

Is There a Space of Maternal Ethics?

Emma Donoghue's *Room*

The world is in this room.

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

“I mean you as in anyone.”

Why I am as in anyone?

—Ma and Jack in *Room*

Emma Donoghue's harrowing 2010 novel, *Room*, exposes us to an extended scene of intensive parenting in a world of isolation, terror, and deprivation. A young woman has been abducted and is imprisoned in a well-secured garden shed by a psychopath. She has had a child in captivity. At the beginning of the novel, “Ma” has been confined for seven years; her son, Jack, the novel's narrator, has just turned five. *Room* is a contemporary parent-child narrative that, like the other narratives discussed in *Wild Child*, also invokes a kind of pre- or extrapolitical reality, a space apart (a space, for example, in which a powerless figure might have the power of life and death in relationship to her own child). The world Ma makes for Jack, the world Ma and Jack make *together* away from the world, is also, however, a space of almost utopian richness. For Jack, it is all (“the world is in this room”), and Ma later says of Jack, “He's the world to me.”¹ How do we account for this disjunction or, more disturbingly, for this relationship between the hyperbolic masculine violence that produces and the relational idealization that comes to be associated with this extreme isolation?

Genre might provide us with some clues. The academic reader, at the very least, will recognize Donoghue's deployment of motifs taken from the captivity narrative, the gothic novel, and domestic fiction, and indeed *Room* might be said to both use and pass beyond such forms and their gendered histories. Yet I'd argue that *Room* is less focused on the politics of masculine violence in real or generic form—surely everyone can think of a “real” story that Donoghue's narrative reminds them of—and more intimately concerned with questions of ethical relationality.² *Room* depicts, in great detail and with striking originality, the story of subjecthood as primarily and profoundly relational or “ethical.” In this respect, *Room* deserves to be read in the context of a posthumanist (and, as we shall see, post-Platonic), Levinasian, and feminist philosophical engagement with the question of what it means to be responsible for what we cannot be said to have freely chosen. After introducing just such a context in the first part of this chapter, I will go on to argue that *Room*'s weaning narrative represents the difficult work of substitution and separation—the ongoing work that situates us as social beings and that is one of the central preoccupations of intersubjective psychoanalysis and the work of Jessica Benjamin. I will then turn to consider *Room*'s engagement with the ethics of maternal decision by making more explicit the novel's relation to aspects of the abortion debate (Ma says to Jack, “I'm your mother. . . . That means sometimes I have to choose for both of us” [115]). Whereas some recent writing on abortion has shifted away from the model of rights and personhood to a model of responsibility and relation, I want to consider *Room*'s posthumanist resistance to any version of a solution that might be said to “miss” the ethical. *Room*, this chapter argues, refuses the sacrifice of irreducible relationality, suggesting that the wild child—every child—must take a parent hostage in order for it to come into being. One leaves Donoghue's text, in other words, with an education in the dangerous and difficult proximity between care and violence. *Room* ultimately depicts a departure from Platonic allegory and from the cave of childhood via a maternal gift of death.

Mother as Hostage

It might seem strange to look for insights into ethical relation in a hostage scenario, but not for anyone who has read the work of Emmanuel Levinas. “The responsibility for another, an unlimited responsibility which the strict book-keeping of the free and non-free does not measure, requires

subjectivity as an irreplaceable hostage,” writes Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being*.³ The ethical address, according to Levinas, has the force of a trauma precisely because here one encounters oneself as both substitutable (there is no *essential* reason that one is the addressee) and simultaneously irreplaceable. As Thomas Keenan usefully explains,

Others address me (such as I am) with an appeal that takes me over, and the boundaries that would be those of identity, ego, subject are shattered in this experience: in responsibility, the hostage is first of all not “I” but “me that is to say, *here I am for the others* [moi, *c’est-a-dire* me voici pour les autres].” This “me,” in the accusative case, marks first of all the place of the addressee, of the accused, and not of an originary agency, free or determined, or of any prior commitment.⁴

One can’t be both “free” *and* responsible, we might say, because one would then be responsible as oneself and therefore, in a sense, only to oneself (to that which does not disrupt an economy of the same). The ethical, as opposed to what I’ll call the contractual, relation (or the fantasy of contractual relation) profoundly disrupts selfhood (“boundaries are shattered”) even as it might also be said to *give* selfhood in the first place. Indeed, this is what Maurice Blanchot emphasizes or “radicalizes” in his account of Levinas: “It is the other who exposes me to ‘unity,’ making me believe in an irreplaceable singularity, as if I must not fail him, all the while withdrawing me from what would make me unique: I am not indispensable, in me anyone at all is called by the other, anyone at all as the one who owes him aid. . . . The responsibility with which I am charged is not mine, and makes me no longer myself.”⁵

What is being explicated here is not some terrifying and unusual event (although the concept of the event is also indispensable to an understanding of the ethical—ethics as performative) but rather the very conditions for being in relation with another. “We are all taken hostage in this way every day and every night,” Keenan reminds us.⁶ Similarly, if Levinas invokes the hostage, he also invokes the far more banal “After you” (when passing through a doorway) as an instance of the priority of the other.⁷ And we might add our own everyday examples: the child cries, “Mommy,” in the supermarket, and almost every woman turns to respond. Such scenes record an instance of the simultaneity of substitutability and irreplaceability; it is

urgent that one respond to this call and this “name” that is at once less and more than a “proper” designation.

In fact, Levinas himself used not only a hostage scenario but also maternity as a privileged figure for ethical relation, and, not surprisingly, this gesture has provoked a range of responses from his feminist readers.⁸ In “‘Like a Maternal Body’: Levinas and the Motherhood of Moses,” Lisa Guenther does not shy away from certain obvious or difficult problems, even as she offers a particularly compelling feminist reading of Levinas and maternal ethics: “Levinas’s own use of maternity as a figure for ethics in general threatens to appropriate one aspect of maternity—its generosity—without acknowledging women’s very particular, historical and embodied experience as mothers. . . . How might a feminist reader of Levinas respond to his account of ethical maternity without either accepting this account as the truth about motherhood as such, or overlooking the feminist potential of his work?”⁹ Much will turn on Guenther’s careful reading of the textual allusion in *Otherwise Than Being*, in which the mother in question is the biblical Moses who cannot believe that he is to be held responsible for such a discontented people. Levinas cites Numbers 11:12 in accounting for the self’s responsibility for the other: “In proximity, the absolutely other, the stranger whom I have ‘neither conceived nor given birth to,’ I already have in my arms, already bear, according to the Biblical formula, ‘in my breast as the nurse bears the nurseling.’”¹⁰ A reading of this passage and its corresponding Talmudic commentary allows Guenther to argue that a Levinasian ethics of maternity opens up a crucial gap between being and imitation and suggests that imitation comes first: “[O]ne becomes a mother by becoming *like* a mother; . . . one becomes responsible not by drawing on some innate female capacity, but by imitating in advance of any example the gestures of substitution by which I take the place of an Other who both faces me and exceeds my grasp.”¹¹ Even in Levinas, Guenther argues, the ethical always requires a political supplement: “Given the exposure of the responsible self to violence and persecution—given the possibility of abusing the generosity of Others or being abused oneself—we need a politics of justice that protects both mothers and children from a reification of the ethical asymmetry between self and Other into a social asymmetry between those whose role it is to bear Others and those who enjoy the luxury of being borne, perhaps without even realizing it.”¹² Something of the dizzying play of self and self-undoing

in Levinasian ethical relation (“substitution”) can also be seen at work in Donoghue’s *Room*. Consider, for example, the following exchange between Ma and Jack. After their escape from “Room,” Ma has to explain to Jack her difficult relationship with her own father, who is revolted by Jack’s very existence. Ma says to Jack, “He thinks—he thought I’d be better off without you.” Their conversation continues:

“Somewhere else?”

“No, if you’d never been born. Imagine.”

I try but I can’t [thinks Jack].

“Then would you still be Ma?” [he asks.]

“Well, no, I wouldn’t, So it’s a really dumb idea.” (227)

Jack’s demands on Ma are incalculable—almost unbearable—yet he has also given Ma the gift of self. There is, in other words, no return to “before” the moment of traumatic subject formation, and both Ma and Jack know this.¹³

But how are we to account for *Room*’s father/captor/rapist figure? As I suggested earlier, genre gives us some clues. “Old Nick” (Ma and Jack’s not-incident name for their captor) may be the conventional tormentor of gothic fiction, but he is also merely the male provider with a stay-at-home mom for a wife, even if the “home” is an eleven-by-eleven-foot cell. Old Nick is both Satan and Santa Claus, gothic tormentor and provider, bringing gifts (“Sundaytreat”) as well as horror. The domestic novel is miniaturized and intensified in *Room*, and a reference to *The Stepford Wives* names this particular zone of indistinction between gothic and domestic fiction (233). *Room* foregrounds, in other words, the way older genres (gothic novel, domestic fiction, captivity narrative) can register, exploit, and protest patriarchal norms of gender construction and relation. Old Nick says to Ma, “Above-ground, natural light, central air, it’s a cut above some places, I can tell you. Fresh fruit, toiletries, what have you, click your fingers and it’s there. Plenty girls would thank their lucky stars for a setup like this, safe as houses. Specially with the kid—” (69); “You have no idea about the world of today. . . . Six months I’ve been laid off, and have you had to worry your pretty little head?” (72). Nick is delusional, of course, yet he simultaneously reads and performs what remains (for him at least) an available cultural script—the script of “patriarchal sex right” (or domesticity as “bride capture”). Nick, Ma

explains to Jack, thinks that they are *things*, they are his property: “He thinks we’re things that belong to him, because Room does” (81); “We’re like people in a book, and he won’t let anybody read it” (90).¹⁴

But *Room* also participates in another and perhaps less obvious genre: the postapocalyptic narrative. This aspect of the novel comes with its own account of violence and with the suggestion that Old Nick may himself be a victim. Not insignificantly, this postapocalyptic scenario first appears as Jack’s private and perhaps merely half-registered thought. At the beginning of *Room*, Ma uses the word *crater* and explains its meaning to Jack, who narrates:

“Look,” I show her, “there’s holes in my cake where the chocolates were till just now.”

“Like craters,” she says. She puts her fingertip in one.

“What’s craters?”

“Holes where something happened. Like a volcano or an explosion or something.” (24)

At the very end of the novel, Jack returns to say good-bye to Room and finds that it is craterlike (321), but this figure is also used to account for (and not account for) the “evil” that is Old Nick. Ma explains to Jack that Old Nick looks human but has “nothing inside,” no “feeling bit”:

. . . “You know your heart, Jack?”

“*Bam bam.*” I show her on my chest.

“No, but your feeling bit, where you’re sad or scared or laughing or stuff?”

That’s lower down, I think it’s in my tummy.

“Well, he hasn’t got one.”

“A tummy?”

“A feeling bit,” says Ma.

I’m looking at my tummy. “What does he have instead?”

She shrugs. “Just a gap.”

Like a crater? But that’s a hole where something happened. What happened?

(112)

Room’s narrative unfolds, according to this reading, in the emptied space left by an event (“something happened”) that, like the enigmatic apocalyptic disaster of McCarthy’s *The Road* (as we shall see), coincides with the violence and the self-undoing of patriarchy.

Nevertheless, the question of who is holding whom hostage in *Room* is not as obvious as one might expect. For the captivity is not simply confined to Ma's relationship with "Old Nick." *Room* is also a profound meditation on motherhood itself as a hostage crisis. One thinks here of stories of extreme violence, of mothers who kill their children or who are tempted to kill their children out of their own experience of radical subjection and powerlessness (both Adrienne Rich and Sara Ruddick tell such stories).¹⁵ In the more obviously "political" articulation of this nightmare, such mothers are isolated from other adults and lack the necessary supports for the rigorous work of parenting, and *Room* is surely haunted by the history of this patriarchal motherhood (a "history" that may or may not be past). That is to say, it is not only a certain patriarchal experience of motherhood that takes women hostage, because mothers can also be held hostage by the inevitable demands of small children, those wild "subjects-coming-into-being." "Would an 'individual,'" asks Carole Pateman in *The Sexual Contract*, "ever enter into a contract to be a parent?"¹⁶ And with whom would such a contract ever be made? With a "little savage"? With a person "incapable of entering into a contract"? With the social or with humanity? These are some of the questions that contemporary parenthood exposes us to and that the present study pursues through the pages of contemporary fiction. While never losing track of the violence represented by Old Nick's patriarchal presence, *Room* succeeds in conveying something of the threat that motherhood itself poses to Ma's being. Although a certain formal logic dictates that "Ma" is only ever "Ma" (Jack is the narrator of *Room*, and there is only a very limited sense in which we are ever in Ma's head), this formal choice is clearly overdetermined: "Ma" certainly doesn't "choose" motherhood, and she is, as the novel powerfully reminds us, the victim of repeated rape.¹⁷

Hence, *Room* also asks us to think about the forced or violent aspect of any form of relation. One can choose to *formalize* entering into a relationship (and this is, of course, one reason why marriage ceremonies are significant), but relation is, by definition, extravolitional. And this is where we might begin to read *Room*'s two hostage crises together. The hyperbolic violence of Old Nick's psychopathology (what we might call the afterlife of patriarchy as well as the persistence of a certain generic fictional form) can also be read—and this is a necessarily risky procedure—to represent, or allegorize, the extravolitional and traumatic ("wild") quality of the novel's mother-child relation and of ethical relationality more generally.

Mother as Surviving Other

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud tells a story to explain the emergence of subjectivity and the entrance into the social that takes place when a child learns that he can tolerate his mother's absence. This is all possible because Freud's protosubject has become a subject of representation: he has given up omnipotence for language. The child plays the *fort-da* game and re-presents his mother's absence and her return: "The interpretation of the game then became obvious. It was related to the child's great cultural achievement—the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach."¹⁸ Freud (who is observing a particular child, his own grandson) remarks that this child was intensely attached to his mother, "who had not only fed him herself but had also looked after him without any outside help."¹⁹ Yet this child might also be said to remain inside a certain fantasy of omnipotence. To be inside this fantasy is precisely not to be able to tolerate the mother's absence, an absence that would also mark the child's own radical limitations as a subject. Perhaps the child is just practicing, preparing, playing—he hasn't crossed over from being the tyrannical, egoistic, dependent infant to being the subject of language (and who ever entirely completes this passage?). And, less remarked on, I believe, is how the little subject of the *fort-da* game also practices and represents his own death or absence (even as this must simultaneously evade his capacity as a representing subject). Freud's eighteen-month-old grandson, that is to say, comes up against the very limitations of representation and human being.

In its own way, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* anticipates Donoghue's weaning narrative about a child, Jack, who comes into being as a social subject by learning to tolerate a degree of separation from his mother. Separate rooms are, in a sense, the telos of the novel, even as they were once Jack's version of hell, and the novel marks Jack's toleration of this separation as always only provisional. Ma has told Jack a very selective story about his origin, one that Jack likes to rehear and repeat:

"... You were all sad until I happened in your tummy."

"You said it." (3)

Room has been Jack's world, but now his mother begins to "unlie" to him, to teach him about the "outside" so that they can plan their escape. At the beginning of the novel, Jack regularly breastfeeds and talks about it, and at the end we hear him saying good-bye to his mother's breasts:

"No," says Ma, putting her hand between, "I'm sorry. That's all done. Come here."

We cuddle hard. Her chest goes *boom boom* in my ear, that's the heart of her.

I lift up her T-shirt.

"Jack—"

I kiss the right and say, "Bye-bye." I kiss the left twice because it was always creamier. Ma holds my head so tight I say, "I can't breathe," and she lets go.

(303)²⁰

Clearly, weaning in *Room* is traumatic for *both* Jack and Ma, and, for both, as I have suggested, it involves an incalculable loss. Insofar as *Room* is a weaning narrative, it is the story of a child's linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and ethical development, but it is also the story of parenting, of primary caregiving. *Room*, in other words, is not a sentimental manipulation of the figure of a child, and it doesn't give us a version of Lee Edelman's ideological child of "reproductive futurism." In Edelman's provocative and well-known critique, this "reproductive" future is "no future"; instead it is a grandiose and heteropatriarchal repetition of the same.²¹ But the relationship to the future in *Room* is very different. In *Room*, we might say, the mother wants a future that her child blocks. In *Room*, Jack wants to escape, but "not really":

... "You said you were going to be my superhero."

I don't remember saying that.

"Don't you want to escape?"

"Yeah. Only not really."

"Jack!" (113)

And after their "adventure," he wants to go back to Room and to Bed:

... I snuggle against her, I say, "Want to go to Bed."

"They'll find us somewhere to sleep in a little while."

“No. *Bed*.”

“You mean in Room?” Ma’s pulled back, she’s staring in my eyes.

“Yeah. I’ve seen the world and I’m tired now.” (155)

In wanting separation from Jack, Ma expresses a desire for a future—for herself and for Jack; but this separation is also a kind of loss and a death. Ma wants, one might say, to be a subject with rights (to depart from the state of nature where she must provide absolute care), but she also wants no separation from Jack and thus no future for anyone. This impossible crisis of desire is represented by the suspense or utopia of *Room*, the timeless time of relation that is its state of exception *and* a kind of call to death. The first section of *Room* is entitled “Presents,” and although gifts are important here, surely we are also to hear the temporal significance of this title. Elizabeth Freeman writes of the impossibility of imagining “family” without any technological supplement; she is interested in how the supposedly natural family is produced by photography, video, and so on.²² But crucially, in *Room* there are no cameras. In fact, Ma’s (adoptive) mother says,

“It must be terrible to not have any” . . .

“Any what?” says Ma.

“Pictures of Jack when he was a baby and a toddler,” she says. “I mean, just to remember him by.”

Ma’s face is all blank. “I don’t forget a day of it.” (299)

The relation between mother and child in its very presentness and fullness is undocumentable, or at least that is the experience or fantasy of this relation (it “will not be televised”). In *Room*, there are no substitutions, no supplements, no future, no rights. Part of *Room*’s literary achievement, then, is to be able to depict the wild side of maternal relation (what André Green calls “maternal madness”)²³ and to depict the child not as the representative of a sanctified futurity in the sense discussed by Edelman, but rather as a participant in a dangerous seduction.²⁴

The future will be work for Ma and Jack. Room will have been, for Jack, a kind of prelapsarian space (“In Room we were sometimes naked and sometimes dressed, we never minded” [283]), and for the world beyond Room, he and Ma have a list of things to try when they are braver. The future, as we have seen, means being able to survive separate rooms: as part of an attempt

to convince Jack, Ma says, “I read a book at college that said everyone should have a room of their own” (304); but it also means being able to survive substitution and the chaotic promise of a world beyond one’s illusory control: “In Room we knewed what everything was called but in the world there’s so much, persons don’t even know the names” (267). But with its depiction of Ma and Jack, *Room* also explores the set of philosophical and ethical principles that every subject must negotiate; Donoghue’s novel is, in other words, a study of “ethics as first philosophy.”²⁵

To appreciate this aspect of Donoghue’s achievement is to follow Jessica Benjamin’s attempt to privilege a feminist theory of intersubjectivity as the necessary supplement to the classical Freudian intrapsychic model. The ethical burden of Benjamin’s work is to move from thinking in terms of polarized power dynamics (“domination is an alienated form of differentiation”)²⁶ to the possibilities of intersubjectivity (“[T]his focus allows us to grasp how difficult it is—developmentally, clinically and socially—to achieve that felt experience of the Other as a separate yet connected being with whom we are acting reciprocally”).²⁷ Benjamin usefully argues that “splitting” (using a psychoanalytic vocabulary of subject versus object, active versus passive, masculine versus feminine, good versus bad) is characteristic not of the psyche but of one psychic *position*—the position that Melanie Klein referred to as the paranoid-schizoid position, as opposed to the depressive position, and that D. W. Winnicott understood as the omnipotence that must be given up for being-in-relation to emerge. An account of splitting is invaluable for understanding forms of anxiety and defensive organization and their manifestation as both personal and political forms of domination and abjection. But, thankfully, according to Benjamin, this splitting doesn’t tell the whole story. Benjamin writes insightfully of Freud’s partial vision: “Thus, his categorical oppositions between activity and passivity describe a psychic reality, that of splitting, in which the theory itself participates.”²⁸

Drawing on a particular aspect of Winnicott’s work, Benjamin writes of the “good-enough mother” who orchestrates for an other (or others) the very developmental process that culminates in the possibility of ethical relation. The mother does this by gradually failing her child, gradually being less attuned to his every need and desire. By surviving his destructive—or “wild”—response, this mother figure, then, allows the child to discover that there really is an other beyond his omnipotent control. “*Any subject’s primary responsibility to the other subject,*” Benjamin writes, “*is to be her*

intervening or surviving other."²⁹ "There is somebody, an Other, out there whom I might connect to," exclaims Benjamin's child. "In short," Benjamin goes on, "since the outside can be a source of goodness, it becomes safe and even desirable to go outside. Otherness is not, simply, inherently threatening."³⁰ I am for the other, in other words, in precisely the way that I *fail* to be for the other (and this is maternal work). Thinking intersubjectively, for Benjamin, also means thinking in terms of what she calls the "third"—the fragile thirdness of intersubjectivity that can, for example, break down and appear in "masquerade" or in "persecutory" form: "In the analytic situation, we are continually confronted with the fear and desire for submission rather than the surrender to the third. In social life, we see the collapse of the third into a simulacrum that demands compliance or offers merger, undifferentiated oneness, between people and leader, leader and ideals."³¹

Benjamin credits the emergence of a discourse of the third to Lacan ("In so far as we remain within the register of analysis," Lacan writes, "we will be obliged to admit an original intersubjectivity"),³² yet there is a distinctiveness to her own account. First and most crucially, Benjamin's account is post-Oedipal (which is to say, not dependent on a specifically Oedipalized narrative) and is in fact highly motivated by the acknowledgment of non-Oedipal forms of familial configuration. Benjamin writes,

Unfortunately Lacan's Oedipal view equated the third and the father, equated the difference between twoness and thirdness with the division between a maternal imaginary and a paternal symbolic or law. . . . I have tried to show how the notion of the father as creator of symbolic space denies the recognition and space already present in the dialogue between mother and child. In that notion it is as if the third, the symbolic representation of the father, were the cause rather than the result of symbolic processes, or what I am calling thirdness.³³

Benjamin credits careful study of caregiver–infant interaction for knowledge concerning the crucial role of "affective accommodation," play, rhythm, and "lawfulness" in establishing a protorelation with thirdness:

Precisely this early aspect of lawfulness was missed by Oedipal theory, which privileges law as boundary, prohibition, separation. It frequently misses the

element of symmetry or harmony in lawfulness—its musical aspect. Such theorizing fails to grasp the origins of the third in the nascent or primordial experience that has been referred to by such terms as oneness, union, resonance. . . . [T]he semiotics of two collaborating to create a third form the basis for our relation to larger thirds that we constitute as “the law.”³⁴

Room, I want to argue, helps us to understand mother–child relations in precisely these Benjaminian terms. There is always already a thirdness in the elaborate play that characterizes Ma and Jack’s mother–child bond and makes their very survival possible. And this is play in a strong Winnicottian sense, play that occupies a transitional space that “has the paradoxical quality of being [both] invented [as if it came from the “inside”] and discovered [as if it were already there awaiting joint discovery].”³⁵ Winnicott writes, “The thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. This is the precariousness of magic itself, magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is being found to be reliable.”³⁶ One of the more compelling aspects of *Room* is the linguistically rich world that Ma makes for Jack, full of all sorts of cognitive, physical, and tactile play (from “word sandwiches” to “phys ed”). “We have thousands of things to do every morning,” comments Jack (8). That Donoghue so successfully conveys this is both a narrative feat and a tribute to the creative power of a primary caregiver.³⁷ One is also struck by the fullness of *Room*, by its presentness, which is also to say (again), by the absence of substitutions. And this condition, while always illusory, effectively captures a certain psychical moment. Room is Room. Bed is Bed. Wardrobe is Wardrobe. Table is Table. Rug is Rug. Toothpaste is Toothpaste. And so on. Many a reader will also notice that this resonates with a certain world of children’s television: *Dora* (a crucial intertext in *Room* and not to be confused with Freud’s *Dora!*), *Blue’s Clues*, and *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* come to mind (as does Freud’s *The Uncanny*, with its animation of things). Jack remarks, “I flat the chairs and put them beside Door against Clothes Horse. He always grumbles and says there’s no room but there’s plenty if he stands up really straight” (8).

It is also in the space of Room, therefore, that Jack begins his education (this is the weaning narrative as *bildungsroman*). He encounters the primal scene, sexual difference—

“You cutted the cord and I was free,” I tell Ma. “Then I turned into a boy.”

“Actually, you were a boy already” (4)

—the question of humanness (Jack thinks in relationship to what his mother tells him about Old Nick, “I thought humans were or weren’t, I didn’t know someone could be a bit human. Then what are his other bits?” [135]), and the distinction between inside and outside (Jack experiences his own interiority and the opacity of the other, and he experiments with secrecy when he decides not to tell his mother about a spider and its web, for fear that she will kill it and brush the web away: “It’s weird to have something that’s mine-not-Ma’s. Everything else is both of ours” [10]). These are all preliminary lessons for Jack in substitution and separation. *Room*, in other words, is both allegorical and subtle, and as such it refuses to endorse an absolute distinction between what characterizes life in Room and life after Room. These spaces are clearly not identical, but neither can they be divided into a space before and after the arrival of a thirdness that, as Benjamin suggests, traditional Oedipal accounts tend to associate with “the law.”

Hence, Jack *must* experience days when Ma is “gone,” days when she doesn’t create the world for him and with him but stays in bed. This, of course, indicates to us something significant about the psychic state of the character in the realist plot, but it also testifies to certain “failures” when it comes to mothering or giving primary care, failures that a child survives and maybe even needs (although, in Winnicott’s account, the good-enough mother is always in charge of these failures, managing them). Ma’s gone-ness functions for Jack as a *fort-da* episode or rehearsal for trauma, death, and the entry into a cultural field, and in such instances, *Room* conveys to us Jack’s developing and resistant capacity for relationship and insight. He maintains a certain faith, for example, in maternal omniscience (“Ma knows everything except the things she doesn’t remember right, or sometimes she says I’m too young for her to explain a thing” [9]), even if her power is indissociable from Jack’s fantasy of her power and is linked to her inseparability from Jack. To plan to leave Room, to plan an escape from Room and Old Nick, is to reveal both Jack’s and Ma’s vulnerability (to Jack), and this, Jack says, is a “bad idea”:

“I’m OK,” she says, rubbing her cheek, “it’s OK. I’m just—I’m a bit scared.”

“You can’t be scared.” I’m nearly shouting. “Bad idea.” (92)

While Ma and Jack are still in Room, she loses a painful bad tooth, and Jack claims this object, while also encountering it in all its strangeness: “He [‘Tooth’] was part of her a minute ago but now he’s not. Just a thing” (70). Jack insists on taking this part of Ma with him when he escapes from Room, and later, when he is separated from her, he sucks on it for comfort. Tooth is a version of Winnicott’s transitional object, in that it is “between” Ma and Jack. Winnicott writes, “It is not the object, of course, that is transitional. The object represents the infant’s transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate. This is often referred to as the point at which the child grows up and out of a narcissistic type of object-relating, but I have refrained from using this language because I am not sure that it is what I mean.”³⁸ Although Jack’s object, *unlike* Winnicott’s object, “goes inside”—Jack thinks that he has swallowed Tooth and that “maybe he’s going to be hiding inside me in a corner forever” (307)—it shares with Winnicott’s object the quality of being neither “forgotten” nor “mourned.” Winnicott continues: “[Instead] it loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between ‘inner psychic reality’ and ‘the external world as perceived by two persons in common,’ that is to say, over the whole cultural field.”³⁹ It is in this sense that Ma gives Jack the world.⁴⁰

Ma and Jack, as the novel makes clear, are vulnerable to the extent that they are separate and separable from one another and each subject to debilitating limitations. But *Room* also suggests that they are vulnerable to the extent that they are subjects of language; they are each a “somebody” and an “anybody,” and Jack has to learn to negotiate the structure of pronouns and, more generally, of substitutability. Ma tells Jack as they plan the escape,

... “You’re the one who matters, though. Just you.”

I shake my head till its wobbling because there’s no just me. (128)

And immediately upon his departure from Room, Jack thinks, “I’m not in Room. Am I still me?” (138). What we hear when we listen to Jack is not just his development, or his resistance to development, but his insights into the nature of being and relation. His questions, in other words, reveal certain ideological fractures that we all learn to ignore. “Am I meant to forget?” Jack asks when others are surprised later by his memories of Room (210).

While Jack and his mother are still in the hospital (transitioning to life in the outside), the well-intentioned Dr. Clay tries to teach Jack about the fundamental laws of property. A puppet that Jack is playing with belongs to Dr. Clay and so can only be borrowed:

“Why?”

“Well, everything in the world belongs to somebody.”

Like my six new toys and my five new books, and Tooth is mine I think because Ma didn’t want him anymore.” (209)

Dr. Clay presumably thinks better of what he has said and elaborates:

“Except the things we all share,” says Dr. Clay, “like the rivers and the mountains.”

“The street?”

“That’s right, we all get to use the streets.”

“I ran on the street.”

“When you were escaping, right.”

“Because we didn’t belong to him.”

“That’s right.” Dr. Clay’s smiling. “You know who you belong to, Jack?”

“Yeah.”

“Yourself.”

He’s wrong actually, I belong to Ma. (209)

This brief and almost innocuous conversation, to which I will return, is extremely illuminating, for here Dr. Clay is teaching Jack the ABCs of (Lockean) liberal individualism. He teaches him about property and self-ownership. For this, Dr. Clay knows, is what it means to live in the “outside” or the social, even as Jack’s questions and resistance tell another story.

For all that *Room* explores the richness of what Benjamin calls the “semi-otics of two collaborating to create a third,” the novel is also haunted by a hyperbolic version of the persecutory third, the evil “father.” Jack, as we have seen, experiences profound anxiety about the fragility and the threat of “thirdness,” as well as about what it means to survive in a state that is provisionally separate from his mother. He cannot, for example, bear the thought of moving the furniture in their little space; such movement is a concretization of the principle of substitution and thereby also endangers

the materiality of his linguistic universe: Bed can't be moved to the place where TV is, because "That's TV Wall" (note that the capitals belong to Jack and not to Ma's recorded speech). "That's just what we call it," replies Ma (42). But Jack is not convinced. He also occasionally stutters (revealing fractures in his own experience of self-continuity) and counts in an effort to keep his world together. But the most immediate source of danger is, of course, Old Nick, and thus Jack's anxiety also signifies, on the realist level, as a less-than-conscious response to, or registration of, the trauma that he and his mother survive on a daily basis. Although Ma does her best to keep Jack sheltered from Old Nick, Nick regularly appears at night after Ma has put Jack to bed in Wardrobe. From this concealed space, Jack frequently gets to witness the repetition of the scene of his own origin, as primal scene and rape:

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 when I'm asleep?
 I don't know, maybe Ma does the counting. (37)

And in a quite extraordinary scene of interpretation, Jack registers his father/captor as a rival: "Then I have a terrible idea, what if he's having some [breastfeeding]? Would Ma let him have some or would she say, *No way Jose, that's only for Jack?*" (47). At such moments, the "realist" horror of patriarchal violence coincides powerfully with *Room's* allegory of the always already perilous status of a full and present mother-child idyll.

Donoghue's novel is quite explicit about the idea that Jack's survival must involve a kind of death (indeed, it is both Jack and Ma who must pass through death—the five sections of the novel are entitled "Presents," "Unlying," "Dying," "After," and "Living"). But *Room* shows us how this death, this precarious process of separation, coincides with the possibility of a less anxious and more complex relationship to the world. And what, we might ask, would happen to the child who *failed* to separate? One is reminded here of the infamous literature on bad mothering, from Leo Kanner's and Bruno Bettelheim's "refrigerator mothers," who provide no love and produce autistic offspring, to Philip Wylie's "Mom," whose "smother love" emasculates her son.⁴¹ What is interesting about these infamous accounts is not their

misogyny, plain and simple, so much as the way that they symptomatically make the entire question of being and ethics a question of good and bad mothering. *Room*, on the other hand, takes up these questions (as do Toni Morrison in *A Mercy* and Jessica Benjamin throughout her work) in a more profoundly ethical register. Even so, I would suggest, Donoghue's novel prompts us to think of Old Nick as a kind of monstrous child: Nick is an example of what can go wrong when the child fails to separate!—"No way Jose, that's only for Jack!" Old Nick, or patriarchal masculinity as psychopathology (and that is the equation at work here), would constitute a kind of failure to work through the *fort-da* game that results in holding the mother/woman/other hostage. Obviously, this has more than isolated psychological consequences. At the end of the novel, Jack addresses Ma:

"Grandma says there's more of him."

"What?"

"Persons like him [Old Nick], in the world."

"Ah," says Ma.

"Is it true?"

"Yeah. But the tricky thing is, there's far more people in the middle."

"Where?"

Ma's staring out the window but I don't know at what. "Somewhere between good and bad," she says. "Bits of both stuck together." (316–17)

Maternal Power and the State of Nature

Following Ma and Jack's escape from *Room*, Ma is interviewed by a TV journalist who tries various forms of provocation, culminating in a question that stops just short of invoking the possibility of infanticide: "When Jack was born—some of our viewers have been wondering whether it ever for a moment occurred to you to . . ." (237). The reporter interrupts herself and asks instead whether Ma ever considered giving Jack up for his own good: "[D]id you ever consider asking your captor to take Jack away? . . . To leave him outside a hospital, say, so he could be adopted. As you yourself were, very happily, I believe. . . . It would have been a sacrifice, of course—the ultimate sacrifice" (237). "The ultimate sacrifice." The only kind of maternal relationship that would not have been a failure, the journalist essentially suggests, would have been killing Jack or giving him up for his own good,

precisely refusing the more difficult task of substitution and separation, the ongoing work of what it means to be both dependent and individuated, to belong only to each other *and* to the world.

The journalist's invocation of a certain maternal "sacrifice" recalls the Hobbesian mother's power of life and death—the original form of sovereign power—in the "state of nature": "If there is no contract, the dominion is in the mother. . . . [S]he may either nourish or expose it."⁴² But it also, quite specifically, inserts *Room* into the fraught discourse on abortion. I want to approach this aspect of the novel by looking at two distinctive philosophical engagements with the abortion question that, I will argue, evade an encounter with the ethics of intersubjectivity that informs Donoghue's novel. In her classic essay "A Defense of Abortion," Judith Jarvis Thomson argued that a woman has no obligation to continue an unwanted pregnancy, precisely because it is analogous to being held hostage (it should be noted that Thomson deploys the hostage-taking scenario to very different ends from Levinas!). Thomson devises an imaginative scenario whereby you wake up and "find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment and the Society Of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help."⁴³ Thomson argues that, although it might be very nice of you to help out, you are certainly under no obligation: "If anything in the world is true, it is that you do not commit murder, you do not do what is impermissible, if you reach around to your back and unplug yourself from that violinist to save your life."⁴⁴ Thomson's case for abortion is based through and through on the notion of consent and on the cordoned-off concepts of "rights" and of individual personhood, concepts that need to be safely separated from any sense of what one "ought" to do: "[T]his," she writes, "is to obscure what we should keep distinct."⁴⁵ Thomson's essay concludes by clarifying that "the permissibility of abortion in some cases" is not an argument "to secure the death of an unborn child," since "the desire for the child's death is not one which anybody may gratify, should it turn out to be possible to detach the child alive."⁴⁶

In a more recent engagement, "Abortion, Killing, and Maternal Moral Authority" (2008), Soran Reader makes a radical (and at the same time oddly conservative) case for abortion rights. For Reader, Thomson's liberal proabortion argument, with its particular respect for the rights of the autonomous individual, fails to adequately account for the unique aspects of

the mother–child bond. Although prochoice arguments assert that women should not be morally or legally obligated to gestate a fetus (and Reader comments on many such arguments, ranging all the way from those that invoke fetal–maternal relationships experienced as the most intimate form of “dyad,” to those which draw on the language of occupier and occupied), they do not show “how women can have a moral right to secure the death of the fetus once it is out of their body.”⁴⁷ This is exactly Reader’s (distressing) goal. Reader, in this sense, picks up immediately where Thomson left off, in order to make the opposing case. Thomson concludes her essay by reminding her reader that she is merely “pretending” that a fetus is a person for the sake of argument *and* by emphasizing that a right to an abortion is precisely *not* a right to the death of an other. But women who seek abortions don’t merely want to give up the *fetus*, Reader explains, they want to give up the *relation* (“they want to ensure that there is no being at all in the world to whom they are related as mother to child” [134]), and hence this “moral right” is “vulnerable to developments in medical technology” (that is, improvements in neonatal care) (134). The crux of Reader’s argument is that killing actually prevents a far more devastating outcome, for if a fetus might, in Thomson’s words, be merely “detached” and yet survive, to be surrendered to the care of others, the mother, according to Reader, would never outlive her failure as a mother, and her child would live the rest of his or her life as unworthy and abandoned! “You can justifiably end your fetus’s life,” Reader explains, “but you cannot justifiably abandon it. That this seems an extraordinary conclusion underscores how unique motherhood is in human life, and how much we are likely to be misled if we assume moral categories that work between adults will capture the moral realities of person-creation adequately” (144). For Reader, abortion constitutes an early termination of one’s responsibility.

There are odd contradictions in Reader’s argument, however, that even a brief account should not leave unrecognized. For example, while Reader draws on the importance of technological change, on the one hand, she simultaneously invokes a kind of “normal motherhood” that would seem to be impervious to such developments, on the other: “In normal motherhood, the procreative mother becomes the gestating and birthing mother, who becomes the caring, socializing, and educating mother” (139). And while, on the one hand, Reader gestures toward the “social construction” of maternity, on the other hand, this “construction” is universalized and absolutized

to such an extent that its “construction” appears almost irrelevant. Reader writes, “To be a mother in our culture is to be absolutely required to perform these works of person-creation. The power of maternal norms is without peer in our moral life. Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative has nothing on the normativity of the cry of your own needy child” (140). The critical reader (with a small *r*) will wonder whether this absolute responsibility extends to fathers (the answer is no) and whether the mother maintains her right of life and death in relationship to her child beyond the threshold of birth (the answer is, surprisingly, yes): “When circumstances are objectively terrible, when the mother is in a good position epistemically, and when she judges it would be best for the child’s life to end, she alone has the authority to determine that this should happen.” And, as if sensing that we need some reassurance, Reader adds, “But the moral dangers are not great because the standard for justification of infanticide set by our concept of motherhood is very high” (145).

Reader’s extraordinary argument invokes a specifically maternal authority that culminates in what she refers to as “the final protection”: “A mother who fails to extend the final protection to her child of killing arguably fails in the hardest of many hard but inalienable maternal duties” (146). Here, Reader (who explicitly invokes Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as well as Hobbes’s *Leviathan*) might be said to theorize abortion and the maternal from the perspective of Morrison’s Sethe—from the perspective, that is to say, of an enslaved woman, radically exposed and completely bereft of any form of legal protection, abandoned to “the state of nature.”⁴⁸ And although it is hard not to be distracted by Reader’s excessive or fantasmatic mode of identification (she reads every mother as the Hobbesian mother or as Morrison’s Sethe, and *not* as the mother in *A Mercy*, who does, as we shall see, “abandon” her child), this is also, it must be said, Reader’s *real* argument. This is both how “we” do think the maternal, she suggests (in this respect she is simply teasing out the implications of our conventional thought), and how we *should* think the maternal. The maternal is, in a crucial sense (to be distinguished from the liberal individualist humanist sense), *prior to the social*. The social emerges, in Reader’s account, in the very process of birth:

As soon as it is born, even while it is being born, a child forms relationships with others. These relationships, like motherhood, impose moral duties on the capable rela. . . . The extreme situation in which the mother’s moral authority

over the life and death of the child is actualized, then, is by definition one in which no others known to be safe are available to protect the child when the mother cannot do so. . . . [Yet m]others, bearing the awesome responsibility they do, cannot be expected in an instant and under stress to trust their child to the protection of just any volunteer, or the impersonal state. Where there is no known, trusted, safe person available, a mother may well conscientiously judge it right to end her child's life, rather than abandon it to the mercies [see Morrison's *A Mercy!*] of unknown, untested and perhaps unsafe others. (146)

The mother's job, it would seem, is to police the border between the wilderness and the social and to decide whether to relinquish her child, before or after birth; one can kill one's child, in other words, and thereby save it from sociality—save it from the world. To fulfill one's maternal responsibility is to make certain “the fetus [or child] will never be abandoned to the unknown will of others” (143).

Reader explicitly addresses several objections to her argument, including the idea that another concept of motherhood might be “morally preferable” (147). Here, interestingly, the concept of reproductive technologies makes a brief (re)appearance. Reader refers to this as the normalization of “partial mothering”: “Some of these possibilities [in vitro conception, surrogacy, adoption, paternal care] are actualized in other cultures, and some have been or will be actualized in our own. But it is far from clear that such changes represent moral progress” (148). Reader stands up instead for the norms of motherhood that have “stood the test of time.” She can't imagine a replacement or alteration that would “ensure the protection of new people anywhere near as well as the passionate commitment of mothers has done. . . . It is part of motherhood to love your children and protect them no matter what” (148). Reader's extreme yet fascinating account crosses paths with many of the motifs and concerns that will emerge in subsequent chapters of this book (from the “ethics of abandonment” and the maternal gift of death to the discussion of philosopher David Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been*) and with the various accounts of intensive parenting that I will discuss in more detail; but, despite its definitive severance of mothers from fathers, Reader's account of the maternal sounds surprisingly like the fantasies of absolute *paternal* protection that I will return to in my discussions of McCarthy's *The Road* and Villeneuve's *Prisoners*.

To read Emma Donoghue's *Room* is to encounter a mother who finds herself in the very situation that Reader conjures up. The journalist, in the scene that I touched on at the beginning of this discussion, is unwilling to relinquish her quest for sensation. She says to Ma, "You must feel an almost pathological need—understandably—to stand between your son and the world," and Ma "nearly snarls" in reply: "Yeah, it's called being a mother" (236).⁴⁹ But Donoghue's allegory of parenting troubles Reader's approach. Reader imagines a kind of radical maternal responsibility and relation, but she also suggests that one has the right to say no to such relation, and, to this extent, Reader still separates out nonrelation from relation—as if it were a choice. At the same time, Reader imagines that it is possible *not* to abandon a child, a possibility that *Room*, and, indeed, all the narratives in this study, suggests would conflict with a specifically maternal ethics of abandonment. Indeed, insofar as she imagines that one might fulfill one's responsibility as a mother and *not* abandon the child, Reader participates in the fantasmatic invocation of what one can only call maternal omnipotence (or sovereignty). Yet, even as Reader's maternity presents itself as an awesome and truly terrifying responsibility, it nevertheless promises safe exits and solutions—even the possibility of successfully achieving "normal" motherhood and of avoiding having to abandon one's child. One grows out of dependency and relation, Reader finally suggests, and, hence, the relationship between mother and child can be absolutely set apart from any other form of relation.

Two distinct approaches to the abortion question are on display in Reader's and Thomson's essays. By appealing to the concept and language of individual rights, Thomson solves the abortion dilemma in what have become familiar terms, even if they are not without their own strangeness: "There may well be cases in which carrying the child to term requires only Minimally Decent Samaritanism of the mother, and this is a standard we must not fall below."⁵⁰ Reader instead privileges the notion of the absolutely vulnerable and dependent "child" and the corresponding figure of the absolutely responsible mother. Reader also suggests that this relationship of absolute vulnerability and responsibility has a temporal dimension: a point comes at which an individual is no longer dependent upon the mother, and thus the relationship comes to an end. Given this relational structure, to abort a fetus is to "complete" one's "responsibility early." "She fulfills her maternal responsibility for her fetus's life," explains Reader, "in such a way

that the fetus will never be abandoned to the unknown will of others” (143), that is, never abandoned to the social. For all their differences, then, both Reader and Thomson demonstrate an ethical dependence on the classically humanist conception of the self-contained individual. Thomson’s absolutely individuated rights-bearing mother and Reader’s figure of the child who has outgrown either dependence on another or the absolutely powerful protecting mother with no relationship to the social, in other words, are fantasmatic figures of isolated self-responsibility and self-right. If abortion presents us with wild demands—with what I want to insist are the ethical demands of relation—then Thomson and Reader both posit isolated being as a (false, magical) solution. They suggest, implicitly, that the answer to the problem of relation is to say that we are not related—because our “rights” radically distinguish us from each other, or because we can choose to not choose relation, or because at a certain age we just stop being reliant on others for our survival. In *Room*, Ma’s response to the interviewer’s invocation of infanticide or abandonment takes the form of a suicide attempt (a very nonplayful *fort-da*). She is driven to this extreme, I would suggest, by the implication (emanating from the interviewer, who is, in this sense, the voice of the social) that the normative (Christian?) ethical model demands a sacrifice she is not willing or able to make—the sacrifice of being’s irreducible relationality. “If we understand maternity in this way,” Lisa Guenther writes, “not as a fixed biological or even social identity but as the response to an ethical imperative from the Other, then maternity might become disengaged from a strict biological interpretation without being thereby disincarnated.”⁵¹ *Room* stays with us precisely because, in accordance with an ethical itinerary that I want to claim is at once wild and posthumanist, it refuses to give up on this relationality, not for anything under the sun.

Room’s Allegory of the Cave

One day, some time after he and Ma have been rescued, Jack catches a few moments of a TV discussion (a somewhat academic discussion, it should be added) on the subject of his own abduction:

“I would have thought the more relevant archetype here is Perseus—born to a walled-up virgin, set adrift in a wooden box, the victim who returns as hero,” says one of the men.

“Of course Kaspar Hauser famously claimed he’d been happy in his dungeon, but perhaps he really meant that nineteenth-century German society was just a bigger dungeon.”

“At least Jack had TV.”

Another man laughs. “Culture as a shadow on the wall of Plato’s cave.”

Grandma comes in and switches it right off, scowling.

“It was about me,” I tell her.

“Those guys spent too much time at college.” (294)

Despite Grandma’s dismissal, those of us who have, perhaps, spent too much time at college can’t help receiving Donoghue’s message here. In case we missed it, *Room* is also a feminist and deconstructive retelling of Plato’s founding fable of Western metaphysics. In fact, it is such a careful and effective retelling that the comparison deserves a closer look.

“Next,” writes Plato (speaking as Socrates) in *The Republic*, “think of our nature in relation to education, and the lack of it, in terms of the following image.”⁵² Socrates proceeds to tell Glaucon his allegory of the cave. “Imagine human beings as if they were in a cave-like dwelling underground. . . . They have been there since childhood. . . . [D]o you think people in that condition will have seen anything of themselves or of each other except for their shadows, cast by the fire on to the surface of the cave in front of them?” (514a, 515a). As one of the TV intellectuals remarks, *Room*’s cave has its own “shadow on the wall of Plato’s cave,” in the form of TV, and Dr. Clay, who oversees Jack’s treatment after his release, articulates the standard version of a modern understanding of enlightenment when he asks Jack about the bees he has recently seen (and been stung by): “Is it exciting seeing them for real,” the doctor asks, “not just on TV?” (274). The second half of Donoghue’s novel might, then, be read as an extended contemporary account of “what will naturally follow,” as Socrates puts it, “if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error” (515c).

Socrates’s allegory serves, primarily, to reinforce a fundamental Platonic notion of the truth as that which escapes the play of representational distortion and remains uncontaminated by iterability. A simple reading of *Room* might hear only an echo of Plato’s lesson. Donoghue would then be thought to have given new force to Plato’s condemnation of pre- or unphilosophical understanding by personifying its shadows and delusions in the form of

a terrifying kidnapper of women and children. According to this reading, Donoghue's subtle account of the difficulties experienced by Ma and Jack upon escaping *Room* would translate Plato's account of the "pain" experienced by the cave dwellers upon first confronting the "glare" of the truth. Even as the escapee approaches "closer to the truth of things" and his eye is turned "towards things that more truly are," Plato explains, he will "turn round and try to bolt back in the direction of the things he could see, thinking these really and truly clearer than what was being shown to him" (515d, 515e). Jack and Ma look out the hospital window and see cars and people outside and below them on the street. Jack asks,

"Are they real for real?"

"As real as you and me."

I try to believe but it's hard work. (176)

This would be the Platonic irony of *Room*: that the imprisoned subjects of false appearance at first resist enlightenment and are tempted to want to return to the safety and familiar numbness of their captivity. "I've seen the world," says Jack, "and I'm tired now" (155).

But while *Room* does record the profound ambivalence experienced, particularly by Jack, in the wake of its protagonists' release (Ma's suicide attempt is also, of course, an expression of ambivalence), it nevertheless resists a Platonic ethical conclusion. As such, it helps us to see where Plato's allegory of enlightenment reaches an impasse and substitutes what we could call a patriarchal (or phallogocentric) violence for an ethical ordeal. Upon leaving his captivity, Plato says, the cave dweller first sees only more shadows and reflections:

First of all, he'd find it easiest to see shadows; next it would be Reflections of human beings and everything else in water, then the things themselves; and from these he'd move on to the heavenly bodies and the heavens themselves, though he'd start by looking at them at night, gazing at the light of the stars and the moon, because that would be easier than looking at the sun and the sun's light by day. (516a-b)

In this almost negligible hesitation ("the sun and the sun's light by day"), we can begin to sense an impending aporia. Does the progress of enlightenment

end with seeing what the sun shows or with seeing the sun? Is all seeing, even outside the cave, the seeing of a light show? Plato's allegory is a fiction of the possibility of growing up and out of the illusions and fictions of mediated seeing, but it is on a direct path into the sun.

"Then finally," says Socrates, "he'd be able to catch sight of the sun, not just reflected in water, or as it appears in any alien location, but the sun itself, by itself, in its own place, and observe it as it is" (516b). The disavowed impossibility (or blinding violence) of this Platonic apex (seeing the sun) could be read, against the grain of Plato's text, as a registration of and fantastic solution to the deep ambivalence that clings to Ma and Jack's escape from Room. Indeed, one might even suggest that the sun in Plato's allegory (and in accordance with a reading that one could find in Derrida's *Dissemination* and elsewhere) has a profound relationship to the (patriarchal) father of logos (and thus to Room's Old Nick). The progress Plato describes from illusory imprisonment (in a world of shadows and echoes) toward a direct encounter with blinding sunlight might be reread to describe Ma's forced initial displacement from a world of representationality (or writing) to an order of power, with its absolute distinction between the single source of light and the blindness of its subjects: Ma is "blinded" by the all-commanding light of Old Nick's patriarchal violence. But *Room*, in deconstructive fashion, does not simply reverse the Platonic narrative (logos as imprisonment in darkness rather than emancipation into the light). It does not repeat the Platonic tendency to pit a space of shadow and illusion against a diametrically (temporally and spatially) opposed world of light and truth. Instead, and specifically with the arrival of Jack (the arrival of relation), *Room* depicts a world of play and fiction developing within the space opened up by the violence of patriarchal imprisonment. And this is also why Ma and Jack's "escape" cannot be experienced as a simple emancipatory triumph. In other words, Donoghue's account of the profound ambivalence that adheres to the postcaptivity world of Ma and Jack extends her deconstructive engagement with Platonic metaphysics and with a classically phallogocentric ethics. Hence, an alternative, and to some extent, parallel narrative for Ma and Jack sees them being forced to leave the world of Room's constitutive relationality, a world of storytelling in which the sharp distinction between play and real cannot take hold, in order to enter a social "enclosure" characterized by insistently logocentric divisions and separations.⁵³ "Am I meant to forget?" asks Jack in response to what he has heard from the medical professionals.

“I don’t know,” replies Ma (210). One of the first lessons Jack receives from Dr. Clay, as we have already noted, concerns property relations in the “real” world: “[E]verything in the world belongs to somebody. . . .” the doctor tells Jack. “Except the things we all share.” Even Jack, he adds, belongs to somebody. “You know who you belong to, Jack? . . .” he asks. “Yourself.” But Jack is not convinced: “He’s wrong, actually, I belong to Ma” (209). And Jack continues to struggle with this sense of propriety. “What’s humankind? . . .” he asks. “Is that me too?” Then: “Me and Ma . . . what’s the name for that that I belong to?” (274). The novel is sensitive to the fact that the “outside” world of “freedom” is still, to some extent, Old Nick’s world, a world defined by patriarchal, logocentric, and appropriative logics of identity and possession; hence, the novel also reminds us that the world Ma and Jack made for each other in *Room* was also a world, a version of an alternative world, and its loss remains a kind of disaster. “[W]hat I actually meant,” says Jack, “was, maybe I’m a human but I’m a me-and-Ma as well. I don’t know a word for us two. Roomers?” (274).

If, as I have suggested above, *Room*’s ethical challenge proceeds from its willingness to consider the allegorical possibilities of Old Nick (that is, that he is not just a patriarchal misogynist, that he may also function as a figure for the “wild” violence of the mother–child attachment, the “sovereign” wildness of the state of nature that structures every mother–child, or parent–child, relationship), then we also have to consider the possibility that the world of Plato’s cave, with its shadows and echoes, but also with its chains and walls, is not a delimited space *in* the world but is itself a world. Plato’s cave suggests a space of infantile quarantine, a kind of wild mother–child (or parent–child) zone that the fully human subject has to grow out of and leave behind in order to come into the light of the truth. But the spatializing and temporalizing rhetorical work of Plato’s allegory (we can progress, over time, from the world of shadows and illusions into the space of the truth) effects its own kind of patriarchal violence. Its power to persuade is dependent on our recognizing an absolute difference between the false worlds of play and imitation (whether those worlds take the form of caves, prisons, theaters, or all the rooms in which women have told stories to children from Plato’s time to ours) and the real world of sunlit truth. This opposition, in turn, depends on our not registering the blinding violence of what it would mean to look directly into the sun. The rhetorical and metaphysical force of Platonic idealism finds allegorical representation, I suggest,

in the brutal, patriarchal violence of Old Nick. Old Nick thinks he can master the world, his desire, and the desire of others by enforcing an absolute separation between the domestic space, the space of his power and property, and the outside world. He imagines that he can have relation and a certain patriarchal omnipotence without the risk of loss; he imagines, that is to say, that he can look into the sun. Ma and Jack pay the price for maintaining this illusion.

But as I have been trying to suggest throughout this chapter, *Room* proceeds along more than one allegorical path at the same time. The imprisonment Ma experiences is at once coded as patriarchal (and, as I have just been suggesting, Platonic) and coextensive with motherhood.⁵⁴ Survival, in *Room*, depends on relation; Jack saves Ma: “Actually I felt saved. . . . Jack was everything. I was alive again. I mattered,” Ma tells the TV reporter, and we should hear “matter” in this formulation with all its maternal/material/discursive weight (233). But the mother-child relation is also a kind of tyrannizing madness for Ma. Ma is in danger of losing herself, of having no relation with herself, as long as her world consists of her and Jack in Room. The parent-child relationship here describes an imprisonment that the child (here uncannily recalling Old Nick) needs in order to develop a self. In this sense, Old Nick’s horror also proceeds from the way in which he functions as a child who has never grown up; he needs a (motherlike) captive woman to shore up his being and protect it from loss.⁵⁵ A captured and imprisoned woman is an adult man’s version of a mother. This dynamic also helps to account for the disturbing edge introduced by Jack’s desire to return to Room at the end of the novel.⁵⁶ Jack’s request to stay in or return to Room hints, for Ma and the reader, of the uncomfortable relationship between this child (any child) and Old Nick: every child is a version of a dangerous man; every child is an excessive demand on the other, a demand for relationality in order to come into being. Every child is *this* “wild child,” too: no child can survive without at some point holding someone (a parent, a guardian) hostage in order for it to come into being. (The child’s desire is insatiable, Freud suggested, because the child wants “all.”) Hence, Ma is held hostage by both Jack and Old Nick, even as she also loves Jack and, in her own way, might not have survived without him. This is the case for every parent and, indeed, for every adult: we need children, and we need them like a hostage taker. This is the wilderness of the social. We take each other hostage in order to come into being and to survive—to continue to reproduce (our)

being. This irreducible violence of relation, this taking hostage, this absolute demand, is also condensed in the horror of Old Nick. It is the novel's incredible achievement that it is not afraid to suggest, albeit very subtly, that there's a relationship (could we even call this an ethical relationship?) between Jack and Old Nick—even as it includes the idea that Old Nick is insistently not Jack's father in the biopatriarchal sense: "Jack's nobody's son," Ma insists, "but mine" (234).

The dangerous and difficult proximity of care and violence that is woven throughout *Room* is in play and at work in all the narratives I examine in this book. Moreover, significant transformations in the politics, culture, and technology of reproduction (post-heteronormative, postpatriarchal, deconstructed reproduction) have taken away some of the ideological and material layers that once helped to shield us from this ethical ordeal of reproduction and parenting. Particular historical forms of violence and particular inequalities have served, paradoxically, to conceal the intimacy of the relationship between the affection that defines a parent-child relationship and the violence of need that all being requires to get going and to keep going. My use of the word *wild* throughout this study names this violence, but it is also meant to name the ethical challenge of the intimacy between this violence and what we call care and love. It is this irreducible contamination or mutuality that is "wild" and, hence, the locus of the ethical.

Plato's allegory of the cave in book 7 of *The Republic* includes this odd finale: the philosopher contemplates a scenario in which his subject returns to the cave, only now, dazzled by and accustomed to the sunlight, the enlightened one is like a blind person, and the cave dwellers pity him and conclude that it would be a terrible mistake to try to leave the cave or to lead anyone else out of the cave. Socrates hereby allegorizes the way in which the true philosopher is mistakenly taken for a blind fool in the land of illusions. But, of course, the scene might just as easily be read to suggest that sight (and hence sanity or health) is profoundly contextual (sociohistorically and geographically, not to say geopolitically, determined). If this is not the lesson we take from *The Republic*, it is because we remain hostages in Socrates's cave: he has told us which light is real light (the sun) and which is not (fire, the play of which produces the shadows on the wall of the cave). But on what basis is fire a lesser form of (an imitation or echo of) the sun, unless it be as the result of a declaratory imposition—the force of law? Henceforth, such a declaration would insist, all fire will be, will have been, artificial sun.

In the allegory of the cave, it is Socrates who announces, as if it were merely a constative assertion, the distinction between mere fire and the fire that we call the sun. This naming of the real and the imitation has to be done in the dark (in the dark of rhetorical concealment; the dark in which Plato hides behind Socrates), because it is this naming that produces the very distinction between light and dark (between enlightenment and ignorance) on which metaphysics depends for its epistemological authority. This is Plato's fiat lux: let there be light, says Plato, and there was light, and he saw that it was good.

The allegory of the cave participates in Plato's attempt throughout *The Republic* to describe the kind of (childhood) education required in order to produce "able ministers of State" and to maintain an ideal political community. But, as such, it also works strenuously to disguise power as knowledge (to disguise the performative as the constative) and hence to conceal the state's and the citizen's constitutive wildness (or roguery, to recall Derrida's term).⁵⁷ The wildness of the ethical is concealed behind the illusory science of enlightenment. This is how a Platonic logocentrism takes the world hostage. But if every child, as I have suggested, takes the other hostage in order to come into being, then every child also has to learn to let go of what Platonism desperately tries to hold on to. *Room* narrates a giving up and a letting go that might be understood according to the terms of a decidedly post-Platonic (and posthumanist) maternal gift of death.

Ma and Jack's escape plan requires Jack to know about play and imitation in a very particular way: in order to save his and Ma's life, Jack must be able to play dead. To learn to live is to learn about fiction, representation, and play, and it is to learn how to play *fort-da* with one's own death ("I'm dead dead dead" [137]). Insofar as this lesson coincides with Jack's escape from Room, the novel suggests that this is a kind of last lesson or a rite of passage. Jack doesn't want to learn this lesson—he doesn't want to play dead (understandably), but Ma forces him to do it. This scene, too, gives us an intriguing reimagining or figuration of the maternal gift of death and of a certain child sacrifice. Jack asks Ma, "'Will you be in Rug, too?' I know the answer but I ask just in case" (125). Part of the preparation for this escape will have been Ma and Jack's reading (or retelling) of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the story of Jesus's resurrection (this section of the novel is entitled "Dying").⁵⁸ "But you said you wanted to be the hero," says Ma. Yes, says Jack, "but only pretend . . . not for real" (113). By insisting on Jack's need

to follow through with their escape plan, Ma tells Jack that despite what she may have suggested, or he may have thought, in the end, the safe distinction between real and pretend cannot hold. You must pretend for real, Ma says.

“I don’t want to get buried and goeey with the worms crawling.”

Ma strokes my head. “It’s just a trick, remember?”

“Like a game.”

“But no laughing. A serious game.” (124–25)

But Ma is also, on the story’s allegorical level, telling her son that he is mortal and that the world (of Room, of their intimacy, of everything) will come to an end. And, of course, Ma will also have to pretend, for Old Nick, that her son is dead. Jack leaves Plato’s cave, in other words, at the site of a performance (by Jack and Ma) of Jack’s death.⁵⁹

The possibility that a death can be feigned, and that Old Nick will not be able to tell, is the possibility that allows for Ma and Jack to have a future at all. Fiction, and the possibility that the real and the fictional can be confused, saves them and brings them out of the cave. This would be a counter-Platonic lesson about the relationship between representation and emancipation. Plato, as we know from elsewhere in *The Republic*, is obsessed with policing women’s control over the storytelling that, nevertheless, remains essential to a child’s education: “[T]he first thing we must do is to supervise our story-tellers, approving any story they put together that has the required quality and rejecting any that doesn’t. We’ll induce nurses and mothers to tell children the ones we’ve approved” (377c). They must not tell children just any stories, says Socrates. Why? Because, in addition to any particular problematic content in such stories (disrespectful, unmanly, anarchic behavior), there is also the problem, for phallogocentric culture, of the danger of the fictional and the mimetic in and of itself. Teaching just “any” stories also means teaching stories as stories first. There is a power to fiction and imitation that is not reducible to, and hence manageable as, content. Fiction propagates the appeal of imitation per se, of substitutability, of representationality, of language as productive of being and meaning in a manner that undoes the manageable opposition between performative and constative. Plato is clearly worried that one might become what one imitates. We must therefore insist, he continues, that “good men” never “imitate a woman, whether young or old, whether ranting at a man, setting herself up in competition

with gods, boasting because of her supposed good fortune, or gripped by misfortune, grief, lamentation and the like; still less will we permit imitation of a sick woman, a woman in love, or a woman in labour” (395e). Men might become (be like?) mothers!⁶⁰ This is the “wild” aspect of fiction and storytelling—the wildness of an imitative contagion and of the suggestion that imitation is its own generative and communicable source of pleasure and power. Donoghue’s *Room* allegorizes an alternative pedagogical trajectory whereby the passage out of something figured as the cave of childhood (a frighteningly constraining space for mother and child even as it can be the site of a powerful happiness—a wild space) coincides with a maternal gift of death that is itself indissociable from a lesson about loss and play. To survive, Ma teaches Jack and herself, is not to leave Plato’s cave but to leave (if we can, once and for all) Plato’s allegory of the cave. For a posthumanist ethics, that is to say, one should read not Plato’s cave but Donoghue’s *Room*.

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