible to say that listening is not, at least to some extent, concerned with understanding, and Nancy himself argues that 'there are only two tendencies, precisely, and listening aims at—or is aroused by—the one where sound and sense mix together and resonate in each other, or through each other. (Which signifies that—and here again, in a tendential way—if, on the one hand, sense is sought in sound, on the other hand, sound, resonance, is also looked for in sense.)' (p. 7). For Nancy, then, listening involves a complementary admixture of sound and sense. As evident in this mutual contamination of

sound and sense, Nancy's theory is characterised by the relations he makes between the elements of his supposedly oppositional pairs rather than by an attention to the divisions that might separate them. This is reflected in his deliberative and somewhat convoluted prose style.

By focusing on the relations between terms, Nancy's theory constructs a series of thresholds, which emphasise the indistinction and intermingling of these concepts. In fact, Nancy argues that

to be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin—at least the sound that is musically listened to, that is gathered and scrutinized for itself, not, however, as an acoustic phenomenon (or not merely as one) but as a resonant meaning, a meaning whose *sense* is supposed to be found in resonance, and only in resonance. (p. 7)

In this analysis, the concept of the edge is accompanied by an edgy performativity as Nancy sets up two possibilities – this *or* that – of what 'edge' itself might mean. Edging around meaning, Nancy describes listening musically to sound – to the resonance of sound for itself – as a marginal, fringe experience, one that takes place at a threshold. Thus, the listener always partakes in a threshold experience, with its usual indetermination of inside and outside. The thresholds opened up by listening and the contamination and contagion they involve lead Nancy to posit listening as the aesthetic sense *par excellence*:

To be listening is to be *at the same time* outside and inside, to be open *from* without and *from* within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other. Listening thus forms the perceptible singularity that bears in the most ostensive way the perceptible or sensitive (*aesthetic*) condition as such: the sharing of an inside/outside, division and participation, de-connection and contagion. (p. 14)

In his aesthetic consideration, Nancy expresses auricular indetermination by characteristically listing oppositional terms that turn out to be contagious and contaminated.

In his fundamentally somatic account of the auricular, Nancy claims that ‘to listen is *tendre l’oreille*—literally, to stretch the ear—an expression that evokes a singular mobility, among the sensory apparatuses, of the pinna of the ear—it is an intensification and a concern, a curiosity or an anxiety’ (p. 5).<sup>4</sup> In listening, there is a bodily stretch, a somatic moving towards sound. Furthermore, Nancy argues that the movement made by the body is reciprocated by the movement of sound, by the way ‘the sound that penetrates through the ear propagates throughout the entire body something of its effects, which could not be said to occur in the same way with the visual signal’ (p. 14). The two-way movement between body and sound is replicated in the ear by the physical mechanics of listening, which create an indetermination of the inside and outside due to the “acoustic otoemissions” produced by the inner ear of the one who is listening: the oto- or self[*auto*]-produced sounds that come to mingle with received sounds, in order to receive them’ (p. 16). Through such interconnection and mingling, internal and external sounds become indistinguishable, and, thus, far from simply repeating the ancient cliché of the musical body, Nancy’s theory of listening articulates the body’s exceptional spatiotemporality. The intermingling of internal and external sounds that occurs within the ear is a crucial, albeit microscopic, component of Nancy’s argument that listening is ‘a reality consequently indissociably “mine and “other,” “singular” and “plural”’ (p. 12), creating a threshold in which self (internal and singular) and others (external and plural) become indistinct.

As is evident in his account of the listening ear, Nancy’s auricular theory is marked by his use of bodily and sexual language. His recourse to such language is particularly acute in his analysis of rhythm, the subject and invagination, where he reflects: ‘I should point out that such a direction of the investigation would lead us toward the formation of a

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<sup>4</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the pinna as ‘the broad flap of skin-covered cartilage which forms the external ear in humans and other mammals.’ It also notes the former division of the external ear into the upper ear (pinna) and the earlobe (auricle). The main opening of the ear is the concha.

subject first of all as the rhythmic replotment/deployment of an enveloping between “inside” and “outside,” or else folding the “outside” into the “inside,” invaginating, forming a hollow, an echo chamber or column, a resonance chamber’ (p. 38). In addition to showing that listening causes an invagination of the subject, that a folding-in of the outside and a folding-out of the inside occurs in the listening subject, Nancy argues that ‘to listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside’ (p. 14). Unlike a simple theory of invagination in which the outside is folded in and the inside out and the two envelop each other, then, the penetrative aspect of Nancy’s theory is two-way, occurring from outside and inside the body: the subject penetrates space and is himself penetrated by sound. Consistent with Nancy’s theoretical methodology, then, auricular penetration is characterised as a threshold relation and a confusion between inside and outside, as the two intermingle and become indistinct during listening.

In addition to the relations of space, self and other, Nancy articulates the exceptional temporality of auricularity through his conceptualisation of sonorous presence and the present of listening, which ‘is first of all presence in the sense of a *present* that is not being (at least not in the intransitive, stable, consistent sense of the word), but rather a *coming* and a *passing*, an *extending* and a *penetrating*. Sound essentially comes and expands, or is deferred and transferred’ (p. 13). The presence of which Nancy speaks here is an exceptional presence: it is and is not, there and not there; it is ontologically transitory. This temporality is further complicated and enriched through Nancy’s argument that ‘all sonorous presence is thus made of a complex of returns [*renvois*]’ (p. 16). As *renvois*, the sonorous present is a returned past, which has already come into and gone out of time. It is therefore doubly exceptional, as its ‘presence’ and its ‘return’ are one and the same.

Having outlined Nancy's theory of listening – the relationship between sense and meaning, the exceptionality of bodily space and sonorous time – one might well ask what do Nancy's theories offer the reader or the literary critic? Why might we be concerned with listening when analysing literature, which is now primarily a print-based medium read silently and alone? What is the relationship between listening and reading, between the listener and the reader? Interestingly, the answers to these questions can be found in Nancy's theory itself. For instance, in his exploration of writing, Nancy claims:

*Écrire* in its modern conception—elaborated since Proust, Adorno, and Benjamin, through Blanchot, Barthes, and to Derrida's *archi-écriture*—is nothing other than making sense resound beyond signification, or beyond itself. It is *vocalizing* a sense that, for classical thought, intended to remain deaf and mute, an understanding [*entente*] untimbred [*détimbrée*] of self in the silence of a *consonant* without resonance. (pp. 34-5)

After acknowledging his theoretical predecessors, Nancy argues that modern writing primarily aims to make sense, to create sensations. It is concerned with auricular impressions more than meaning. Modern writing possesses timbre and makes sense resound, vocalising a textual sense of self – a personal textual sound – that was silent in classical philosophy. Indeed, Nancy argues that classical philosophy, at most only concerned with connection and agreement – consonance – is silent in two senses: it is both deaf and mute, and therefore completely devoid of resonance. Due to its timbred quality, modern writing demands to be listened to, and this need to listen to writing becomes evident as Nancy's theory becomes self-reflexive as he turns to analyse the act of writing. In his exploration of *écrire* and *écriture*, Nancy quotes the poet Francis Ponge, who writes: ““For my part—if I examine myself writing—I never come to write the slightest phrase without my writing being accompanied by a mental speaking and listening, and even, rather, without it being *preceded* by those things (although indeed just barely)”” (p. 35). For Ponge, writing – the actual act of writing – involves a mental speaking and listening.

But such speaking and listening is more than simply a mental phenomenon. As modern scientific research shows, subvocalization – Ponge’s mental speaking and listening – has a physical aspect.<sup>5</sup> The speaking voice Ponge listens to as he writes is his own subvocal voice, and it is through the role of subvocalization that a theory of auricular reading can be formed.

Nancy himself addresses the concept of the textual listener, but also from the perspective of the writer, when he argues:

Speaking—speaking and listening, as Ponge makes clear, for speaking is already its own listening—is the echo of the text in which the text is made and written, opens up to its own sense as to the plurality of its possible senses. It is not, and in any case not only, what one can call in a superficial way the musicality of a text: it is more profoundly the music in it, or the arch-music of that resonance where it *listens to itself* [s’écoute], by listening to itself *finds itself* [se trouve], and by finding itself *deviates* [s’écarte] from itself in order to resound further away, listening to itself before hearing/understanding itself, and thus actually becoming its ‘subject,’ which is neither the same as nor other than the individual subject who writes the text. (p. 35)

Nancy accepts Ponge’s account of writing and speaking, but argues that speaking and listening – a textual echo – come after writing, which alters Ponge’s sequence, in which writing is infinitesimally preceded by speaking. In this consideration of speaking and listening, Nancy clarifies and makes more precise the somewhat nebulous, inexact concept of textual musicality, arguing that the music in the text is the resonance through which the text listens to itself. The text has sense, indeed multiple possible senses, and it listens to these senses before it understands itself or conveys meaning. Speaking and listening are the echo of the text, made to resound in the text by the subject who is neither quite the same as, nor completely different from, the writing subject. The writer gives to the text his

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, NASA’s subvocal speech project demonstrates that ‘biological signals arise when reading or speaking to oneself with or without actual lip or facial movement’ (John Bluck and Michael Braukus, ‘NASA Develops System to Computerize Silent, “Subvocal Speech”’, 2004).

or her voice, which thereafter is simultaneously his or her voice and the voice of the text. The concept of the textual voice opens up the role of the reader, as in each reading the voice of the text is listened to by the reader and is, therefore, neither completely the reader's nor the writer's nor the text's own voice. As this readerly interpretation shows, the reader must be made present, made resonant, to complete Nancy's auricular theory of textual listening. Given the music, resonance and voice Nancy argues for in texts, reading must be as much an auricular process as it is a visual one. Indeed, the role of subvocalization – internal speaking and listening – does not belong to the writer alone, but is also an important aspect of the act of reading. When we read a text, we simultaneously listen to it through our subvocal processes, thereby creating a form of auricular and aesthetic contagion in which the voice of the text and our subvocal sounds merge and become indistinguishable.

In reading *Sabbath's Theater*, then, we encounter two forms of the auricular: we experience the auricularity of reading through the process of subvocalization; and we read the auricular episodes in the narrative. Both forms of listening are inflected and intensified by the sexual aspect of listening itself, which is implied in Nancy's auricular theory and made more explicit in the narrative. In *Listening*, already a very visceral account of the auricular, a more sexual dimension emerges in Nancy's exposition of timbre, 'the first correlative of listening' (p. 40). Nancy traces the etymology of 'timbre' to 'the Greek *tympanon*, that is, the tambourine of orgiastic cults' (p. 42), and explains how

timbre can be represented as the resonance of a stretched skin (possibly sprinkled with alcohol, the way certain shamans do), and as the expansion of this resonance in the hollowed column of a drum. Isn't the space of the listening body, in turn, just such a hollow column over which a skin is stretched, but also from which the opening of a mouth can resume and revive resonance? A blow from outside, clamor from within, this sonorous, sonorized body undertakes a simultaneous listening to a 'self' and to a 'world' that are both in resonance. It becomes distressed (tightens) and it rejoices (dilates). (p. 43)

In this account of the orgiastic timbre, Nancy reiterates the exceptionality of the body, which he characterises as an instrument that can sound both inside and outside itself, listen to itself from inside and to the world outside simultaneously. Furthermore, resonance is experienced internally and can also be emitted, externalised, by the body through the mouth. In terms of reading, an exceptional spatiotemporality opens up through the intermingling of the text and one's subvocalization. We listen to the text by listening to our internal emissions of the text's sounds. In listening – to others or to texts – the subject experiences an aesthetic contagion of self and other, a contamination Nancy sexualises through the diction of excitement and pleasure, tightening and dilating of the body associated with anticipation and climax.

The sexual pleasure and sensuality found in even the most basic form of listening is evident in the opening section of *Sabbath's Theater*, in which Sabbath remembers his instructions to his lover, Drenka: 'do as you like, Sabbath said, and she did and liked it and liked telling him about how much she had liked to no less than he liked hearing about it' (Roth, 1995, p. 9). The memory of this auricular relationship elicits the mutual, interpersonal connection between the lovers: one enjoys fucking lots of men and the other enjoys listening to reports of these sexual trysts. Sabbath becomes excited and aroused simply by listening to Drenka's sexual stories, and she, too, enjoys auricular sex, pleading with Sabbath: "'Tell me everything. Don't leave anything out,'" even while he eased into her' (p. 26). Drenka's command casts listening as a form of desire. She desires to be filled by stories, just as she desires to be filled by Sabbath's penis. She wishes to experience the satisfaction of penile and auricular penetration, both of which create forms of sensual contagion.

Beyond the basic pleasure of interpersonal listening, in this chapter I argue that sexual behaviour in *Sabbath's Theater* encompasses many more interesting and complex

forms of auricular sex. Using Nancy's exceptional and somatic auricular theory and the vocabulary he provides to discuss listening, I explore the categories of auricular sex found in the narrative, beginning with an analysis of the erotic pleasure of listening to accented speech, which involves a rich interrelationship of sensation and meaning. I then analyse telephonic sex, arguing that this auricular technology creates a particular exceptionality through which to experience sexual listening. In the next section of the chapter, I argue that a different temporal complexity involving sonorous presence and return occurs in auricular memory, both in listening to memories and in remembering auricular events. In 'Auricular Dogging', I argue for the sexual excitement created by listening in on others, which includes the listening-in on literary narratives of sex as carried out by the reader. Following the pleasures of listening to others have sex, I conceptualise auto-affective auricular sex, which creates an exceptional indetermination of self and other, and, turning to further forms of auricular auto-affection, I argue that auricular fantasy and reincarnation effect an exceptionality by producing, or bringing back into time, sounds that fade away. This exceptionality also occurs in ventriloquial listening – my eighth category of auricular sex – which involves listening to somebody speaking as if they were somebody else. In my penultimate category, I stretch my ear to music, which involves bodily pleasure and sensation, and thereby creates the means for sexual seduction, memory and fantasy. I close the chapter with a consideration of the exceptionality and pleasure of silence.

## **2. Cunning Linguist**

In *Sabbath's Theater*, the eponymous hero Mickey Sabbath tells his story predominantly as a heterodiegetic narrator but with occasional autodiegetic interventions. The sixty-four–

year-old tells and listens to his own story as if it were about someone else, thereby creating a distinction between the speaking 'I' and the subject of the narrative. Through this narratorial ploy, Sabbath tells the reader his life story as a director, street puppeteer and great lover of sex, with the main focus of the narrative being on his love life with his Croatian mistress Drenka, the wife of a local hotel owner. Beginning *in medias res* with Drenka's reported warning – 'either forswear fucking others or the affair is over' (Roth, 1995, p. 3) – the opening section of the narrative works almost as a prologue, describing the lovers' marital situations, their love affair, and ending with Drenka's revelation that she has cancer. Sabbath concludes this prologue-like beginning by explaining that Drenka was dead within six months of her announcement. Thereafter, the greater part of the narrative is composed of two timeframes. In the principal diegesis, Sabbath narrates the period immediately following Drenka's death – how his wife Roseanna asks him to leave home having suffered him long enough, and his subsequent road trip, during which he attends a friend's funeral in New York, makes arrangements for his own burial plot and visits his childhood neighbourhood in New Jersey. Throughout this journey, in the second timeframe, the narrative travels back into Sabbath's elaborate memories. During these moments, Sabbath recalls his life as a kid on the east coast, how he became infatuated with women, and the untimely death of his brother in the Second World War. Chronologically following the memories of these early years, Sabbath narrates his time as a seaman, his great whoring expeditions abroad, his life as a street performer, director and puppet master, and the two major scandals in his life – being arrested for fondling a breast in public during one of his street performances, and the release of a telephone sex tape he made with a workshop student later in life when he was working as a puppetry professor in a rural town.

Throughout his narrative, Sabbath depicts the great sexual pleasure he derives from listening, with his taste for the auricular being made particularly apparent in his account of listening to Drenka's English:

her accent remained to the end remarkably juicy: *chave* for *have*, *cheart* for *heart*; at the conclusion of *stranger* and *danger*, a strong rolling *r*; and her *l*'s almost like a Russian's, emerging from a long way back in the mouth. The effect was of a delightful shadow cast on her words, making just a little mysterious the least mysterious utterance—phonetic seduction enthraling Sabbath all the more. (p. 71)

Sabbath finds Drenka's accented and imperfect English appealing, seductive and arousing. He finds it 'juicy', and this strange metaphor of accented wetness marks his sexual excitement and desire. Sabbath believes that Drenka's enduring mispronunciations are exotic, with their rolling 'r's and the deep Russian-like 'l's, and the pleasure he gains from Drenka's voice – the tint it brings to what she says – comes from the renewed attention it gives to everyday words. Indeed, Sabbath finds this 'lingual making-anew' seductive rather than what Drenka actually says, which indicates that it is the sense, the sensation, of words and not their semantic significance that is sexually appealing to him.<sup>6</sup> Sabbath's auricular pleasure in accented speech is equally apparent when he picks up a young woman named Christa in order to seduce her into having sex with Drenka. Describing how he collected Christa in his van, Sabbath's narrative focus turns to Christa's voice – 'the German accent was gentle but inflammatory (for Sabbath, any attractive woman's accent

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<sup>6</sup> In her essay 'Roth/CounterRoth: Postmodernism, the Masculine Subject, and *Sabbath's Theater*' (1998), Debra Shostak argues that Drenka's speech is a sexual part of her existence, particularly when her body is dying (p. 134). Furthermore, in her analysis of the way in which Sabbath adopts one of Drenka's speech patterns, Shostak contends: 'the linguistic transference, like their process of co-narration [as they reminisce about a past sexual experience], suggests that they have realized intersubjectivity, each retaining a self as they interpenetrate one another. This moment of equilibrium and transcendence through sex and death implies the possibility of a "self" that is not purely illusory, even if linguistic performance is the only possible sign of that self. If one of the fundamental premises of the postmodern is the impossibility of transcendence, Sabbath and Drenka achieve a moment that seems to refute postmodernity' (p. 135).

was inflammatory)’ (p. 54). Listening to the accented voice, ‘Sabbath, ever vigilant to all stimuli’ (p. 291), delights in the combined sensuality of the woman’s accent and her visual attractiveness. By creating a synaesthetic relationship between auricular sensation and visual perception, Sabbath shows how he is influenced by the way ‘timbre resounds with and in the totality of perceptible registers’ (Nancy, 2007, p. 42).

In his auricular relationship with Drenka, Sabbath is not, however, merely content with her exotic, indeed erotic, pronunciation. He also wants her to be an accomplished and, therefore, stimulating storyteller. To that end, he trains Drenka in the art of storytelling, describing how ‘it had . . . taken him years to make Drenka a decent narrator of her adventures, since her inclination, in English at least, was to pile truncated sentences one on the other until he couldn’t understand what she was talking about’ (Roth, 1995, p. 71). At the narrative level, Sabbath finds Drenka’s English unsmooth and disjointed, which denies him full access to her sexual stories and undermines the potential sonority of her speech. Indeed, her sentences are truncated – ‘cut short, mutilated’ (*The Oxford English Dictionary*) – which has the effect of cutting or mutilating – castrating – Sabbath’s own sexual pleasure. He therefore trains Drenka to narrate effectively, and ‘gradually, as she listened to him and talked to him, there was an ever-increasing correlation between all she was thinking and what she said’ (Roth, 1995, p. 71). Sabbath’s coaching results in a satisfying connection between Drenka’s thoughts and speech, and in particular Drenka becomes ‘syntactically more urbane than nine-tenths of the locals up on their mountain’ (p. 71). Thus, Sabbath is able to delight in the sense and sensuality of her accentuated voice as well as experience good, old-fashioned storytelling, the combination of which brings out the mutual contamination of the French ‘*sens*’: Sabbath finds sensual pleasure at the phonetic level, but experiences the joy of understanding at the syntactical level. Through this combination, therefore, he achieves auricular pleasure from individual sounds, which

come and fade away, as well as from the sequential arrangement that creates sense – meaning – and makes comprehension possible.

### 3. Telephonic Sex

Delineating the family life of the North American Berglunds against the backdrop of 9/11 and its aftermath, much of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) focuses on the relationship between the Berglund's son Joey and his girlfriend Connie. A significant aspect of this relationship is the couple's renewed and concentrated experimentation with telephone sex during Joey's time away at university, 'which they hadn't had since the earliest days, when they were sneaking around and whispering on phones in their respective bedrooms' (Franzen, 2010, p. 256). For the young couple, the rediscovery of telephonic listening 'had become a lot more interesting in the meantime, because they knew how to talk to each other now. At the same time, it was as if they'd never had sex before—was cataclysmic that way' (p. 256). The couple's renewed telephone sex has an intense effect on their relationship, and Joey in particular finds the new sexual experience it opens up irresistible: 'he returned to the wormhole three or four or even five times a week, disappeared into the world the two of them created, and later reemerged and shut the windows and went out to the dining hall or down to his dormitory lounge and effortlessly performed the shallow affability that college life required of him' (p. 259). The telephone provides the couple with a new spatiotemporality through which they can experience a technologically aided form of auricular sex. By describing the technological connection as a wormhole, the narrator marks the telephone call as a structure 'that resembles a tunnel between two black

holes or other points in space-time' (Perkowitz, 2011, para. 1).<sup>7</sup> For Joey specifically, the wormhole opens up a world into which he can escape his routine existence, and he delights so much in this form of sexual listening that

he quietly shelved his sound arguments against too-frequent calling and fell gratefully on phone sex as a replacement for his solitary science-library masturbation, which now seemed to him a squalid aberration, embarrassing to recall. He succeeded in persuading himself that, as long as they avoided ordinary newsy chitchat and spoke only of sex, it was OK to exploit this loophole in his otherwise strict embargo on excess contact. (Franzen, 2010, p. 258)

The telephonic wormhole is, therefore, a double loophole. It offers the couple a get-out clause to Joey's initial telephone rules and it operates as an intricate tunnel through which they can have auricular sex. Tapping into – dialling up – the etymology of 'telephone', Joey finds pleasure in the telephonic ability to reduce distance 'as if surfacing through a wormhole in the fabric of reality' (p. 257).<sup>8</sup> The repetition of the scientific term 'wormhole', combined with the narrator's depiction of Joey travelling through reality's 'fabric' – time and space – substantiates the intrinsic connection between the sensual pleasure of auricular sex and telephonic exceptionality. Telephonic travel allows Joey to be in two dimensions simultaneously in a way similar to the dual spatiotemporality made possible by adulterous parallelism in *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000): Joey simultaneously

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<sup>7</sup> In his *Encyclopædia Britannica* entry, Sidney Perkowitz provides the following helpful analogy to describe wormholes: 'consider an ant walking across a flat sheet of paper from point A to point B. If the paper is curved through the third dimension, so that A and B overlap, the ant can step directly from one point to the other, thus avoiding a long trek' (2011, para. 1). Furthermore, Perkowitz explains that 'the possibility of short-circuiting the enormous distances between stars makes wormholes attractive for space travel. Because the tunnel links moments in time as well as locations in space, it also has been argued that a wormhole would allow travel into the past' (2011, para. 2).

<sup>8</sup> In a recent *Guardian* article, Nicholas Royle also dials up the etymology of 'telephone', writing: "When the phone starts ringing in a novel or short story, the air is charged with magic and coincidence, superstition and death. The word telephone is literally 'voice at a distance'. We can think of the literary work as a telephone call (the author or narrator addressing us), but also as a kind of telephone network (both in the form of dialogue and in the narrator "bugging" different characters, recording what they say or think)" (2010, para. 2).

occupies the physical time and space in which he jerks off and he is with Connie in the electronic wormhole. The ability to traverse time as well as space is symbolised at a microscopic level by the way in which the telephone allows Connie and Joey to communicate across two separate US time zones (Minnesota and Virginia). This exceptional ability to be in two spatiotemporalities simultaneously also informs Joey's fantasy of bodily superimposition, in which 'Joey, as he climaxed again, believed that he was with Connie in her bedroom on Barrier Street, his arching back her arching back, his little breasts her little breasts. They lay breathing as one into their cell phones' (Franzen, 2010, p. 257).

Within this exceptional spatiotemporality, Joey

realized that it was making their contact *all the deeper and realer* to hear Connie finally naming the things they'd done and the things she imagined doing in the future. This deepening was somewhat strange, since all they were doing was getting each other off. . . . To discover, now, that sex had been fully registering in her as language—as words that she could speak out loud—made her much realer to him as a person. The two of them could no longer pretend that they were just mute youthful animals mindlessly doing their thing. (p. 258)

The very articulation of sex – talking about it and listening to another talk about it – heightens the couple's erotic life, and this auricular accompaniment works both retroactively and prospectively, adding an erotic layer to the couple's past sexual experiences whilst also providing an anticipatory excitement to their future intercourse. Listening to Connie at this moment, this 'now' when Connie reveals her linguistic sexual prowess, Joey is simultaneously excited by their past and future interactions, as well as by this auricular moment itself. Able to speak sex and listen to it – to create an auricular sense of sex – the couple separate themselves from dumb youthful animals, who, the narrator

somewhat stereotypically implies, just ‘do it’.<sup>9</sup> Unlike such young, unsophisticated animals, the couple experience a fresh appreciation of their sex life in the auricular wormhole. Therefore, and much like Sabbath and Drenka, Connie and Joey experience a form of exceptional sex through their very use of language, thereby creating an exception to the way in which exceptional sex reduces its participants to animalistic, bare life. However, despite the way in which the couple’s sophisticated use of language therefore removes them from animalistic sex, it does not place them in the *polis*, in collective human life. Indeed, telephonic sex enables the couple to experience exceptionality by momentarily removing them from the usual spatiotemporal laws of the physical world. Consequently, telephonic sex places Connie and Joey in a zone that is neither fully the state of exception nor fully the political sphere, thereby opening up the possibility of a third spatiotemporality.

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<sup>9</sup> In *The Open: Man and Animal* (2002), Agamben provides an historical analysis of the articulation of the difference between man and animal and their complex relation to language. Looking at the work of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anatomist Ernst Haeckel and what Agamben labels ‘the modern anthropological machine’ (2004, p. 35), Agamben contends that ‘in reality, the passage from animal to man, despite the emphasis placed on comparative anatomy and paleontological findings, was produced by subtracting an element that had nothing to do with either one, and that instead was presupposed as the identifying characteristic of the human: language’ (pp. 34-5). In his analysis, Agamben argues against a simplistic, naturalising approach that divides man and animal by the former’s ability to use language, proposing that ‘in identifying himself with language, the speaking man places his own muteness outside of himself, as already and not yet human’ (2004, pp. 34-5). For Agamben, ‘what distinguishes man from animal is language, but this is not a natural given already inherent in the psychophysical structure of man; it is, rather, a historical production which, as such, can be properly assigned neither to man nor to animal. If this element is taken away, the difference between man and animal vanishes, unless we imagine a nonspeaking *man*—*Homo alalus*, precisely—who would function as a bridge that passes from the animal to the human. But all evidence suggests that this is only a shadow cast by language, a presupposition of speaking man, by which we always obtain only an animalization of man . . . or a humanization of the animal. . . . The animal-man and the man-animal are the two sides of a single fracture, which cannot be mended from either side’ (p. 36).

In Connie and Joey's relationship, the pleasure of talking and listening to one another on the telephone extends beyond the auricular accompaniment of past and future sex to encompass the fantastically impossible. Throughout their telephonic exchange,

words made everything less safe, words had no limits, words made their own world. One afternoon, as Connie described it, her excited clitoris grew to be eight inches long, a protruding pencil of tenderness with which she gently parted the lips of his penis and drove herself down to the base of its shaft. Another day, at her urging, Joey described to her the sleek warm neatness of her turds as they slid from her anus and fell into his open mouth, where, since these were words only, they tasted like excellent dark chocolate. As long as her words were in his ear, urging him on, he wasn't ashamed of anything. (pp. 258-9)

In these auricular fantasies, Joey welcomes what he sees as the dangerous and limitless nature of words, and he takes pleasure in the visceral, sensual, aspect of listening. For instance, in the description of Joey's ingestion of Connie's faeces her turds take on a double nature: imaginatively, they enter Joey's mouth and he delights in the sensation of her impossibly tasty chocolate faeces; as words, they enter his and also Connie's ears, and both experience the pleasure of auricular sensation. Indeed, Joey is sexually liberated by the very physicality of having her words in his ear.

In *Freedom*, telephonic listening portrays the exceptionality of the auricular wormhole and how the couple use this spatiotemporality to enrich their sexual interaction. As the main telephonic episode between Sabbath and his workshop student Kathy Goolsbee in *Sabbath's Theater* shows, Sabbath also uses the wormhole to expand and intensify his auricular pleasures. Indeed, telephone sex is the only sexual interaction Sabbath and Kathy have together. It does not intensify or colour their joint sex life; it is their sex life. When Kathy accidentally leaves a tape of one of their sex conversations in the ladies' room and it is later discovered, the SABBATH – 'Women Against Sexual Abuse, Belittlement, Battering, and Telephone Harassment' (Roth, 1995, p. 214) – committee is formed and a hotline set up for those wishing to listen to how "Professor

Sabbath has been able to manipulate [Kathy] into thinking that she is a willing participant”” (p. 215). In the text, a transcript of the conversation, printed as a footnote below the main narrative, records how, with Sabbath leading, professor and student listen and talk to one another during this telephonic exchange:

Now pull your Levi's down. . . . Pull 'em down around your ankles.

*(Whispered)* Okay.

And take them off. . . . I'll give you time. . . . Did you take them off?

Yeah.

What do you see?

I see my legs. And I see my crotch.

Do you have bikini underpants on?

Yes.

Take your hand and put your finger right on the crotch of your underpants. Just on the outside of the underpants, rub it up and down. Just rub it gently up and down. How does that feel? (pp. 219-20)

In this sequence, Sabbath and Kathy's staccato dialogue expresses the to-and-fro, listen-and-respond, process of their telephonic conversation. However, despite the seeming equality of the two partners as they listen and react to one another, all of Sabbath's questions and directions are aimed at making Kathy describe what she is doing so that he can listen and masturbate to her words. During the telephone conversation, Kathy questions Sabbath's assumed position as the interviewer since she also wants to become the principal listener. Taking on the role of inquisitor and listener herself, Kathy asks Sabbath sexual questions and prompts him to masturbate:

What are you doing right now?

I have my cock in my hand.

You squeezing it and rubbing it? I want you to rub it. Tell me. I want my mouth on it. I want to suck it. Oh, God, I want to kiss it. I want to put your cock in my ass. (pp. 223-4)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Taking a different (visual) approach, in 'Portrait of the Sexist as a Dying Man: Death, Ideology, and the Erotic in Philip Roth's "Sabbath's Theater" [sic]' (1998) Frank Kelleter argues that the typographical layout of the piece problematises the position of victim and victimiser (p. 297), and in *Philip Roth's Rude Truth* Posnock (2006b) notes a similar ambiguity of roles in Sabbath and Drenka's relationship, writing: 'the depth of their shared

With Sabbath and Kathy, the listener on the telephone is the one who gains sexual pleasure from the erotic sense and power of language, not the speaker. Both characters wish to listen rather than speak, and their interaction implies that speaking is only a necessary component of telephonic listening. Indeed, as I argue in section 6, the pleasure of listening on the telephone is so great that Sabbath and Kathy both end up listening to themselves in the wormhole rather than each other, thereby creating a moment of telephonic auto-affection.

#### 4. Memory

During Sabbath's return drive from New York and his boyhood home in New Jersey, he remembers and narrates Drenka's last night in hospital before she dies from cancer. During the sequence, Sabbath recalls how Drenka demanded to listen to him narrate stories of his youth: "'Tell me. Tell me.'" At the Bo-Peep too, she had always begged him to tell her, to tell her, to tell her' (Roth, 1995, p. 420). This memory of Drenka's desire to listen to Sabbath embodies the two forms of auricular memory that occur throughout the narrative. In the principal memory, Sabbath remembers directly the sounds Drenka made and makes them present for the reader by repeating them and thus bringing them back into time. I shall refer to this type of auricular memory as an 'audible' memory. In the memory-within-the-memory about the motel, Sabbath does not recall and repeat Drenka's sounds but

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connection . . . defies "orderly life" and stable categories. Their connection begins conventionally enough as teacher and student. . . . But this is a hierarchy in name only and quickly dissolves' (p. 169).

remembers the scene as an auricular event. This second memory is, then, a memory of or about the auricular. It is a ‘non-audible’ auricular memory.

Sabbath’s pleasure in both forms of auricular memory comes from the sense entailed in listening and the temporal complexity created through recollection. A particularly vivid example of one of Sabbath’s non-audible memories is his recollection of his first wife Nikki listening to him during a rehearsal. With dramatic flair, Sabbath recalls:

There was Nikki. . . . There is Nikki, listening the way she listened when she was given even the minutest note—the look of voluptuous attention, the dark, full eyes without panic, tranquil as only they were when she was having to be someone other than herself, murmuring his words inwardly, brushing her hair off her ears so nothing was between his words and herself, breathing little sighs of defeat to acknowledge just how right he was, his state of mind her state of mind, his sense of things her sense of things, Nikki his instrument, his implement, the self-immolating register of his ready-made world. (p. 201)

In this synaesthetic memory – the visual direction ‘there’, the ‘look’ of Nikki’s eyes and the image of her brushing her hair are all ocular indications of Nikki’s powers of listening, the main focus of the recalled event – Sabbath emphasises the sense of Nikki’s presence through the opening adverb ‘there’, which he sustains through his extended use of the present tense. By summoning up the presence of Nikki, Sabbath creates an intense memory, which also emphasises the influence auricular events have in his life. He represents the experience of being listened to, and in so doing makes Nikki present to the reader – she is *there* before us.

During the sequence of Drenka’s last night in hospital, Sabbath also recalls how his lover and he reminisced about the time they micturated on one another:

‘I remember you stood there, Mickey. And I was in the stream on the rocks. And you stood there, over me, and it was very hard for you to start getting it out, and finally there came a drop. Ohhh,’ she said, recalling that drop.

‘Ohhh,’ he muttered, his grip tightening on her hand. (p. 425)

In this complex and doubled ‘audible’ memory – the memory of a reminiscence – Drenka’s non-semantic ‘Ohhh’ returns the lovers to a past time that no longer exists, to the time of the sexual urination. By repeating Drenka’s ‘Ohhh’, Sabbath reanimates the exceptional temporality of this sound, bringing back into the present the ‘Ohhh’ that had passed away, as by its very nature ‘the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence’ (Nancy, 2007, p. 2). Furthermore, Sabbath’s memory and narration of this auricular exchange repeats once again Drenka’s ‘Ohhh’, thereby reanimating the exceptional coming and going of sound. Thus, Sabbath relives the sexual sense of listening to Drenka’s voice, to the sonority of her simple yet intoxicating ‘Ohhh’, within the remembered event and, additionally, in his memory of that event. The pleasure he experiences in auricular memory, in the re-presentation of sounds that fade away, can be seen as the motivation for his telephonic archive, in which ‘including his four with Big Kathy, there were a total of thirty-three tapes, perpetuating the words of six different students who’d taken the puppetry workshop’ (Roth, 1995, p. 212). Through technology, then, Sabbath is able to perpetuate sound – the exceptionality of sonority – and create a permanent collection of sexual resonance. Thus, his archive oxymoronically preserves sounds that are by their nature transient.

Despite the pleasure of recalling auricular sexual events and the exceptionality this entails, after Drenka’s death Sabbath finds certain memories unappealing. For instance, he explains how ‘he was jealous now of the very men about whom, when Drenka was living, he could never hear enough’ (p. 34). As Sabbath expresses, Drenka’s death marks a shift from a past happiness to a present grief: ‘the diabolical pleasure this had once afforded him! The happiness! When she was alive, nothing excited or entertained him more than hearing, detail by detail, the stories of her second life’ (p. 34). The difference between the

exciting stories pre Drenka's death and the memories of them that become distasteful after is caused by the difference between the listening contexts. Rather than the sexual excitement of Drenka's voice animating the stories as it did when she was alive speaking to him, with her voice gone and the bare content of the stories exposed, Sabbath's focus is now solely on the details – the other man, the 'crooked dick!' (p. 70). He no longer has the accompanying excitement of Drenka's voice coming into his ear, which, rather than the stories' content, created the somatic, visceral pleasure of auricular sense and sensation. Indeed, these memories remove him from his private, sensual life with Drenka and position him as just one member in her collection of lovers.

## 5. Dogging

*The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun 'dogging' as 'the practice of watching or engaging in exhibitionist sexual activity in a public place, typically a car park, esp. as part of a gathering arranged for this purpose.' Clearly, this definition marks dogging as a visual practice, as something people watch or others exhibit. In *Sabbath's Theater*, Sabbath's desire to listen to others having sex reworks this exhibitionist sexual activity into an auricular experience. The animalistically labelled dogger, usually a voyeur or observer, is here a listener, an eavesdropper, opening up his or her ears to other people having sex. Such listening-in calls for the distinction Nancy makes between passive hearing and active listening – auricular dogging involves more than a simple overhearing. One deliberately strains to listen to others; one 'over-listens' not 'overhears'.

In the narrative, Sabbath finds particular sexual pleasure in listening to his wife and her lesbian lover, Christa, the woman he once seduced into sleeping with Drenka, having

sex. Standing outside the bedroom window, Sabbath over-listens to – auricularly dogs – the lovers as they act as gorillas and, thereafter, recite Roseanna's Alcoholics Anonymous prayer together: 'the duet was faultlessly rendered, neither of them groping for either the words or the feeling, two voices, two females, harmoniously interlaced. Young Christa was the ardent one, whereas Roseanna's recitation was marked by the careful thought that she had clearly given every word' (Roth, 1995, p. 438). Over-listening, Sabbath sexualises what is intended to be a sobering recitation, marking out for special consideration the entwined voices of the two females and discerning in their harmonious vocalisation the foreshadowing of their interlaced bodies writhing together. Following the prayer, Sabbath over-listens to the women as they become aroused:

And here began their bliss. Stirring each other up took no time at all. These weren't the cluckings of two contented gorillas Sabbath was overhearing now. The two of them were no longer playing at anything; there was nothing nonsensical any longer about a single sound they made. No need for dear God now. They had taken unto themselves the task of divinity and were laying bare the rapture with their tongues. (pp. 439-40)

Compared to the non-linguistic gorilla 'cluckings' Christa makes as Roseanna strokes her and the words of the prayer they say aloud together, Sabbath finds the sounds of the women's erotic behaviour non-nonsensical. Despite – or indeed because of – the lack of semantic meaning, the sexual sounds make sense to Sabbath. The women lovers are 'talking in tongues', not religiously but sexually, and their rapturous tongue-talk prefigures the mutual cunnilingus possible in lesbian sex. Following their initial excitement and a period of searching, the lovers finally discover one of their clitorises, and the reader is told how 'in the same immense instant, they landed on it together, and never before had Sabbath heard in any language anything like the speech pouring out of Rosie and Christa upon discovering the whereabouts of that little piece that made the whole picture complete' (p. 441). With the detection of the clitoris, Sabbath tunes into the lovers'

excitement and their subsequent ejaculations, which he interprets as some form of magical, mystical language. As with Connie and Joey, the lesbians' talking removes them from animal, bare life but does not place them back into the *polis*, into collective, human life. Rather, theirs is a private language that excepts them from the political sphere and simultaneously excludes everyone else from their erotic one. But, despite not being able to understand them at the level of comprehension, the lesbians' tongue-talk and private language offer Sabbath a new range of auricular, sexual sensations, which pour out of their mouths and, like liquid, flow into his ears.

In addition to solitary and secretive over-listening, planned dogging forms a large part of Sabbath's relationship with Drenka, who arranges for him to listen in on her telephone sex with other men. As Sabbath recalls, 'after each new liaison had got under way, he would listen on the extension while, beside him on the bed, holding the portable phone in one hand and his erection in the other, she drove the latest lover crazy with the words that never failed to do the trick' (p. 26). On the extension line, Sabbath is simultaneously in bed with Drenka who jerks him off and connected to the other man by the telephonic wormhole, the exceptional spatiotemporality of which I discussed in section 3. Without addressing Sabbath – who goes unnoticed by the other man on the end of the line – Drenka is in effect talking to Sabbath, or rather for him, and the sexual conference call offers a telephonic model of a complex sexual configuration based upon listening, speaking, absence and presence. Opening up the wormhole to three-way communication, this type of telephone call offers a model for the formation of new sexual relations made possible through the manipulation of time and space.

Auricular dogging is not, however, limited to the text's diegesis but also extends to the role of the reader, who 'listens' in to the masturbatory episode of Kathy's participation in 'Professor Sabbath's Audio-Visual Club' (p. 231) through the transcript of the

‘telephonic transmission’ (p. 214). The footnoted transcript is announced in the principal diegetic text by an asterisk – ‘this tape records the fourth such telephone conversation to which the student was subjected\*’ (p. 215) – and as its opening sentence purports, it aims to set forth the conversation to supposedly discerning citizens: ‘\*What follows is an uncensored transcript of the entire conversation as it was secretly taped by Kathy Goolsbee (and by Sabbath) and played by SABBATH for whoever dialed 722-2284 and took the thirty minutes to listen’ (p. 215). The footnoted introduction to the transcript informs the reader that ‘in just the first twenty-four hours, over a hundred callers stayed on the line to hear the harassment from beginning to end’ (p. 215). Ironically, then, the hotline transmits and makes public the very act it wishes to condemn and stop.

This type of discursive irony is central to Michel Foucault’s analysis of sex in *The Will to Knowledge* (1976), in which he problematises the common conception of a repressed Victorian era. Arguing against this notion, Foucault turns to the means and mechanisms used to uncover sex since the eighteenth century, claiming:

Rather than the uniform concern to hide sex, rather than a general prudishness of language, what distinguishes these last three centuries is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it: around sex, a whole network of varying, specific, and coercive transpositions into discourse. (1998, p. 34)

Foucault’s repeated use of the pronoun ‘it’ playfully mimics the way in which sex was made to come out into the open whilst simultaneously and ostensibly being censored or veiled in non-explicit, non-sexual language. By wrapping verbs of extraction around ‘it’ – sex – Foucault also imitates and emphasises the energy employed to make sex speak. In the narrative, the SABBATH committee’s decision to make public the tape recording can be seen as part of such a discursive enterprise, as the broadcast and transcription of the

tape recording are two devices wrapped around sex in order to uncover it whilst purportedly condemning it.

Like the vast number of interested listeners, the reader, too, ‘listens in’ on the conversation. She effectively dials SABBATH, enters the wormhole and listens to the tape recording as an eavesdropper, an auricular dogger.<sup>11</sup> The reader’s role as a dogger is emphasised by the transcript’s sub-textual domain, as it is below the main narrative. Consequently, the reader must over-listen or here under-listen to the transcript whilst reading the main narrative. The listening reader therefore adopts a position similar to that Roseanna describes in her journal account of her adolescent life at home, in which she explains how her sister and she used to listen to her father having sex with various women: ‘I don’t imagine he was a good fuck, drunk as he was. But we would always listen from behind the door and were aware of everything going on’ (Roth, 1995, p. 264). As if behind a closed door, the reader also takes up a position in which she cannot see any sexual behaviour. Instead, the reader is left to her auricular abilities but is helped along by extra-diegetic notation such as ‘(*Babyish laugh*)’ (p. 216), ‘(*embarrassed laugh*)’ (p. 216) and ‘(*confessional laugh*)’ (p. 217), which records how Sabbath and Kathy speak and the sounds they make during the telephone conversation. These notations emphasise the crucial significance of listening in the telephone sex conversation: in contradistinction to prompts in a script that guide oral delivery, they direct the reader in how to listen to the couple’s sounds, how to listen in on them and become competent auricular doggers.

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<sup>11</sup> In a similar way, the reader listens to Nicholson Baker’s *Vox* (1992), the entire narrative of which is an extended telephone sex conversation between a man and woman. In *Philip Roth* (2007), David Brauner touches upon the vicarious role of the reader in relation to the transcript and refers to a ‘pornographic transaction between reader and writer’ (p. 126). Brauner also discusses the choice faced by the reader when confronted by these two texts – does the reader give precedence to the transcript and her voyeurism or does she turn to the narrative first? (p. 126).

With the telephone recording in *Sabbath's Theater*, the reader is one of many listeners, but she is still directly engaged with the telephone recording itself. Indeed, telephonic auricular dogging makes space for multiple listeners without engaging the line and barring the reader from listening to others talk dirty and masturbate. The direct engagement the reader has with the taped conversation is marked by the difference between the diegetic text and the footnote transcript. In the main text, even moments of direct speech are embedded within a narrative framework, which imposes a form of mediation between reader and textual sound. In contrast, when the committee or the narrator interferes through their extra-diegetic notation, they do so predominantly to enhance textual sonority, which only adds to the auricular aspect of dogging. Furthermore, the genre and form of the transcript attempt to create a sense of recorded sound and its transmission, making present what has been said and listened to previously, the exceptional sounds that have faded away into their permanence. It is a record, a recording, of what was said as it was said, with the effect of making these transactions present. We listen to the spoken words of Sabbath and Kathy as they said them and as they have been recorded, so that their presence – always already a return – remains ‘present’.

In addition to the collective nature of auricular dogging, the hidden position of the reader-listener returns us to the privacy and secrecy entailed in the etymology of the French ‘*écoute*’. As Nancy explains in *Listening*,

after it had designated a person who listens (who spies), the word *écoute* came to designate a place where one could listen in secret. *Être aux écoutes*, ‘to listen in, to eavesdrop,’ consisted first in being in a concealed place where you could surprise a conversation or a confession. *Être à l’écoute*, ‘to be tuned in, to be listening,’ was in the vocabulary of military espionage before it returned, through broadcasting, to the public space, while still remaining, in the context of the telephone, an affair of confidences or stolen secrets. (2007, p. 4)

Like the spy, the reader listens in secret to the text, partaking in a form of auricular dogging in which other listeners participate privately as well. With telephonic listening, the auricular dogging of reading is metaphorically intensified as the telephone retains, according to Nancy, the secretive aspect of listening. By listening to the recorded telephone conversation, the reader-listener is placed in the position of one who partakes in the ‘affair of confidences or stolen secrets’ (Nancy, 2007, p. 4). As well as emphasising its secretive and subversive nature, the transcript’s sub-textual position in *Sabbath’s Theater* also challenges the usual priority given to sight in the visual-auricular hierarchy.<sup>12</sup> It is textually underground, away from the mainstream, something we listen into rather than something put fully on display.

In the transcript section of *Sabbath’s Theater*, the co-presence of the two texts creates a scenario of double auricular dogging, as the reader listens to the tape recording whilst also listening in to the principal narrative of Sabbath and Kathy’s discussion about the publication of the tape recording itself. Bringing the reader back to the archetypal dogging arena of the car and the car park, the conversation above the tape recording transcript takes place in Sabbath’s van, where ‘across the road a couple of pickup trucks were parked in the dirt lot of the roadside nursery’ (Roth, 1995, p. 216). Rather than peering in through the window to see Sabbath and Kathy, the reader listens in as the young woman tries to explain to Sabbath how she left the tape recording in the ladies’ bathroom and how, in order to profess her love for him, she cries: “‘I want to suck you’” (p. 216).

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<sup>12</sup> In her introduction to *Blind Date* (2003), Avital Ronell praises Anne Dufourmantelle for her intricate consideration of sex and its relationship with the visual, writing: ‘the studied aversion of the philosophical gaze to sex is the subject of this book. However, it is not clear that sex claims object status in or “outside” of philosophy, or that something like sex is at all something to be *seen* by a practice so ocularcentric as gazing or by internally installed viewers such as, say, intuition. In some sense *Blind Date* traces the history of an aversion that monitors the constantly rebounding intrusion of an expelled negativity. Under censorship and whited out by the blind light of surveillance, “sex” constitutes a site of massive distortion where philosophy seeks truth’ (2007, p. xvii-xviii). For Dufourmantelle’s consideration of sex and the visual, see in particular pp. 4, 11, and 63-4.

When Sabbath declines her offer, the narrator brings the reader right into the van by a direct address, telling him: ‘not too hard on Sabbath, Reader’ (p. 230). Playing at the same time as Sabbath and Kathy’s conversation within the car about the tape recording is the sub-textual transcript of the tape recording itself. This double – stereophonic – dogging gives a sense of the all-pervasive auricular penetration in reading this section of *Sabbath’s Theater* – we can listen simultaneously to multiple sounds in a way that we cannot simultaneously read multiple texts.<sup>13</sup> The reader is infiltrated by textual sound, caught between the spatiotemporality of the footnote recording and the main text in a double session of auricular dogging.

## 6. Auto-Affection

As much as Sabbath delights in interpersonal listening and auricular dogging, he also finds great sexual pleasure in listening to himself, in tuning into his ‘turbulent inner talkathon’ (Roth, 1995, pp. 230-1). Sabbath’s adoption of a heterodiegetic narrative voice to tell his own story can be seen as another aspect of this talkathon. Given his love for listening, this narratorial decision enables Sabbath to enhance his oral performance for his personal auricular pleasure. It creates a rich narratorial configuration by accentuating the gap between the ‘I’ of the narrator and the subject of the diegesis, the gap between Sabbath the narrator and Sabbath the character. In narrating his story as a heterodiegetic narrator, Sabbath listens to himself as if he were telling and listening to – for every speaking is already a listening – the story of another, which results in a form of auto-affective

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<sup>13</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘stereophonic’ as: ‘giving the impression of a spatial distribution in reproduced sound; *spec.* employing two or more channels of transmission and reproduction so that the sound may seem to reach the listener from any of a range of directions.’

auricular dogging. Sabbath takes pleasure in listening to himself discuss himself as if over-listening to the sexual exploits of another.<sup>14</sup>

Within Sabbath's narrative, a prominent, albeit somewhat counterintuitive, episode of masturbatory listening comes during his telephone conversation with Kathy. In this exchange, the sexual excitement afforded by listening to oneself is most clearly marked by the way in which Sabbath and Kathy begin to ignore the voice at the other end of the line and ultimately climax to the sounds they themselves make:

Put your finger right up inside your cunt.  
 Oh, God, it's so hot.  
 Put it up there. Now move it up and down.  
 Oh, God.  
 Move it up and down, (*bleep*). Move it up and down, (*bleep*). Move it up and down, (*bleep*). Fuck it, (*bleep*). Come on, fuck it. Come on, fuck it.  
 Oh, God! Oh, God!  
 Go ahead, fuck it.  
 Oh! Oh! Oh! Mickey! Oh, my God! Ahh! Ahh! Ahh! Jesus Christ! Oh, my God!  
 Jesus Christ! I want you so bad! Uhhh! Uhhh! Oh God. . . . I just came. (pp. 224-5)

This auricular self-involvement illustrates how the exchange transforms from a two-way to a more singular masturbatory act at the moment of climax, whilst at the same time simultaneously involving two listeners in two separate spaces connected in the telephonic wormhole. Throughout this climactic exchange – which shows how Kathy's name has been completely 'bleeped' out by the committee in order to protect her identity – Kathy speaks more and becomes self-involved as she listens to herself rather than Sabbath. Her

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<sup>14</sup> In his keynote address 'Ardent Masturbation' at The Writings of Intimacy in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries conference (Loughborough University, 12 September 2010), Leo Bersani ended with the thought-provoking idea that by talking and listening to himself throughout *The Meditations* (1641), René Descartes was practising some form of auto-affection. Taking a different approach, in 'Bored with Sex?' (2003) Adam Phillips addresses the concept of self-listening, opening up an insightful series of questions, including: 'at such moments I am being addressed, but who is addressing me? I am talking to myself but who exactly is doing the talking, the strangely silent talking we call thinking; and who, perhaps more perplexingly, is the listener when we are talking to ourselves?' (p. 6).

auricular auto-affection is signalled by the accumulation of expletives, the exclamatory shouts, the orgasmic pause, the elliptical silence and the final acknowledgement of satisfaction. Throughout these moments before orgasm, Kathy is mostly involved in listening to herself, and she comes almost to silence Sabbath, the voice – or here rather the ear – in the wormhole. This move to a self-occupied, auto-affective form of pleasure is echoed almost exactly by Sabbath:

Oh, I'll bite on your nipples. Your beautiful pink nipples. Oh, (*bleep*). Oh, it's filling up with come now. It's filling up with hot, thick come. It's filling up with hot white come. It's going to shoot out. Want me to come in your mouth?  
 Yeah. I want to suck you right now. Very fast. I want to put you in my mouth.  
 Oh, God. I'm sucking it hard.  
 Suck me, (*bleep*). Want to suck my dick?  
 Yes, I want to suck you. I want to suck your cock.  
 Suck my stiff cock. Hard, stiff cock. Suck my hard, stiff cock.  
 Oh, God.  
 Oh, it's full of come, (*bleep*). Oh, (*bleep*), suck it now. Ahha! Ahh! Ahh! Ahh! . . .  
 . . . Oh, my goodness. . . . Are you still there? (pp. 233-4)

After his exclamations and ejaculation, Sabbath's final question explicitly reaffirms how the person at the end of the line has become a non-vocal partner in this masturbatory act. Having dialled up to listen to one another, Sabbath and Kathy actually reach sexual climax by listening to themselves.

In the narrative, a different form of auricular self-arousal is achieved through recorded replay. With little to do one evening, Sabbath realises that 'if he left now he'd be home before ten. Too late to get to Drenka, but how about Kathy? Take her to the house, dial S-A-B-B-A-T-H, listen to the tape while they went down on each other' (p. 261), and he actively looks forward to 'settling in by the fire for a pleasant fall evening of listening on the phone to Kathy and him coming' (p. 235). Due to the pleasure Sabbath finds in listening to himself, he archives all of his telephonic sex tapes, storing them 'in excellent order not only so that each was easy to locate when he needed it to hand but so that they

could be quickly accounted for if he ever worried, as irrationally he sometimes did, that one or another had gotten misplaced' (p. 213). The masturbatory promise held by the tapes is articulated in the *double entendre* 'to hand': the tapes are easily accessible, and Sabbath recognises the masturbatory, digital – hand-job – potential they offer. Kathy likewise finds the taped conversation arousing, and, as she listens to it in the library, 'after only ten minutes, the tape had made her so wet she had left everything and taken off with the headset for the ladies' bathroom' (pp. 211-12). As Kathy explains to Sabbath, in her hot, flushed moments, she finds herself completely overwhelmed: "I was, like, so wet and swollen, how could I concentrate? I was in the library to research my paper, only I couldn't stop masturbating" (p. 212). Thus, listening to the tape stops Kathy from working and ushers her into her auricularly sexual realm with Sabbath. As she listens to the recording of her earlier listening experience, Kathy doubles the pleasure of auricular sex and experiences the exceptionality of being in two times and spaces simultaneously. Whilst she listens to the tape in the ladies' bathroom, Kathy is involved in the time and space of her present listening and is, through the recording, also involved in the time and space of the original erotic conversation. By listening to the telephone recording, Sabbath and Kathy are both able to re-listen to their own voices. Furthermore, by re-listening to their conversation, Sabbath and Kathy listen to, or as, earlier listening selves, thereby creating an extra-exceptionality in which an already auricularly complex configuration of inside and outside, self and other, is repeated and replayed.

## **7. Fantasy and Reincarnation**

Fantasy is often considered to be a visual phenomenon, an understanding that is supported by *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines ‘fantasy’ as ‘a spectral apparition, phantom; an illusory appearance’, and ‘the process or the faculty of forming mental representations of things not actually present’. To fantasize is ‘to visualize fancifully, to represent in the fancy’ (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). In contrast, *Sabbath’s Theater* offers an auricular form of fantasy, through which Sabbath creates full-scale auditory productions. His greatest musical production comes towards the end of the narrative when he returns home from his trip to New York. Instead of going straight into the house, Sabbath sits in his car outside and fantasizes about his wife masturbating. During this fantasy, Sabbath imagines and listens to ‘her’ sexual sounds:

And now she bends her legs up again. This is the position in which she wants to come. Here begins the muttering. ‘Can I? Can I?’ All the while she is making the decision *when*, she is muttering aloud, ‘Can I Can I Can I come?’ Whom does she ask? The imaginary man. Men. The whole lot of them, the leader, the masked one, the boy, the black one, asking herself maybe or her father, or asking no one at all. The words alone are enough, the begging. ‘Can I? Can I come? Please, can I?’ (Roth, 1995, p. 432)

Sabbath’s fantasy moves from the visual positioning of Roseanna’s body to a sustained emphasis on ‘her’ sounds. He listens to her imagined pleading, to her conjured voice and to the sounds of sexual desire. He also intensifies the auricular aspect of the fantasy by imagining multiple listeners, the imaginary men Roseanna addresses and listens to, seeking their permission to release herself in orgasm. As made evident through this auditory fantasy, Sabbath’s claim that ‘words alone are enough’ (p. 432) does not reflect his wife’s thoughts, but is instead a projection of his own desire for auricular stimulation.

Auricular fantasies do not have to be entirely internal or solitary. In *The Humbling*, for instance, Axler and his lover Pegeen create a shared auricular fantasy in their personal

bedroom auditorium. In this fantasy, Pegeen makes Lara, a young lady she has seen before, ‘present’ through the act of narration:

From then on Lara was with them whenever they wanted her.

‘You’re fucking her,’ Pegeen would say. ‘That’s Lara’s perfect little pussy.’

‘You fucking her too?’

‘No. Just you. Close your eyes. You want her to make you come? You want Lara to make you come? All right, you blond little bitch—make him come!’ Pegeen cried, and no longer did he have to tell her how to ride the horse. ‘Squirt it all over her. Now! Now! Yes, that’s it—squirt in her face!’ (Roth, 2009, p. 106)

Pegeen’s imperative – “‘close your eyes’” – registers the literal occlusion of Axler’s visual stimulus, making his fantasy of Lara predominantly auditory, which Pegeen intensifies by addressing the absent-present Lara. Axler senses Lara’s exceptional ‘presence’ through listening, and the shared auricular fantasy ends in ejaculation, to which Pegeen responds by directing Axler to squirt his semen in the absent-present Lara’s face. Through this fantasy, Pegeen creates an auricular sexual threesome in which the woman plays the actor or narrator, the fantasy object is physically absent and the man revels in the sexual pleasure of listening. Moreover, the mutual enjoyment both Axler and Pegeen experience in listening to each other brings out Pegeen’s sexual ability to ride Axler, the horse, and, therefore, listening to language actually enables the lovers to enjoy freely their sexual animality.

Where Pegeen fantastically brings the living Lara into the bedroom auditorium, Sabbath’s auricular fantasies occasionally result in auricular reincarnation. During a visit to Drenka’s grave, Sabbath

hadn’t imagined that, looking down at the plot, he would see through to Drenka, see her inside the coffin raising her dress to the stimulating latitude at which the tops of her stockings were joined to the suspenders of her garter belt, once again see that flesh of hers that reminded him always of the layer of cream at the top of the milk bottle when he was a child and Borden delivered. It was stupid not to have figured on carnal thoughts. ‘Go down on me,’ she said to Sabbath. ‘Eat me,

Country, the way Christa did,' and Sabbath threw himself onto the grave. (Roth, 1995, p. 64)

This graveside visitation begins with Sabbath's visual imagination but ends with his focus on his auricular senses; his initial corporeal thoughts give way to Drenka's spectral words. This movement from sight to sound emphasises how Sabbath's carnal impulses are related to listening to Drenka rather than seeing her, and the very auricularity of his fantastical reincarnation of Drenka causes him to throw himself down on her grave, the closest he will come to 'going down' on her. Where he only imagines Drenka's bodily reanimation, Sabbath makes her into an auricular *revenant* when he remembers her words, language and speech. He provides his lover with an exceptional sonorous existence, thus subverting the visual nature of the spectre, the meaning of which derives from the Latin 'specĕre' for 'to look' or 'see' (*The Oxford English Dictionary*).

Sabbath provides a different form of auricular reincarnation when he channels Drenka's sounds through his body as if he were a medium. During his graveside visit, Sabbath is horrified when he espies Lewis, another of Drenka's lovers, leaving her flowers and then masturbating over her grave. Sabbath scares the lover by throwing a rock, collects the flowers and throws them away. When Sabbath holds the flowers, he realises that they are wet with sperm, and a moment later

he did something strange, strange even for a strange man like him, who believed himself inured to the limitless contradictions that enshroud us in life. Because of his strangeness most people couldn't stand him. Imagine then if someone had happened upon him that night, in the woods a quarter of a mile down from the cemetery, licking from his fingers Lewis's sperm and, beneath the full moon, chanting aloud, 'I am Drenka! I am Drenka!' (Roth, 1995, p. 78)

Sabbath mixes his trip to the cemetery, the resting home of the dead, with the ingestion of the male life force, sperm, and gives life to the dead Drenka through auricular reincarnation. As an act of auricular reincarnation, Sabbath speaks out as Drenka and

simultaneously listens to ‘her’ as if she were alive, with her/his words resonating inside and outside his body in a moment of exceptional sensual contagion.<sup>15</sup> Unable to let go of his voluptuous lover, Sabbath reincarnates her as a speaking being to whom he can listen once again.

## 8. Ventriloquism

In *Sabbath’s Theater*, an alternative form of auricular manipulation is present in ventriloquism, ‘the art or practice of speaking or producing sounds in such a manner that the voice appears to proceed from some person or object other than the speaker, and usually at some distance from him’ (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). As *The Oxford English Dictionary* implies, ventriloquism involves a displacement of the voice as well as spatiotemporal manipulation. Correlatively, ventriloquial listening is the spatiotemporal complexity involved in listening to somebody talk as another. The mechanics and effects of this form of listening are keenly portrayed in the analeptically narrated depiction of Sabbath’s 1950s puppetry routine, which eventually leads to his arrest for fondling a student’s breast. During Sabbath’s drive to New York for his friend’s funeral, Sabbath tells

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<sup>15</sup> In her introduction to the special edition of *GLQ* on queer temporalities, Elizabeth Freeman discusses what has become a staple metaphor for queer theory, the drag act. She reflects: ‘we might think of it as a nonnarrative history written with the body, in which the performer channels another body, literalizing the permeability to which [Dipesh] Chakrabarty refers and making this body available to a context unforeseen in its bearer’s lived historical moment’ (2007, p. 164). As Freeman implies, drag is often seen as a visual queering of self and other, but Sabbath’s reincarnation of Drenka offers a new way to think about drag, with the performer experiencing auricular auto-affection (if she speaks) and a form of exceptionality – being in and out of multiple times and spaces simultaneously. Therefore, the purchase of the drag act would be the exceptionality it offers the subject rather than the permeability of the body or the untimeliness of his or her persona. Furthermore, the drag performer’s speaking and listening would provide him with an auricular form of pleasure in which he listens to himself speak as somebody of another gender.

the reader about his street puppetry performances, his 'Indecent Theater of Manhattan' (Roth, 1995, p. 123):

Back then his street speciality, his trademark, was to perform with his fingers. Fingers, after all, are made to move, and though their range is not enormous, when each is moving purposefully and has a distinctive voice, their power to produce their own reality can astonish people. Sometimes, just drawing the length of a woman's sheer stocking over one hand, Sabbath was able to create all sorts of lascivious illusions. (p. 122)

In Sabbath's act, the audience suspends its disbelief and listens to a finger, the voice of which comes from Sabbath hidden behind a screen. Sabbath finds this ventriloquial act particularly thrilling, and claims: 'shoving your hand up a puppet and hiding your face behind a screen! Nothing like it in the animal kingdom!' (p. 244). The displacement of voice and body in the act of puppetry is sexualised as Sabbath uses sheer stockings to entice his womanly prey, and, more explicitly, because he believes that 'in the fingers uncovered, or even suggestively clad, there is always a reference to the penis' (p. 122). Due to the phallic symbolism Sabbath discerns in the finger, he effectively gives the male sex organ the power of speech and believes that his audience listens to the voice of a finger and a penis simultaneously. Taking advantage of his finger-penis act, Sabbath uses his 'sly, salacious middle finger' (p. 124) to seduce women:

whenever he spotted an attractive girl among the twenty or so students who had stopped to watch, he would break off the drama in progress or wind it down, and then fingers would start in whispering together. Then the boldest finger—a middle finger—would edge nonchalantly forward, lean graciously out over the screen, and beckon her to approach. And girls did come forward, some laughing or grinning like good sports, others serious, poker-faced, as though already mildly hypnotized. (p. 123)

During his performance, Sabbath actually breaks away from the action of the play in order to entice the attractive girl. At this stage in his enticement, there is relative silence as the fingers whisper to one another, which is presumably accompanied by the audience's

straining to listen to what the fingers are saying. Having deliberated, the middle finger – culturally used to signal sexual profanities such as ‘up yours’ and ‘fuck you’ – fingers the chosen girl to come forward, listen and respond to his questions: ‘after an exchange of polite chitchat, the finger would begin a serious interrogation, asking if the girl had ever dated a finger, if her family approved of fingers, if she herself could find a finger desirable, if she could imagine living happily with only a finger . . . and the other hand, meanwhile, stealthily began to unbutton or unzip her outer garment’ (pp. 123-4). In this description, the finger’s interrogation – and a sense of what the girl listens to, one question after another – is mimicked by Sabbath’s syntax, with the ellipsis marking the continuous stream of questions and the conjunction showing how the other hand is utterly outside the woman’s consciousness. When Sabbath is lucky enough to reach this far in his act, ‘the interrogation would abruptly turn wanton and the fingers proceed to undo her blouse’ (p. 124). However, ‘only twice did the fingers undo a brassiere catch and only once did they endeavour to caress the nipples exposed’ (p. 124). In the case of the student whose breast Sabbath caresses, the auricular effect of ventriloquism upon the girl allows Sabbath to undress her and play with her nipples. She is seduced by ventriloquial listening, by the alluring effect of listening to a voice as if it were emanating from two indeterminate locations.

As Sabbath informs the reader, he is able ‘not only to play with his fingers and his puppets but to manipulate living creatures as well’ (p. 125). A form of human ventriloquism is at play in the first part of the text when Sabbath’s attention turns to his memory of Drenka’s eighteen-year-old niece Silvija and how he cajoled Drenka into telling him he could have sex with the teenager: ““Say the things,” he told her, “say everything,” and she did. “Yes, you have my permission, you dirty man, yes,” she said,

“you can have her tight young pussy, you dirty, filthy, man” (p. 22). To fulfil Sabbath’s fantasy, Drenka acts as Silvija, and in the guest bedroom of Drenka’s hotel

there was she ‘seduced,’ ‘Silvija’ protesting all the while that ‘Mr. Sabbath’ must promise never to tell her aunt and her uncle what she had agreed to do for money. ‘I never had a man before. I only had my boyfriend, and he comes so soon. I never had a man like you.’ ‘Can I come inside you, Silvija?’ ‘Yes, yes, I always wanted a man to come inside me. Just don’t tell my aunt and my uncle!’ ‘I fuck your aunt. I fuck Drenka.’ ‘Oh, you do? My aunt? Do you? Is she a better fuck than me?’ ‘No, never, no.’ ‘Is her pussy tight like me?’ ‘Oh, Silvija—your aunt is standing at the door. She’s watching us!’ ‘Oh, my God—!’ ‘She wants to fuck with us, too.’ ‘Oh God, I never tried that before—’. (p. 23)

In this auricular seduction, Sabbath is no longer the ventriloquist but the excited listener, the aroused audience member. Drenka/‘Silvija’ titillate Sabbath through the use of the titular ‘Mr’, which emphasises Silvija’s youth, her respect for him and his relative power and experience. Drenka/Silvija further their ventriloquial flirtation by drawing a distinction between Sabbath the ‘man’ and the boyfriend, who prematurely – immaturely – ejaculates and leaves Silvija unsatisfied. When Sabbath joins in this playful dialogue, he introduces an element of fantastical dogging, telling Drenka/‘Silvija’ that Drenka is standing to the side watching them. Through role-play and the spatiotemporal displacement of ventriloquism, the lovers create a complex scenario in which their sexual pleasures are founded upon and amplified by listening. Sabbath listens to the absent young Silvija, who is made present to him through auricular ventriloquism. Through this performance, Sabbath is pleased by stereophony, as he listens to one person acting as another, which involves a triple listening and an exceptional configuration of presence and absence: Sabbath listens to Drenka speak as Silvija; he imagines that he is listening to Silvija herself; and he listens to Drenka even as she acts as another.

As an episode in *The Humbling* implies, ventriloquism also takes place in the act of reading. Telling Axler about a former relationship with a woman, Pegeen explains: “‘We’d

be tucked up in bed, reading—reading to ourselves, reading passages aloud to each other”” (Roth, 2009, p. 50). Here, the lesbians’ bed metonymically represents sex or at least a sexual locus. It is a place of private, intimate reading, both individually and as a shared pursuit. Within the intimacy of the sexual bed, reading functions as a metaphor for masturbation (reading alone) and sexual intercourse (reading to one another). Moreover, as, according to Nancy, ‘writing is also . . . a voice that resounds’ (2007, p. 36), the partner in the bed who reads to the other also participates in an act of auricular contagion in which her voice mingles with that of the text. By reading aloud, then, the reading partner ventriloquizes the voice of the text, which is in turn internalised by the one who listens. Distinct from the shared experience in which Pegeen and her lover read aloud to one another, reading to oneself involves a more solitary form of masturbatory ventriloquism. In this type of reading, the reader – including the reader of *The Humbling* – listens to himself through the words of another – the words of the text – and listens to that other through his own subvocalization. As listening readers who tune into the sexual transcript, or like Pegeen and her lover who arouse one another by reading, or, as we shall see, like Sabbath who masturbates to the music in Dostoyevsky, when we find ourselves aroused by reading we are experiencing a form of exceptional sexual intercourse, which is created by the simultaneous process of textual ventriloquism and ventriloquial listening.

## 9. Sweet Song

Throughout *Sabbath’s Theater*, Sabbath shows a passion for listening to music, using it as a means of seduction and as a way both to relive past sexual pleasures and to create new

fantasies.<sup>16</sup> Sabbath's use of music to seduce women is vividly played out when he entices Christa into having sex with Drenka. Sabbath picks up Christa from the roadside in his van, and hopes that his jazz music will work as an aphrodisiac: 'he wondered if it might not soften up this German girl, the late-night languor-inducing beat and that tactful, torchy something in Goodman's playing, and so for three minutes he said nothing to her and, to the seductive coherence of "Body and Soul," the two drove on through the dark of the wooded hills' (Roth, 1995, p. 56). Sabbath believes in the erotic sensuality and potential of Benny Goodman's music, which has the effect of simultaneously producing a sleepy, defenceless longing and a certain inflammability. Sabbath's desire that the music 'soften up' Christa marks his wish both to make her susceptible to his seduction and to get her ready – soft and receptive – for sexual intercourse. Furthermore, the seductive coherence Sabbath senses in the music prefigures Christa and Drenka's bodies being harmoniously entwined in sex. Thus, the music both seduces Christa and anticipates her sexual intercourse with Drenka.

Beyond its seductive uses, music enables Sabbath to relive his sexual affairs with Drenka. We are told, for instance, that when he drives Roseanna to the rehabilitation clinic following the revelation of the telephone sex scandal with Kathy, 'up front in the car Sabbath played the Goodman tapes to which he and Drenka used to dance together in the motel rooms he rented up and down the valley when they'd become enraptured lovers' (p. 226). Much to Sabbath's delight, 'the tapes more or less drowned out Roseanna's tirade and allowed Sabbath some respite' (p. 226). During this drive, listening activates Sabbath's memory of his times with Drenka, and he thinks about listening to music and

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<sup>16</sup> In *Blind Date*, Dufourmantelle traces *jouissance* back to music, writing: 'jouissance has to do with joy, the "joye" of the troubadours' odes, plenitude. Joy is not desire realized, which dies suffocated in and along with its realization; joy goes right through any heaviness, and in this sense it is doubtless musical in essence. That is why, musically, one can bring jouissance and ideas together and inscribe them in the same space, the space received by the psyche, by intelligence, when it thinks or when it loves' (2007, p. 55).

dancing with Drenka, remembering how ‘first they fucked, then they danced, Sabbath and [Drenka], and while Sabbath faultlessly sang the lyrics into her grinning, incredulous face, his come would leak out of her, making even more lubricious the inner roundness of her thighs’ (p. 226). As Sabbath’s recollection shows, the couple’s sexual interaction is enriched by the auricular sensation of song, just as Sabbath’s life is made more bearable and exciting by music and its ability to effect erotic memories.

The sexual power of music is equally important to Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain* (2000), a discussion of which opened this thesis. Towards the beginning of the narrative, Silk talks to his friend, Roth’s recurring writer-figure and the narrator of the text, Nathan Zuckerman, and tells him: “‘Everything stoical within me unclenches and the wish not to die, never to die, is almost too great to bear. And all this,’” he explained, “‘from listening to Vaughn Monroe’” (Roth, 2000, p. 14). Following Silk’s comment about the power of music, Zuckerman describes to the reader how

some nights, every line of every song assumed a significance so bizarrely momentous that he’d wind up dancing by himself the shuffling, drifting, repetitious, uninspired, yet wonderfully serviceable, mood-making fox trot that he used to dance with the East Orange High girls on whom he pressed, through his trousers, his first meaningful erections; and while he danced, nothing he was feeling, he told me, was simulated, neither the terror (over extinction) nor the rapture (over ‘You sigh, the song begins. You speak, and I hear the violins’). (p. 14)

On these nights, Silk dances with himself, moving in(to) time with his past sexual awakening and exploration. Music and dance accompanied Silk’s youthful erections, and they now allow him to experience the fear of extinction (going out of time) as well as the feeling of rapturous living (being in time). For both Sabbath and Silk, music offers a double temporality – they listen to it in the present, which stimulates their recollection of past listening experiences. As Silk tells Zuckerman, the music often returns him to women and sex, just as it does Sabbath: “‘Hear these songs?’” The four radios were playing in the

house, and so even out on the road it would have been impossible not to hear them. “After the war, those were the songs,” he said. “Four, five years of the songs, the girls, and that fulfilled my every ideal” (p. 21). Sabbath and Silk’s sexual revelries are musical revelries. Their sexual desires and deeds come with a soundtrack, which the reader listens to as she is escorted back and forth through the men’s erotic lives, past and present.

Both Sabbath and Silk find in musical sense a means to fantasize as well as to remember, to travel forwards as well as backwards in time. Indeed, in his long fantasy of Roseanna masturbating Sabbath interprets her sexual activity as music:

Ohhhh. Ohhhh. Ohhhh. And then she lies there and she pants for a while . . . in all, there is much here to be compared with Bernstein conducting Mahler’s Eighth.

Sabbath felt like offering a standing ovation. But seated in the car at the foot of the long dirt drive leading up nearly a hundred yards to the house, he could only stamp his feet and cry, ‘Brava, Rosie! Brava!’ and lift his God Bless America yarmulke in admiration of the crescendos and the diminuendos, of the floating and the madness, of the controlled uncontrollableness, of the sustained finale’s driving force. Better than Bernstein. His wife. (Roth, 1995, p. 433)

Within this sexual fantasia – “a composition in a style in which form is subservient to fancy” (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, citing Stainer and Barrett) – Sabbath places himself as an audience member listening to Roseanna’s sonorous masturbation and acknowledges her performance with the customary musical cry – ‘Brava’. Sabbath imaginatively listens to Roseanna, but he, not she, is getting off to sound. By sounding out this fantasy internally (to himself) and externally (to the reader), Sabbath is listening to himself imitate and create the sounds of another. He is imaginatively listening to another whilst in actuality listening to his own inner voice, his own subvocalization, in an exceptional moment of auricular contagion.

Sabbath’s pleasure in listening to his masturbatory fantasia about Roseanna is similar to the sexual excitement he experiences in reading. In a moment of autodiegetic narration, Sabbath recalls his early days as a seaman, telling the reader:

I had been reading O'Neill. I was reading Conrad. A guy on board had given me books. I was reading all that stuff and jerking myself off over it. Dostoyevsky—everybody going around with grudges and immense fury, rage like it was all put to music, rage like it was two hundred pounds to lose. Rascal Knockoff. I thought: Dostoyevsky fell in love with him. (p. 155)

Sabbath's focus on the music in Dostoyevsky's work unveils the auricular basis of his literary pleasures. He finds in Dostoyevsky an all-consuming music, a loud fury and rage. He reads and listens to Dostoyevsky as an opera, creating an amplification and resounding combination of the voice of, and the music in, the text. As a Rascal Knockoff himself (Sabbath's homophonic play on 'Raskolnikov'), Sabbath knocks one off to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) due to its operatic force and the intense auricular sensation reading this literary opus creates.

The seductive and sexual sensation Sabbath appreciates in music can be traced at least as far back as Homer's *Odyssey*. As Odysseus and his men endeavour to return home to Ithaca, Circe infamously warns the epic hero:

““You will come first of all to the Sirens, who are enchanters of all mankind and whoever comes their way; and that man who unsuspecting approaches them, and listens to the Sirens singing, has no prospect of coming home and delighting his wife and little children as they stand about him in greeting, but the Sirens by the melody of their singing enchant him.”” (Homer, 1999, Book XII, ll. 39-44)

Whilst Circe allows for the possibility that the Sirens can entice anyone, her caveat predominantly focuses on the susceptible male, his potential seduction and the consequent breakdown of his family. Within this classical seduction story, men are aroused and beguiled by the Sirens' singing. To survive the Sirens' enchantment, Circe tells Odysseus: “““You must drive straight on past, but melt down sweet wax of honey / and with it stop your companions' ears, so none can listen””” (ll. 47-8). In her instructions, however, Circe

makes an exception and allows Odysseus alone to experience the sonorous experience of the Sirens' singing. She tells him:

“but if you yourself are wanting to hear them,  
then have them tie you hand and foot on the fast ship, standing  
upright against the mast with the ropes' ends lashed about it,  
so that you can have joy in hearing the song of the Sirens” (Il. 49-52)

Circe's instructions to Odysseus are dualistic. She frees him to listen to the Sirens but tells him to be tied and restrained. Thus, she makes Odysseus play the part of the masochist, in which he can enjoy the sexual enticement of the Sirens' song whilst being voluntarily bound by lashing ropes.

Like Axler in *The Humbling*, a discussion of whose ability to listen began this chapter, Sabbath has a provocative auricular capacity in addition to his aptitude for sweet talking. By positioning themselves as attentive listeners, both Sabbath and Axler invert the Sirens' erotic, dangerous potential and, consequently, the longstanding literary and cultural tradition of the 'smooth-talking' male who entices women with his flattering speech. Sabbath's personal ability to seduce women by listening is portrayed in his first telephone conversation with Kathy when she phones to apologise for being absent from class due to illness. For his part, Sabbath takes up the position of the interested listening party, and, 'seizing on the surprising call to quiz her paternally about her "goals," learned that she was living with a boyfriend who tended bar at night in the student hangout and was at the library during the day writing a "pol sci" dissertation' (Roth, 1995, p. 210). Whilst it is true that Sabbath listens for his own benefit, to ascertain details about this woman's personal life, by listening to her, by paying her auricular attention, he eventually seduces her. Thus, Sabbath's auricular enticement reconfigures the seductive powers of the Sirens, who promise knowledge through their sweet song:

“no one else has ever sailed past this place in his black ship  
until he has listened to the honey-sweet voice that issues  
from our lips; then goes on, well pleased, knowing more than ever  
he did”. (Homer, Book XII, ll. 185-9)

Like those who listen to the Sirens, Sabbath is aroused by Kathy's informative discussion, but Kathy herself is aroused by Sabbath's seeming desire to listen to her. She is seduced not through his 'honey-sweet voice', a viscous, sticky, tasty sonority, but by his stretching to listen to her, his auricular opening up to her. Kathy is seduced by the sense and exceptionality created in being listened to, and the auricular attention she is afforded is emphasised by the way in which 'they talked for half an hour, exclusively about Kathy' (Roth, 1995, p. 210). To effect the sense of the caring and considerate individual, Sabbath focuses on Kathy's responses, thereby simultaneously demonstrating both his auricular interest in, and influence over, her. Sabbath's auricular capacity, or at least his ability to persuade women that he is listening, supports his belief that 'he had the artistry still to open up to them the lurid interstices of life, often for the first time since they'd given their debut "b.j." in junior high' (p. 213), and his auricular art has the same seductive power as “the magical / Sirens and their singing” (Homer, 1999, Book XII, ll. 158-9). Sabbath's technique inverts the classical role of listening, so that the listener is the seducer, and the speaker the seduced.

## 10. Silence

At the end of a chapter on listening, filled with voices, sound and resonance, it seems appropriate to close with an analysis of silence. For Sabbath, silence does not offer a respite. Rather, he uses it to entice women. When Sabbath seduces women by listening to

them, he becomes quiet and plays upon the erotic effect of listening to silence, as his seduction of Christa demonstrates:

He stopped talking and on they drove. In that silence, in that darkness, every breath assumed its importance as that which kept you alive. His aims were clear. His dick was hard. He was on automatic pilot, excited, exultant, following behind his own headlights as though in a torch-led procession to the nocturnal moisture of the starry mountaintop, where celebrants were convening already for the wild worship of the stiff prick. Dress optional. (Roth, 1995, p. 60)

Here, silence is equated with darkness, but far from being a form of absence or negation, Sabbath finds the dark night – and, correspondingly, silence too – to be a time of excitement and sexual possibility. With only their breathing to listen to, Sabbath is in control, excited at his seductive mastery. As Sabbath fantasizes about the sexual time of night and the wild sexual gathering in silence, Christa eventually begins to speak again. After and to the time and space of silence, she talks about her previous job as an exotic dancer, telling Sabbath: “‘I entertained more at private parties, if you want to know. Bachelor parties. For about a year’” (pp. 60-1). In reaction to this successfully silent manoeuvre, Sabbath thinks ‘yep, played it perfectly’ (p. 60), and his play upon silence indicates that silence should be ‘understood [*s’entendre*, heard] not as a privation but as an arrangement of resonance: a little—or even exactly . . .—as when in a perfect condition of silence you hear your own body resonate, your own breath, your heart and all its resounding cave’ (Nancy, 2007, p. 21).<sup>17</sup> Silence is a spatiotemporally exceptional

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<sup>17</sup> In *Infancy and History* (1978), Agamben argues that ‘the ineffable, the un-said, are in fact categories which belong exclusively to human language; far from indicating a limit of language, they express its invincible power of presupposition, the unsayable being precisely what language must presuppose in order to signify’ (2007a, p. 4). On the positivity of silence and its various manifestations, see also, Foucault (1996, p. 164, and 1998, p. 27). In *Blind Date*, Dufourmantelle links pornography to a lack of silence, arguing: ‘pornography deliberately damages what it touches, in order to make it into a consumable product, a semblance, flesh to be viewed with no secret to unveil, no silence to respect, no space other than that of immediate satisfaction and then its repetition.

resonance, something that is both there and not there simultaneously. Sabbath's use of silence demonstrates its significance, as is reaffirmed when he refuses Kathy's offer of a blow job as they discuss the publication of their telephone sex tape. Sitting in his van, Sabbath tells Kathy: "do us all a favour—do Brian instead. That may even be what he's angling for by turning into a deaf-mute. Didn't you say that the shock of hearing the tape has turned him into a deaf-mute? Well, go home and sign him that you're going to blow him and see if his face doesn't light up" (Roth, 1995, p. 230). In Sabbath's admonition, he mockingly reads Brian's silence as a sexual come-on, as an effort to reinitiate sex with Kathy. Moreover, Sabbath takes pride in having made Brian deaf and mute – silent in two senses – through his sexual relationship with Kathy. Sabbath has emasculated, sexually silenced, Brian, who is now unable to experience the pleasures of auricular sex or provide auricular excitement for others.

Sabbath shows his love of silence and its sexual possibilities again during his drive with Roseanna to the rehabilitation clinic. As he listens to his jazz music, which allows him to recall his sexual listening and dancing with Drenka in their motel room, Sabbath remembers how he sang 'not like Hoagy Carmichael, in English, but in French no less – "Suivant le silence de la nuit / Répète ton nom . . ."' (p. 227). The words Sabbath sings echo the pleasure he himself takes in listening to silence, particularly the silence of the night in his seduction of Christa. Where Nancy argues that 'sense opens up in silence' (2007, p. 26), Sabbath uses silence to open up sexual possibilities, sexual sense and sensation – to open up women. A similar opening up through silence is appraised by Axler in *The Humbling* when he watches Pegeen and a woman Pegeen and he pick up from a bar have sex:

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Pornography is not on the side of darkness but on the side of the scorching, shadowless light of midday' (2007, p. 64).

First Pegeen stepped into the contraption, adjusted and secured the leather straps, and affixed the dildo so that it jutted out straight. Then she crouched above Tracy, brushing Tracy's lips and nipples with her mouth and fondling her breasts, and then she slid down a ways and gently penetrated Tracy with the dildo. Pegeen did not have to force her open. She did not have to say a word—he imagined that if either one of them did begin to speak, it would be in a language unrecognizable to him. (Roth, 2009, pp. 112-13)

The narrator's exclusively visual description of the two women emphasises the silence of this scene. This is a sexual dumb show, in which Tracy is opened up to sex with Pegeen through silence, just as she is physically opened by Pegeen's strap-on dildo. Tracy responds to the silence, which makes sexual sense to both women. During this *ménage à trois*, and that involving Drenka and Christa, Axler and Sabbath take on the role of the silent observer, and it is to another type of silent threesome partner – the excepted member – that I turn in Chapter V.

## V. SEXUAL SETS

I poured us a drink then sat myself down in an armchair and watched as he took Marisa's temperature, shone a light into her ears, looked deep into her open mouth, felt under her armpits and examined her chest. The moment was decisive. Not the beginning of a new sensation but a revelation of it in its entirety, like coming out of a dark room and being met by the brilliant orb of the sun. Whoever I had been before – whatever luxuriating oddities had marked me out from other men in the matter of love and loss (and I had only ever felt marginally odd, just a trifle too given to losing my heart and ending up at the suffering end of passion) – all equivocations were finally at an end: I was now someone who was aroused by the sight of another man's hands on the breasts of the woman he loved. Henceforth, given the choice, I would rather Marisa gave her breasts to a man who wasn't me. That was to be the condition, the measure, of my love for her. At a stroke I was freed from the fascination of Freddy's jealousy. I was now liberated into my own. (Jacobson, 2008, p. 53)

This analeptically narrated sequence provides the decisive moment in Howard Jacobson's *The Act of Love* (2008). Felix Quinn, a Marylebone antiquarian bookseller, narrates his pleasure at watching his sick wife being treated by a Cuban doctor on their honeymoon in Florida. Of equal import as the disastrous honeymoon night in *On Chesil Beach* (2007), this momentous occasion confirms to Felix his proclivity for 'cuckoldage' (Jacobson, 2008, p. 240) and lays it bare for the reader. The moment marks a temporal cleft in Felix's life, dividing it into pre and post knowledge of his specific sexual desires. His hospitable act of sharing a drink with the doctor foreshadows Felix's desire to share his wife: he therefore finds sexual excitement by arranging for his wife to have sexual relations with other men. At a stroke – at once a temporal indicator and the touch of the doctor's hand across Marisa's breast – Felix is freed from experiencing the jealousy felt by Marisa's first husband Freddy and will, from this moment, attempt to create and indulge in his own.

Returning to Giorgio Agamben's conceptualisation of the state of exception and focusing in particular on his use of set theory, in this chapter I shall argue that *The Act of Love* both diegetically and extradiegetically creates a series of sexual sets. As I argue in section 1, within the diegesis Felix arranges for his wife to have sex with other men for his own sexual pleasure. Thus, rather than see Felix as the traditional wronged partner who is simply cast aside, through the complexity of inclusion and exclusion in set theory I argue that Felix is a member of a sexual set made up of Marisa, her lovers and him. Within the set, Felix is simultaneously excluded by his wife and her lovers from their liaisons and included in their love life as he arranges her affairs. Through his establishment of the sexual set, Felix creates a state of exception, which I explore in the chapter's first subset (2.1-3) in terms of the spatiotemporality of the marital home, Felix's psychosomatic dimension 'subspace', the indetermination of law and its transgression, and the concept of abandonment. Within this subspatial sphere, Felix acutely actualises his desire for exceptionality and, through the establishment of the law of permitted adultery, he experiences the complete breakdown of the difference between the law and its transgression. In the exceptional state of the sexual set, concepts such as fidelity and infidelity, the rule and its transgression become indeterminate.<sup>1</sup>

In the second of the chapter's subsets (sections 3.1-3), I turn to sets that are created through narratorial relations. In the first narratorial set, I analyse Felix's role as the overall narrator and his moment of self-exception, which he effects through his adoption of the heterodiegetic voice. This metaleptic shift markedly emphasises his position inside (as a character in) and outside (as the narrator of) the narrative. Secondly, I examine the narratorial set of Marisa and Felix, in which Marisa tells Felix about her sexual affairs for his auricular pleasure. Lastly, I look at the narratorial relationship between Felix and the

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the role of perversion in relation to *The Act of Love*, see Mary Fitzgerald's review in *The Observer* (2009).

reader. Within my discussion of narrative sets, I analyse narratorial authority beyond the standard concept of reliability, arguing that the narrator takes on the role of the sovereign authority, with the narratee positioned as the *homo sacer*, abandoned to the narrator and his narrative.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, I argue that we need to rethink the reader's relation to the narrative: she is not, as is often argued, a simple voyeur looking in on the characters and the action of the narrative, but is an exception, at once included and excluded in the narrative set.<sup>3</sup> Coupled with the possible arousal inherent in auricular textual sex (see the previous chapter), the reader's excepted position leads to the conclusion that reading is itself a form of exceptional intercourse.

## 1. The (Extra)Marital Set

In *Homo Sacer* (1995), Agamben turns to set theory to elucidate his concept of the state of exception. As he explains, 'set theory distinguishes between membership and inclusion' (1998, p. 24). Analysing this relationship, Agamben argues:

A term is included when it is part of a set in the sense that all of its elements are elements of that set (one then says that  $b$  is a subset of  $a$ , and one writes  $b \subset a$ ). But a term may be a member of a set without being included in it (membership is, after all, the primitive notion of set theory, which one writes  $b \in a$ ), or, conversely, a term may be included in a set without being one of its members. (p. 24)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For readings of the novel that touch upon the subject of narratorial reliability, see, for example, the following reviews: Jonathan Derbyshire, 'The Sweet Pain of Betrayal' (2008); Bel Mooney (2008); Tim Souster, 'Between and Sting and a Smart' (2008); Samuel Thompson, 'Wannabe Pervert' (2008); John Walsh (2008); Tom Barbash, 'Sexual Insult' (2009); and Nicholas Lezard (2009).

<sup>3</sup> On the question of the reader as voyeur in specific relation to *The Act of Love*, see, for example: Mooney (2008); Nick Rennison's review (2008); and Thompson (2008).

<sup>4</sup> To comprehend Agamben's use of set theory in terms of its mathematics, we must first understand that a mathematical theory is comprised of collections of objects (such as numbers) and operations or relations (such as +, -, < or >). Furthermore, it is necessary to understand that in set theory there is nothing beyond sets. Whereas geometry can be

As Agamben argues, the difference between membership and inclusion opens up a number of complex relations. For instance, if we think about set theory in terms of political parties, we can say that to be a member of a party (a set) means one is normally part of that party but can, at certain times and for various reasons, opt out of it and not be included in it. Inversely, to be included in a political party means that one is usually not part of the party but has, at a certain moment, come into it. Therefore, membership and inclusion are differentiated by their inverse temporal relations to the set. In his brief exploration of set theory, Agamben renders the problematisation of membership and inclusion in exceptional

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reduced to points or sides, for example, set theory's base element, so to speak, is the set. Moreover, a collection of objects is itself a set. Now, let us first deal with Agamben's second proposition, which appears to be the more straightforward of his two claims – that a term can be included in a set without being a member of it. If we have a set of natural numbers, which we call N, we can create within this set a subset of all the even numbers, which we shall call E. Whilst all the elements of E – all the even numbers – are included in N, E itself – the set of all even numbers – is not a member of N as nowhere in N shall we find set E. Therefore, we have an example of inclusion without membership, and we can express this as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} N &= \{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, \dots\} \\ E &= \{0, 2, 4, 6, 8, \dots\} \\ E &\subset N \\ E &\notin N \end{aligned}$$

To understand Agamben's first claim – that a term can be a member of a set without being included in it – let us think of an additional set, set O, which is the set of all odd numbers. Now, let us create set X. Set X is a finite set made up of two elements, E and O. Therefore, E and O are the two members of set X. However, E and O are sets themselves. Their members are all the even and all the odd numbers. Therefore, the members of E and O cannot be included in X, which is a finite set. Thus, E and O are members of set X without being included in X. We can express this as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} O &= \{1, 3, 5, 7, \dots\} \\ X &= \{E, O\} \\ E, O &\in X \\ E, O &\not\subset X \end{aligned}$$

Agamben's analysis of set theory is largely an interpretation of Alain Badiou's *Being and Event* (1988). To compare the two, see Agamben (1998, pp. 24-5) and Badiou (2007, in particular, pp. 81-111).

terms. For him, the exception in-determines the very terms – ‘membership’ and ‘inclusion’ – he used to explain set theory, as

*the exception is what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot be a member of the whole in which it is always already included. What emerges in this limit figure is the radical crisis of every possibility of clearly distinguishing between membership and inclusion, between what is outside and what is inside, between exception and rule. (p. 25)*

In Agamben’s theory of exceptionality, another limit figure – the *homo sacer* – provides a striking example of the indetermination of membership and inclusion, as he is simultaneously a member of the political sphere that excepts – no longer includes – him and is included in the political sphere even though his membership to it has been taken away. The *homo sacer* is, therefore, an exceptional element of the political sphere.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout *The Act of Love*, the exceptional relationship between membership and inclusion is played out in various configurations. Indeed, Felix yearns to be inclusively excluded and exclusively included in Marisa’s affairs, to be the term of a set who is included but not a member and who is a member but not included. In Part Two, ‘Marisa’, he narrates his affair with Marisa during her first marriage to Freddy, their subsequent wedding and their honeymoon in Florida. In this part, Felix’s desire to be excepted becomes evident when he watches the Cuban doctor treat Marisa during their honeymoon:

The sight of those silken-furred fingers on Marisa’s breasts precipitated in me, anyway, the desire to see them elsewhere on and, yes, *in* her body. A generalised desire which, over time, took on a less opportunistic, more sophisticated colouration. Marisa did not have to be feverish or otherwise at the mercy of a man. We did not have to be in Florida smelling the Everglades. And at last I did not have to see with my own eyes. Hearing about, learning about it, and ultimately simply *knowing* about it, would be enough. (Jacobson, 2008, p. 54)

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter I for a detailed exegesis of the *homo sacer* and his relationship to the political sphere.

In his narration of this crucial event, Felix's initial empirical account dissolves into wish-fulfilment, and he explains how in the future he only needs to hear or know about the affairs he arranges for his wife; he does not need to witness them. The analeptically narrated honeymoon sequence functions proleptically as Felix uses the recalled event to glance forward, to offer an explanatory foundation for his sexual tastes and desires, specifically illuminating his earlier and oft-repeated premise, '*no man has ever loved a woman and not imagined her in the arms of someone else*' (p. 37). Despite its narrative significance, Felix himself later disregards the importance of this inaugural event in his discussion of how he initially 'set up' Marisa's love affairs, singling out the importance of each of her current, individual lovers:

If we are talking simple jealousy, then of course the lover, singular, had me by the throat as the gaggle of them never did. He alone had Marisa's attention, therefore he alone had what belonged to me. And on top of that he was the first. With him I had to learn from the beginning – the Cuban doctor could no more be called a beginning than Quirin [Felix's relation] could – how to bear what I had no choice but to bear. He took from me – whoever he was – my virginity. (p. 111)

Going against his own narrative investment in the importance of the honeymoon episode, Felix finds each current lover to be the most significant, thereby placing more importance in their uniqueness than their collective identity, thereby also breaking up what is a temporal sequence into distinct moments and entities. Felix registers the importance of these multiple first-time occasions by repeatedly reclaiming and re-losing the cultural marker of virginity, which he achieves vicariously with each of Marisa's lovers.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it

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<sup>6</sup> Writing about the relationship between sex and forgetting in *Blind Date* (2003), Anne Dufourmantelle argues that sex is always and repeatedly a first time, proposing that 'sex is forgetting itself. It is a magnificent, essential power to forget. Forgetting "preoccupation," worry, "for-death," sex in its dimension of jouissance but also in its dimension of repletion and constraint is a practice of oblivion. Forgetting that it has already taken place and will take place again and always, sex functions as a constantly reiterated first time, a forgetting of that to which desire is subjected (its internal, fantasmatic, neurotic, constraints), a forgetting of the body—yes, really, for the body is present, it is no longer anything but

is as if with each of her new lovers both Marisa and Felix experience a fresh hymenic moment.

After a series of early failures, such as trying to couple Marisa with his relative Quirin, Felix is eventually successful at creating the desired sexual set when he selects Marius – an adulterer and onetime English lecturer – as a lover for Marisa. Together, Felix, Marisa and Marius form a set, in relation to which Felix becomes an exceptional element. This sexual set is registered in the proleptic opening lines of the prologue:

FOUR O CLOCK SUITED THEM ALL – THE WIFE, THE HUSBAND, THE LOVER.

Four o'clock: when time in the city quivers on its axis – the day not yet spent, the wheels of evening just beginning to turn. (p. 1)

By beginning *in medias res*, Felix's opening is declarative. He simply states the elements of his set as if they require no explanation, and, significantly, he does not explain the relationship between them. Furthermore, the inclusive 'all' emphasises the totalising effect of this set in his life. The categories of wife, husband and lover form the overarching structure of both his life and, as I argue in section 3.1, his narrative. At this early stage in Felix's story, the temporal dislocation at work in prolepsis, his reference to the quivering quality of twilight, and the exclusively included nature of prologues – prologues are included but put aside, excepted from the narrative – all anticipate the exceptional nature of this pervasive structure in his life.<sup>7</sup>

With the establishment of the set, Felix explains how his own position as the excepted member is to work. Somewhat declaratively, he tells the reader:

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presence, but not as body, it makes itself present as the source of desire and pleasure, as a landscape, an image, a zone of attraction and repulsion giving rise to calm or to violence' (2007, pp. 99-100).

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter III for my theory of the incestuous prequel, which takes into consideration exceptional structures that share certain spatiotemporal qualities with the prologue.

No, the love of which I speak, love desperate and bloody, the only love that *deserves* to speak its name – the last erotic adventure left to us as we await execution – requires another man. A rival. Not a companion in enjoyment of your spouse's favours, not a Jim to your Jules or a Jules to your Jim. Not a vacation from you or a variation of you, or even the Heathcliff-if-all-else-perishes rocky-eternity beneath you, but the dread, day and night and in all weathers alternative to you. You as it hasn't fallen you to be. You who might efface you and make you as though you had never been. (p. 39)

Through his opening invocation of Lord Alfred Douglas's poem 'Two Loves' (1894), in which homosexuality is characterised as "the love that dare not speak its name" (l. 74), Felix establishes the unique value of cuckoldage, replacing the ineffable quality of Douglas's sentiment with the worth of his own sexual predilection.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, he replaces something 'queer' with something 'straight' but exceptional. Felix then explains to the reader that in order to accomplish this final sexual feat another man is required, and with reference to Henri-Pierre Roché's *Jules et Jim* (1953) about two friends' love for, and rivalry over, the same woman, Felix discounts male bonding over one's partner and stand-in, interchangeable, variants of oneself. Furthermore, his allusion to Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) serves to reject the figure of the archetypal desperate lover who will destroy all those around him. Rather than a counterpart, a friendly rival or a paradigm, Felix argues that cuckoldage requires an equivalent figure whose identity in difference will erase one's very existence. He also argues against the erotic appeal of lesbian sex, telling us: 'I mean another man. The fancy which some husbands entertain of

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<sup>8</sup> Asked to explain the concluding line of Douglas's 'Two Loves' during one of his 1895 trials, Oscar Wilde replied: "The Love that dare not speak its name" in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo. . . . It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it' ('Testimony of Oscar Wilde').

seeing their wives carnally embracing another woman is something else entirely' (Jacobson, 2008, p. 38).

In his quest for sexual satisfaction, Felix becomes an absent-present – exceptional – supplement to Marisa's sex life with others – he is the physically absent husband who is nonetheless present to his wife as the organiser of her affairs. As Felix explicates, he desires to realise his position as an absent presence rather than as a full presence in the sexual set: 'had Mephistopheles himself appeared and offered me the opportunity to be at their table with them while they canoodled – not as an invisible presence but as an unwanted and ignored third party, a no one before whom they felt free to kiss without compunction – I'd have dared damnation for it' (p. 194). In this feverish Faustian fantasy, Felix explains the qualitative nature of the position he seeks. Unlike an invisible spectator, Felix wishes to adopt the role of the present yet undesired element who does not interfere with the sexual set but observes their behaviour without inhibiting them. Initially unable to achieve the effects of such a Faustian pact, Felix imaginatively actualises his role as the exception when he interferes with Marisa and Marius's early seductions at the Wallace Collection in London. During this sequence, Marius searches for a love note Marisa has hidden in the gallery and Felix adopts the role of vicarious lover. Felix explains to the reader: 'I didn't go to the gallery as Marius's rival. I went as his alter ego. And in a sense Marisa's alter ego too. I went looking for the thing she'd hidden so that I could enter the heart of their intrigue, but more than that I went looking to learn how the cuckolding of me felt, as it unfolded, from the other side' (p. 165). Felix's fantastical displacement allows him to act as two alter egos and experience a complex reflexivity, through which he can sense his cuckolding from the inside, or even as an 'insider', of the sexual set.<sup>9</sup> As Felix

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<sup>9</sup> Early reviewers of the text readily observed this aspect of Felix's behaviour. For instance, in 'Jealous Guy' (2008), Sarah Churchwell argues that Felix 'needs a proxy for his own emotions' (para. 2), and in 'Horrid and Humourless: Jacobson's Act of Love [sic]'

tells the reader, his relationship to and within the set is realised through his position as the excepted member: 'I ceded preference to Marius. I liked following him. It satisfied my sulphurous desire to be demeaned, that last in a line of obscene pursuit – Marisa laying down her scent, Marius tracking her, and I trailing in the rear of them both, like a wounded dog' (p. 166). During this creative enactment, Felix informs the reader that he is twice-removed from Marisa: 'I was pursuing not only Marisa, I was pursuing his pursuit of her as well' (p. 167). Felix's equivocal position 'in' the set is accentuated by his fantastical substitution of Marius for himself – 'I'd have liked him not to move for an eternity so that I could go on attributing to his heart the palpitations which shook my own' (p. 167).

Through the creation of the set, Felix produces an exceptional situation and a complex form of relationality. The relationality he experiences is similar to that Agamben theorises between the rule and chaos:

Since 'there is no rule that is applicable to chaos,' chaos must first be included in the juridical order through the creation of a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, chaos and the normal situation—the state of exception. To refer to something, a rule must both presuppose and yet still establish a relation with what is outside relation (the nonrelational). (1998, p. 19, citing Schmitt)<sup>10</sup>

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(2008), Sarah Keating describes how he 'hovers at the edge of their affair; their frisson a form of foreplay for his tortured, by now celibate, soul' (para. 8). In her interview with Howard Jacobson in *The Observer*, Polly Vernon argues for jealousy's inherent self-reflexivity, defining it as 'the constant awareness that other people fancy the person you love, that other people would take them from you, if they had half a chance' (Jacobson and Vernon, 2008, para. 50).

<sup>10</sup> In an analysis of desire and speech, Dufourmantelle argues that sex is always characterised by nonrelational relationality. In her Lacanian argument, she claims: 'when desire makes the other the object of its fantasy, when it speaks obscene, degrading words to someone it adores, it does not topple that person off a pedestal, not at all; it only hurtles even more violently against that person's inviolability, his or her radical otherness. Words tear and devour, gestures grasp, but the other is always not there, the connections are missed, always, the encounter is left hanging, eternally deferred. It is the destiny of sex to miss the other, precisely in the place where it rejoins the other. There is no difference between desire and love; there is only an immense lack of self-knowledge' (2007, p. 82). In the 2007 special edition of *GLQ* on queer temporalities, Elizabeth Freeman comments that many of the roundtable participants are 'involved in theorizing new forms of relationality, or theorizing relationality not only otherwise than the dominant ways but otherwise than the dominant ways of homonormative theory' (2007, p. 188). Freeman also

Similar to the rule and chaos, Felix and the lovers are related to one another by the very way in which they are nonrelated. For Felix's sexual set to work, the two elements – the lovers and he – must remain related through nonrelation. He cannot become inclusively included in their sexual affairs but must retain a relation with what is outside relation (to him) – the lovers' sphere. Correlatively, Felix cannot be unrelated and totally excluded from the set, as he makes clear when he reflects upon the possibility that he is unaware of being cuckolded by his relative Quirin: 'exclusion had all along been my object, but now exclusion was achieved I felt excluded from the exclusion I had sought' (Jacobson, 2008, p. 100). Felix's paradoxical musings reveal his desire to be excepted in Agamben's sense, not in some absolute way. Indeed, Felix wishes to embody the '*relation of exception . . . the extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion*' (Agamben, 1998, p. 18), and he endeavours to convey the inclusive exclusivity he seeks in his quasi-dialectical, Socratic exchange with Marisa concerning her relationship with Marius:

'I'm lonely. I feel excluded.'

'I thought exclusion was what you sought.'

'I seek palpable exclusion.'

'Felix, there is no such thing.'

'There is. There is the exclusion of being there and not being there. The exclusion of your being oblivious to me. Allowing his hand access to your breasts, kissing without inhibition in my presence, as though I am beneath your notice.'

'Has it occurred to you that kissing without inhibition in your absence might be more fun?'

'For you.'

'Can't you consider yourself excluded by virtue of your exclusion – or is that too straightforward?' (Jacobson, 2008, p. 223)

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argues that 'the rubric of time at least seems to offer the possibility of unmaking the forms of relationality we think we know' (p. 188). For these queer reworkings of relationality, see Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, et al., 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion' (2007).

Felix's seemingly illogical and nonsensical formula expresses his desire for exceptionality, as 'palpable exclusion' is the exceptional form of intimacy created by relational nonrelation. Felix's wish for this form of intimate connection – 'being there and not being there' simultaneously – is made possible through his role as the exception, which 'is included in the normal case precisely because it does not belong to it. . . . non-belonging can be shown only at the center of the class, by an exception. . . . In every logical system, just as in every social system, the relation between outside and inside, strangeness and intimacy, is this complicated' (Agamben, 1998, p. 22). Through his absent presence in the (extra)marital set, Felix creates an indecipherability between inside and outside as he exists on the threshold of the affair. His indeterminable position as the exception offers an alternative to the traditional account of the wronged partner and his or her literary representation. Indeed, Felix's creation of the set produces an exceptional, strange and intimate relationality between Marisa, Marius and himself.

## **2. The State of Exception**

### **2.1 (Extra)Marital Time and Space**

In Felix's narrative, the marital home becomes the main locus for the arranged affair between Marisa and Marius and it is as significant to the sex life of the set as are the honeymoon suite in *On Chesil Beach* and the adulterous hideaway in *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000). Unlike the traditional love-affair narrative in which the cheating partner steals time away from married life, in this narrative of domestic affairs both husband and wife welcome the 'other man' into their home. In his discussion of this development in

Marisa and Marius's (and indeed his) relationship, Felix explains: 'I liked him being in my house. There are men who would kill for less reason. They are in denial. Their funeral. They don't know what they're missing' (Jacobson, 2008, p. 185). Moreover, he reflects upon his (un)homely desires and denounces himself in an imaginary court, claiming: 'had I been the judge charged with trying me for crimes against the hearth, I'd have sentenced me to hang at first light and let the birds peck my bones clean' (p. 79). Felix's self-condemnation indicates that his hospitality to Marius challenges the perceived inviolability of the home, which was essential to the division between public and private, politics and bare life in ancient Greece. As Agamben explains with reference to Aristotle, 'simple natural life is excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense, and remains confined – as merely reproductive life – to the sphere of the *oikos*, "home"' (1998, p. 2). By merging public and private through the inclusion of another in their sex life and bringing him into their home, into their domestic affairs, Felix challenges the married couple's economy, the meaning of which, as Jacques Derrida explains in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (1991), 'no doubt includes the values of law (*nomos*) and of home (*oikos*, home, property, family, the hearth, the fire indoors)' (1992a, p. 6).<sup>11</sup>

Felix's domestic state of exception – arranging for his wife to have an affair in the marital home – gives the house a specifically sexual essence, which is similar to that Agamben discerns in the marquis de Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795). Discussing this eighteenth-century treatise, Agamben argues:

the political meaning of Sade's work is nowhere as explicit as it is in this pamphlet, in which the *maisons* in which every citizen can publicly summon any other citizen in order to compel him to satisfy his own needs emerge as the political realm par excellence. . . . the boudoir fully takes the place of the *cit  *, in a dimension in which

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<sup>11</sup> On the word '*oikos*' and the concept of economy and its relation to place, see also, Derrida and Christie V. McDonald, 'Choreographies' (1982, pp. 68-9).

the public and the private, political existence and bare life change places. (1998, p. 134)<sup>12</sup>

For Agamben, de Sade's pamphlet – 'Yet Another Effort, Frenchman, If You Would Become Republicans' – 'is the first and perhaps most radical biopolitical manifesto of modernity' (p. 134). But unlike de Sade's French citizens, Felix does not summon Marius. Rather, he schemes to get Marius into his house and (crudely put) his wife, and he satisfies himself vicariously in his role as the included exclusion. Furthermore, the situation Felix creates is not fully comparable to 'life in Silling's castle—with its meticulous regulations that do not spare any aspect of physiological life' (p. 135), as Felix does not have complete control over Marisa and Marius's bodily functions.<sup>13</sup> However, the creation of the (extra)marital state of exception does offer 'a normal and collective (hence political) organization of human life founded solely on bare life' (p. 135). Sexuality is, it should be remembered, one of bare life's 'modern avatars' (p. 120), and the workings of the set are 'normal' in the sense that norm and exception become indistinguishable in the state of exception. Furthermore, Felix himself considers the exceptional setup to be normal, as his happy declaration following an argument with Marisa reveals: 'normal life resumed. We were a happy family once more. The three of us' (Jacobson, 2008, p. 244). Despite Marius's ignorance of Felix's domestic organisation and sexual excitement, the set makes space for a quasi-collective sexual existence, which is primarily housed in Felix's home. The arrangement therefore brings the qualities of the state of exception into the *oikos*, showing how a collective sexual existence can be organised in the domestic sphere.

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<sup>12</sup> In *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (2009), Leland de la Durantaye notes that 'in a recent interview Agamben spoke of ways in which "pornography has made it impossible to distinguish sexuality as a public or a private matter"' (p. 419). The interested reader might also wish to see Dufourmantelle's *Blind Date* (pp. 48-50 and 101) to compare her reading of de Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* with Agamben's.

<sup>13</sup> Silling's castle is the principal location in de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785).

For Felix, the space of the (extra)marital house is inextricably connected with his spatiotemporal desires, which he makes particularly evident when he theatrically imagines Marius's homely entrance:

Here he is, your four o'clock lover, he would have said, looking at his watch as she let him into the house, her sombre face lightening on seeing him as it had once lightened on seeing me – four o'clock, the hairspring handover hour, neither day nor night, four o'clock when a man of dreams and cynicism has no choice but to imagine himself in some other place. And of course, of course, the lovemaking would have been out of this world, sad, hectic, final, as the butterfly beat its wings for the last time in the moment before the hand of death closed over it. (p. 259)<sup>14</sup>

Felix's imaginative reconstruction of Marisa and Marius's ritual meeting depicts a temporal break in the day, a rupture in the orderly mechanisms of time devised to regulate people's lives. The 'hairspring' hour marks an exception in both the day's temporal cycle as well as in the law of marriage, and the temporal focus Felix provides here is fundamental to his portrayal of the (extra)marital configuration, 'in which not only the exception and the rule but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside, pass through one another' (Agamben, 1998, p. 37).<sup>15</sup> Felix's use of the hackneyed expression, 'the lovemaking would have been *out of this world*' (my emphasis), explicitly connects the spatiotemporal qualities of exceptionality to sexual intercourse, thereby emphasising his focus on the spatiotemporal effects sex can create. Through his allusion to the butterfly of Thanatos, Felix again shows his preoccupation with the spatiotemporality of sex. Significantly, Marius himself explains the butterfly's meaning when Felix and he first meet some time before Felix endeavours to organise Marisa and Marius into a sexual set. Even though Felix tells Marius that he knows about the Greeks' understanding of death,

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Fitzgerald (2009) momentarily touches upon the relation between time and the house in the narrative and argues that 'the three fall into what seems like a comfortable routine of time-sharing in the marital home' (para. 2).

<sup>15</sup> See Howard Jacobson's 'Wine, Women, and Soho' (2002) for a further meditation on twilight in relation to his 2002 novel *Who's Sorry Now*.

Marius pontificates: ““They made him a beautiful young man and shoved a butterfly in his hands. Wherever you are at four o’clock, you hear the bu’erfly beating its wings for the final time. That’s why – since you brought the subject up – your heart aches, as every heart on the planet aches, in sympathy with the dying day as it faints in the embrace of desire”” (Jacobson, 2008, p. 16). For Felix, then, the butterfly of Thanatos is intimately connected with Marius and his twilight visitations. Due to this connection, Felix’s allusion to Thanatos does not merely repeat the idea of *jouissance* as *la petite mort*, but marks both the butterfly and the (extra)marital sex between Marisa and Marius as transient and temporally indeterminate. For Felix, four o’clock, the butterfly and the (extra)marital sex mark a transitory moment in which the lovers move from being alive (in time) to being dead (out of time). Thus, the temporal conditions for the (extra)marital sex – the twilight hour of four o’clock – make exceptional sex possible, whilst the sex itself creates an exceptionality of its own, producing an indeterminate moment similar to the timely quality of the butterfly of Thanatos.

In his role as narrator, Felix reproduces the exceptional temporality of Marisa and Marius’s twilight sex for the reader. Within his narrative considerations of the (extra)marital home, Felix intensifies the home’s temporal quality through narratorial suspension and toys with the reader by telling her:

Marius was not all at once installed in my house after claiming his prize from Marisa – or, to speak plainer, his prize *of* Marisa. There was an intervening courtship period of several months – call it an interregnum – in the course of which all three of us had a number of adjustments to make.

I linger over this period perversely, though I hasten at the same time to get Marius under Marisa’s sheets. Were my intentions sadistic, I’d have put them to bed together chez moi long ago; for the sadist hurries to the place of pain. As a masochist I obey a more complex and delicious chronology. It is always too soon to be there, for the masochist, no matter how long it’s taken. There is always more of the run-up to torment to undergo before it can be enjoyed in its completeness.

So there are further details to be recorded of this ‘interregnum’ before Marius’s cuckooing of me can be completed. (p. 189)

Felix's temporal pleasures seem paradoxical: on the one hand, he finds the condition of never arriving at the desired and therefore impossible moment arousing; on the other, he wishes to push his narrative speedily along, to 'hasten' to the moment Marius and Marisa get into bed with one another. Furthermore, his meditation on his temporal pleasures is performative as well as explanatory, as he makes the reader share in his own timely desires by delaying Marius's entrance into the marital home. The opening of Felix's description – 'Marius was not all at once installed in my house' – establishes a recalled event that Felix then defers in order to linger over an earlier period in the threesome's relationship. After the description of the 'interregnum', Felix returns to the subject of the marital home, telling the reader: 'thus our little family. Marius and Marisa in bed together in my house' (p. 205). Felix's narrative technique of announcement and deferral enables him to convey the tension between quick becoming and slow enjoyment as well as allowing him to create the sense of temporal suspension, during which the reader is left waiting for Marius's homely entrance.<sup>16</sup> This temporal suspension is keenly felt by the reader as Felix has already previously told him: 'eventually – though this is to hurry anticipation forward – she invited him to the house we shared, and subsequently into her bed' (p. 181). Furthermore, Felix's technique of announcement and deferral places the reader in a temporal sphere similar to the one Felix himself occupies during the affair: the reader is temporally suspended between past and future events in a narrative 'interregnum', a state

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<sup>16</sup> In his review of *On Chesil Beach*, 'Edward's End' (2007), Jonathan Letham sees a similar admixture of speed and slowness at work in McEwan's fiction, arguing: 'our appetite for Ian McEwan's form of mastery is a measure of our pleasure in fiction's parallax impact on our reading brains: his narratives hurry us feverishly forward, desperate for the revelation of (imaginary) secrets, and yet his sentences stop us cold to savor the air of another human being's (imaginary) consciousness. McEwan's books have the air of thrillers even when, as in "On Chesil Beach," [sic] he seems to have systematically replaced mortal stakes – death and its attendant horrors – with risks of embarrassment, chagrin and regret' (para. 2).

of exception Felix desires, creates and then replicates for the reader.<sup>17</sup> The change in tense – from the past to the present ‘I linger’ – indicates Felix’s acute awareness of his narrative control, and his deliberate structuring of events shows how narrative itself can create a form of exceptionality.

## 2.2 Subspace

Within the set of (extra)marital time and space, Felix delimits a subset, the psychosomatic dimension ‘subspace’, explaining to the reader:

There is a word used by those who practise suspensefulness as a calling: subspace – the ritual abandonment of your will to another’s sexual caprices, the nirvana stillness of complete submission. In subspace you receive with joy and gratitude whatever punishment is meted out to you – a private insult, a public humiliation, a flogging, a blade, a flame, the torture of your choice or your torturer’s. (Jacobson, 2008, pp. 114-15)

Subspace is a complex state of exception, producing a condition of suspenseful peacefulness and complete submission. In the early stages of Felix and Marisa’s adventure into ‘cuckoldry’ (p. 296), Felix places himself within subspace whenever Marisa leaves him to join her lovers. Left alone, Felix attempts to actualise this imaginative spatiotemporality by transforming their marital ‘bedroom into a cathedral’ (p. 114), and he explains to the reader that the masochistic pleasure of subspace demands an active passivity:

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<sup>17</sup> In *Blind Date*, Dufourmantelle sees a slightly different temporal technique – announcement coupled with brief depiction – at work in the writings of de Sade, arguing: ‘with Sade, everything is already anticipated, this will happen, and that: he exploits the theatrical effect of announcing orgies, spectacles, and other atrocities, but when it comes down to the description of the thing itself, the matter is expedited in a few paragraphs or even just a few sentences. The staging is designed for anticipation and cuts’ (2007, p. 49).

you do not squander subspace on unconsciousness. You are alert or you are nothing when you choose submission to your wife's caprice as your vocation. You are Henry James's novelist on whom nothing dare be lost. And every second I slept was a second lost of the torture of being awake. Sleep through the nights of your wife's unfaithful absence and you might as well embrace the consolations of common men – drink, gambling, sport, suicide. (p. 115)<sup>18</sup>

During one of Marius's home visits, Felix finds himself still in the house and, excited by his proximity to the lovers, remains there to enjoy this newly discovered form of subspace. Describing this first homely occasion, which thereafter becomes a regular subspatial experience, Felix tells the reader:

Anything I heard while concealed in the lumber room would . . . have belonged to active not to passive jealousy, but I heard very little. Marisa had never been a noisy lover, and Marius at best mumbled his pleasures into his moustaches. Of the three of us I was the only one who bellowed, and I wasn't here to listen to myself. But I wasn't interested in hearing them moan anyway. I am not that kind of pervert. It's talk that does it for me – a single 'Fuck me, Marius' knocking the stereophony of fucking itself into a cocked hat. And if I couldn't hear the words I always had Marisa's narrative of the night before to remember and peruse. Humiliating though this is to report, I would flatten myself against the wall, not to hear the lovers but to be close to them, to feel, if nothing else, the vibration of their breathing, and then I would mentally run through all that Marisa had told me of their lovemaking the last time they were in the house. Thus, though I'd contrived to be at their elbow, I was always trailing in their wake – having to make do with the reported kisses of yesterday when I was only a few inches and a wall from the real kisses of today. Yet again, never quite laying hold on the thing I sought. (pp. 220-1)

Faithful to his wish for passivity, Felix neither hears nor desires to hear the lovers' sounds. Therefore, he distinguishes himself from Sabbath, who, in *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), greatly enjoys the sexual pleasures of auricular dogging (see Chapter IV). As Felix explains (and as I turn to in section 3.2), he is not aroused by sounds but by talk and narrative. Against the wall, he derives sexual pleasure from the spatiotemporality of the

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<sup>18</sup> Felix is alluding to James's essay 'The Art of Fiction' (1884), in which the novelist writes: 'therefore, if I should certainly say to a novice, "Write from experience and experience only," I should feel that this was rather a tantalizing monition if I were not careful immediately to add, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!"' (1957, pp. 32-3).

threshold, which both joins and divides him and the lovers. Lying there, he is excited by his proximity to the lovers and the feel (presumably imagined) of their breath. To this almost silent scene he adds his own soundtrack, arousing himself with the temporal feedback and delay afforded by replaying past sexual narratives. Thus, Felix's sexual pleasures are temporally and spatially exceptional, offering him a form of erotic satisfaction distinct from that achieved through masturbation or coitus. As Felix tells us, his temporal situation emphasises the suspense involved in desire, in which the gap between wanting and acquiring is seemingly irreducible. Felix is divided – he is simultaneously a day behind, left with yesterday's sex stories but feeling the lovers' breathing today. Far from being undesirable and 'having to make do', Felix organises this situation and finds the temporal fissure it offers – subspatial suspension – sexually exciting and fulfilling.

Felix endeavours to recreate the exceptionality of subspatial moments for the reader throughout his explications of this dimension. For instance, when he explains his (non)masturbatory habits on subspace nights, Felix articulates bodily denial through rhetorical temporal deferral, saying: 'as for the other privation which I owed Marisa in the course of these cathedral nights, I will not speak of it here. Whatever else it may be, this is not a fluidal narrative. But no is the answer, I did not' (p. 115). Here, Felix tells the reader how he gains sexual pleasure through the experience of a suspended temporality rather than active auto-affection, and this suspension of time is rhetorically created through the short deferral inherent in preterition (*occupatio*): an initial refusal ('I will not speak of it here') is shortly followed by a discussion – albeit elusive – of the very topos deemed unspeakable ('But no is the answer, I did not'). Thus, Felix's counterexample of 'fluidal narratives' (literal examples of which include Edward's premature ejaculation in *On Chesil Beach* and Sabbath's ingestion of semen in *Sabbath's Theater*) creates the sense of

temporal suspension through the use of preterition and the force of implication over explicit reference. Firstly, the preterition works to delay the subject of masturbation, thus syntactically creating a non-fluid movement from the initial declaration of the unmentionable topic to the discussion of the topic itself. Secondly, the seminal fluid of male masturbation is itself absent from Felix's narrative. Any image of seminal fluid is implied and therefore deferred by the text and consequently supplied by the reader in her interpretation of the text. As I argue more fully in Chapter VI in relation to an act of rape, the sexual aspect of such moments – here, the presence of seminal fluid – is therefore included by its exclusion. As a textual listener, the reader, if so inclined or desiring, completes the sexual force of Felix's description. She puts the semen into the text and makes it fluid, both syntactically and imaginatively, and thus partakes in a form of textual exceptionality.

### **2.3 The Abandonment of (Extra)Marital Law**

In *The Act of Love*, the state of exception operates in terms of the law as well as in relation to time and space, as the desire to be cuckolded is actually a desire to have a faithful relationship. Marisa and Felix's (extra)marital setup makes it 'impossible to distinguish transgression of the law from execution of the law, such that what violates a rule and what conforms to it coincide without any remainder' (Agamben, 1998, p. 57). Felix himself conveys the paradoxical nature of the law of (in)fidelity when he labels his thesis that every man wants to be cuckolded 'a categorical, unwavering truth' but immediately claims: 'I fully expect it to be contradicted' (Jacobson, 2008, p. 37). In this pseudo-Kantian formula, Felix establishes a categorical imperative for cuckoldage only to admit –

paradoxically – its possible negation. Similar to the way in which the law of (in)fidelity simultaneously nullifies both its execution and its transgression, Felix's thesis cancels itself out in its very articulation. Felix reiterates this seemingly contradictory logic when he poeticises how 'the love you bear the woman who betrays you – except that it is no betrayal, for a consummation cannot be called betrayal – flowers into adoration' (p. 39). Thus, by having sex with Marius, Marisa is showing fidelity to Felix's desire that she be unfaithful, which problematises common understandings of faithfulness, infidelity and adultery, and their portrayal in literature.

Advancing the logic of (in)fidelity further, Felix believes that Marisa herself is a 'complex topological figure in which' fidelity and infidelity, marriage and adultery 'pass through one another' (Agamben, 1998, p. 37), as she offers him the opportunity 'to lie simultaneously with Salome and Socrates' (Jacobson, 2008, p. 77). As Salome, Marisa is the personification of seduction, immorality, and threat to man; as Socrates, she represents ethical behaviour and humility, which is made evident through her charity work – she volunteers at Oxfam and the Samaritans and also reads to a blind man. The indetermination of law and transgression within the couple's relationship is acutely reiterated towards the end of the narrative when Felix and Marius finally discuss the latter's affair with Marisa following Marisa's removal to her sister's house due to cancer and her subsequent inability to cope with Felix any longer. During this meeting, Marius tells Felix: "'You have no more right to act the aggrieved husband than I have to act the aggrieved lover. Less, if you want to know the truth'" (p. 279). Marius's conclusion reaffirms how Felix voluntarily experiences 'a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer ma[k]e any sense' (Agamben, 1998, p. 170).

The indetermination of law and transgression – fidelity and infidelity, marriage and adultery – is inextricably linked to the concept of abandonment, and Felix arranges Marisa's (extra)marital affairs in order to be abandoned by her. He does not desire to be 'simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable' (Agamben, 1998, p. 28). Through the very law that sanctions his or her abandonment, the excepted member always retains a relation to the law, and 'it is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order' (pp. 28-9). Thus, the law and the excepted member are related to one another by their very nonrelation.<sup>19</sup>

Felix experiences a form of actual abandonment – being left alone – when he believes that Marisa is cuckolding him with some unknown lover, and he describes this feeling in loosely Oedipal terms, telling the reader:

It was in her duty of care – parentally, so to speak – that she was prepared to acknowledge dereliction. An acknowledgement that implied a countercharge, the merest whispering of a reproach: for who, if she was failing to care for me, was caring for her?

That was what I heard in the new music of her tenderness to me – the sad and unexpected reasoning of our arrangement, that when the husband abdicates his responsibility to protect, another must take his place. (Jacobson, 2008, p. 109)

Despite this sensation of being alone, Felix is ultimately frustrated by his inability to create a feeling of exceptional abandonment, as he explains with reference to one of Marisa's early lovers:

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<sup>19</sup> In his 2009 *Guardian* article, 'Howard Jacobson's Top 10 Novels of Sexual Jealousy', Jacobson sees the image of thresholds and borders as characteristic of jealousy itself, writing: 'I love the dark, interior stickiness of the subject, where torment knows it should not be left to itself, but wants it no other way, and the victim forever haunts the border between the things he fears and the thing he longs for. This is the subject of *The Act of Love* [sic]' (para. 3).

I could not lie transfixed in subspace, imagining her out in the abandoned night, if she were merely enjoying an orderly conversation with someone at the very sight of whom she did not go up in flames. If I were to continue extinguishing myself as a man, it had to be in a higher cause than this. Marisa had to frighten me with greater recklessness, of heart and body, and with a rival far more destructive of my peace of mind, and far more menacing to her erotic self-composure, than Miles.

Someone who would bring the both of us to our knees. (pp. 139-40)

In this reflection, Felix expresses his desire for self-destruction and the complication of Marisa's erotic control through the rhetoric of religious or political aspiration. Furthermore, his unimaginative use of the archetypal posture of subjugation – 'someone who would bring the both of us to our knees' – nevertheless articulates the complex relation Marisa and he take on with one another, which is similar to that between the sovereign and the *homo sacer*. For Felix, both Marisa and he need to be abandoned and subjugated.

Felix achieves the mutual abandonment he seeks through the creation of the sexual set. Given their exceptional relationality, the three elements of the set – Felix, Marisa and Marius – create a double configuration of the sovereign-*homo sacer* dynamic: Felix is the abandoned member of the set, excepted from Marisa and Marius's liaisons; and the lovers are excepted members as their sexual relationship takes place in a sphere in which marital law is suspended. Felix registers the exceptional animalisation of all three members during Marius and his post-set discussion. As he speaks with Marius, Felix marks himself as "the hunted" (p. 281) and also reflects: 'beneath our feet a bestial carpet in lurid colours, and in my eyes the bestial of Marius's wild afternoons in my house, he and my wife locked like animals in each other's embrace. I kept my gaze on him so he could drink it in, my possession of their coupling, until he choked on it' (p. 283). Through the (extra)marital setup, then, Felix puts into operation two distinct but related situations, in which 'the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo*

*sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereign' (Agamben, 1998, p. 84).<sup>20</sup>

Felix considers his own sovereign-like control when he reflects on his ability to remove Marisa from the (extra)marital state of exception:

It's hard for me to accept I wished Marisa harm. Where would the sense have been in that? I wanted her to fall for Marius in a big way, because that would hurt me, not her. But I see I may at some level have sought her degradation as the price or even the condition of mine. In which case I bore the blame for whatever Marius was doing, or not doing, to her now. Was this too, then, intrinsic to my intentions from the start – that I would have to save her from him? (Jacobson, 2008, p. 247)

As a result of their agreed set(up), then, both Felix and Marisa are abandoned and tied to each other's judgement. They are sovereign powers, and 'whether or not [relative] atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and ethical sense of the police who temporally act as sovereign' (Agamben, 1998, p. 174), or rather here, husband and wife.

For Felix, abandonment offers various forms of sexual pleasure. With regard to Marisa, he wants her to be abandoned to sex, which he imagines occurs when she sleeps with Marius: 'whenever I thought of Marisa in the arms of Marius, I saw her at her most philosophically reflective, grave and distant, at odds with her own nudity, and therefore – because sex had to be shocking to her before she could enjoy it – at her most alarmed and most abandoned' (Jacobson, 2008, p. 207). Somewhat oxymoronicly, Felix believes that Marisa will be most alarmed and abandoned with Marius because she is philosophical and

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<sup>20</sup> Early reviewers discuss the narrative's depiction of shifting, ambiguous and seemingly contradictory relations in terms of: 'how to be both voyeur and actor' (Tim Adams, 'Take My Wife . . . and I Wish Somebody Would', 2008, para. 5); sadism and masochism (Churchwell, 2008); 'complicity and pleasure in one's lover's act of betrayal' (Gerald Jacobs's review, 2008, para. 8); and the story of King Candaules (Rennison, 2008, para. 5). For the Candaules tale as it appears in *The Act of Love*, see Jacobson (2008, pp. 68-71). It may be interesting for the reader to note Jacobson's praise of Dostoevsky's *The Eternal Husband* (1870), which he claims is 'Pinteresque in that you never know who's doing what to whom and which character is causing the other the greater sexual discomfort' (2009, para. 11).

distant when in his arms. In Felix's imagination at least, Marisa experiences a form of bare life and abandonment during her liaisons with Marius because she is contemplative, not because she experiences some stereotypical loss of self in the moment of *jouissance*. Thus, Felix's meditation on Marisa's sex with Marius offers an alternative interpretation of the idea of sexual abandonment.

To fulfil his own sexual desires, Felix actualises abandonment during subspatial nights when he assumes Marisa is with a lover. On these nights, he imaginatively combines a sacred space with the punitive system of incarceration, explaining to the reader: 'at about nine o'clock I locked the house up, not to keep Marisa out but to keep me in. For my cathedral was a prison too' (p. 114). Through this configuration, subspace entails the quintessential characteristics of the state of exception in which the *homo sacer* is abandoned. The state of exception is not a prison, but neither is Felix truly imprisoned. Rather, he is abandoned by and to Marisa in a mode of self-punishment, as 'to be "banned" originally means both to be "at the mercy of" and "at one's own will, freely," to be "excluded" and also "open to all, free"' (Agamben, 1998, p. 29).<sup>21</sup> As Agamben explains, 'the ban is the force of simultaneous attraction and repulsion that ties together the two poles of the sovereign exception: bare life and power, *homo sacer* and the sovereign' (p. 110). In his narrative, Felix poetically describes how he is both left alone by Marisa and simultaneously connected to her during nights of subspatial abandon:

As if attached to her by tenuous threads of love, like a fly caught in the web of his desiring, I vibrated to every sound she made and every thought she had. Marisa whispering, laughing, confiding, gasping. Marisa opening her body – it didn't

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<sup>21</sup> As I explained in Chapter I, the abandoned person is excepted from the law by the law itself. He is both abandoned by the law, set free from the legal sphere, and abandoned to the law, as he is at the mercy of any legal subject, who can act as sovereign and kill him. Therefore, the *homo sacer* is both abandoned by the law that removes him from the *polis* and to the law, to those legal subjects who can kill him. He is at once seemingly free from yet entirely captured by the law. For the sake of brevity, I shall express abandonment's dual meaning through the phrase 'by and to'.

matter to whom, it mattered only that she felt the shock, the shame, the rapture or whatever of it, and sent the silken message back to me, from however far away she was. (Jacobson, 2008, p. 116)

As a voluntary cuckold, Felix is willingly ensnared in a web of his desiring. Lying in the silken trap, he is abandoned by Marisa yet senses her actions, her sexual opening up. Thus, the spider's web metaphorically symbolises the nonrelational relation between Marisa and Felix: the couple sense and influence one another even in – or indeed because of – their mutual absence, as 'the ban is essentially the power of delivering something over to itself, which is to say, the power of maintaining itself in relation to something presupposed as nonrelational' (Agamben, 1998, p. 109-10). For Felix, the spatiotemporal experience of abandonment, of being related and nonrelated simultaneously, provides a form of sexual arousal and pleasure.

Abandonment also allows Felix to experience sexual pleasure through pain and total self-abnegation. Wearing his white pyjamas for his nightly subspace visit, he tells the reader: 'these were sacrificial garments, the vestiture which signified the abnegation of my virility and independence. I was Marisa's to do with as she willed, and let my icy blood stain the garments I wore in her service until every corner of them was incarnadined. Thus robed and eviscerated, I lay myself down to keep vigil through the night' (Jacobson, 2008, p. 114). Felix's sacrificial desires and bloody fantasy are in fact sacred yearnings, in the sense that 'the sacredness of life . . . originally expresses precisely both life's subjection to a power over death and life's irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment' (Agamben, 1998, p. 83). As his own wish for total abandonment to Marisa shows, at least figuratively Felix 'may be killed but not sacrificed' (p. 83). Specifically, Felix desires to be hurt or killed off sexually by Marisa, as becomes evident when he tells the reader:

In the blackest corner of my soul I would have wished her to secure me against treasonable temptation before she left the house, perhaps by binding my hands

behind me. Or even – for there was nothing in my fever I dared not contemplate – by hacking them off at the wrists. And that wasn't the end of it either. Once you allow amputation into your erotic imagination there is only one conceivable conclusion. The man must be constrained, the man must be unmanned, the man must die without a trace of manhood left. (Jacobson, 2008, p. 116)

Excited by his sexual fantasies, Felix's semi-logical musings on abnegation turn into feverish ejaculations, and his preoccupation with emasculation and traceless castration metaphorically substantiates his position as the abandoned non-man existing in the state of exception. As Felix himself conveys, he finds the diminished and simultaneously intensified sexual existence made possible through abandonment arousing: 'so I lay there, in the stretched silence, as on a slab of stone, imagining how it would be when one day, as a gift, she consented to dismember me, though she had to all intents and purposes gifted me dismemberment already, by virtue of her absence' (p. 116). Felix is sexually excited by the gift of spousal absence and the potential gift – or indeed even the imagining of the gift – of castration offered to him through abandonment. His wife removes herself from him physically and, he imagines, might even offer him the possibility of removing or excepting his own sexual member.

### **3. The Narratorial Set**

#### **3.1 Self-Exception**

Through his position as the extradiegetic narrator, Felix creates a second exceptional set, which is distinct from, but related to, the sexual set he portrays in the diegesis. As the extradiegetic narrator, Felix organises his sexual narrative into a set of five parts: 'Marius'; 'Marisa'; 'Marius and Marisa'; 'The Wife, the Lover'; and 'The Husband'. Through this

arrangement, Felix configures a collective literary life in which Marisa and Marius are bound to his authority. As ‘The Husband’, Felix himself is the only member of the set not to be formally paired with any other member. Thus, he deliberately sets himself apart and makes his separation even more marked as his self-designated part, ‘The Husband’, concerns the post-set period when Marisa has breast cancer and Marius dies of a heart attack whilst walking in Shropshire. Despite setting himself aside in two senses, Felix penetrates each part of the set through his ‘presence’ as the extradiegetic narrator. Therefore, he is the exceptional element of the narrative set, included extradiegetically even when he is excluded from the diegesis.

During part four of the narrative, ‘The Wife, The Lover’, Felix exaggerates his narratorial exceptionality through a metaleptic shift from his usual autodiegetic voice to a heterodiegetic one. This change in narrative voice occurs when Marisa tells Felix that he cannot be with Marius and her during their sexual *rendezvous* and Felix goes to a fetish club in an act of defiance, despite the fact that ‘*a fetish club held no interest for him. He did not like dressing up and was not in need of a public whipping. Marisa’s sleeping with Marius was flagellation of the heart enough*’ (Jacobson, 2008, p. 235). During this sequence, Felix fantastically substitutes himself for Marisa’s previously wronged husband Freddy, telling the reader:

*Felix had of course – because he could not keep his nose out of any of her things – read Marisa’s diary entry relating to the fetish club she’d been taken to in Walthamstow. The event was long ago, a betrayal of Freddy not him, but he lived it as in present time and imagined taking himself to such a place – preferably not in Walthamstow – and meeting Marisa there, on the night she was supposed to be with the Samaritans, being felt up by strangers. (p. 234)*

Through his imaginative substitution, Felix collapses past and present into one another and vicariously repeats the experience of Freddy, living somebody else’s past cuckoldage as his own imaginary present. As with adulterous parallelism in *Gertrude and Claudius*, Felix

is imaginatively in two temporalities at once – Freddy’s past and his imaginary present – and thereby produces an exceptional situation as well as (re)creating the condition of being (vicariously) abandoned by Marisa.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, however, Felix finds the literal experience of being in the fetish club to be an anti-climax, not least because it fails to create an adequately intense sense of sexual animalisation. As he explains, ‘*the conceit aroused him more than its execution. A woman leading a man around like a dog – it should have been exciting, but it wasn’t. Some element was missing. What was it? A proper reduction of man to animal, Felix decided. Had the woman gone on to geld the man, or have his throat cut in an abattoir, then yes, arousing*’ (p. 239). Despite his dissatisfaction with the club itself, Felix’s narratorial transformation creates an exceptionality of its own. In his portrayal of the fetish club scene – a ‘*netherworld of hellish passions*’ (p. 242) – Felix metaleptically excepts himself from his own narrative whilst he simultaneously narrates ‘his’/‘Felix’s’ experience. Combined with the change in narrative voice, the typography (italicised prose throughout) of the fetish club excepts this sequence from the rest of the novelistic set, marking it as being simultaneously excluded and included in the overall narrative.

Felix justifies his narratorial displacement by arguing that the heterodiegetic voice will exonerate his actions, explaining: ‘my single departure from utter fidelity to Marisa, the one and only time as Marisa’s husband that my lips made contact with flesh that wasn’t hers, must be reported in the third person. It wasn’t me who did what I did’ (p. 234). Rather than achieving a form of narratorial dissemblance, however, Felix’s position inside his distanced narrative as narratorial object and outside as narrating subject creates a

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<sup>22</sup> The temporality at play here is further complicated by the use of the preterite tense. Exactly how this tense functions in narrative and what temporal dimension it denotes is beyond the scope of the present study, but the interested reader will find an informative discussion of this problematic in Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1990 [1983], pp. 79-83).

narratorial exceptionality.<sup>23</sup> Through this highly reflexive and simultaneously removed mode, Felix narratorially creates an indecipherability between inclusion and exclusion: 'Felix' is both inside and outside his narrative construction, simultaneously playing the alegal law-making sovereign and the abandoned *homo sacer*; he controls the narrative as the narrator yet is completely in thrall to it as a character.

When Felix goes to the fetish club, he arrives early and decides to walk around London before returning at a busier hour. During his walk, he imagines reading trashy reports of his marital situation: '*LEADING LONDON BOOKSELLER MURDERED WHILE VACATING HOUSE FOR WIFE'S SEXY ROMP WITH UNEMPLOYED TOYBOY. He was flattering himself, he realised. Who'd care he was a bookseller? KINKY HUSBAND MURDERED, more like. KINKY CUCKOLD HUSBAND*' (p. 236). Through the use of newspaper style, Felix further accentuates his narratorial self-distance and creates an additional temporal fold into this narrative sequence. As Felix the character imaginatively reads about himself as tabloid subject, 'Felix' the narrator becomes twice removed and a threefold relationship is established between narrator, diegetic character and metadiegetic newspaper character. Felix's doubled self-estrangement is metaphorically represented by his literal erasure – or at least the erasure of detail about himself – in each subsequent headline, and the distance created between narrator, character and newspaper subject has its temporal counterpart in the way in which Felix imaginatively reads tomorrow's newspaper headlines.

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<sup>23</sup> In Genette's analysis of narrative discourse, Felix's narratorial change of person and level would correspond to 'an enallage of convention as in Caesar's *Commentaries*' (*Narrative Discourse*, 1983, p. 244). For Genette, this type of metaleptic transformation is particularly significant. Indeed, he claims that 'an even more glaring violation [than a character narrator leaving his story] is the shift in grammatical person to designate the same character' (p. 246).

### 3.2 'One Thousand and One Times One Thousand and One Nights'

Within the diegesis, Marisa and Felix create another narratorially exceptional set. At his request, Marisa tells Felix about her sexual liaisons with Marius, and these metadiegetic stories form a major part of Felix and Marisa's (extra)marital relationship. With echoes of Sabbath and Drenka's auricular intercourse, Felix explains how Marisa 'would set aside a ritual time to include me, to the extent that language can ever be inclusive, in the progress of her feelings for Marius and of his feelings for her. Henceforth, she would be as wife to Marius, and as storyteller to me. We would stay married, but our conjugality would begin and end where her narrative began and ended' (Jacobson, 2008, p. 204). Through this auricular arrangement, Felix again adopts the position of the inclusively excluded member of the set. He is unable to be with the couple physically but is granted access to their sexual liaisons through Marisa's narratives, which constitute the married couple's sole conjugal interaction.<sup>24</sup> Whereas Felix disavows listening to Marisa and Marius's sex sounds when he is in the room next to them, he finds listening to Marisa's narratives of sex arousing. Distinct from the need to be active in order to over-listen to the lovers as they

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<sup>24</sup> A similar arrangement is depicted in Lars von Trier's film, *Breaking the Waves* (1996), which portrays the relationship between Bess and Jan in a remote Scottish village. After Jan is paralysed in an oil rig accident, he recollects the couple's early telephone sex exchanges and tells Bess to have sex with other men:

'Remember when I phoned you from the rig? We made love without being together.'

'Do you want me to talk to you like that again? I, I'd love to.'

'Bess, I want you to find a man, to make love to, and then come back here and tell me about it. It will feel like you and me being together again. Now that, that will keep me alive.'

As the dialogue shows, Jan is attracted to the potential sexual pleasures offered by listening to erotic stories of his wife's 'adultery', whilst also wishing to free Bess from the couple's sexual paralysis. Responding to Bess's reluctance, Jan explains: "'This morning when I, when I told you to, to get a lover, it wasn't for your sake. It was for my sake. Because I don't want to die.'"

have sex, listening to Marisa's stories allows Felix to remain relatively passive and, as I shall argue, again play the role of *homo sacer*. For Felix, the auricular relationship composed of storyteller and listener is exciting and fulfilling, and he even compares himself to Othello, claiming: "Being told, as Iago very nearly taught him, is more rewarding. Words excite far more than mere vision ever can" (p. 285).

Befitting his experience of inclusive exclusion, Felix both enjoys and despairs at the power of language as he listens to Marisa's stories, and he provides a glimpse of his personal linguistic pleasures when he recalls the family trip to the local brothel. Reflecting on this jaunt, he explains to the reader: 'I never again went to be whipped in Baker Street. The experience wasn't metaphorical enough for me' (p. 233). With both the fetish club and the brothel, Felix finds their literalness unsatisfying. Indeed, Felix's desire for language's intangible effects is so marked that at times he even desires not to speak or listen, reflecting:

There are some desires which are too elusive and undefined ever to be put satisfactorily into words: utter them and they lose their trepidation, call them by their name (supposing that you know their name) and you forgo that oscillation between the possible and the unthinkable, between what you rub at in your imagination and what you fear ever coming to pass (or worse, not coming to pass) in reality. If that oscillation made us giddy it also made us the more in love. Perhaps I shouldn't speak for Marisa. It was part of our unspokenness never to be certain how in love the other person was. For me, though, the not knowing what was permissible, what Marisa made of my odd nature, how many of my dreads and fancies she had become aware of and would ever allow to come to pass, threw me into a frenzy of waiting and wondering that conventional people would regard more as servitude than love, but which for me was love's very image, love without surety or promise, love in an eternity of suspense. (pp. 77-8)

The rationale Felix gives for his seemingly contradictory desires – to listen and not listen – is based upon the reification he discerns at work in language. Felix suffers and enjoys the linguistic vacillation between primary sensation and secondary nominalism as much as he welcomes the torments of language itself. His desire for language is located in

potentiality's duality, which in Aristotelian terms – at least as glossed by Agamben – 'is always also *dynamis mē energein*, the potentiality not to pass into actuality' (Agamben, 1998, p. 28). Felix finds pleasure in immaterial metaphor and in language's potentiality, which includes negative or non- potentiality.

Despite his pleasure in language's inherent ambivalence, Felix cannot abide the idea of complete fabrication. During their meeting towards the end of the diegesis, Marius taunts Felix with the idea that Marisa's narratives have been unfaithful, and at Marius's funeral in the last sequence of the narrative Marisa herself declares: "Felix, I told him better than he was" (Jacobson, 2008, p. 306). Pressed by Felix to explain, she reiterates: "Better, other . . . I gave you the Marius you wanted" (p. 306). Unable to bear the possibility that he has been exclusively excluded rather than excepted by Marisa's narratives, Felix asks: "What are we talking here, Marisa," . . . "hyperbole or invention? Are you telling me we've buried a man who never lived?" (p. 307). Within the timeframe of the narrative, both Felix and the reader are left unsure about the answer to these questions as Felix finally concedes:

There are some things you know you must postpone. At least in the presence of death. However bewildering or sensational, they are not for now, they are for later. And maybe not even for then. So we walked, and I was glad to. (p. 307).

Thus, by ultimately not pursuing the issue, Felix suspends the possibility of his exclusive exclusion.

Felix reflects upon Marisa's commanding narratorial role within their relationship when he considers the intricate process of storytelling. Thinking about Marius's possible sexual meeting with two teenage sisters, Felix considers the fact that 'in [Marius's] reporting of the event years later he was sparing of . . . details; unless the person reporting it in turn to me was sparing of the details on his behalf' (p. 163). Felix's concern about

Marisa's reliability and editorial influence registers her narratorial power over him, which is heightened by his belief that 'no one ever tells the whole truth about sex. Something must always be added or taken away' (p. 163). As the narratorial authority in their sexual arrangement, Marisa can manipulate and arrest her narration as she pleases, which, as I turn to in the following section, is similar to the power the narrator has over the reader. Moreover, as Felix tells the reader, Marisa causes him to experience a sense of self-effacement: 'I couldn't be sure she remembered Marius had gone, or notice that it was I who was lying beside her and not him' (p. 211). By talking to Felix as she lies next to him, Marisa effectively excepts him from her storytelling and even her presence, and Felix experiences 'the bond of inclusive exclusion to which a thing is subject because of the fact of being in language, of being named' (Agamben, 1998, p. 21). As the listening party, Felix is subjected to Marisa's language, simultaneously included in and excluded from her sexual narratives.

Felix conveys his concerns about his position as the narratee in Marisa and his relationship by comparing his situation with the deathly torment faced by Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights*. In hyperbolic fashion, he tells the reader:

This was a story, though, that couldn't end. One Thousand and One Times One Thousand and One Nights, and always more to anticipate and dread. How long before Marisa would plunge her nails into my neck and whisper in my ear, like a lick of flame, 'Love me, Marius'? And then 'Fuck me, Marius'? And then, and then, 'Marius, I love you'? (Jacobson, 2008, p. 211)

In his fantastical restaging of Scheherazade's plight, Felix reveals his need to listen to Marisa's stories for the sake of his sex life. Indeed, he requires an infinite narrative series so that he can experience everlasting auricular pleasure and the thrill of never arriving at a final, conclusive moment. His question – 'how long?' – and his repetition of 'and then' express his impatience, but his mathematical upstaging of Scheherazade's predicament

reaffirms his longing for this narrative scenario to continue for ever. Despite his seemingly exaggerated interpretation of his situation, Felix has good reason to fear for his sex life as it is largely based upon listening to Marisa's narratives and, moreover, 'the link between bare life and politics is the same link that the metaphysical definition of man as "the living being who has language" seeks in the relation between *phonē* and *logos*' (Agamben, 1998, p. 7). The relationship between language and existence is not simply part of an analogy in Agamben's schema, as 'the living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the *polis* by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it' (p. 8). Within this conceptualisation, the voice relates to bare life, whereas the ability to use language belongs to the politically recognised subject. Through her very capacity to use language, then, Marisa excepts her voice and consequently her bare life. In contrast, Felix, the being with voice only within this particular situation, does not produce language. Whilst Marisa speaks and thereby demonstrates her ability to use language, Felix listens, figuratively showing a lack of political subjectivity. Marisa and Felix's relationship as storyteller and listener is part of the dynamic between sovereign and *homo sacer*, political life and bare life: Marisa uses *logos*, whereas Felix, playing the role of the listener, is limited to *phonē* only. He is placed in a 'linguistic "state of exception"' (p. 25), abandoned to Marisa and her *logos*, her narrative law and power.<sup>25</sup> As the narrator in their relationship, Marisa has significant control over Felix because 'to speak [*dire*] is, in this sense, always, to "speak the law," *ius dicere*' (p. 21).

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<sup>25</sup> In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben theorises another type of linguistic state of exception, arguing: 'language's sovereign claim thus consists in the attempt to make sense coincide with denotation, to stabilize a zone of indistinction between the two in which language can maintain itself in relation to its *denotata* by abandoning them and withdrawing from them into a pure *langue* (the linguistic "state of exception"). This is what deconstruction does, positing undecidables that are infinitely in excess of every possibility of signification' (1998, p. 25).

### 3.3 The Reader

Felix and Marisa's narratorial relationship metonymically represents the textual relationship between the reader and the narrator. This textual relationship is made particularly apparent in *The Act of Love* by the way in which Felix continually addresses, questions and provokes the reader, as evident in a consideration of Marisa's metadiegetic stories:

And did Marisa, in reply, orchestrate her re-enactments? Did she do to me what she had done to Marius?

I take that line of questioning, since we are being candid, to be no better than mine. (Jacobson, 2008, p. 210)

In this quasi-exchange, Felix supplies the reader with a set of questions only to reproach him. Furthermore, he elicits the reader's collusion through the inclusive 'we', and throughout the narrative Felix persistently implies that he is responding to the reader's questions. For instance, when Felix considers Marisa's charitable act of reading to a blind man, he imagines how 'softly, beneath her words, she would feel the ebb and flow of his breath on her flesh' (p. 174). Felix then playfully admonishes the reader's implied inquisitiveness: "'And her erectile tissue?' Reader, you ask too many questions' (p. 174). Here, Felix's question implies that the reader is dissatisfied because he is not being narratively fulfilled. However, Felix himself enforces this desire upon the reader, as the reader is left to consider his 'own' un-asked question, the answer to which is ultimately held in abeyance. Thus, Felix both creates and addresses the reader's dissatisfaction. Furthermore, when he discusses how he listens to Marisa's stories, Felix conflates his own narrative tendencies with the reader's, instructing the reader to act impatiently:

How long before my bodice-ripper's reader's heart would crack asunder with the madcap all-consuming joy of it?  
Go on – ask. *How long how long how long . . .* (p. 211)

The narrative suspense created by Felix's implied questions and orders reaffirms his control over the reader. For instance, Felix rarely gives the reader access to Marisa's metadiegetic stories, and, even in a moment of unusual generosity, he only explains:

But I was sleepy now, wiped out by all she'd told me of the afternoon she'd spent with Marius, her untainted limbs entwined with his, her eyes rolling in her head like a bacchante's, her breasts bathed in a cold quick-silver sweat. (p. 290)

The non-presence of Marisa's sex stories supports Genette's arguments in *Narrative Discourse* that 'the existence of an intradiegetic narratee has the effect of keeping us at a distance, since he is always interposed between the narrator and us' (1983, p. 260), and that 'we, the readers, cannot identify ourselves with those fictive narratees anymore than those intradiegetic narrators can address themselves to us, or even assume our existence' (p. 260).<sup>26</sup> But more than this, Felix's habit of addressing the reader, informing her of Marisa's narratives but simultaneously denying her full knowledge of them, positions the reader as an exceptional element of the narrative set, a situation Felix himself conceptualises, as I turn to later in this section. Thus, the reader is abandoned by and to Felix the narrator, occupying a position neither fully inside nor outside the narrative. Felix's narratorial manipulation also recreates for the reader the temporality inherent in Felix's own suspenseful sex life. But unlike Felix, the reader is ultimately denied the erotic pleasure of Marisa's stories.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Felix's narratorial manipulation emphasises how the

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<sup>26</sup> For the way in which telephonic dogging in *Sabbath's Theater* challenges Genette's argument about intradiegetic narratees, see section 5 in the previous chapter.

<sup>27</sup> Critical analysis of Felix's manipulative narrative is not without precedent. In her review of the novel, Bel Mooney (2008) argues that Felix 'forces you to be part of its compulsions' (para. 6), and Sarah Churchwell (2008) similarly proposes: 'Felix's confident proclamations come to seem egotistical and coercive' (para. 3). Samuel

reader is held up and suspended in a quasi-eternal waiting that is driven and enforced by the narrative.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to his invocations and manipulation of the reader, Felix comes close to developing a theory of the exceptional quality of literature itself through his reflections on the writer, genre and the reader. During his confrontation with Marius towards the end of the narrative, Felix turns to the figure of the artist and proposes that all art is supplied by masochists:

‘But if we’re talking rapture, the anvil. The hammer strikes, the anvil feels the blow. The hammer does, the anvil feels. Hammers don’t paint paintings or write novels.’

‘Of the Henry James type?’

‘Of any type. Art happens on the anvil, beneath the hammer.’ (Jacobson, 2008, p. 286)

For Felix, the masochist artist – the only true artist there is – is a cuckold caught up in expectation and temporal anticipation. Felix elaborates this theory by drawing a parallel between the writer and the cuckolded husband:

Employing a suspense identical to the suspense of the husband who waits to be betrayed, the writer (in Henry James’s words a person ‘on whom nothing is lost,’ and therefore upon whom, if he is any good, everything is visited) puts himself in a position to observe, as God the immortal cuckold has been observing from the moment He divided light from darkness, the ever recurring disloyalties of his creations. . . . The writer’s creativity is no different, engraving, in loving detail, the

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Thompson (2008) argues that Felix ‘coaches us in close reading’ (p. 36), and he comes closest to arguing for the reader as a textual element (p. 37). However, Thompson’s analysis retains the idea of the reader as voyeur, and he fails to extend the theoretical possibilities of the reader as ‘the third party’ beyond assuming her cuckolding effect on Felix (p. 37). In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette relates the concept of readerly inclusion specifically to metalepsis, arguing: ‘the most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative’ (1983, p. 236).

<sup>28</sup> The text-reader relation is particularly complex as there are at the very least four textual spatiotemporalities, which are those of the diegesis, the narrative, the narration and the act of reading. See Genette (1983 and 1990) for a comprehensive account of narrative time and space.

infidelities of characters dear to his heart. Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Molly Bloom – what do they have in common? Simply this: that each yields to minutely observed seduction at the hands of unworthy men, and in the process subjects her creator, who loves her better than any other man ever could, to the torments of the damned. (p. 92)

Constructing his theory in strongly gendered terms, Felix argues that (male) writerly suspense is the same as that felt by the willing cuckold, both of whom experience the pleasurable torment of orchestrated (in)fidelity.<sup>29</sup> In this reflection on literature, Felix considers the (in)fidelities of Anna, Emma, Tess and Molly in relation to how they affect their male creators, not in relation to their textual partners. For Felix, both writer and 'betrayed' husband arrange 'their' women's (in)fidelities by exposing them to other men. Through their similar actions, the difference between writer and cuckold collapses, and both writer and husband occupy an exceptional position inside and outside their respective sexual sets, left suspended and tormented by their (un)faithful women. In a less theoretical way, Felix considers the torturous effect narrating one's cuckoldage can have when he describes how his acquaintance Ernesto spies and reports on Marisa's affairs for him: 'so when I asked him to open Marisa's mouth and describe – *lentamente*, Ernesto, *e con espressione* – the manner in which Marius slid his tongue into it, I was quite possibly putting him through agonies as unendurable as my own' (p. 195). As a result of Ernesto's narrative, both Felix and he experience Marisa's kiss with Marius. They both taste the 'agonies' of cuckoldage, demonstrating how in writing or narrating about his cuckoldage – and therefore listening to (see the previous chapter) – the narrator relives it.

Moving from the writer and narrator to the concept of genre in his literary reflections, Felix tells the reader:

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<sup>29</sup> Despite the fact that Felix presents his theory in terms of husbands, male writers and a male god who are cuckolded by women, there is no logical reason why the configuration cannot be reversed, so that women writers and wives arrange their men's (in)fidelities.

the minute I put my mind to Marisa on the loose, I either had her swooning in the arms of a highwayman in tight breeches, or stripped naked and fucked until her brains bled. I accept no personal responsibility for this. When it comes to finding words for sex, the narrowest no-man's-land separates the most refined imagination from the coarsest. Literature and popular romance the same – the border between them is invisible and unpoliced. Is *Jane Eyre* a novel of serious intent or an exercise in sentimental pornography? At the moment Anna Karenina weeps over the loss of her honour to Vronsky, are we in a tragedy or a penny dreadful? We are in both, is the answer. Because desire itself inhabits that same narrow strip of unclaimed territory between sacrament and slush (pp. 137-8).

Beyond expressing the generic bases of his own desires, in this literary theory snapshot Felix proposes that in reading novels such as *Jane Eyre* (1847) or *Anna Karenina* (1875-7), for example, the reader occupies a space in which it is impossible to distinguish between genres – historic romance or horror, a serious novel or pornography, tragedy or penny dreadful.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Felix argues that due to the metaphoric no-man's-land of literature, the invisible border between 'high' and 'low', the reader adopts the exceptional position of being in two genres simultaneously. Specifically, Felix emphasises the particularity of the relationship between sex, desire and literature in his closing suggestion that desire and literature share the same exceptional threshold in which the 'high' and 'low' and 'sacrament and slush' become indistinguishable. Thus, Felix argues that the themes of sex and desire render the literature in which they are found both generically and qualitatively indeterminable. They affect both literary genre and the experience of reading.

Throughout his literary reflections, Felix also analyses and comments on the role of the reader, at one point ruminating:

Wherein lies the difference between the cuckold's transports of uncertain wondering – tell me tell me tell me tell me – and the reader's?

The wanting to know what happened next – *and then and then and then*: what is that but the spur to curiosity that drives us back, again and again, to our oldest and greatest stories?

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<sup>30</sup> For an account of genre that articulates the problematic of boundaries as well as inclusion and exclusion, see Derrida, 'The Law of Genre' (1992b [1980]).

Listen, Menelaus – what is Helen whispering to Paris? What Trojan promises lull her to her sleep, what Trojan laughter stirs her from her bed of shame?

What are her suitors, Odysseus – more suitors than she has ears to hear them with – saying to your wife Penelope while you dawdle on the high seas? (pp. 210-11)

Through his opening rhetorical question, Felix implies that the cuckold and the reader are equivalent figures. He then supports this implication by imaginatively taunting both Menelaus and Odysseus, and thereby presenting the cuckolded reader as archetypal and originary, as if since the beginnings of western civilization people have persistently asked: ‘*and then, and then, and then*’? Following his rhetorical questions, Felix continues his theory of the cuckolded reader by declaring: ‘thus literature, pandering to our uncertain desires. And thus the reader, in his eternal wanting to be told – *what next what next* – as unclean as any cuckold’ (p. 211). Felix’s repetitive syntactical structure gives the impression that both reader and text presuppose one another, that they are two members of a literary set. Like the voluntary cuckold who is inclusively excluded in his partner’s affairs, the reader is inclusively excluded from, and exclusively included in, the narrative, at once implied and addressed but excepted by the narrator.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the reader is much more than ‘your ordinary twopenny-halfpenny voyeur’ (p. 220), and together text and reader form a threshold relationship.<sup>32</sup> Felix identifies this readerly form of exceptionality in his consideration of Marisa’s approach to the visual arts, explaining: ‘she gave the impression of a person looking deep into a subject which both was and wasn’t in the room with her. The right way, I have always thought, to address art. As something that is and

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<sup>31</sup> In his review of the novel, Stephen Abell hints at the anticipated role of the reader by invoking the classic image of ‘a Virgil awaiting his Dante’ (2008, para. 2).

<sup>32</sup> The concept of the threshold recurs throughout Genette’s analysis of narrative, an example of which I analysed in Chapter I. Connected to the relationship between narrator and reader, for instance, Genette discusses metaleptic manipulations, arguing: ‘these games, by the intensity of their effects, demonstrate the importance of the boundary they tax their ingenuity to overstep, in defiance of verisimilitude—a boundary *that is precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself*: a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells’ (1983, p. 236).

isn't of one's time' (p. 148). To reconfigure Felix's perspective in textual terms, the text is both in and out of the reader's spatiotemporality and, correlatively, the reader is both there and not there in the text, inside and outside its spatiotemporality, of and not of the narrative's time and space.

In *The Act of Love*, the reader's exclusively included position is made conspicuous by her absence from Felix's own narrative set-like structure. By not marking the reader's 'part' in his narrative set, Felix includes the reader through her exclusion and positions her as an exceptional element of his set. As an absent presence, the reader is always in a suspended relation to the text, abandoned by and to it as she reads and listens to it. The text does not, however, pander to the reader's whims as Felix implies, but rather controls and directs them. As with the complex interaction of sovereign and *homo sacer* in Marisa and Felix's (sexual and narratorial) relationship, the reader also plays both parts: she is abandoned by and to the narrative – excepted by the narrative – but also sovereign in the sense that she can abandon the narrative at any moment. The reader's exclusively included position in the textual set therefore constitutes reading as a spatiotemporally exceptional activity. Added to the auricular sex made possible through reading (as discussed in Chapter IV), then, the reader's exclusive inclusion 'in' the text sets up the act of reading as a form of exceptional intercourse.

## VI. CODA: AN EXCEPTIONAL ROOM

In this coda, I wish to make room for an exception of my own. So as not to give the impression that portrayals of exceptional sex are restricted to novels by male British and American writers, I shall briefly turn to Irish writer Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010). My inclusion of a woman writer provides an exception to my focus on narratives by male writers, not to the theory of exceptional sex. Indeed, it supports the arguments I made in Chapter I regarding my choice of texts, which is related to the discipline of literary studies and not to a philosophical proposition about the gender of texts themselves. Furthermore, by including a text by a woman writer, I do not commit the same error that often occurs in queer theory, which is to argue that a certain group of people, community, or indeed group of writers and artists has an exclusive claim to a specific sexual practice.

Told by five-year-old Jack, *Room* depicts the story of Ma and Jack's entrapment in a secured garden room where Ma has lived since her abduction by Old Nick at the age of nineteen. Inside Room, Ma is continually abused and raped by Old Nick, and her sustained sexual torture produces a still-born baby and her son Jack. The text begins on Jack's fifth birthday, the day Ma decides to explain to him their peculiar situation in an effort to convince him of the need to escape. Having never been outside, Jack has difficulty comprehending his mother's revelation that there is a world beyond Room. Despite his confusion and reticence, however, Jack does eventually agree to Ma's escape plan, in which he must act sick, and, as that fails, then dead, so that Old Nick will take him out of Room in order to dispose of his body. With the odd twist, blunder and accompanying narrative suspense, the plan is eventually successful. But post-Room, mother and son are

confronted with the ‘outside’ world, which Jack finds “trippy-uppy” (Donoghue, 2010, p. 310).

My interest in Donoghue’s text is in its portrayal of exceptionality as experienced through a child’s viewpoint. Jack’s narrative shows his efforts to understand time and space, thereby providing an acute account of the peculiar and fascinating nature of spatiotemporality. Moreover, as a child who experiences nothing other than Room for the first five years of his life, Jack’s outlook brings something of a *tabula rasa*’s perspective to time and space. Distinct from the child who has lived in the everyday world, Jack’s desire to understand time and space is specifically related to his experience of exceptionality, of not being able to distinguish in from out. Therefore, my analysis of this narrative enriches the study of exceptionality as Jack’s story offers a worldview completely informed by living in a state of exception. Indeed, as a doctor tells him after his escape from Room, Jack is “like a visitor from another planet” (p. 225). Through its narrative of entrapment, escape and coming to terms with life outside Room, Jack’s story also opens up the complexity of the concepts of norm, law and exception. Furthermore, his narrative of Ma’s continued sexual abuse by Old Nick, and the way in which Ma endeavours to explain their situation to Jack by comparing them both to characters in a book, offer further narrative exceptionalities, a succinct exploration of which will open up, rather than conclude, this thesis on sex, time and space.

## **1. ‘Room just is’: Time and Space**

After learning about his entrapment, Jack experiences a form of frustration, telling the reader: ‘before I didn’t even know to be mad that we can’t open Door, my head was too

small to have Outside in it. When I was a little kid I thought like a little kid, but now I'm five I know everything' (Donoghue, 2010, p. 102). In this confessional moment, Jack displays his characteristic reification of concepts such as 'Door' and 'Outside', his tendency to make things into concrete entities. Combined with this propensity, Jack's humorous belief that comprehension relates to the size of one's head illustrates his difficulty in understanding time and space despite his professed maturity. A complexity difficult enough for most five-year-olds, the understanding of time and space is particularly problematic for Jack as he has always been locked up in Room. For Jack, then, his mother's revelation about her life outside Room creates a significant temporal threshold, dividing his life into pre and post knowledge of a possible outside world. Before Ma's announcement, Jack's only real awareness of a possible difference between Room and something else – outside – came from the television and the small skylight in the roof. Jack's amazement at a possible outside is made particularly apparent when Ma and he spot snow:

'What snow?'

'See,' she says, pointing up.

There's a little bit of light at Skylight's top, the rest of her is all dark. TV snow's white but the real isn't, that's weird. 'Why doesn't it fall on us?'

'Because it's on the outside.'

'In Outer Space? I wish it was inside so I can play with it.' (p. 8)

For Jack, Old Nick is the only person that enters and exits Room, who comes and goes as he pleases. But even with regard to Old Nick, Jack resorts to the television as his point of reference, telling his mother: "'When he's not here, in the daytime, you know what? He actually goes in TV'" (p. 58). Jack applies a similar logic to the problem of sleep during a discussion with Ma:

'Where are we when we're asleep?'

I can hear her yawn. 'Right here.'

‘But dreams.’ I wait. ‘Are they TV?’ She still doesn’t answer. ‘Do we go into TV for dreaming?’

‘No. We’re never anywhere but here.’ Her voice sounds a long way away.  
(p. 46)

The most decisive event in Jack’s young life is his escape from Room, which produces a significant break in his spatiotemporal understanding. In Ma and his attempt to get out of Room, Jack plays dead and Old Nick believes that he is taking the boy away to dispose of his body. As he acts dead in the back of Old Nick’s truck, Jack wonders:

Outside.  
Could I be? (p. 138)

This tentative query conveys Jack’s ontological and subjective confusion, which he quickly reiterates when, still in the truck, he thinks:

I’m not in Room. Am I still me?  
Moving now. I’m zooming along in the truck for real for really real. (p. 138)

Bewildered and uncertain now that he is outside Room, Jack again resorts to the television to explain his existence, telling the reader: ‘it’s like a cartoon I’m inside but messier’ (p. 139).

Rather than freeing Jack from – among other things – spatiotemporal confusion, being outside Room is troublesome and unsettling. As his grandmother explains to the parent of a child Jack accidentally pushes over when trying to cuddle him, “‘he’s learning about boundaries’” (p. 288). For Jack, ‘Outside is the scary’ (p. 219) and he does not see it as an improvement on Room, wondering: ‘Why is it better out than in? Ma said we’d be free but this doesn’t feel like free’ (p. 257). Outside, Jack experiences temporal complications as much as spatial ones. As he tells the reader, ‘in Outside the time’s all mixed up. Ma keeps saying, “Slow down, Jack,” and “Hang on,” and “Finish up now,” and

“Hurry up, Jack” (p. 196). Jack confides in the reader about the effect this temporal disruption has on him, explaining: ‘I can hardly ever guess what time it is, there’s clocks but they have pointy hands, I don’t know the secret and Watch isn’t here with her numbers so I have to ask Ma and she gets tired of me asking’ (p. 197). The reliance Jack shows on his digital watch illustrates that in Room time was numbers to him, numbers that were connected to the routine Ma created for them to survive the possibility of interminable boredom. Despite his inability to ascertain the time, Jack does try to comprehend what time is and how it might work outside Room, reflecting: ‘in Room me and Ma had time for everything. I guess the time gets spread very thin like butter over all the world, the roads and houses and playground and stores, so there’s only a little smear of time on each place, then everyone has to hurry on to the next bit’ (pp. 286-7).

## 2. “What’s normal?”

Jack’s initial ignorance of the difference between inside and outside is fundamentally related to the concept of the norm. In Room, Ma attempts to provide Jack with a ‘normal’ childhood, as is evident in their ritual measurement of his height:

I put my finger on the 4 and stand with my face against it, my finger’s on my hair.  
 ‘I didn’t get taller much this time.’  
 ‘That’s normal.’  
 ‘What’s normal?’  
 ‘It’s—’ Ma chews her mouth. ‘It means it’s OK. *No hay problema.*’  
 (Donoghue, 2010, p. 13)

To limit Jack’s disappointment at his perceived slow growth, Ma reverts to the standard parenting technique of measuring her son against the norm, but she is unable to explain fully what normal is due to the fact that they exist in isolation and have nothing to which to

compare Jack's height. For Jack, there is no norm or exception, nothing against which to measure, and Ma has no yardstick with which to explain their situation. Consequently, she tries to explain to Jack that normal means something is okay and quotes his favourite television show *Dora the Explorer*.

Jack's inability to comprehend distinctions within Room – inside and outside, norm and exception – is connected to the concept of homelessness, which is an outcome of states of exception. Discussing the state of his clothes, Jack tells the reader: 'I don't mind the holes but Ma says they make me look homeless, she can't explain what that is' (p. 29). By living in an exceptional state that is the norm to him, Jack cannot fathom the meaning of home or, correlatively, homelessness. Jack's home is Room but this – oxymoronically – means that he is officially homeless. Indeed, when Ma instructs Old Nick to take the supposedly sick boy to the hospital, she advises him: "Just tell them he's an illegal alien with no papers" (p. 120). Despite her tone, Ma is not, however, asking Old Nick to lie. As a result of being born within a state of exception, Jack is an alien to the law. Like the refugee whom Agamben considers a modern exemplar of the exiled *homo sacer*, Jack has no rights.<sup>1</sup> He is unknown to the law. He has no political subjectivity, but is totally subject to Old Nick's sovereignty.

In his post-Room world, Jack experiences a particularly complex circulation of norm and exception. For example, during their stay at the Cumberland Clinic where they receive specialist medical treatment, Ma tells Jack to "Relax" because "Everything's different here" (p. 184), to which he responds: "But what's the rule?" (p. 184). Jack's simple question therefore reveals his inbuilt need for some sense of authority or norm.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Homo Sacer* (1995), for example, Agamben argues that 'the refugee must be considered for what he is: nothing less than a limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state, from the birth-nation to the man-citizen link, and that thereby makes it possible to clear the way for a long-overdue renewal of categories in the service of a politics in which bare life is no longer separated and excepted, either in the state order or in the future of human rights' (1998, p. 134).

Excited at her own freedom, Ma expresses the flexibility that is possible in the outside world when she replies: “‘There is no rule. We can have lunch at ten or one or three or the middle of the night’” (p. 184). Almost paradoxically, then, Jack experiences a greater sense of rule within the alegal state of exception that is Room than outside in the lawful world.

The lack of rule Jack experiences in his immediate immersion in the outside world reaffirms how states of exception are not limited or isolated, that they can exist in many forms, times and spaces, and, furthermore, that the relation between norm and exception is far from simple. Jack himself expresses the complex concept of the exceptional situation during a discussion of rules with a doctor from the clinic when he thinks: ‘then there’s special cases, like police are allowed to shoot guns but only at bad guys. There’s too many rules to fit in my head, so we make a list with Dr. Clay’s extra-heavy gold pen’ (p. 274). Moreover, when Ma talks to journalists during a press conference she moves beyond Jack’s confusion over the norm and the exception and catalogues different forms of punishment and ways of living that are similar to hers in Room. As she tells the reporters, the various forms of living Ma describes are characterised by spatiotemporal deprivation, abandonment and being reduced to sexual, bare life:

‘Yeah, but not just—I mean, of course when I woke up in that shed, I thought nobody’d ever had it as bad as me. But the thing is, slavery’s not a new invention. And solitary confinement—did you know, in America we’ve got more than twenty-five thousand prisoners in isolation cells? Some of them for more than twenty years.’ Her hand is pointing at the puffy-hair woman. ‘As for kids—there’s places where babies lie in orphanages five to a cot with pacifiers taped into their mouths, kids getting raped by Daddy every night, kids in prisons, wherever, making carpets till they go blind—’. (pp. 235-6)

### **3. Jack and the Wolf**

As part of her efforts to convince Jack of the need to get out of Room, Ma describes her previous escape attempt and Old Nick's reaction to her failure, telling Jack: "“When he found the hole . . . he howled”" (Donoghue, 2010, p. 96). Jack responds to Ma's onomatopoeic imitation of Old Nick by asking: "“Like a wolf?”" (p. 96). Despite his mother's rejection of this theory – "“No, laughing”" (p. 96), she says – Jack's question reveals his perception of Old Nick as an animal, and his invocation of the wolf is not as childish as it might initially seem. Indeed, when mother and son return to Room at the end of the narrative due to Jack's wish to visit his old home, Jack explains:

When we get up close to the door of the house, I know it's Old Nick's house because there's the yellow ribbon that says in black letters *CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS*. A big sticker with a scary wolf face that says *BEWARE OF THE DOG*. I point to it, but Ma says, 'That's only pretend.'

Oh yeah, the trick dog that was having the fit the day Ma was nineteen. (p. 317)

The dog trick Old Nick used to lure Ma marks both Old Nick's own animalistic nature and the way in which he removes Ma and Jack from the collective human sphere by isolating them in Room.

Despite their efforts to live a 'normal' existence by playing, watching television and establishing routines, Ma and Jack are reduced to a form of animal, bare life through the sovereign power Old Nick has over them. Discussing her earlier failed escape, Ma tells Jack: "“I was afraid he'd hurt me but that time, he thought it was just hilarious”" (p. 96). However, not being hurt emphasises rather than diminishes Ma's utter helplessness, as it reveals her inability to challenge Old Nick. Indeed, as Ma reveals to Jack: "“When he came back the next night, he said . . . if I ever tried a stunt like that again, he'd go away and I'd get hungrier and hungrier till I died”" (p. 97). As Jack imaginatively explains, Old Nick is their sole provider: 'he brings groceries and Sundaytreat and disappears the trash, but he's not human like us. He only happens in the night, like bats. Maybe Door makes him up with

a *beep beep* and the air changes. I think Ma doesn't like to talk about him in case he gets realer' (p. 18). In his role as the supplier of goods, Old Nick is a corruption of the magical, mysterious Saint Nick who also brings 'gifts' in the night. But, unlike the benevolent Saint Nick, Old Nick has sovereign power over Ma and Jack, over their entire existence. Like pets, they are reliant on him for their survival, and when Ma instructs him how to treat Jack's 'dead' body, Old Nick even speaks to her 'like he's talking to a dog' (p. 137). Moreover, Old Nick uses Ma's body for his own animalistic pleasures, and thereby forcibly reduces her to sexual, bare life.

#### 4. 'like in a book'

As with the honeymoon suite in *On Chesil Beach* (2007), the adulterous getaway in *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), and the (extra)marital house in *The Act of Love* (2008), Room is a sexual space. It is, in fact, an intensely sexual room specifically designed for Ma's entrapment and her repeated rape. In Room, Ma is a *homo sacer* to Old Nick's sexual desires, existing merely as bare life. As Jack tells us, he is hidden away in his cupboard throughout Ma's abuse and tries to focus on the creaking of the bed:

When Old Nick creaks Bed, I listen and count fives on my fingers, tonight it's 217 creaks. I always have to count till he makes that gaspy sound and stops. I don't know what would happen if I didn't count, because I always do.

What about the nights I'm asleep?

I don't know, maybe Ma does the counting.

After the 217 it's all quiet.

I hear the TV switch on, it's just the news planet, I see bits with tanks through the slats that's not very interesting. I put my head under Blanket. Ma and Old Nick are talking a bit but I don't listen. (Donoghue, 2010, p. 37)

For Jack, Old Nick's visits are composed of noises. Indeed, the child does not know that Ma is being raped, but, despite not being fully aware of his mother's plight, Jack creates his numerical and auricular games in an effort to screen out Old Nick's visits. As Jack's descriptions indicate, his games are mechanical rather than fun: 'lamp goes off *click* and Old Nick creaks the bed. I count in ones sometimes instead of fives just for different. But I start losing count so I switch to fives that go faster, I count 378' (p. 47).

Like the lack of seminal fluid in Felix's account of masturbation in *The Act of Love*, Jack's narrative only implies that Ma is being raped: sex takes place but Jack is only aware of the noise of the bed creaking and Old Nick's 'gasp sound'. Consequently, the reader has to infer Ma's sexual abuse from Jack's numerical and auditory description, and she must put the sex back into narrative time and space, providing an element of the story that exists neither fully inside nor fully outside the text. Therefore, the sexual abuse is narratorially exceptional – it is absent from Jack's account but supplied, made present, by the reader, thus adding another exceptional aspect to the role of reading.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In *Blind Date* (2003), Anne Dufourmantelle sees a similar sexual 'presence' in her discussion of Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger's love letters. Analysing this epistolary exchange, Dufourmantelle states: 'no sex—unless it is there within every word, and between the words, in the rhythm, in the resonance of what is not said, in the path they are opening up openly' (2007, p. 87). More generally, Dufourmantelle contends that literature and culture are 'that which in the blank spaces of language designates desire as the center of gravity of all activity of thought, secret or exposed' (p. 17). In his essay 'The Stanza of the Self: on Agamben's Potentiality' (2004), Paolo Bartoloni analyses '[Ezra] Pound's work with ideograms taken from the Chinese language and his working of metaphors influenced by Japanese haiku' (p. 14), and argues: 'as Charles Taylor has commented interpreting Pound's writing, "these juxtapositions [were] just to see reality undistorted." In Pounds [sic] own words: "[Art] means constataion of fact. It presents. It does not comment." Is art here presenting the "such-as-it-is", and thus locating itself in the space of the *interim*? It appears so, especially if one compares Taylor's analysis of Pound's writing with my discourse of interstices: "This is the nature of the Poundian epiphany; it happens not so much in the work as in a space that the work sets up; not in the words or images or objects evoked, but between them. Instead of an epiphany of being, we have something like an epiphany of interspaces"' (p. 14).

Within the narrative, a second instance of textual exceptionality is opened up during a literary conversation between Ma and Jack. In an effort to explain to her son the peculiarity of their situation and in particular why Old Nick will not let them have certain supplies, Ma makes a textual analogy, telling Jack: “‘We’re like people in a book, and he won’t let anybody else read it’” (p. 90). Ma’s simple analogy can be read to imply that the act of reading draws characters out, that characters are released from their purely textual lives by the help of the reader. Therefore, literary characters are exceptional: they are at once inside the text but brought out by the reader. Consequently, they occupy an indeterminate, threshold existence, neither fully inside nor outside the text. In response to Ma’s analogy, Jack thinks: ‘but she said we were like in a book, how do people in a book escape from it?’ (p. 105). But whilst Jack does not answer his own question, he does later experience a spatiotemporality similar to that implied in Ma’s analogy. As he tells us, when Ma and he move into special housing following their stay at the clinic he experiments with his new environment: ‘one day I wonder if the windows open. I try the bathroom one, I figure out the handle and push the glass. I’m scared of the air but I’m being scave, I lean out and put my hands through it. I’m half in and half out. It’s the most amazing—’ (p. 314). When Ma catches Jack, interrupts his fun, and admonishes him, he simply responds: “‘I wasn’t falling . . . I was being in and out at the same time’” (p. 314).

Ma and Jack’s literary exchange illustrates that further exceptional textual relations are possible, and it again demonstrates how exceptionality provides new ways to think about narrative – its structures, times and spaces – as well as the relationship between narrator, text and reader. Specifically, Ma’s analogy opens up a consideration of character ontology that adds a further dimension to my conceptualisation of exceptional textual relations, which include auricular reading and the reader’s inclusively excluded and exclusively included position within a narrative. As I have argued, within the exceptional

state of reading the reader is at once penetrated by his own voice and the voice of the text. Furthermore, he is presupposed and excepted by the narrator, positioned both inside and outside the narrative simultaneously. In addition to these two aspects of reading, Jack's narration of the rape of his mother and their discussion of the readerly ability to help characters escape from the text substantiate the theory that literature offers a radical – exceptional – form through which to explore sexual behaviour. Moreover, as young Jack may one day come to realise, reading literature itself can remove us from the legal sphere of collective life and prove to be a seductive, pleasurable and, at times, disturbing form of sexual exceptionality.

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