

# Sex, Time, and Space in Contemporary Fiction



Ben Davies

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Exceptional Intercourse

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*To my parents, Lynn and Alan Davies, with love.*



## PREFACE: *THE HUMAN STAIN*

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 71-year-old black Classics professor, who passes as white, is able to have sex with a woman less than half his age.<sup>1</sup> 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 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 Dame 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 deliberate 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 *would* or *could* 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 professor; without Viagra, Silk thinks, 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 what he sees as '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, moreover, his way of explaining that situation, open up the complex relationality between norm and exception, inclusion and exclusion, that characterises the state of exception—Giorgio Agamben's exchangeable term for the state of emergency.<sup>2</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 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 explains:

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 this 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 fascinatingly 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' 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. (Roth 2000, p. 5)

In this imagined lecture, Silk presents Achilles as a self-expected 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 much less epic fashion, Silk establishes himself as the local 'pariah' (p. 25) when he retires from the college at which he has worked most of his life on being unfairly charged with racism; at once a form of 'self-banishment' (p. 170), Silk's retirement is, then, also somewhat enforced. Furthermore, he retains a relationship with Athena College, and its 'Administration' in particular, throughout the narrative, if mainly for and by negative means. Two years after his retirement and the death of his wife, moreover, he places himself in what he sees as a sexually charged and 'potentially disastrous' (p. 32) state of emergency. In Zuckerman's interpretation, Silk enters this state, 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, Silk rejuvenates his sex life once he becomes and sees himself as a

displaced man. Correspondingly, his lover believes: ‘they stripped him and so he’s come to me naked. In his mortal moment’ (p. 237).

Silk’s self-conceived emergency state is intensified, as Faunia—the young woman with whom he has renewed his sex life—is also cast as a type of abandoned figure. As Silk tells Zuckerman, Faunia may have come from a prosperous family, but she was sexually abused by her step-father and consequently abandoned her home during her adolescence, she became married to a man who used to beat her, and she lost her two children in a house fire. Due to this horrific life story, Silk himself perceives Faunia as a type of outcast; in his eyes, ‘Faunia’s been exiled from the entitlement that should have been hers’ (p. 28) and ‘has absolutely nothing’ (p. 28). Faunia’s wretched, reduced 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.’ ‘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 from ‘those literate girls’ and the legitimate society they represent. Her illiteracy figuratively reduces her to her animal primitiveness—a type of bestial reduction Agamben argues results from being placed in the state of exception. Significantly, 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. Faunia’s illiteracy, however, is not genuine. Rather, she pretends to be illiterate—at least in Zuckerman’s opinion—‘to impersonate a member of a subspecies to which she does not belong and need not belong but to which...she wants [Silk] to believe she belongs. Wants herself to believe she belongs’ (p. 164). Faunia herself, then, deliberately enhances her position as an abandoned, reduced figure through her illiterate pretence, which, for Zuckerman, she does ‘not to infantilize herself, however, not to present herself as a dependent kid, but just the opposite: to spotlight the barbaric self befitting the world’ (p. 297). Her false illiteracy ‘spices things up’ (p. 297), and as with Silk and Viagra, ‘she just cannot get

enough of the toxins: of all that you're not supposed to be, to show, to say, to think but that you are and show and say and think whether you like it or not' (p. 297). Faunia's act enables her to be—and to be seen as—the non-socialised, illiterate, woman/animal. Moreover, she envisages herself as part-human, part-animal—an animal entrapped in her female body:

There are men who are locked up in women's bodies and women who are locked up in men's bodies, so why can't I be a crow locked up in this body? Yeah, and where is the doctor who is going to do what they do to let me out? Where do I go to get the surgery that will let me be what I am? Who do I talk to? Where do I go and what do I do and how the fuck do I get out? I am a crow. I know it. I know it! (p. 169)

Beyond—but bound up with—his declaration that sex is itself a state of emergency, Silk's new life can, then, be seen as being marked as exceptional in a number of ways: under a spurious charge of racism, he removes and estranges himself from the norm that was his intellectual society yet remains tied to it, especially its 'Administration', which can be read as representing the college's 'Law'; he is caught up in sexual intoxication, which he sees as distancing him from, and causing a tension with, the norms appropriate to a retired man of his age and station in life; he finds a lover who is figured as having been abandoned by society and who sees herself as an entrapped animal; he himself is seen by Faunia as naked and exposed; and both Silk and Faunia show a desire for animalistic fucking. In his theoretical work, Agamben argues that the state of exception also renders indeterminable the distinctions between the law and its transgression, inclusion and exclusion, and spatiotemporal markers, such as inside and outside. Therefore, Silk's designation of sex as a state of emergency opens up the way in which sex can create numerous exceptional transformations. For Silk himself, moreover, sex *is* a continuous state of emergency, which he personally enters by taking Viagra and re-erecting his ability to have penile intercourse.

Silk's declaration of a sexual state of emergency offers an entryway into this present book, which analyses contemporary narratives of 'exceptional sex', most extensively Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007), John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), Howard Jacobson's *The Act of Love* (2008), and Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010). As put forth in Chapter 1, my analysis of Agamben's theoretical work on the state of exception opens up the concept of exceptionality to new interpre-

tation, in particular allowing for a more radical sexual politics than is often associated with Agamben's thought. Moreover, I extend the analysis of exceptionality to the realm of narrative fiction as well as to other modern theoretical work by, for instance, Michel Foucault (on the novel and the norm), Jacques Derrida (on literature), and Gérard Genette (on narrative thresholds). In keeping with this approach, I do not (like Silk) argue that sex itself is a state of exception, or that it is perpetual; rather, in each chapter I analyse types of exceptional sex that entail indeterminations of time and space, the law and its transgression, inclusion and exclusion, the sovereign and the abandoned man, and human and animal. Through my analysis of exceptionality, this book argues for new ways to think about narrative representations of sex, especially in relation to time and space; it also offers a political dimension to the study of such contemporary narratives, as I argue that the reduction of human to beast that occurs in the state of exception is more disruptive and significant than any reduction to gender or sexual orientation. Moreover, the theory of exceptional sex 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. Correlatively, I argue for exceptionality to be seen as a critically productive way to analyse textual time, space, and relations, especially those between the narrative and the narrator, and the narrative and the reader. Through this focus on textual spatiotemporality and relationality, I ultimately propose that reading can itself be understood as a form of exceptionality.

## NOTES

1. For a reading of *The Human Stain* that analyses Coleman's racial makeup in terms of animality and sovereignty, see Chapter 3, 'Autoimmunity and Anteracism', of Christopher Peterson's *Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, Animality* (2013, pp. 74–112).
2. In his work on the state of exception, Agamben uses the terms 'exception' and 'emergency', 'state of exception' and 'state of emergency', interchangeably. For example, in a discussion of modern sovereign power in *State of Exception* (2003), he claims:

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. (2005a, p. 22, my emphases)



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