

Superhero Comics and Everyday Heroics —Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay**

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Abstract

In his Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, Michael Chabon uses superhero comics as a structuring principle to question what conditions lead to redemption from the biopolitical seizure of life by the logic of exception. Set in World War II, the novel dramatizes how the logic of exception places Jews in a double bind in the face of the Holocaust; it locates the possibility of redemption, and freedom from the double bind, in neither submitting to the power of the

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State, nor in resistance of it, but in “living in the midst of life” and in practicing “everyday heroics.” This essay brings together a diverse set of discourses about escapism—or lines of flight—including Eric L. Santner’s notions of the “deanimation of the undead” and the “blessings of more life,” to propose that Chabon’s novel celebrates neither escapism nor nihilism; instead, the essay suggests that only in Joe and Sam’s circuitous and tango-like movement around the tensions between the repetitive cycle of life constituted by their efforts both to “escape from” the contingencies of everyday life and to “escape to” the surety of teleology can they be “shocked” by love, by the miracles of the unexpected, and by the magic of what Chabon calls in the novel our “everyday heroics.”

Key Words: escapism, superhero narrative, everyday heroics, logic of exception

It was never a question of escape.
 It was also a question of transformation.
 —*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*
 (Chabon, 2001: 3)

In 1939, Josef Kavalier, a Jewish refugee who has just escaped from Prague to New York, teams up with his Brooklyn-born cousin, Sam Klayman, and together they create the widely popular comic book series *The Escapist*. In this series, an escape artist, Tom Mayflower, is granted by his mentor the magical power to free himself from the chains of his own physical disability, and the world of evil and crime. “The Escapist” is a fitting title for the duo’s artistic invention, for “escape” defines what the leading character of their comic book does in the fictional world, and what Joe and Sam practice in their own lives—escape from the seizure by the superhero fantasy and into the “everyday heroics” of living with the “blessings of *more* life,” or with the understanding that, though there is almost always “more” in life than they can rationally calculate, they are committed to responding, ethically and aesthetically, to the infinite but banal demands of life. Firstly, they escape from who they are by renaming themselves: Josef Kavalier becoming Joe Kavalier, and Sam Klayman becoming Sam Clay. Secondly, though both escape into the fantasy world of superhero comics to avoid losses they have difficulty naming or metabolizing—Joe, his inability to save his family from the Holocaust, and Sam, his denial of his homosexuality—the novel nevertheless ends with Joe escaping from a “closet” of his own making into which he retreated when he cut himself off from human contact for more than a decade, and Sam coming out of the normative “closet” of heterosexuality. In so doing, they confront the vicissitudes of an imperfect world, as if each has come to understand that there is no escape from the dialectical structures of subjection and freedom, love and abandonment, bondage and redemption. Both learn that only with a stubborn faith in the possibility that miracles—mundane and exceptionless—do happen

in the post-secular world of the everyday, can they be released from their psychic bondage to the superhero fantasy *into* living “in the midst of life.” It is, in other words, only when they are shocked into immersing themselves in the creatureliness of everyday life that they will be able to confront its impasses and, as a result of exposure to these impasses, release themselves from their passionate attachments to the fantasy of heroic exceptionality.

In presenting Joe and Sam as dual protagonists of his Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*,¹ Michael Chabon seems to have made “escape” a virtue (2001). The epigram—“Wonderful escape!” (2001: dedication page) which is taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “Wakefield” (dedication page)—further corroborates this impression. Escapism is, of course, a characteristic feature of American popular culture, although whether it could be deemed an appropriate response to the Holocaust, which serves as the very historical background to this novel, is an issue of scholarly contention. Lee Behlman, for example, finds it “surprising” that Chabon should present the idea that “distraction may be itself a valid response” to the Holocaust, and towards the end of his article becomes increasingly forthright and criticizes the author’s endorsement of escapism as a “turn away from history” (2004: 71). Alan L. Berger also agrees with Behlman that Chabon “avoids encountering the *Shoah*” (2010: 81), and goes on to accuse the author of transforming the historical tragedy “into a metaphor,” and of collapsing “the distinction between the mysticism of hope and the Nazi mysticism of death” (88). Moreover, Berger claims that escapism is morally “irresponsible,” as “escapism leads to forgetting. And forgetting is the ultimate form of Holocaust denial” (88).

Does the novel employ “the metaphor of escape as the governing principle,” as Berger claims (2010: 80)? Is escapism

¹ Henceforth abbreviated as *Kavalier and Clay*.

morally reprehensible? Is it a “turn away from history?” What is “escapism” anyway? What if it involves less a flight from a known but rigid reality than a flight into, search for, and pursuit of, the unknown, the contingent, and the possible, that exists not in some sort of temporal and spatial “beyond,” an Elsewhere, but in the banal miracles of everyday struggles? Is the kind of escape that discomforts Behlman and Berger merely an aesthetically innovative way of engaging with history, and of registering the wounds of history, as Hilary Chute posits in “*Ragtime, Cavalier & Clay*, and the Framing of Comics?” Can escapism be more than an aesthetic response to trauma by becoming a productive mechanism that leads to, but does not end with, the tentative and contingent translation of trauma into awakening, fantasy into faith, and resistance into responsibility? With these questions in mind, this essay brings together a diverse set of discourses about “escape”—or lines of flight—including Eric L. Santner’s notions of the “deanimation of the undead” and the “blessings of more life” to read Chabon’s novel problematizing the very notion of escape by linking it to a theological paradigm, according to which escape from a busy but meaningless existence, as Santner argues in the Jewish terms of Franz Rosenzweig, needs not lead to either escapism or nihilism; nor does it have to signify either a rejection or an embrace of a higher moral principle. Instead, Santner argues in *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, while drawing on Rosenzweig’s psychotheological insights, that Jewish commandments actually press for, and encourage, putting into practice a way of life that recognizes and faces up to the traumatic nature of history and subjectivity (2001). Chabon’s novel invites, and even demands such a psychotheological reading, given that engagement with superhero comics is not only an aesthetically significant endeavor, but one that carries psychotheological significance that, once fleshed out, enables the subject to be eventually released from his or her attachment to the superhero fantasy that such comics endorse. In other words, rather than seeking empowerment in superhero

fantasies or investing energies in a divine economy of salvation, the subject, once awakened, is driven to seek the “blessings of more life” that are harbored in the banality of “everyday heroics.” In concluding his novel with this elusive and fragile possibility exuding from the “here and now,” Chabon offers his readers an ethical vision that may be too mundane and ineffectual to alter the course of history, but it is nevertheless an affirmative vision that can give people a sense of belonging to a world replete neither with divine providence, nor with (super)human mastery, but with the contingency of promises in the everyday life; promises that, rather paradoxically, also exceed and disrupt the repetitive rhythm of the everyday life.

I. Superhero Fantasy and Heroic Exceptionality

Chabon’s *Kavalier and Clay* presents a genealogical study of American comic books, attributing the emergence of this new art form in the 1930s to the influx of immigrants, especially to the Jewish immigrants’ need for heroic redemption—a need that was exacerbated by the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe. Against this background, comics, a combination of pictures and words, appeared as a convenient medium for first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants not yet fluent in English. Comics articulated immigrant aspirations for upward mobility and dramatic transformations into new beings. Superhero comics, in particular, gave vent to the feeling that the immigrants are at once orphans and aliens in their adopted country at an exceptionally critical historical moment,² and testified to the Jewish people’s collective

² In a perceptive semiotic analysis of the unprecedented popularity of the Superman comics among American readers, Gary Engle argues that Superman is considered a great American hero because he is an immigrant and an orphan (1987). In the last decade, however, a number of notable scholarly works have appeared to specifically examine the Hebrew descent of the superheroes. In 2011 a special issue on “Jewish Comics” appeared in *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish*

desire that a Messiah appear to deliver them out of the trauma of the Holocaust.³

“From its inception, the modern comic book has been a friendly domain for Jews,” so claims Jay Schwartz, for “from Marvel’s Stan Lee to *Maus*’ Art Spiegelman, Hawkman, the Flash, Thor, Superman and Batman were all created by overactive Jewish imaginations.” “Why the Jews? How did the People of the Book become People of the Comic Book?” goes on to ask (2005). In a way, this is also the question posed by Chabon in *Kavalier and Clay*. Why have Jews invested so much creative energy in comics, and why are so they passionately attached to the superhero narrative? Does the prevalence of superhero narratives register and

Studies, whose specific aim is to examine the “theoretical, literary, and historical contexts of graphic narrative and its links to Jewish identity and discourse,” as the editor, Derek P. Royal, states in his Call for Papers. In 2012, Harry Brod has added to this booming studies in the Jewish contribution to the comics with his *Superman Is Jewish?: How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way*, in which he rigorously argues that the Jewish immigrant experience not only makes possible the creation of the superheroes as cultural icons but also informs the very way that Americans view the American Dream.

³ Whereas most critics are content to draw comparisons between superheroes and the mythic figures from different religious backgrounds, recently more and more critics are determined to prove that early comics artists, a majority of whom are Jewish, fuse Jewish history, legend, and culture into their stories. Harry Brod points out that it is out of their faith in a messianic utopia yet to come that many immigrant Jewish artists came to imbue the superhero comics with messianic meaning. See especially Chapter Two, “Flights of Jewish Imagination” of his *Superman Is Jewish* (2012)? His argument resonates with a similar one made by Simcha Weinstein, who in *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero*, argues that because the creators of many famous superheroes are Jewish immigrants, the superheroes they have created also carry Jewish ideologies, values, and beliefs. One of the Jewish ideologies that inform the superhero comics, he claims, finds its way into the messianic nature of the superhero myth (2006). I believe, however, Chabon’s attitude is quite ambiguous. It is possible that he writes *Kavalier and Clay* not only to celebrate this myth of superhero as savior but also to undercut its ideological credibility.

reflect the secularization of Messianism, as Ken Schenck has so argued in “Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah,” and, along with it, their collective impatience with the “future to come” which has kept Jews waiting for emancipation for two millennia (2008)?⁴ Is it possible that, even though the superhero narrative may proffer a psychologically comforting fiction for Diaspora Jews, it may also articulate the Jewish people’s impatience with the “not yet?” If this is the case, Chabon’s novel both registers this impatience and enters into a dialogue with it, remarking on its necessity, and exposing its impossibility at the same time. His plea for a direct engagement with the everyday is correlative to his advice that the political and ethical possibilities of comics be acknowledged and activated. For Chabon, the theological import of the everyday heroics is inseparable from the ethical and aesthetic expansiveness of the superhero comics. Whereas the former spells out an ethics informed by the divine imperative to “love thy neighbor,” the latter suggests not only an aesthetics that is truly democratic, as it embraces the possibilities of self-invention and self-transformation,⁵ but more importantly, an ethics that is attentive to the possibilities that specific acts of commitment and redemption may also become acts of betrayal that fail to answer to

⁴ Whereas most of recent books on Jews and comics have taken Chabon’s *Kavalier and Clay* as evidence to legitimize their argument that immigrant Jews contributed greatly to the creation of superhero comics, Danny Fingeroth, even though he makes a compelling argument in *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* that behind the masks of Superman is hidden not only his civilian identity but also his Jewishness, nevertheless warns against making too direct and simplified links between one ethnic community—in this case, the Jews—and the superhero comics (2008). Derek P. Royal advises that we should heed Fingeroth’s sensible reminder (2011). I believe that Chabon, in writing *Kavalier and Clay*, while celebrating the myth that Jews create the superhero comics, also subjects the superhero fantasy to a rigorous critique.

⁵ This is the main gist of Hilary Chute’s reading of Chabon’s *Kavalier and Clay*, as she argues that Chabon makes use of a “democratic form of art” to represent and engage with history. See especially pages 281-282 (2008).

the infinite call of the Other. The engagement with the everyday is therefore heroic because it takes tremendous psychic effort on the part of the subject to work through the fantasy used to defend against the demands of the contingency of life.

In pairing Joe with Sam and introducing contrapuntal perspectives to the *bildungsroman* narratives of these two young men's formation as comics artists, Chabon insinuates that the issue of escape is not merely about law and order—it is also about the fantasy of heroic exceptionality which emerges as a support of a reality that needs not only law and order, but also an exception to the law to secure the subject a sense of place in the world. It is through this fantasy concerning the exceptionality of the superheroes that the subject learns to desire the superhuman power that is taken as the only guarantee of truth and justice. Fantasy, in Slavoj Žižek's interpretation, does not satisfy or realize the subject's wishes; instead, the desire of the subject is "constituted" by fantasy. Here lies, so Žižek writes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the "paradox" of fantasy: fantasy is the frame that constitutes the subject's desire, but "the desire structured through fantasy is a defense of the desire of the Other" (1989: 118). If so, the superhero fantasy is also predicated on this paradoxical trajectory of desire. In the novel, both Joe and Sam have psychologically invested in the superhero fantasy to escape from their everyday lives as poor and marginalized Jewish artists, only to be disappointed and traumatized by its inadequacy—Joe by the failure of America to intervene in the war waging in Europe, and Sam by the overprotecting potency of a homophobic State. Therefore, if awakening from the superhero fantasy is traumatic, then it can be seen as synonymous with an exodus, or escape, from the fantasies that keep them in bondage and prevent them from living in the midst of life. Chabon, in charting the two protagonists' embrace of, and then flight from, the fantasy of heroic exceptionality, emphatically exposes the superhero narrative as an ideological fantasy to which they have to surrender before working through it.

II. Into the Superhero Comics They Escape

The novel as a whole contains three interwoven narratives, with each offering different expositions and critiques of the problem of escape. These three narrative levels are the extradiegetic narrative, in which the author/narrator intrudes to write the early history of American superhero comics; the diegetic or intradiegetic level, which is about the two cousins' many adventures to escape from the various form of bondage they face; and the metadiegetic level, which is about the superhero comics created by Joe and Sam, stories of heroic feats that satisfy their hopes for redemption and deliverance. In the metadiegetic narrative, Chabon uses exuberant language to capture the seductive appeal of the superhero fantasy, but in embedding this auratizing representation of the superhero comics in the diegetic narrative, he can subject the superhero fantasy to an ideological scrutiny, exposing both the paradoxical logic of heroic exception which forms the core of its fatal attraction and the genre's stylistic excesses. The diegetic narrative, which constitutes the body of the novel, is divided into two divergent but parallel plots charting the two cousins' different routes of escape. The authorial/narratorial narrative, or the extradiegetic narrative, is interwoven into the other two narratives, and through this the author/narrator intrudes to rescue the superhero comics from a fate of waste and oblivion by shifting the focus to the genre's stylistic experimentation, thereby opening up another avenue in the practice of freedom. By so rendering the three narratives to interrupt one another, and augmenting pressures from within its own narrative frame, Chabon disarms and loosens, if only partially, the logic of heroic exception, while introducing a dimension of the everyday that almost always exceeds the subject's calculation and thereby demands a suspension of and interruption into the preemptive project that centers around the sublimity of the superhero's virtual feats. It is on this level that the author rewrites the superhero narrative as wish-filling fantasy

into one that fulfills the democratic aspirations of aspiring immigrants, and maps out a space of literature where escape—in the sense of an escaping from—can be worked through and escape—in the sense of an escaping to—can be artistically performed and avowed. To escape, in the final analysis, is not to “turn away from history,” but to confront the “real” of history in the open and infinite sphere that we call everyday life, and, moreover, to confront it in gestures and styles that exceed even the generic constraints of superhero comics.

The archetypal fantasy that Chabon uses to flesh out the dialectical cycle of escape is the fantasy of heroic exceptionality. To concretize this fantasy and also to illustrate its seductive pull, Chabon casts the two protagonists of his novel, Joe and Sam, as two master artists of American comics, while describing in detail the kind of personal and historical traumas that have propelled them to invest enormous amounts of psychic energy into the creation of superhero comics, as they work hard to domesticate and discipline the disorderliness of their everyday lives, and to fit them into the rational and moral design of this new artistic form.

As reality intrudes into their fragile worlds, they respond by imaginatively plotting different routes of escape, with comics being one of them. Embedded within the main diegetic narrative as an expression of the two artists’ youthful fantasies, the superhero narrative sketches out a clearly identifiable trajectory and activates a narrative desire that can best be described as melodramatic as it embraces an all-or-nothing binary opposition. This narrative trajectory invariably begins with a traumatic incident that initiates the singling out and transformation of an everyman into a superhero, and ends with the superhero’s undertaking of an endless series of rescue missions. The traumas experienced by the superheroes mirror, or at least resonate with, the creators’ personal losses. The comics created by Joe and Sam thus contains an element of self-reference or self-reflexivity that spills over the diegetic narrative and comments on the author/narrator’s own

trauma and desire for redemption. Given that superhero comics, in this sense, are artistic responses to and interpretations of trauma, they leave the subject in a state of hyper-tension, both excited by and anxious with the prospect of an exception to social reality. It is this hyper-tension, or biopolitical animation, that binds the subject to live a life that falls within rigid patterns of meanings. The subject is overly active to build up defense structures, such as the power fantasy of heroic exception, to live a life that is devoid of guilt and anxiety. However, as Chabon's novel seems to suggest, this readiness to enact the superhero fantasy leads to a circuitous loop within which the symptom is mistaken as the cure, and preemption ironically actualizes what it sets out to prevent from happening. Foreclosure of the excess pressure that comes with the subject's encounter with social reality that resists comprehension does not bring the subject any closer to unraveling the enigma of freedom; rather, it is by the traumatic working through of defensive fantasies that the subject will truly be ready to encounter the contingencies of everyday life.

The intriguing twist in Chabon's account of the superhero comics created by Joe and Sam is that superhero stories proffer power fantasies that also involve traumas, both personal and historical. In *Kavalier and Clay*, two superhero comics created by Joe and Sam are recounted: *The Escapist* and *Luna Moth*, and both, so argues Philip Sandifer, when examined closely, are less about power fantasies than about the working through of trauma (2008: 177). On a personal level, the two poor immigrant cousins want to use the comics to climb the economic ladder, as the success of the comic book sustains both Joe's hope that with the money he earns he can buy his family freedom, and Sam's American Dream of self-invention. However, economic success does not blind them to the "traumatic" core of the superhero narratives. Given that their superheroes are bound by the gravity of readerly expectations, Joe and Sam, as authors of their superhero comics, are not as free as the superheroes they have invented. Joe is frustrated with the

endless battles that he dispatches his hero to fight, seeing no end to it. As invincible as the Escapist is, the evil forces he battles always seem stronger, and both his power and freedom seem curtailed and delimited by forces over which he has no control. Superhero comics are thus framed in terms of this repeated tug-of-war between superheroes and their foes. The superhero may set other people free, but, given that he is subject to the whims of evil characters, he cannot free himself. Similarly, while superhero comics may express their readers' hopes for redemption, they cannot be redeemed from the trite formula of endless repetition. These are generic constraints they cannot transcend.

Moreover, there are institutional constraints that exceed their comprehension. Seen as trauma narratives, the two superhero comics may also be taken as artistic responses to the failure of the legal and political capacities of the state to offer protection to subjects whose rights and liberties are violated, and security threatened. These narratives are expressions of loss and trauma, signifying a crisis of legitimacy and initiating an excitation for some sort of transcendental and exceptional "beyond." At these critical moments, when the law fails to respond properly, superheroes step in almost as if they were substitutes for state authority, fighting crime and freeing the world of fear, piecing together fragments of shattered, denied and traumatized desires into a collective fantasy. To the degree that the superhero narrative is informed by a passionate desire to transfigure trauma into a founding occasion for the "transcendent sublime," to borrow a phrase from Dominick LaCapra, it is oriented or "excited" by an "all-or-(almost)-nothing 'logic' of the absolute" that is fertile ground for the construction of the world in post-apocalyptic terms that privilege the rhetoric of the "state of exception" and crisis management (2004: 148). It can be said that, even though superheroes have but a virtual presence in reality, they nevertheless give "body," or as Santner puts it in *The Royal Remains*, "flesh," to sovereign power as they are seen to incarnate the principles and functions of sovereignty (2011: ix).

Yet, there is something ambiguous about superheroes' relation to political sovereignty given that their access to power is neither divinely ordained nor judicially approved. As such, superheroes occupy a rather ambiguous relation to both law—be it secular or religious—and lawlessness. On the one hand, they are inside the law, guarding its borders and preventing society from lapsing into chaos. On the other, in fighting violence with violence, they are not unlike the evil characters they struggle against as they also transgress and violate the law of the reigning order. Thus, the paradox of the superhero comics is that their protagonists—the superheroes—at once maintain and transgress law and order. The very existence of superheroes is necessitated by the failure of the state to maintain law and order, but the actions of the superheroes function to further expose the impotence of legal and political authorities.

Joe and Sam's superheroes are self-appointed representatives of the law, whose very mandate is established belatedly by their heroic actions. They are the law, but they are also beyond and outside of it. As such, superhero comics, as argued by Todd McGowan (2012) and Mervi Miettinen (2011), support Giorgio Agamben's perceptive observation that sovereignty is built upon a dialectical relation between norm and exception, the law and its transgression.⁶ In Chabon's novel, for example, at a critical moment when Joe, who has created the Escapist to fight and destroy fascism, comes to know that the Nazi sympathizer, Carl Ebling, who has been stalking him, is a faithful reader of his work, to the degree that he analyzes each scene of violence in *The Escapist*.

⁶ Both propose to use Agamben's concept of the state of exception to analyze the problematic of the superheroes' paradoxical position as both within and beyond the law that they defend. I find such an interpretative framework particularly fitting to uncover how the idea of heroic exception can work into the tactics of justice, law and order in modern society. I am especially indebted to McGowan's reading of the superhero movies.

While reading the analytical notes made by Ebling, Joe comes to the shocking realization of “the mirror-image fascism inherent in his anti-fascist superman” (Chabon, 2001: 204). This painful realization makes Joe “feel the shame of glorifying, in the name of democracy and freedom, the vengeful brutality of a very strong man” (204). If Joe and Sam’s “anti-fascist superman” is but a “mirror image” of the fascist that he sets out to eliminate, Joe’s celebratory representation of the scenes of violence and destruction performed can be taken as a disguised “glorification” of “the vengeful brutality of a strong man” (204). Superhero comics, in this sense, become trapped by the logic of heroic exception, which forms the constitutive and generic basis of the superhero narrative. Some significant implications follow from this analysis. Firstly, if the need for heroic exceptionality emerges as a response to the failure of the law to arrive at justice, then heroic exceptionality is not merely a temporary and historically specific occurrence, but an exception that is essential to the order of the law. Secondly, if superheroes exist for the sole reason of fighting against criminals, their existence is not only predicated upon, but is also derivative of, the existence of such people in the first place. Superheroes have to break the law and use violence to punish law-breakers in order to restore law and order. Thus, the distinction between law and transgression, norm and exception, no longer holds. Finally, if superheroes maintain their exceptional relation to the law, the need for this heroic exceptionality will never diminish, since, as McGowan rightly points out, it means that such heroic “exceptionality becomes an unlimited end in itself that will never cease to be required” (2012: 132). If the desire for heroic exceptionality will never end, the very condition which calls for the hero, and for a heroic exception to the law, will also continue forever. That is to say, justice and freedom will never be actualized, despite the superheroes’ heroic acts.

Disappointed as he is with his failure to use the superhero comics to influence his readers, Joe still derives comfort from other

minute aspects of the comics. As an artist participating in the birth of superhero comics, Joe uses the emergent genre to imagine a line of escape to break free of the double bind of law and its transgression. From the comic books, “Joe learned to view the comic book hero, in his formfitting costume, not as a pulp absurdity but as a celebration of the lyricism of the naked (albeit tinted) human form in motion” (Chabon, 2001: 176). Whereas in the early stories, Joe’s work “articulated the simple joy of unfettered movement, of the able body, in a way that captured the yearnings not only of his crippled cousin but of an entire generation of weaklings, stumblebums, and playground goats” (177), in his later work, after he is frustrated with his failed efforts to save his family from Nazi persecution, Joe conflates this collective pursuit for freedom with an emphatic engagement with and deployment of the themes of violence and retribution. However, this conflation of freedom and violence is problematic, for violence may generate freedom and bring forth liberation, but it is a freedom that insinuates anarchy and catastrophe.

Such is the deadlock that superhero comics eventually encounter. Despite the fantasy of heroic exceptionality that it activates and promotes, the superhero narrative is unfolded in a rather stale and predictable movement from a traumatic incident to a final restorative moment of redemption. A number of problems ensue, however. If, even in superhero comics, there is no space to plot a line of flight, nor is there a foreseeable time when one can be free, not only from crime and evil, but also from this perennial battle between good and evil, would not the moment that Joe and Sam, whose survival is predicated upon their passionate attachment to this fantasy of escape, come to realize the promises of the superhero comics are empty ones, be a moment of traumatic shock that shatters their secure footing in the world? If there is no escape in sight, then how is freedom possible? Is the question wrongly posed? Is redemption possible?

III. From the Superhero Fantasy They Flee Again

Superhero comics emerged as a new artistic form giving expression to the yearnings of a generation of young immigrants for the possibility of escape, and ended up glorifying violence and celebrating retribution. It could be said that comics are enmeshed in a circular loop in which power, sovereignty, and freedom feed on one another, from which there is no possibility of escape other than a repetitive translation of heroism into villainy, and vice versa. When Joe and Sam first meet and begin to try their hands at making comics, they are excited about finding both a medium to visually tell their stories and, more importantly, an audience who appreciates their visual story-telling. Once their talents are recognized, they begin to use comics as a pedagogical and political medium to promote the ideologies to which they subscribe. For Joe, superhero comics expose the inadequacy of the American government's isolationist policy, and also fulfill his vicarious desire for retribution and violence. For Sam, given his sexual orientation and the homophobia of society in his time, superhero comics are thematically suited to the exploration of alternative structures of intimacy. However, the more the cousins impose their authorial designs on their superhero comics, the more disappointed they become with the failure of their readers to respond to their intentions. In a way, they are caught in a spiral of domination and resistance, control and escape, escaping from one self-forged chain into another self-made closet.

If superhero narratives are marked by the dialectics of trauma and redemption, it can then be said that Joe and Sam are attracted to them because they, already traumatized, seek redemption in such stories. The popularity of comics offers them some relief from their losses, but the comfort is rather short-lived. Once tragedies befall them again, both men escape, one into a war that keeps him waiting for real battles, and the other into a false marriage that exists in name only. Each chooses to escape, but neither is free. At

first, they escape into superhero comics, with Joe running away from his survivor guilt and Sam fleeing from his abandonment complex. Later, they run from the comics again, with Joe escaping first into war and later into seclusion, and Sam running from his gay lover and into the arms of Rosa, the pregnant girlfriend Joe abandons. As Joe flees Rosa's love, Sam escapes into it. Where Joe sees escape, Sam sees catastrophe; where Sam sees freedom, Joe sees anarchy. Both take escape—be it an “escape from” or an “escape to”—as a remedy to their traumas, when “escape” is but the symptom of the deeper problems that each chooses to shun. Whether they are escaping from, or into, the superhero fantasy and the logic of heroic exception that fuels it, both men seek to escape the task of mourning by denying their losses. Neither seems to understand that what they are trying to run from is not an “exceptional beyond” located out there in the world, and that they will not be free unless and until they cease to run from themselves.

Indeed, the lure of superhero stories resides in its promise of redemption. However, they can only be redemptive when there is a loss to be mended and a trauma to be healed. It can even be said that this kind of heroism is a defense against those losses and traumas that, given that they have already caused a breakdown in one's being and existence, need to be repressed, contained, or translated. Chabon seems to recognize the intricate relation between traumas and an overzealous attachment to the superhero fantasy. It is not a coincidence that he spends the first one hundred pages of the novel detailing the guilt that haunts Joe after abandoning his family, or the sorrow that has lingered with Sam since being abandoned by his father. In this sense, it can be said that a peculiar kind of homesickness acts as a psychic motor compelling Joe and Sam to invest much psychic energy in articulating the superhero fantasy. Joe's homesickness is unsurprising, as he was, after all, a refugee who left without his parents and young brother. Displacement easily robs him of his trust in his parents' promise that they will be reunited. Yet, rather

than feeling abandoned by his family, he feels strongly that he abandoned them. While Joe is still haunted by guilt, Sam introduces him to superhero comics, and he immediately identifies in them a messianic promise that his family might be freed and his homesickness overcome.

Sam's homesickness is of a different kind. As the only child in a single-parent family, he has long felt abandoned by his father—a wandering Jew who would rather join a circus than stay home with his family—and he even blamed himself for his father's absence. Chabon's two protagonists exhibit different symptoms of melancholia, and both find relief in comic books. However, in seeking relief therein, they fall deeper into a double bind, finding themselves in the impossible position of searching for a comforting fantasy to replace nostalgia for lost homes, even if they have yet to acknowledge those losses.

Burdened with personal losses and traumas, Joe and Sam differently attempt to deal with the homesickness and psychic pressures weighing on them. Some important theoretical issues follow from this observation. First, whereas the symptoms of trauma include emotional numbness and intellectual confusion, trauma also generates excessive psychic energies, or psychic remainders, which require the subject to make strenuous efforts to “metabolize” its “excess of demand.” The subject then faces pressure translating the “excess of demand” of the enigmatic Other into “a demand for work, a task to be discharged, *something we can do*” (Santner, 2001: 32). However, this operation of psychic translation can be undertaken efficiently only when the subject has sufficient knowledge of the origin and content of his or her trauma. If, as Cathy Caruth has convincingly demonstrated, trauma, by definition, wounds precisely because of its resistance to comprehension (1996);⁷ the radical opacity of trauma means a

⁷ Cathy Caruth's trauma theory has been so influential that it, in a way, changes the way that we theorize trauma. In the introduction of *Unclaimed Experience*, she posits two key concepts which render trauma incomprehensible, its temporal

seamless translation is, from the start, an impossibility and, consequently, that a breakdown in the translation project is not only inevitable, but the subject is also ex-cited to answer, in Santner's language, the "demand for work" (2001: 32). A loop emerges, leaving the subject in a chronic state of ex-citation, or, in Santner's words, "undeadness." It thus ensues, explains Santner, that the subject is traumatized not by the original injury, but also by the failure to respond to the demands of Other, a failure that, rather ironically, does not reflect the subject's incompetence or unwillingness to redress a wrong, but is rather occasioned by the radical enigma of the Other, by "the dense, enigmatic presence of the Other's desire as constitutive of the inner strangeness we call the unconscious" (33-34). If so, it can be said that when the subject tries to escape, he or she is not trying to escape from trauma *per se*, but from this emotional state, which is "neither simply enlivening nor simply deadening, but rather, if I might put it that way, undeadening" (36).

A rather paradoxical, even self-canceling, movement is operative here. Given that "undeadness," or excessive ex-citation, as Santner so argues in *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, is already a response to trauma, and given that, "undeadness" is itself also a symptom of one's "seizure" or "capture" by the "excess of demand" that emanates from the void of trauma, one is then "stuck" in the double bind structure of mourning and rehabilitation. Chabon's novel, especially in its metanarratorial use of superhero comics, seems to be a reenactment of this double bind, with the two cousins fleeing from their personal traumas only to find themselves stuck in an excitation and "undeadness" which requires them to work even harder to ensure their recognition by, and integration into, the communal fabric of American society. In other words, superhero comics and the fantasy that fuels their construction may have temporarily answered their psychic needs,

belatedness and its displacement into bodily metaphors.

but they are nevertheless a Derridean pharmakon that provides them with a power fantasy only to land them in a chronic state of “undeadness.” The real stakes in Chabon’s novel are thus recognizing the value of superheroes as a “transitional” fantasy, and also to envision and map out alternative routes of escape that simultaneously undo the disruptive kernel of the this fantasy and translate it into what Santner calls the “blessings of more life.”

In Santner’s reflections on Sigmund Freud and Franz Rosenzweig, he argues that both endeavored to identify and proffer new possibilities of unbinding the double bind structure entrapping the self. This means that the line of flight is neither a turning towards the superhero fantasy nor a turning against it. Rather, it is through a strenuous procedure of the “deanimation of the undead”—the deactivation of those forces that keep the subject in a state of ex-citation—that the self can be “unplugged” from the double bind of being simultaneously “stuck” and “animated” by this fantasy. If, as elaborated by Elisabeth Weber, “Santner’s coinage ‘undeadness’ designates the wide scope of fantasmatic responses to, or defenses against, the enigmatic messages of Other” (2003: 775), to be alive, then, is not to be blind to the possibilities that there are *more* ways than one to respond to the enigmatic call of the Other. Whereas some may register this “more” as “trauma,” for Santner, to be alive and to open to “the midst of life” is only possible when we welcome the “trauma” generated by the impossibility of endowing the enigmatic messages of the Other with one rigid interpretation sanctified by given institutions. “The deanimation of the undead,” as seen in light of Santner’s explication, refers to a psychic mechanism whereby the fantasies constructed by the subject to defend against the “trauma” of the enigmatic messages of the Other are deanimated; that is, suspended and interrupted, and the subject is released from the punishing pressures of the abstract Law so as one can be truly alive to the contingencies of the everyday life.

According to Santner, the self is stuck in a state of undeadness

because while the self is interpellated into assuming given identities and translating the other's desire into one's own. This kind of identificatory interpellation and the mimetic representation of desire it initiates nevertheless leaves a residue which has the potential to throw the self into an excited state of undeadness, for the self then has to respond to this unnerving psychic excitation with strenuous mental activity to safely metabolize or dispose of this residue. Given that the identificatory interpellation of the subject is initiated by the enigmatic seductions of sovereign power and mediated by the sovereign authorities' recognition and authorization of the subject, the subject is easily seduced by, and thereby becomes passionately attached to, "the prospect of an *exception* to the space of social reality and meaning"; that is, one buys into the fantasy of "some sort of exceptional 'beyond'" (Santner, 2001: 30-31; emphasis added) that one can escape to. It can thus be said that superhero comics are based on this fantasy of an "exceptional beyond"—the fantasy that the superheroes may free us of trauma and return us to a state of plenitude. In investing one's hope in superheroes, who are substitutes for the self's unnamed losses, the self binds itself to the flows of time and allows itself to be captured by the predictable trajectory of the superhero fantasy.

Santner's project, like Chabon's, is to map out a different trajectory so that the self can unbind or loosen this fantasy. To do so, Santner unpacks Agamben's notion of the Janus-faced nature of the sovereign exception; namely, its power to both make and break the law. What makes life undeadening, Santner suggests, is neither the "exposure to lawlessness" nor "the idiosyncratic but undeadening drama of legitimation," but rather "the excess of demand" which compels one to live a life of heightened agitation—with the self always searching for recognition and authorization, always haunted by "the remainders of lost forms of life," and forever projecting hopes and desires to a "future to come." With the excitation to answer "the excess of demand" of

the sovereign authority, the self is driven to meet the “demand for work,” without realizing that the law that the self tries to please, as Agamben has put it, is but “a law that . . . is in force without significance” (as cited in Santner, 2001: 40).

Against this background of a law that is “in force without significance,” superhero comics—and their underlying superhero fantasy—take on this aspect of a passionate, but desperate, attachment to a sovereign authority that is both plenitude and vacuity, trauma and redemption, the law and its transgression. Superhero comics thus situate the superhero as such a figure of sovereign exception, a messiah that signifies stylistic excess but fails to redeem it. If, as Andrew Neal points out, the central question posed by Agamben in his *State of Exception* is “Beyond the ‘fictitious’ state of exception declared by the sovereignty, is there a real state of exception?” (2010: 86), it can be said that Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay, the fictional creators of the fictitious superhero comic, *The Escapist*, pose a similar question, and spend their lives trying to imagine an alternative form and content to meet this need for a superhero and for a heroic exception to the Law.

In the case of Joe and Sam, two lines of flight are available to them, which would lead them to follow diametrically opposed paths in their lives. Once they realize that even superheroes cannot secure their freedom, they then plot out other ways of escape, alternative means of redemption, and paths to live authentically free lives, without suffering the pains of emotional attachment, the stings of a guilty conscience, and the sorrow of broken dreams. In Chabon’s account, two personal traumas change the course of Joe’s and Sam’s lives, and shatter their confidence in the power of comics to sketch out feasible escape routes: the sinking of the *Ark of Miriam* and the drowning of hundreds of Jewish refugee children, including Joe’s young brother, Thomas, disrupts Joe’s life, and prompts him to escape from a burgeoning romance and a promising career to the battlefield; on the same night that Joe gets the news of his brother’s death, Sam experiences a trauma of his

own when the police break up a gay party and his partner, Tracy Bacon, is arrested, while he is sexually molested by an FBI agent. This leaves him with the bitter memory of “the feeling of doom in his heart, a sense that he had turned some irrevocable corner and would shortly come face-to-face with a dark and certain fate” (Chabon, 2001: 413). The death of Joe’s brother again triggers Joe’s survivor guilt, leaving him unable to cope with his failure to save not only his brother, but all those Jews who are doomed to hang on to an existence of “bare life” in Nazi Germany. The gay bashing that Sam experienced when the police broke up the party—an event that illustrates the way that a subtler power, what Michel Foucault calls a “biopower,”⁸ works by defining how life should be lived—robs Sam of any sense of security, and thus implicitly blackmails him into escaping into a heterosexual marriage with Rosa. These two unfortunate incidents produce traumatic rippling effects on Joe and Sam, and expose their fragile claims to citizenship and humanity. Too traumatized and too “tired to do anything about it, and he had, in any case, no idea of what he should do,” Joe at least knew that he “wanted nothing to do with Rosa, with Sammy, with his aunt or his parents or anyone who could tie him, through any bond of memory or affection or blood, to Thomas” (417). In a similar mood, Sam, burdened with the gay bashing he has experienced, decides not to have anything more to do with Tracy Bacon, his love of life, as he simply wants to forget

⁸ In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault invokes the two mechanisms of power that he has developed in *Discipline and Power*—the classical mechanism of monarchical sovereign power and the “disciplinary power,” the latter of which is exercised through the deployment of technologies, production of knowledge, and the control over biological life. Foucault calls such “disciplinary power” “biopower.” These two mechanisms—sovereignty and biopower, he then points out, have merged and coincided, with the old and the new coming into some innovative combination and forming newer modalities of power. The result of the merging of the new and old disciplinary techniques is that the technology of power has infiltrated into every aspect of modern existence, turning even exceptions into the rule (2003).

everything that reminds him of his own homosexuality.

From the superhero fantasy Joe and Sam thus flee again. Joe joins the army, intending to kill any Nazi that comes his way, but when he does kill a Nazi scientist, albeit rather accidentally, he nevertheless feels he is “the worst man in the world” (Chabon, 2001: 590). When he returns from the war, he embarks on the adventure of creating what Chabon describes as America’s first “graphic novel,” *The Golem*, which differs from the superhero comics he created before the war in both style and content. In its style, Joe is influenced by Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane*, as on seeing the film he is immediately struck by its ingenuity, for “its inextricable braiding of image and narrative—*Citizen Kane* was like a comic book” (362). In its content, his graphic novel is no longer about the endless rescues undertaken by an invincible superhero, but instead it tells “a hallucinatory tale of a wayward, unnatural child, Josef Golem” (577), celebrating the power of imagination, and, as an extension, the power of his art, a “lowbrow” art for some people, but a powerful one, nevertheless. As he immerses himself ever deeper in the making of the graphic novel, “Joe came to feel that the work—telling this story—was helping to heal him” (577). Once he rids himself of any exterior motive—to make money, to exact revenge, to educate his readers, to vent his anger, his comic acquires a therapeutic force that frees him from the need to overexert himself to respond to the “excess of demands” of his guilty conscience.

Sam, on the other hand, tries his hand at different business ventures upon Joe’s sudden departure, only to suffer substantial financial losses. He dedicates himself to writing the great American novel, which he has always wanted to write, but finds himself caught in the “economic laws” of modern life, as he “allowed the world to wind him in the final set of chains, and climbed, once and for all, into the cabinet of mysteries that was *the life of an ordinary man*” (Chabon, 2001: 547; emphasis added). Blind to the unnamable and restless energies stirring within himself, he ends up

leading a life of heteronormality, as he tries his hand, in vain, at a string of businesses, writing first “his amorphous and wandering book,” and then even “catalog copy for a seed company,” before he “had at last thrown in the towel on his old caterpillar dreams” (481) and returned to comic books. As Sam works hard at different jobs to support a family, he only sinks deeper and deeper into the “life of an ordinary man.” This does not suggest that the “life of an ordinary man” is a lesser option for him, but rather that the real issue is that in living this life he submits himself to the double bind of a life of undeadness. As he never comes face-to-face with the trauma that prompted him to escape into marrying Rosa and caring for Joe’s son in the first place, he never has the chance to mourn for his loss—the kind of life that he could have lived. Therefore, when he is charged with obscenity by “the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Judiciary Committee” and forced to come out of the closet in the hearing, he realizes the extent of his loss, and it is this that empowers him to make the tough decision of going on the road and setting himself free. After all, he realizes that once the subcommittee exposes his secret, they have in fact handed him a golden key that can release him from the chains that have previously tied him down. “Sammy could not even begin to imagine what it would feel like to live through a day that was not fueled or deformed by a lie” (623). Sam learns that he is only free when he is free to not escape. Mobility is only mobility when the choice of not moving is also an option. He is thus free to exercise his freedom by going west to California to try his hand at TV.

Both Joe and Sam learn from their adventures a significant lesson about escape, which is that it is only possible when they are free to not escape. This is a lesson with a paradoxical import, gained rather belatedly after they suffered many tribulations. With hindsight, they learn to forgo both the logic of teleology and the doctrine of preemption, and, in so doing, they can heroically walk into an unpredictable tomorrow, prepared to deal with the future.

IV. Facing the Real of the Everyday: “The Blessings of More Life”

In *Kavalier and Clay*, the dialectic between trauma and redemption informs both the embedded narrative of the superheroes and the frame narrative of their creators' coming to age. Obviously, in the creation of these comics, the two cousins take full advantage of the logic of heroic exception only to eventually bear witness to the genre's thematic exhaustion, when it falls prey to the logic of exception, which allows or demands its form to exceed and overwrite its content. If it is the superhero's freedom that appeals most to the reader, the appeal of superhero comics then resides in the genre's expansiveness, its potential to include every foreseeable theme, plot, and figure in their panels, as long as the superhero's action is carried out in the name of freedom and justice. The prefix “super” not only represents the superheroes' exceptionality, but also defends the genre's celebration of, and even earnest quest for, ever newer exceptions. The logic of exception, in this sense, can be taken as the *raison d'être* for both the superheroes and the comics in which they appear. However, whereas moral goodness and a happy ending determine the teleological movement of the superhero narrative (the framed narrative), happy endings, as Joe and Sam soon find out, are not always available to them, and despite their desire and intent to eschew tragedies, traumatic incidents recur, throwing them off balance. The narrative of their amazing adventures thus mirrors and enacts these structural principles of compulsive repetition and temporal lags characteristic of trauma narratives.

The question remains whether one can break through one's biopolitical undeadness and transform it into a new potentiality. According to Santner, the moment of breakthrough is a moment of revelation when one encounters not only the most enigmatic part within oneself, but also that enigmatic core within the Other, which is conceptualized as the Neighbor-Thing. It is customary

that one takes the pressures that excite and weigh one down as coming from an external Other, but in Santner's analysis, the Other is as much an external pressure as it is within the self. What makes it the Other—be it the external and the internal force—is its enigmatic core, its resistance to easy interpretation, translation, or transmission. It is this enigmatic core that constitutes the constant struggle both for recognition and for freedom, for authorization and for exceptionalism. Three things deserve further attention in our attempt to understand the animated “struggle” that places one in the state of undeadness. First, the struggle is about reiterated interpretation, or more properly, about the failures of translating the enigmatic messages issued by the Other. Second, given that the enigmatic core is constituted by none other than reiterated interpretations, this core lacks a solid foundation or ground and, as such, the socio-symbolic order in which one finds one's assumed place is also groundless or meaningless. Finally, what keeps one tied to the Other is not rationality or causality, but the absolutely singular and enigmatic way in which one addresses, relates to, and responds to the Other. It thus follows that it is in the enigmatic relationality of how one addresses and responds to the Other, which is seen as my neighbor-with-an-unconscious, that clears a way out of this biopolitical undeadness and into new possibility of collective life.

If the moment of revelation is an event in which one becomes alive to the enigmatic presence of the Other, under what circumstances does this event arrive? Is it by design or by chance, through the exercise of one's will power or with the help of an external force? In a way, *Kavalier and Clay* responds to these questions first by deconstructing the fantasy of heroic exception, and then by celebrating both the power of imagination and the exigency of converting the excess of fantasy into the “blessings of more life.” In so registering the ethical potentiality of the everyday, Chabon proposes a trajectory of living a meaningful life that is in alignment with the one proposed by Santner about finding

blessings and ethnical possibilities in the practices of everyday life in response to calls that cannot be resisted but must be answered. At such moments, with the subject being divested of any symbolic authorization, whatever remains constitutes the “more” of the everyday that is room enough for creative insight and psychic potentiality. Unlike the fantasy of the heroic exception, the Jewish commandments elaborate, so Santner writes, “a form of life around the disruptive, even traumatic, pressures induced in us by the ‘neighbor-Thing’ rather than, under the auspices of the superego, transferring those pressures into this or that national project, this or that construction of ‘home’” (2001: 117). In other words, one performs everyday heroics not because one sets out to become a hero, but because, in responding to the enigmatic demands of the Other, one transforms an ordinary occasion into an ethical encounter, thereby opening up new perspectives about how to live in the midst of the enigmas of life. In this sense, we can say that *Kavalier and Clay* is a novel that celebrates less the fantasy than the power of imagination to give the fantasy new twists, and, consequently, to make available the resources for the subject to make a “slight adjustment” in his/her confrontation with the everyday. In other words, even though the superhero fantasy is the thematic core of Joe and Sam’s comic books, eventually, what “redeems” them is not the superhero fantasy but the very aesthetic possibilities opened up by the comic book, as it blends the power of words with that of pictures to reanimate these longings stifled and anaesthetized by our habit of thinking in rigid and mechanical patterns. Moreover, given that it is comics, rather than the superhero, that the novel celebrates, given also that comics are a hybrid form involving the collaborative work of a team, what the novel really pays homage to is the coming together both of words and images and of a partnership, Joe and Sam, whose collaboration has activated each other’s imagination, and thereby saved both from a deliberate and self-imposed immurement.

Joe finds redemption in the power of art, as he locks himself

in a rented office in the Empire State Building upon his return from World War II, spending days and nights drawing his graphic novel, *The Golem*. In a way, it can be said that in the process of drawing the 2,256-page work, he not only gives birth to, but also falls in love with, an imaginary child of twelve named Josef Golem. In 1949, when Joe returns to New York, he has two plans in mind: he wants to “transform people’s views and understanding of the art form” (Chabon, 2001: 577), and he also wants to get back with Rosa, and to reclaim the life from which he once escaped. His work on *The Golem* goes on well, as he pours “all of the grief and black wonder that he was never able to express . . . into the queasy angles and stark compositions, the cross-hatchings and vast swaths of shadow, the distended and fractured and finely minced panels of his monstrous comic book” (577-578). The magic of art heals him.

Joe uses a hybrid artistic form—a comic book—to perform a creative re-reading of the mythology of the Golem, so that not only is he given a life by his creative work, but his work also gains a new life, or a new reading. In Santner’s explication on Franz Rosenzweig’s thinking on aesthetics, after he points out that Rosenzweig “correlates the theological categories of the Judeo-Christian tradition—creation, revelation, and redemption—with the aspects of the ‘life’ of a work of art” (2001: 132), he goes on to assert that an authentic work of art, or a thing of beauty, is

disarming not in the sense of releasing us, once and for us, from the “too much” of excitation that is, at some level, constitutive of human life, but rather in the sense of loosening our defenses, opening beyond our stuckness in an especially rigid and defensive organization of this pressure. The combination of quickening and release occasioned by a beautiful object can be understood as the vitality that emerges when this organization is loosened. (139)

In a similar vein, Joe’s writing of *The Golem* simultaneously excites and unshackles him, opening and releasing him to an experience of

freedom, for in writing it he allows the Golem to own him, allowing at the same time the comic book to be “a vehicle of personal expression,” rather than a means of promoting righteous ideologies or requesting recognition. It is especially, for him, not a work for sale. The artistic imagination it delivers is neither the transcendental truth of life, nor some experience of the beyond; rather, it is as if the Golem calls him and he responds to this call by “expos[ing] what had become the secret record of his mourning, of his guilt and retribution” (Chabon, 2001: 579). In other words, in writing *The Golem*, he experiences what Santner has called the “deanimation of the undeadness,” as he is loosened from the excitations and fantasies that structure his everyday life, and in so doing, he traverses them, exposing their disruptive core from within. Rather than speaking for the Golem, he allows it to speak to and through him; as a consequence, he also speaks through this character and becomes mentally liberated.

If art is magic, as Joe comes to realize in the making of *The Golem*, its magic is “not the apparent magic of the silk-hatted card-palmer, or the bold, brute trickery of the escape artist” (Chabon, 2001: 576). Rather than taking him to a transcendental realm of the beyond, the “genuine magic of art” returns him to the life that he has shunned and demands that he surrender to the real of everyday world. However, the magic of art is, after all, no substitute for the rawness of life itself. Joe finds it more difficult to patch up a broken relationship and to resume an interrupted dream. The secluded Joe, after having spent years working on his graphic novel, is then ready to admit that “[his] ability to heal himself had long since been exhausted,” and he “needed Rosa—her love, her body, but above all, her forgiveness—to complete the work that his pencils had begun” (578). The relationship with Rosa is important, and even magical, to Joe because it prompts in him a different appreciation of the contingency of everyday life. It allows him a new perspective both on life and on his answerability, or infinite responsibility, to others.

As Joe needs Rosa's love, body, and forgiveness "to complete the work that his pencils had begun," Sam also needs to free himself from a banal life driven by the rhythm of "habit," or the banality of the everyday, to borrow a phrase from Meaghan Morris. After Joe escapes to the frozen Antarctic battlefield from a burgeoning romance, Sam marries Rosa, with the two settling into a life that is as sterile as it is predictable. He buys them a modest house, and "adopted the same policy with regard to [the house] that he followed with his wife, his employment, and his love life. It was all habit. The rhythms of the commuter train, the school year, publishing schedules, summer vacations, and of his wife's steady calendar of moods had inured him to the charms and torments of his life" (Chabon, 2001: 474). Neither Sam, nor Rosa, is happy, however. Sam never talks about his lost love for Tracy Bacon, a radio actor with whom he has a brief romance. If there is any residue that intimates he is still pining for Tracy's love and touch, it is his pairing the superheroes with boy sidekicks in all his comic books that betrays his secret yearning. Sam "[has] got that thing with the sidekicks," as one of his funny-book friends observes. "It's like an obsession with him. Have you noticed that? He takes over a character, first thing he does, no matter what, he gives the guy a little pal" (481). Another friend also insinuates, "I always thought he seemed a little bit—you know . . ." (481). In other words, Sam's deployment of the sidekick plot is taken by his friends as veiled expression of his repressed homosexuality, an open secret that his friends never discuss in front of Sam, and Sam, in his turn, never mentions in front of anybody, not even Rosa. The insinuation of a secretive relationship between the superhero and his sidekick resonates with the claim made by Fredric Wertham on the homosexual relation between Batman and Robin. Whereas Wertham is hostile in his attack at the homoerotic undercurrent of the male bonding at the heart of superhero comics, Sam's friends are no less homophobic, with their small talk betraying their straight biases. Given his subscription to the ideology of

heteronormality of his time, Sam is, sadly speaking, as homophobic as his funny-book friends. Moreover, Sam even takes active measures to cover up his queerness, as he admits to Joe when the two are reunited, “I married [Rosa] because I didn’t want to, well, to be a fairy. Which, actually, I guess I am” (580). With the sidekick plot deployed as the only means available for Sam both to embrace and denounce his homoerotic desire, he ends up sustaining it as an open secret that, like the exposed nakedness of the emperor in “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” is visible to all except to the emperor himself. Yet, to sustain this “open secret,” Sam puts himself in a constant state of heightened excitement, or undeadness, lest he should imperil all the things he has valued: “his career in comic books, his relations with his family, his place in the world” (620), even though it is precisely those things he has taken so much pains to uphold that have built up “a prison, an airless, lightless keep from which there was no hope of escape” (620). The need for secrecy and concealment eventually takes a toll on Sam, making him unable to connect with people except through the oblique homoerotic plot of his superhero comics.

Yet, the sidekick plot, though its import is understood by all, is rarely talked about, and, with the decline of the superhero comics, rarely read, at least not before Wertham makes superhero comics his target. Sam, as a result of the Senate hearing occasioned by Wertham’s passionate, though biased, outcry against the comics industry, is unmasked and forced out of his closet. However, despite Wertham’s homophobia, he may have unwittingly activated a politically progressive reading of the superhero’s homosocial intimacy with his sidekick, an intimacy that is, quite tellingly, a trademark also of Sam’s comics books. Indeed, Wertham’s provocative reading has unwittingly released Sam from a prison of his own construction to a path of unlimited possibility. However, does that mean the uncloseted Sam subscribes to Wertham’s gay reading? Not necessarily. The day after the Senate hearing, Sam comes to reflect on the ramifications of Wertham’s ideological

reading and he adamantly refuses to take Wertham's homoerotic reading as the only politically correct way to decipher Batman's bonding with Robin. Instead, he believes there are other alternatives of reading male bonding. "Dr. Fredric Wertham was an idiot; it was obvious that Batman was not intended, consciously or unconsciously, to play Robin's corrupter: he was meant to stand in for his *father*, and by extension for the absent, indifferent, vanishing fathers of the comic-book-reading boys of America" (Chabon, 2001: 631). Free from living a closeted life of secrecy, Sam is not ready to accept the homoerotic reading that is to "enter into the comics lore and haunt him for the rest of his life" (631). How are we to understand Sam's insistence in reading the sidekick plot as another Oedipial family drama? Does his conservative stand on this issue bespeak his imprisonment in the heteronormative ideology of his time? Is he free at last? Perhaps not. Even though Sam is now released from the fantasy or symptom that keeps him from being alive to the unnamable thing that makes him a stranger to himself, this "release" that Sam has experienced does not allow him to escape, once and for all, from the social institutions that define and constitute his identity. Rather, it simply releases him from one fantasy to another fantasy; it releases him into the hustles and bustles of the everyday life.

As Sam packs his bags to leave his closeted life behind, Joe is also ready to come out of his office at the Empire State Building to deal with the unpredictable perils of domesticity. Both men want to free themselves from the trap or closet they have constructed for themselves, but neither can do it alone. Joe wants to escape back into the life with Rosa from which he fled before the war, but he does not know how he can do this, or even if he has the right to ask for her forgiveness. Sam, for his part, is so busy denying his loss that he is not aware of its extent until he is forced to acknowledge it in the Senate committee hearing.

As Sam sulks alone in a bar after being forced to come out of the closet at the hearing, his friend Deasey assures him that

“Senator C. Estes Kefauver and his pals just handed you your own golden key” (Chabon, 2001: 623), which will truly set him free from living a life of deceit. Sam feels “relieved” after the forced disclosure of his secret. As he is robbed of what he has valued the most—security—he realizes “there was nothing left to regret but his own cowardice” (620). “Coming out,” or the transformation of his identity, is not due to any particular action taken on his own part, but instead comes about due to the actions of the Senate committee. Thus, while the committee may have set out to humiliate him, he instead feels “relieved,” given that the hearing only forces him to say what he has always wanted to. This does not mean that his life with Rosa as a heterosexual couple was a wasted one, but rather that with Rosa he was able to construct a family and prove himself a worthy part of it. His coming-out does not negate his membership of this family, but instead proves the paradoxical state that, in being a member of it, he also stands outside as a non-member member. This understanding complicates any deterministic understanding of identity or history, exposing at the same time that the ground of identification is nothing less than the miracle of love.

Joe’s homecoming is due to an act of love, but it is also a happy coincidence. To begin with, as Joe tries in vain to find his way back to Rosa and their son Tommy, by pure coincidence he runs into the latter at a magic shop. As young as Tommy is, he has an intuitive understanding of the extent that Joe is caged within his own trap. Out of his good intentions to help free Joe, Tommy writes a letter in Joe’s name, threatening to jump out of the Empire State Building, like Superman. Even though Joe did not write the letter, he “recognized the idea as his own,” but “he had felt it necessary, in fulfilling the boy’s challenge, to make a few adjustments here and there.” This act exposes Joe, forcing him to come out of his life of seclusion and secrecy, and he is then reborn and reintroduced into the family, even though it is no longer the same as the one he abandoned.

Both Joe and Sam harbor secret desires that they cannot bring themselves to realize or acknowledge, and both respond to external pressures, or the enigmatic calls of the Other, to translate the encounter with it into an ethical one that renders their subjectivation inoperative. There is in the plot's reliance on coincidence, and on lucky encounters with the Other, a farcical element that belies Chabon's overly optimistic investment in the superhero fantasy. It is also possible that the presence of lucky coincidences in the novel speaks to Chabon's belief in the ethics of relation. Neither Joe nor Sam is a superhero, and they procrastinate in making the ethical decisions that will alter the structures of their lives. Left to themselves, the novel suggests, they will waste their lives in their self-created traps. The moments when Tommy fakes the suicide letter, and the Senate committee calls Sam to the hearing, become "lucky breaks." This does not mean that these moments are not traumatic for Joe and Sam, as the former is seriously injured, and Sam is gravely humiliated. Yet, in those moments, when one is addressed by the Other and has to respond to its enigmatic call with an interpretation that is imaginative and even fantastic—in opening up more signification than is consciously available to the Other—new kinds of solidarity with others become possible.

V. Conclusion

Two trajectories of escape are mapped out in Chabon's novel. In the first half, Joe and Sam escape into superhero fantasies to protect themselves from the traumas of history and life, both personal and historical, only to discover that they are only human, and thus defenseless against various forces, social and historical, that they can neither fend off nor comprehend. In desperation, they both flee from their traumas, with Joe joining the army and Sam finding shelter in marriage. After each has made two unsuccessful attempts to escape from their traumas, they eventually

come to the realization, in the second half of the novel, that the redemption they seek is only attainable in that from which they try so desperately escape. They have been made restless by their discontent with their own identities, impatient with the empty promises of history. They realize, in the course of the second half of the novel, that salvation is not to be realized at the end of the line, but rather is driven by the desires for invention, difference, and singularity. As such, love sums up the magic of this restless aspiration, and is the emotive correlate for this everyman vision of interrupted dialogue and imperfect fusion. In avoiding confrontation with the “opening” to the other, Joe and Sam may want to shun tensions of all kinds, for tensions, as they see them, would deprive them of the surety of teleology, rid them of the security of intentionality, and even plunge them into the contingencies of everyday life. Yet, by tracing Joe and Sam’s circuitous and tango-like movement towards this opening, Chabon’s *Kavalier and Clay* does suggest that only by this process can they be “shocked” by love, by the miracles of the unexpected, and by the magic of what Chabon calls in the novel our “everyday heroics.”

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超人漫畫與平民英雄：
麥可·謝朋的《卡瓦利與克雷的神奇冒險》

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摘 要

麥可·謝朋在他獲得普立茲小說獎的小說《卡瓦利與克雷的神奇冒險》中，使用通俗的超人漫畫為敘事框架，來思索生命中自由、規訓、逃逸、救贖、創傷等與生命政治相關的課題。小說以二次大戰為時空背景，藉由超人神話來彰顯超人的獨一無二，也批判「例外法則」的排他性與潛在暴力。藉由演繹超人神話，小說彰顯面對政治對於生命的無限制制約與掌控，被動的屈服與主動的反擊都落入當代政治的例外法則的窠臼中，只有懸置例外，「自然」而「自在」地生活在當下，才能捉住由超人神話「逃」出，而成為「生活在當下」的「平民英雄」。此篇論文援引桑德勒的說法來解讀這本小說。論文大致分成三部分，第一部分先檢視隱藏於超人神話之後的「例外」邏輯，並說明此邏輯之自我矛盾。第二部分則由小說主人公的成長故事出發，勾勒他們由英雄迷思逃逸而出的不同取徑。第三部分則討論小說如何翻轉「逃逸」為「困局」，而解構英雄迷思，並以「平民英雄」的概念取而代之，而以流變與協商回應倫理的兩難困局。

關鍵詞：逃逸、超人敘事、平民英雄、例外法則