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12

Twin beds

The literary verdict

It may be difficult to clean underneath a double bed, conceded the *Daily Mirror* in 1955, and it might ‘start rows over blanket-snatching But one thing must be admitted. It’s so darned friendly’ (11 October 1955: 9). Hygiene, convenience, comfort: all played their part in the century-long debate about double or twin, but for the *Mirror* the trump card in favour of the double is that it is ‘so darned friendly’ – that ‘so darned’ introducing an air of wholesome and naïve surprise, but also, through its own euphemistic substitution of ‘darned’ for ‘damned’, suggesting another lurking euphemism: the sexual as well as the companionable ‘friendliness’ of the double.

The invocation of friendliness by the *Mirror* acknowledges that the battle over ‘double or twin?’ would never be won on practicalities alone. The choice inevitably concerns sleepers’ affective connections. Friendliness marks the spousal relationship as companionable, returning it to the territory of the companionate marriage discussed in Chapter 9. It gestures towards the fashionable buzz-word of the 1950s, ‘togetherness’, a concept condensing a marital ideal and the means to achieve it. But while few would suggest that friendliness in a marriage is undesirable, it sheds only a dim light on to the complexities of the emotional and sexual geography of the marital bedroom.

The previous chapter sought the emotional associations of twin-bedded marriage in the newspaper columns of the twentieth century, the Mass-Observation archive and oral histories. It also drew, as has the whole book, on literary texts. Jan Struther’s *Mrs Miniver* (1939), Orwell’s *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), Betjeman’s *Mount Zion* (1931) and Larkin’s ‘Annus Mirabilis’ (1974) among others, have all made their contributions along the way. This final chapter, however, turns its attention wholly to literature, and particularly the novel, as a key cultural site for the elaboration of ideas about the domestic

mise-en-scène of marital intimacy. Fiction, especially in its classic realist mode, frequently offers direct access to the interiority of its characters. The fleeting thought, the barely registered wince, the vindictive snub – the full emotional palette, however ambiguous, finds its place. Such subtleties of register are not the stuff of newspapers or furniture catalogues. They are, however, the meat and drink of literature.

Such interiority is not simply individual but also profoundly social, prompted by the network of others which holds, enables and frustrates the interiorized subject. The novel form is often said to be particularly suited to conveying the complexity of the social world not only because of its historical connections to social realism but also by its capacity to speak in many voices. Its language is polyphonic (Bakhtin 1984), its narrative not so much productive of the definitive resolution of conflicting discourses but characterized by its dialogic quality – however harmonious or discordant that dialogue might be – whereby a range of perspectives, interpretations, values and judgements meet, engage, jostle and separate. In this, ‘there is no finalizing, explanatory word; the voices of the characters and that of the narrator engage in an unfinished dialogue’ (Dentith 1995: 42). Rather than modelling singularity or conclusiveness, the novel is well-suited to ambiguity and irresolution, to holding two points of view in equilibrium. Consequently, the question ‘double or twin?’ is likely to be answered there neither definitively nor consensually, but with the emotional stakes in that choice intact.

Literature locates its interiorities not only individually and socially, but also spatially. Dialogues and reflections, encounters and misadventures, typically unfold in a recognizable world of cities and villages, and as often as not in houses, streets and tea-rooms rather than the more exceptional environments of battlefields, jungles or distant planets. The houses in the ‘house of fiction’ (James 1934: 46), the homes in which characters live out their dramas, are never innocent of the emotional texture and implications of the narration overall. Some novels lead from the domestic front, as it were: *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Bleak House* (1852–3), *Howards End* (1910) and Lettice Cooper’s *The New House* (1936; discussed later in this chapter) are just some of novels where the house at the centre of the narrative gives the work its title. Countless other fictional houses and domestic interiors condense the novel’s ethos as a whole. The gloomy interior of Thornfield in *Jane Eyre* (1847), the drawing room of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), the unlovely bedsit in *The L-Shaped Room* (1960), Barbara Pym’s vicarages and suburban villas: all are integral to the novels’ narrative architectures.

Nor do such dwellings need to announce their importance in the title or through the extremity of their interventions. Indeed, the novel, particularly in certain of its historical iterations, is particularly fond of the everyday and the domestic, and of the unexceptional character of the houses and the objects that furnish them. Robinson Crusoe’s obsession with the details of his cabin

on the island sets the terms of the genre of which it was the progenitor. For Crusoe, indeed, such domestic activity is fundamental: 'Having settled my household Stuff and Habitation, made me a Table and a Chair ... I began to keep my Journal' (Defoe [1719] 2007: 60). The book does not just foreground the importance of the things of the household, but it is the consequence of them. Without them, there would have been no journal, no novel.

The twentieth-century novel is less concerned with the construction of household furniture than Crusoe was, and more interested in its capacity to speak of those who live among it. The novel's characteristic concern with the exteriority of domestic milieus is, therefore, of a piece with its anatomization of the interiority of those who dwell there and with its polyphonic form. Indeed, the novelist Christopher Isherwood argued that this combination of interiority, dialogue and domesticity was the special contribution of a certain tradition of twentieth-century fiction originating with E. M. Forster (whose approach he consciously emulated) which invested the minutiae of domestic life with the gravitas and consequence of the epic and the tragic. Isherwood recalls his friend, the novelist Edward Upward, suggesting that 'the whole of Forster's technique is based on the tea-table: instead of trying to screw all his scenes up to the highest possible pitch, he tones them down until they sound like mothers'-meeting gossip' ([1938] 1996: 107; see too Izzo 2001: 47–51). For Isherwood, this insight was revelatory, and led to a technique that he called 'tea-tabling'. In redrafting one novel, for example, he records his revisions: 'The murder was cut – "tea-tabled" down to an indecisive, undignified scuffle; and the ending was an apotheosis of the Tea-Table, a decrescendo of anti-climaxes' (ibid.: 159). Nor does the tea-table merely provide the occasion for social interaction, but its accoutrements intervene, furthering the cause of one party, parrying the advances of another. 'I was Christopher Isherwood no longer', he wrote, 'but ... a martyr-evangelist of the tea-table, from whom the most atrocious drawing-room tortures could wring no more than a polite proffer of the buttered scones' (ibid.: 122). If scones could so potently intervene in the cut-and-thrust of the drawing room, what might be precipitated by the presence of double or twins in the marital bedroom?

This chapter considers how a strand of twentieth-century domestic literature, written at the high-water mark and during the subsequent decline of twin-bedded marital sleep, furnished the bedrooms of their characters' homes. It examines how the emotional economy of the bedroom – the traffic in cultural freight and ascribed value circulating between twins and doubles, shared rooms and separate rooms – participates in the contemporary conversation about marriage, its mores and material environments. It asks how literature plots the respective claims and powers of the emotional and the material in marriage, and how the marital bed or beds intercede.

A long-forgotten novel published in 1934 makes the case in its starkest form for the significance of the bedroom furnishings to the fate of the house's

inhabitants. Noël Godber's *Twin Bedsteads* is a comic novel whose two intertwined plots both turn on twin beds. Following a miscommunication over the breakfast table, the recently married John and Norah Orston-Lee exchange their double bed for a pair of 'chastely designed little walnut bedsteads' (Godber 1934: 13). Distraught by what each takes this to mean about the other's feelings, they separate. Meanwhile, John's friend Archie Nutting takes a job at Prodmore and Prickle, a bedstead manufacturer fallen on hard times in the recession. Hitherto their beds had sold well but now, according to the foreman, they are a 'ruddy wash-out' (ibid.: 44). Archie's job is to revive the firm's fortunes. After a series of diversionary mishaps, both plot strands are resolved. The Orston-Lees reunite, jettisoning their twin beds in favour of a 'gorgeous four-poster' (ibid.: 285), and Archie introduces a range of twin beds – the 'Antony and Cleopatra' – which puts Prodmore and Prickle back on its feet. John and Archie meet for a drink to celebrate. "'Here's to Twin Bedsteads!' said Archie, sipping his Snifter', to which John retorts, "'To blazes with Twin Bedsteads – here's to Double Beds!'" (ibid.: 283). Twin beds might be instrumental in saving Prodmore and Prickle, but it is the double that rescues the marriage of the Orston-Lees.

Twin Bedsteads was a novel of its moment. It was preoccupied with the effects on manufacturing of the recession: the author had clearly informed himself of the economic struggles of bedstead manufactures in the 1930s. It takes for granted the power of modern celebrity: the 'Antony and Cleopatra' are successfully marketed by the creation of a living advertisement, with the twin beds placed in a department store window and occupied by two film stars. The beds, moreover, are named after two of history's most famous lovers, an association that proves commercially smart while contributing to the novel's mockery of the misguided vagaries of this furnishing fad. More ominously, 1934 was also a moment when it was still possible for a novel to include an enthusiastic self-proclaimed Fascist within its repertoire of comic characters (ibid.: 252–5). But in its own rather schematic way, the novel is also concerned with the fault-lines of modern marriage, instantiated through the twin bedsteads. In focusing entirely on the phenomenon of these beds, the novel gives unusually close consideration to the ambiguous associations of both twin and double beds, and of the ways in which these were inflected by class, gender and age to comic effect. Their cultural currency was such that readers could be trusted to get the joke.

It is the modishness of twin bedsteads that drives both plotlines: it salvages Prodmore and Prickle's fortunes and threatens to undo the Orston-Lees' marriage. Fashion, the novel warns, is never merely trivial or superficial, but can have disastrous effects on the lives of those who unthinkingly follow its whims. In a relay of misunderstandings, it is partly the modishness of the choice that John and Norah Orston-Lee each believe to be driving the other's

wish to switch from double to twin. Yet neither understands the choice as *only* a matter of style, irrelevant to the emotional dynamics of their marriage. Each is hurt by the other's (mis)perceived preference. Norah introduces the possibility of the more fashionable option as a test of John's priorities and commitment: if he chooses twins, it will demonstrate his under-valuation of their nocturnal intimacy. As the cook correctly surmises, he "Adn't the nouse to see that she was only trying to make 'im say 'ow much 'e liked sleepin' in the same bed with 'er' (ibid.: 19). For his part, John, immersed in the financial pages of the newspaper, agrees to the change because he is distracted, and assumes she favours fashion over intimacy. Crestfallen, he concludes that 'double-bedsteads were very Victorian and not in keeping with modern ideas' (ibid.: 21). Careless inattentiveness is his contribution to the debacle.

The Orston-Lees' trusty servants foresee the trouble such folly will produce. Only the young parlourmaid, her head turned by marital inexperience and the allure of fashion, speaks out in twin beds' favour: 'I think they're much nicer. So smart and up to date like' (ibid.: 14). The redoubtable cook, Mrs Roly, and the butler disagree with her:

"Them that's been joined together in 'oly matrimony let no man tear asunder,'" misquoted Mrs. Roly gravely. 'They're agin Nature. "One flesh – one bed," I says, "The two shall be twain ... "'

'Hear, hear!' approved the Orston-Lee's butler ... 'A good big double fourposter, like Queen Elizabeth used to sleep in. That's my idea of a bed for married couples.' (ibid.)

This wisdom from below is not only the result of the servants' innate good sense insulating them against the foolishness of fashion – the parlourmaid, after all, would opt for twins if she married. It is more the wisdom of age, of those who have been around long enough to understand that what keeps a marriage on its feet depends, in large part, in what happens in the bedroom. In Mrs Roly's terms, the 'twain' become one flesh more easily in one bed. The double guarantees a bond that cannot be secured by emotion alone; it needs the help of the bedroom furniture.

The emotional co-ordinates of the choice of marital bed, in however slight and sketchy a form, are all present in *Twin Bedsteads*. Norah's suggestion of twins is an indirect question about her husband's happiness, and one which he answers in deference to what he casually assumes about her own priorities. Miscommunication about desire and intimacy results in dismay and distress, alienation and withdrawal. The twin bedsteads are the platforms on which the Orston-Lees' marital drama is performed, the narrative making abundantly clear that they represent misguided modishness over good sense, and practicality ('hygiene') over intimacy (Godber 1934: 152). The novel sets

its face against these fashionable interlopers by mobilizing precisely the associations adumbrated by Marie Stopes in her marital advice books. Stopes thought that twin beds were the 'invention of the devil' (1928: 115), and John Orston-Lee agrees: they are the work of 'the fiend incarnate' (Godber 1934: 126). Stopes's book starts from a premise of marital disappointment, though promising hope and redemption, while Godber's dedication 'to all young people contemplating matrimony' (Godber 1934: n.p.) frames his novel as a cautionary tale. Nevertheless, *Twin Bedsteads* inhabits the same diagnostic territory as *Married Love*, and its case regarding the damage to marriage caused by the careless adoption of twin beds strikes the same chord as Stopes's polemic.

It was not until much later in the century that marital advisers voiced a similar antipathy to twin beds, and a comparable time-lag was also apparent in the literary response. After the Second World War, the literary keynote becomes more consistently one of, at best, pragmatic acceptance or indifference and at worst, and increasingly, antipathy and repudiation, until twin beds became a literary shorthand for a failing marriage. *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) sets the post-war tone, with the unsatisfactory character of Celia, the wife of the narrator-protagonist Charles Ryder, established and parsed across a twin-bedded scene. Following a two-year separation, the couple are reunited in New York. As they prepare for bed Celia chats brightly about their children, but their estrangement is redolent in every detail:

She talked ... while she undressed, with an effort to appear at ease; then she sat at the dressing table, ran a comb through her hair, and with her bare back towards me, looking at herself in the glass, said 'Shall I put my face to bed?'

It was a familiar phrase, one that I did not like; she meant, should she remove her make-up, cover herself with grease and put her hair in a net.

'No,' I said, 'not at once.'

Then she knew what was wanted. She had neat, hygienic ways for that too, but there were both relief and triumph in her smile of welcome; later we parted and lay in our twin beds a yard or two distant, smoking. (Vaugh [1945] 1962: 219)

The whole awkward and unpleasant scene is constructed through a series of splits, displacements and circumlocutions. The twin beds ensure that there will be no contact between Charles and Celia without prior consultation, their separation of the couple giving Celia the advantage in the back-and-forth of their negotiations. At the fork in the road of her nightly routine, she strategically forces Charles to declare his sexual intentions, which in turn confirms her rights as his wife subsequently to discuss the state of their

marriage. While a double bed would not have rendered redundant the question 'Shall I put my face to bed?', the twins ensure that the rapprochement she initiates is temporary, strategic and unconvincing, with the next phase in their negotiations conducted from the demarcated territories of separate beds.

The repudiation of Celia is effected not only by her strategic manoeuvres but also by the attribution to her of a quality more often attributed to twin beds themselves: hygiene. Charles notes the 'curiously hygienic quality of her prettiness' and the similarly 'neat, hygienic ways' with which she transacted their sexual encounter (ibid.: 218, 219). The longstanding association of twins with hygiene is here displaced, rendered objectionable. However appropriate hygiene may be in the design of bedsteads, it is scarcely recuperable as sexually appealing, yet deference to the dictates of hygiene governs how Celia looks and behaves. A quality previously celebrated as the proper preoccupation of the assiduous household manager is internalized and distorted by the managerial wife. *Brideshead Revisited*, renowned for its fascination with the English upper classes, plays its small part in the narrowing and hardening of the emotional repertoire associated with that most middle class of sleeping choices, twin beds.

The positioning of twin beds as symptomatic of a restricted emotional repertoire became increasingly habitual in the post-war period, their invocation certain to be a sign of a marriage in trouble. Indicative of this is a short story in John Updike's *Too Far To Go* (1979), a collection of fourteen stories originally published between 1956 and 1976 (Updike [1979] 1982: 9). These trace in real time, as it were, the decline and fall of the marriage of Richard and Joan Maple, each story a staging post – though never an unambiguous or inevitable one – on the road to divorce.

The title of 'Twin Beds in Rome' (1964), the fourth in the sequence, brings together in melancholic contradistinction the romantic associations of the Italian capital and these markers of marital malaise, suggesting a hopeless mismatch of romantic expectation and marital experience. The twin beds which the Maples find in their hotel room prompt them to reflect on their marriage and their inability finally to settle for each other. Joan doesn't think the twin beds really matter: 'This isn't a honeymoon ... You can come visit me in my bed if you can't sleep'. But Richard finds them an affront: 'He felt they had been insulted. Until they finally parted, it seemed impertinent for anything, even a slice of space, to come between them' (Updike [1979] 1982: 63). The equation of proximity with intimacy familiar from Stopes's writing is taken for granted by Richard, but the different emotional reactions of the spouses to the spatial interruption serve as a litmus test of their attitudes to each other, and to long-term marital intimacy more generally.

As it turns out, the initial response of each spouse to the twin beds proves unreliable. While Richard 'fell easily into a solid sleep' (ibid.: 64), Joan

found it more difficult: 'I couldn't go to sleep, and every time I reached over to give you a little pat, to make you think you were in a double bed, you'd say, "Go away" and shake me off' (ibid.: 65). The distribution of unconscious acceptance and refusal of this nocturnal arrangement did not finally fall along predictable lines, and in each case a seeming ease – Joan with the prospect of the beds, Richard with the fact of them – conceals a deeper ambivalence about what they introduce into their relationship. Joan's initial indifference is followed by a desire to reassure Richard of her continuing proximity; Richard's apparently peaceful sleep is broken by a shout of 'Leave me alone! ([1979] 1982: 65), an eruption which Joan welcomes for its truthfulness even though his words contradict his avowed desire to share a bed with her. Contradiction, ambivalence, equivocation – all forms of doubled or split states – characterize Richard and Joan in their unconscious as well as conscious lives. There is no singular perspective, no unambivalent decision to be reached. The 'technical purity' (no space between) of their long-term double bed has no more secured their rocky, 'mangled' marriage than, in the end, their twin beds in Rome deliver its death-knell (ibid.: 63, 60). A benign lack of understanding, or rather a set of incompatible truths, is almost the best they can hope for. 'You're such a nice woman', says Richard. 'I can't understand why I'm so miserable with you' (ibid.: 63).

In delineating the shifting dimensions of the marriage, the story refuses to endorse the judgement on twin beds made by Richard, piecing together a more finely balanced picture of the tensions that keep the spouses together and drive them apart. The story's opening lines confirm the mismatch signalled by its title: 'The Maples had talked and thought about separation so long it seemed it would never come. For their conversations, increasingly ambivalent and ruthless as accusation, retraction, blow, and caress alternated and canceled, had the final effect of knitting them ever tighter together in a painful, helpless, degrading intimacy' (ibid.: 59). Intimacy, usually invoked as an unalloyed marital good, is stripped of its golden glow and becomes a source of shame and suffering. Paradoxically, the Maples' conversations about separation only bind them together more tightly, generating an intimacy that is not only 'painful, helpless, degrading' but also constitutive of the whole 'ambivalent and ruthless' process of mutual dependence and marital unravelling.

In a further refusal of familiar assumptions regarding intimacy as an index of marital health, the Maples' sexual relationship shares in the messy and unpredictable balance of forces shaping the whole relationship: 'Their lovemaking, like a perversely healthy child whose growth defies every deficiency of nutrition, continued: when their tongues at last fell silent, their bodies collapsed together as two mute armies might mingle, released from the absurd hostilities decreed by two mad kings' (ibid.). Their desire for each

other emerges not from healthy and harmonious communication but as a surprisingly – ‘perversely’ – vigorous respite from their endless, exhausting marital skirmishes. The result – at this stage of the story cycle, at least – is that ‘their marriage could not die’ (ibid.: 60).

The Maples’ responses to the twin beds are played out through a series of more or less conventionally gendered positions, from Joan’s pragmatic refusal to feel her relationship with Richard is either symbolized or determined by their separate beds, to Richard’s sadness, wounded sexual pride and gloomy over-reading of the beds on this of all trips. A similar distribution of gendered affiliations or refusals of what twin beds offer is echoed later in the decade, when the American playwright Robert Anderson, best known for *Tea and Sympathy* (1953), and, according to his obituary, ‘among the theater’s most visible, serious playwrights of the 1950s and ‘60s’ (*New York Times* 10 February 2009: A25), staged *You Know I Can’t Hear You When the Water’s Running* (1967), first on Broadway and then in London. The work comprises four one-act sketches about marriage, all focused on ‘restoring ordinary conjugal sex as a subject of nonblack comedy’ (quoted in Adler 1978: 124). One of these, ‘The Footsteps of Doves’, is set in the showroom of a bedding store. Harriet and George, couched for their twenty-five married years in a double bed, are shopping for twins. Harriet, menopausal, practical and ‘aloof’ (Anderson 1967: 33), seeks the change in the hope of a better night’s sleep. George is reluctant, perplexed and nostalgic, seeing this as the end of their sexual relationship and marriage: ‘The longest distance in the world’, he says, ‘is the distance between twin beds. I don’t care if it’s six inches or six feet. It’s psychological distance’ (ibid.: 34). He is only reconciled to the transition by scenting the promise of an affair with Jill, a young divorced woman he meets in the store who is browsing the doubles (she and her ex-husband having slept in twins (ibid.: 43)). The play closes with George, out of Harriet’s earshot, addressing the double bed with the words ‘Be seeing you’, and the lights gradually fading until they leave illuminated only ‘the fifty-four-inch [double] bed’ (ibid.: 50, 51). Marriages and affairs may come and go, this tableau suggests, but the double will inevitably, in the end, triumph.

Anderson said that he wrote *You Know I Can’t Hear You* because he ‘wanted to write a man’s play’ (quoted in Adler 1978: 123), and, indeed, the sympathies of ‘The Footsteps of Doves’ undoubtedly lie with George. Harriet’s perspective is glimpsed briefly, when she parodies George’s ‘very romantic picture’ of the joys of the double as ‘a couple of soup spoons nestled in a drawer’ (Anderson 1967: 40). She refers to her own marginal place in this sentimental account as ‘old ever-ready I may want the space so that you’ll have to make the effort. ... Not just suddenly decide you might as well since you hardly have to move to get it’ (ibid.). But George is given more time than Harriet to express his point of view: when Harriet and the salesman leave the stage to choose

headboards, George remains and encounters Jill. The implication is clear: Harriet has only herself to blame if he looks elsewhere for sexual intimacy, for George has spelt out to her what is at stake: 'I'm fighting for our marriage, Harriet. ... Nietzsche said the big crises in our lives do not come with the sound of thunder and lightning, but softly like the footsteps of doves' (ibid.: 37). The play's title confirms George's warning: this is indeed their crisis, and it is entirely of Harriet's making.

George protests at the decision to shift to twins as a kind of domestic determinism: the dimensions of the house (the bedroom is too small to accommodate the king-size he favours) are calling the shots, he argues, rather than the wishes of those who live in it. 'The house is meant to serve *our* purposes, not the other way around' (ibid.: 40; original emphasis). A similar sense of passive domestic determinism is critiqued in Edward Albee's play 'Counting the Ways' (1977). More formally experimental than Anderson's, this play is also interested in the dynamics of change in the later phases of a marriage, again figured in the transition from a double to twins. This time, however, the shift is not instigated by the conscious intervention of either spouse (named only as He and She). One day, instead of waking up in his familiar king-size, He finds twin beds, and asks, 'When did it happen? When did our lovely bed ... split and become two?' (Albee 1977: 33). Her response – predicated on 'calm and reason' – is 'Well, I suspect it's been coming. ... These things sneak up on you' (ibid.: 29, 34). The unsought change accrues a sense of inevitability confirmed by She's passive acceptance of it. Once again, acquiescence to the change is gendered feminine while the husband, distraught, protests the loss of the intimacy figured by 'our lovely bed'. In both plays, as in 'Twin Beds in Rome', the men are the emotional registers of the change, voicing grief at their loss, while the women's pragmatism refuses to recognize that this is territory fraught with emotion.

Anderson and Albee mark out twin beds as sites of casual feminine betrayal and dismayed masculine protest, and as harbingers not only of sexual death, but of death *tout court*. Anderson's George says of the single bed that they could 'put sides and a lid on it and bury us' (1967: 33), while Albee's He says 'they're for a solitary, or for a corpse!' (1977: 34). In the theatre of the 1960s and 1970s, the equation has become a simple one. While the wives accept, welcome or seek the new sleeping arrangement, for the husbands, twin beds are anti-sex, their separation of the spouses signifying psychological distance, sexual withdrawal and marital coldness. Inexorably, they presage the ultimate terminus of death. The double, on the other hand, is celebrated by the husbands as a sign of marital vitality and sexual vigour casually discarded by their careless wives. The men care about the emotional and sexual intimacy attributed to the power of the double; the women are weary of it. When Norah introduced the twin bedsteads in Noël Godber's novel, it was a change

made in error, without the intention of inflicting pain on her husband. By the 1960s, twin beds' anti-sex associations are explicit, their unilateral imposition on a hitherto healthily intimate marriage attributed to the middle-aged wife. Proximity might continue, but it is impoverished. For Rosamond Lehmann in *A Sea-Grape Tree* (1976), 'Austere twin beds in shadow suggest a long habit of counter-erotic nuptial intimacy' ([1976] 1982: 146). While twin beds confirm a habituated nuptial intimacy, this is named as explicitly 'counter-erotic'. They are not just asexual, therefore, but actively anti-sexual agents.

This too is the tenor of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* (1951), where twin beds condense the shortcomings of Sarah and Henry's marriage, itself the emotional foil to Sarah's affair with Maurice Bendrix. Henry is a civil servant with an incipient bald patch and an expertise in widow's pensions, while Bendrix is the intense and saturnine writer with whom Sarah falls passionately and irrevocably in love, in contrast to her anodyne fondness for Henry. After Sarah's death, Henry 'moved into his dressing-room, and the room they [he and Sarah] had shared with the cold twin beds was left for guests who never came' (Greene [1951] 1975: 171). Henry's paradigmatic loneliness is prefigured by the twin beds and compounded by their subsequent failure to be taken up by guests.

The couple's twin beds stand in contradistinction to the far from chilly double bed in which Sarah and Bendrix conduct their affair, and which metonymically exemplifies the intermingled joy and pain, love and hate, into which their affair binds them. When Bendrix, jealous and insecure, wants to hurt Sarah, his desire forms as a wish 'to take a woman back with me and lie with her upon the same bed in which I made love to Sarah; it was as though I knew that the only way to hurt her was to hurt myself' (ibid.: 57). The lovers' sexual relationship adumbrates a psychic and subjective commingling at once sadistic and masochistic, and that undifferentiated state is figured by the materiality of the double bed. Indeed, the complexity of the emotional entanglements occasioned by the double is in part what marks the affair out as a vital, mature and complex dynamic, in contrast to the implicit and irreducible infantile paucity of the marriage and its analogue twin beds, the nature of both of which – 'cold' – is deemed by Bendrix to be adequately registered in that single monosyllabic adjective.

The contrast between double and twins is underlined by the circumstance of Bendrix and Sarah's first sexual encounter in a cheap hotel near Paddington, in 'a real Edwardian room with a great gilt double bed and red velvet curtains and a full-length mirror. (People who came to Arbuckle Avenue never required twin beds.)' (ibid.: 44). There, in miniature, is the by now familiar dichotomy: the double bed equals sex – even if charged with agony as well as joy – while twin beds stand for a chilly if companionable marital celibacy, 'a quiet friendly marriage that would go on and on' (ibid.: 56). Proximity continues

and intimacy of a kind persists, but in a form deficient, flawed, decidedly counter-erotic.

Sexless marriage set against passionate affair, fondness against desire, bureaucrat against writer: such contrasts are simplistic, even hackneyed. And, indeed, there is something curiously conventional and over-determined about the co-ordinates between which the novel is plotted. The familiarity of the romance narrative, however, is no bar to its continuing popularity or capacity to hold readers' attention: as Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey remind us, romance remains 'one of the most compelling discourses by which any one of us is inscribed' (1995: 12). In *The End of the Affair*, the well-worn romantic scenario is renewed by Bendrix's compulsive anatomizations of his feelings – his capacity as a writer to plot, describe, capture a mood or a nuance, a fear or a longing, in a well-turned phrase or startling trope, his sense of the power and the pitfalls of storytelling. Hereby the familiar emotional distribution between affair and marriage accrues texture, heft and nuance. Bendrix's first-person narration is in turn recalibrated by the introduction of the unmediated voice of Sarah in the sections of her diary that comprise Book Three, gradually revealing her account of the affair, her reason for ending it and its aftermath. The novel is spoken in the two distinct voices of the lovers, although these never directly address each other.

Of still greater importance than the discerning consciousnesses of the narrative voices to the translation of *The End of the Affair* from conventional if sophisticated romance to a much more unorthodox narrative, however, is the intrusion into the three-way relationship between Bendrix, Sarah and Henry of the ultimate *deus ex machina*, God. When Sarah believes that Bendrix has been killed in an air raid (the affair is conducted during the London Blitz of 1940) she prays, making a pact with God: if Bendrix's life is spared, she promises to give him up and to return to her marriage. It is, and she does, without giving Bendrix any explanation. Baffled and intensely jealous (assuming Sarah has a new lover), Bendrix is compelled to relinquish his hold on the narrative, as on his life, signalled by the handing over of the narrative reins to Sarah's diary. There, she recounts her struggles with the pain and joy occasioned by her promise to God, with the echoes between her experiences of profane and sacred love, and the abandonment of the rational self that both kinds of love precipitate. In so doing, Sarah finds carnal love and love for God to be indistinct. She asks God, 'Did I ever love Maurice as much before I loved You? Or was it really You I loved all the time? Did I touch You when I touched him? Could I have touched You if I hadn't touched him first, touched him as I never touched Henry, anybody?' (Greene [1951] 1975:123). Her all-too-human love for Bendrix has tipped her into belief in a God towards whom she had been hitherto agnostic. 'I've fallen into belief like I fell in love', she tells Bendrix in a letter (ibid.: 147).

And Bendrix, despite his impotent rage at his displacement, finds himself tracing a similar trajectory in his own experience of love. 'The words of human love', he writes, 'have been used by the saints to describe their vision of God, and so, I suppose, we might use the terms of prayer, meditation, contemplation to explain the intensity of love we feel for a woman' (ibid.: 47). Despite his furious railing against belief, his love for Sarah finally results in his own submission to it, the last words of the novel a weary prayer addressed to a God who has battered down his resistance: 'O God, You've done enough, You've robbed me of enough. I'm too tired and old to learn to love, leave me alone for ever' (ibid.: 192). In this apostrophic concession, Bendrix unwillingly confirms the words of the Catholic convert Léon Bloy which form the novel's epigraph: 'Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence' (ibid.: [6]).

The End of the Affair takes literally the proposition advocated by Marie Stopes – although in less overblown, more orthodox and more disturbing terms – that the sexual might open a route to the metaphysical. Greene's narrative, however, refuses the simplicity of Stopes's conclusion that this physical and metaphysical rapture will be straightforwardly pleasurable, let alone marital. The extra-marital passion Sarah experiences with Bendrix in the undifferentiated space of his double bed introduces her to the possibility of the existence of a God in whom she had previously disbelieved, and to a transcendence and relinquishment that is the source of acute and enduring pain for all. There is no comfort in the access to divine mystery, only anguish. Miracles neither soothe nor placate. Rather, they profoundly upset and displace the consolations of 'ordinary corrupt human love' (ibid.: 124), for ultimately the living – Sarah, before her death, and thereafter Bendrix – are forced to confront its limitations and ephemerality, and as a result are left bereft, shattered and comfortless, delivered to faith reluctant and exhausted.

The novel's delineation of the unpredictability and incommensurability of desire within marriage refuses the simple contrast between a marriage condemned as arid and the revivifying powers of the passionate affair, and neither does it endorse the opposite set of judgements. The paradoxes posited in answer to such oversimplifications are multiple, but one strand can be tracked through the relationship of the novel's beds with sex, with sleep and with friendship. Henry and Sarah's twin beds might be cold, but Henry, at least, sleeps easily in his. Sarah records in her diary watching him sleep; she feels towards him 'not intimate but companionable ... I must have wanted him, in a way, once, but I've forgotten why, and I was too young to know what I was choosing. It's so unfair. While I loved Maurice, I loved Henry, and now I'm what they call good, I don't love anyone at all' (ibid.: 104). 'It's so unfair': the complaint of a child as yet unreconciled to life's inevitable injustices, but

also a verdict on the insubstantiality and unpredictability of desire, and on the conundrum of the demise of Sarah's socially sanctioned, genuine, if no longer sexual love for Henry simultaneously with the truncation of her illicit but passionate love for Bendrix.

Love and desire, sadly, do not play by the rules – not for Henry, nor Sarah, nor indeed for Bendrix, whose double bed brings him love and sex but denies him the sleep so easily accessed by Henry: 'I would take pills at night to make me sleep quickly, but I never found any pills that would keep me asleep till daylight' (ibid.: 74). The price Bendrix pays for intensity is tormented wakefulness. Henry sleeps soundly in an innocent oblivion that has the effect of binding Sarah to him. Just as the access to the metaphysical via the physical does not constitute an endorsement of this trajectory, neither does the naming of the 'cold twin beds' of Henry and Sarah's marriage erase the companionable love that is sustained by Sarah's affair. Ironically, Sarah's death leads to the intensification of the friendship and mutual reliance of Bendrix and Henry. The bond that ultimately endures throughout the novel, albeit transferred from Sarah and Henry to Henry and Bendrix, is neither sexual nor romantic love, marital or otherwise, but affectionate friendship.

The End of the Affair endorses twin beds' associations with Lehmann's 'counter-erotic nuptial intimacy', but in such a way as to problematize this correspondence as much as to reinforce it. Nonetheless, the novel remains an instrument in the post-war narrowing of the emotional repertoire attributable to twin beds until they became unambiguous indicators of sexual failure. They increasingly figured as, at best, the misguided choice of menopausal wives, and at worst – as in the contemporary American poet Robert Gibb's poem 'An End to the Marriage: My Step-Mother Buys Twin Beds' – as a structural bromide administered by a woman of almost fairy-tale malevolence: in this case, the poet-speaker's wicked stepmother, who condemns her hapless, powerless husband to a nocturnal life 'billeted upon that small celibate bed' (Gibb 2005: 183). Oozing with contempt for his stepmother and writing of her introduction of twin beds as a vengeful act of virtual castration on his long-suffering father, the poem is an act of masculine bonding and filial identification, articulating an incredulous fury at the blighting of his father's life by the (presumed) sexual privations inflected by his stepmother. Drawing on a by now longstanding set of associations between twin beds and a marital-sexual death-knell, the poem represents the nadir of twin beds' literary fate.

The effect of the growing post-war consensus on the iniquities of twin beds was to normalize what had been a much more contested and nuanced set of emotional associations and judgements. Before the Second World War, even those few texts (such as Godber's *Twin Bedsteads*) which situated twin beds as players hostile to marital happiness were nonetheless alert both to the contrary case and to the partiality, both historical and psychological,

of their own argument. There remained a case to be made, an argument to be conducted; the jury was out on twin beds, their pleasures and dangers. Their deleterious effect could not simply be taken for granted, nor their invocation straightforwardly assumed to condense associations of a chilly marriage in sexual retreat. In these earlier texts, the judgement on twins – and indeed, at times, on the double – was less bullish, less certain, more open to discussion, more aware of its position as a stance rather than a self-evident truth universally acknowledged. This is particularly the case with fiction of the interwar years, where the conjugal bedroom frequently figures in the *mise-en-scène* of marriage. There, marital exchanges are stage-managed and mismanaged, the choice of double or twin not infrequently organizing the encounter as well as playing its part in its emotional charge. The tenor and texture of the marriage are condensed, explored and weighed up – though not always predictably so – in the way the couple sleep. In such texts, twin beds appear without prejudice, without the almost invisible commonsense ease of consensual meanings. They are contributors to the marital debates and the dramas, but they play a range of different parts. They signify, but their significations are open, elastic, contested and – to twenty-first readers, at least – surprising.

Such is the case in *The Way Things Are* (1927), a deft and deceptively humorous novel by E. M. Delafield, best known for the *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930) but a prolific and popular middlebrow author from 1915 until her death in 1943. *The Way Things Are* anatomizes the muted pangs and longings of a woman in a disappointingly prosaic marriage. Laura is married to the dull but dependable Alfred, whose conversational enthusiasm is reserved for the cultivation of sugar-beet. One morning, Laura awakes and surveys the landscape of her bedroom and her marriage: 'Alfred lay sleeping on the far side of the double bed. They ought to have had modern twin beds, of course – much more hygienic, and, Laura could not help thinking, much more comfortable as well. They often talked about it. Or, rather, Laura often talked about it. Alfred, like so many husbands, was of a silent disposition' (Delafield [1927] 1988: 19). The epithets Laura applies to twin beds – modern, hygienic and comfortable – are familiar, associated with them from their inception. Nonetheless, they give pause when included in a morning reverie prompted by a husband's somnolent form. Twin beds might belong to the modern world of hygiene and comfort, but their appeal surfaces in response to the disappointments of marriage. Is their invocation simply defensive, desired for their capacity to mitigate marital disappointment? Does their allure consist only in their pragmatic capacity to give material equivalence to her emotional distance from Alfred – a distance soon to be filled by a serious and invigorating flirtation with a composer of popular tunes called Duke Ayland? Or do their twinned forms, with their associations with modernity, hygiene and comfort,

offer Laura a more ameliorative if elusive form of spatial and emotional recalibration of the marriage?

Laura is a woman of her time. A published author of short stories, fashionably agnostic, comfortable in her use of a popular Freudian language of repressions and sex-complexes and the unconscious, she also owns 'a small volume of Dr. Marie Stopes ... bestowed by Laura beneath a pile of her more intimate underwear at the back of her chest of drawers' (ibid.: 99). Her interest in psychology and the presence of a book by Stopes may not put Laura in the sexual avant-garde, but they do place her among the forward-thinking of her time. Nonetheless, there is a poignancy to the location of Stopes's book – presumably *Married Love*, still by far her best-known volume in 1927 – concealed beneath her 'more intimate underwear' at the back of a drawer. The services of neither the underwear nor the book, it seems, are called on very often. *Married Love* is addressed to the many, 'particularly in the middle classes', who 'marry expecting joy [but] are bitterly disappointed' (Stopes [1918] 2004: 9). Perhaps Laura had acquired the book when she felt that her own disappointment might be temporary, and that joy could still be hers. By now, however, married for seven years, *Married Love*'s promise of sexual rapture in marriage would have rung hollow. Her own marriage had delivered two children (to one of whom she is passionately attached), but only a yawning emotional and sexual distance from Alfred: 'Marriage, indeed, had served to inculcate in her the chastity – than which there is none more rigid – of a romantic woman, married to a man with whom she has never been in love' (Delafield [1927] 1988: 183). Laura's struggles are therefore generated by the conjunction of a romantic disposition, a loveless marriage, and a communicative and passionate lover.

'Conflict, in the language of psycho-analysis, was the almost incessant companion of Laura's psychological existence' (ibid.: 14), and the main psychic conflict she experiences is between the demands of the 'things' of the book's title and her longing for an emotional life. That ominous title, *The Way Things Are*, redolent of stasis and weary resignation, suggests the inevitability of their power. Laura is left only with the distinctly cold comfort of her own clear-sightedness, apparent throughout the novel but intensified at the end, when she finally sees through the false promises made by the 'insidious and fatally unpractical qualities' of 'imagination, emotionalism, sentimentalism' (ibid.: 336) – all of them the stuff of romance, all ultimately doomed to evaporate and disappoint. This recognition allows her to see that she is not the romantic heroine whom Duke encouraged her to consider herself, but just 'an average woman' (ibid.). Both she and Duke 'were incapable of the ideal, imperishable love' (ibid.: 335), but to tolerate the prospect of living with this insight, she realizes that 'only by envisaging

and accepting her own limitations, could she endure the limitations of her surroundings' (ibid.: 336). To go on living, she needs to internalize – match herself to – this newly diminished version of herself, to make bearable the emotional wasteland of 'the way things are'.

If the title points to Laura's ultimate surrender to her domestic circumstances, the novel also allows glimpses of other interpretations of 'the way things are'. As someone familiar with the basics of psychoanalytic and sexological thinking (she has read Freud, Jung and Havelock Ellis (ibid.: 110, 207, 158)), and indeed someone who before her marriage was fully familiar with the corporeality of human life (she had qualified as a masseuse (ibid.: 4)), Laura is someone whose view of human character and motivation comprehends the complexities of both mind and body. She is drawn to her sister's friend Losh, a medical student with a special interest in abnormal psychology, and recounts to him in thinly disguised form her impossible dilemma: married to Alfred, in love with Duke. His response is not encouraging: 'It's a vicious circle, I know, but I don't believe in all this blinking optimism. Better face things as they are' (ibid.: 291). For Losh, 'the way things are' comprehends not just the inevitable disappointments of married life, but also their (to him) inevitable psychological consequences: neurosis and nervous breakdown. In conversation with him, the 'things' of the title acquire a psychic dimension alongside their more general circumstantial one.

Laura's judgement of the relative importance to be accorded the clamour of her desires, however, never equates with Losh's. While he suggests that the best course of action would be to 'go off with him for a bit' (ibid.: 290), she cannot bring herself to deceive Alfred. Decency and common sense, the values of her class and milieu, continue to matter to her. Consequently, *The Way Things Are* is less concerned with her romance than with Laura's continuing attachment to her marriage, children and home, and the relative claims and limits of each. Laura may offer an 'unspoken tribute ... to romance, that lurking possibility' (ibid.: 37) every morning, but this longing is ultimately incompatible with her marriage vows, her attachment to her children and the demands of the household.

The intensity of the 'tremulous fervour' Laura experiences with Duke is founded as much in her longing for communication as in sexual desire. Alfred is of a 'silent disposition', whereas Duke talks. He is attentive, observant, frank and sympathetic, and 'Laura yielded to the insidious rapture of talking about herself exactly as she wished herself to be talked about' (ibid.: 117). Yet seductive as this is, she is also dimly aware that such intensity is fragile and temporary. Even at the height of the affair, Duke's letters are disappointing, and his powers of communication already fail at crucial moments (ibid.: 224, 173). What's more, her sister, the thoroughly

modern Christine, pronounces 'her verdict upon Laura's problem of the emotions' (ibid.: 204) in a characterization of the likely trajectory of an affair for a married woman:

If one has married the wrong person, more or less – and after all, almost anyone feels like the wrong person after one's lived with them for a number of years, I imagine – surely it's better to go on, than to begin all over again with somebody else. It's such a waste of all the adjusting that one has learnt to do. Because the awful thing is, that one love affair is very like another. It gets to a certain pitch, and then – practically always – it declines. And it seems to me it would decline even faster than usual, if the woman knew all the time that she'd given up, say, her children for the sake of the man. (ibid.: 203–4)

Christine's words induce in Laura a 'revulsion of feeling' against such a course of action, entrenching her still more deeply in her sense of the impossibility of the situation. Marriage disappoints, of course, but so too will romance, and all the more quickly if chosen at the expense of her children.

Laura is defeated not only by her doubts about the longevity of romance, by love for her children and by her fondness for Alfred, but also by the snares of domesticity. She finds that the house itself conspires against her: 'At Applecourt, it [her romance with Duke] had lost poignancy from the sheer weight and force of other preoccupations' (ibid.: 274), such as the insistent, nagging need to decide what pudding should be served at lunchtime. In the end, the forces of domesticity triumph: 'The atmosphere of the house was too strong for her' (ibid.: 334). Compounding her sense of personal inadequacy, she realizes that she has not simply been beaten in a fair fight by a more powerful opponent, for the house's atmosphere is, she knows, her own creation: 'A vague recollection of a sentence, read somewhere, to the effect that it is always the wife and mother who is primarily responsible for the atmosphere of the house, depressed Laura's spirits' (ibid.: 36). In further testimony to her personal failure, she has herself created the domestic ambience that finally overcomes her. Everything confirms Laura's sense that there is no real alternative to the emotional barrenness of her marriage, and that this is, if not her own fault, at least her responsibility. In the end, inevitably, she concedes defeat: 'The children, her marriage vows, the house, the ordering of the meals, the servants, the making of a laundry list every Monday – in a word, the things of respectability – kept one respectable' (ibid.: 335–6). These 'things of respectability' hold her in her marriage, numbing her sufficiently to be able to relinquish Duke. The status quo – 'the way things are' – remains in place, unshaken and utterly indifferent to her unhappiness.

The 'things' of the title by which Laura's romantic longings are defeated are therefore not only circumstantial and psychic but also material – they are, quite literally, things. These include not only puddings and laundry lists but also the bed she shares with Alfred. Laura's desire for 'modern twin beds' is caught up in her ambivalence about 'the way things are'. Her longing for twin beds is a bid to take charge of 'things', to interrupt their capacity to govern her most intimate life, to use them rather than being controlled by them. Twin beds would signal her association with modernity – something to which Laura is committed, refusing 'absolutely to be anything but truly modern' (ibid.: 183) – but which her sister embodies with much greater ease. 'Hygienic' twin beds also indicate a modern pragmatism which Christine again embodies, her own marriage a companionable but briskly unromantic contract entered into 'without earnestness, without illusion, and without emotion' (ibid.: 296), and nonetheless – or consequently – destined to be a success. Such pragmatism is not available to Laura, 'by nature earnest, and emotional, and desperately given to illusions' (ibid.). The longing for twin beds is a bid to be more like Christine, but too much stands in her way. There is a mismatch between Laura's mind and her emotions: 'Her brain might function with all the clarity of 1927 but her emotional reactions remained those of 1912' (ibid.: 150). Pragmatic marital modernity such as Christine's is available to Laura intellectually, but this does not touch her feelings. The way things are emotionally for Laura is how they were in 1912. Her inability to be emotionally 'modern' in 1927 – to align her desires with the marital modernity of the longed-for twin beds – means that things will remain in their current unsatisfactory form, double bed and all.

The novel is a powerful rebuttal of the 'blinking optimism' of Marie Stopes's marriage manuals. While Stopes argued for the power of 'a marriage bed, large, square and comfortable' (1935: 58) in helping secure marital happiness and as a route to the spiritual raptures of married love, Laura knows that it takes more than the proximity engineered by a double bed to produce intimacy. If she is compelled to acknowledge the power of 'the things of respectability' to keep one respectable, so too she has to recognize their limits: they can keep her respectable, but they cannot make her happy. Her ambitions were in some ways modest: she would have settled for 'an emotional life – of her own' (Delafield [1927] 1988: 8), but even this remains beyond her reach. The emotions plotted across the expanse of the double bed early in the novel are still more entrenched at its resolution, in the diminution of expectation, disillusion and disappointment. The way things are is the way things will stay.

While for Laura twin beds are signs of modernity, hinting at the possibility of a nocturnal prophylactic against the disappointments of the marital double, other novels of the interwar period – the high-water mark of twin-bedded marriage – take a more Stopesian line on the question of double versus twin,

but nuance their judgements by situating them in the 'unfinished dialogue' (Dentith 1995: 42) of characters and narrator. It is precisely owing to the unfinished nature of such dialogues that characters' emotional and material investments are held in the balance. It is not that no judgements are made, that the novel's voices do not speak more persuasively for one side or the other, nor that twin beds float free of ideological baggage, but that the unfinished dialogue leaves these open to contestation. Contrary verdicts are allowed to enter the frame.

Lettice Cooper's *The New House* (1936) is a paradigmatic instance of such a narrative dialogue. The novel's structure contributes to this sense of debate between a multiplicity of viewpoints and voices, as successive chapters comprise a mix of third-person narration and free indirect discourse from the perspectives of different members of the family: Natalie – an elderly widow moving out of the old family home, Stone Hall, and into the nameless new house of the title – and her three children. As Natalie undresses in her new bedroom at the end of removal day, she sees the familiar furniture and thinks back to her secret dislike of sharing the marital bed with her husband: 'She had been glad when they followed the changing fashion and bought two single beds, although she would never have admitted to herself or anyone else that she did not like the physical proximity. Married people did sleep together, and presumably enjoyed it' (Cooper [1936] 1987: 294). Fashion facilitates the switch to twin beds, but the change also articulates and rearranges the intimate dynamics of her marriage, the beds channelling her more general disposition of disappointment and sense of entitlement. Stopes, no doubt, would have declared that Natalie's problem was not to be found in the double bed but in her casual revelation that the marriage bed's association with enjoyment was based only on presumption, rather than on experience or expectation.

While such judgements are in tune with twenty-first-century assumptions about twin beds, they are, however, in danger of blunting readings of their earlier literary appearances as contributors to the marital negotiations crisscrossing these texts. While twin beds certainly provide these novels with a shorthand for marital sexual distance, neither rests their case there. As in Greene's *The End of the Affair*, *The New House's* apparently straightforward condemnation of twin beds obscures a more nuanced set of judgements of the double-versus-twin dynamic. Natalie's son, Maurice, offers a recognizably Stopesian perspective on the errors of modern marriage and its sleeping arrangements, but while the novel largely endorses his views, it also problematizes Maurice himself, as well as affording a glimpse of his wife Evelyn's quite different perspective. Maurice is subject to Evelyn's desire for fashionable conformity, and so finds himself unwillingly sleeping in a twin bed. For him, the double bed signifies a bygone golden age of easy marital intimacy:

He remembered a blissful week-end in his own old home in the big old-fashioned bed in the spare room, when Evelyn had come into his arms without any arranging and calculating, and he could wake up and touch her, feel her warm and sweet by his side, so that he had really felt as though he was married. Evelyn had not liked it; she said that everybody had single beds nowadays. She had talked as though it were almost indecent to have anything else. (ibid.: 286)

Proximity, for Maurice, means sexual spontaneity, whereas twin beds introduce a gulf which, on his part, has to be navigated and negotiated, but which offers Evelyn – shallow, fashion-conscious, consumerist – the opportunity for a degree of sexual control. Crossing the divide between the beds requires ‘arranging and calculating’ – precisely the intermission for reflection advocated by the nineteenth-century marital reformers discussed in Chapter 10 and welcomed by Harriet in ‘The Footsteps of Doves’. The spontaneity for which Maurice longs positions Evelyn as ‘old ever-ready’, as Harriet complained George saw her.

Maurice, as one of the four protagonists of the novel, governs much of the characterization of Evelyn (although his mother and siblings largely confirm it). Overall, the control she seeks in the bedroom is indicative of her calculating and acquisitive character, her investment in superficial and materialist values. However, her preference for twin beds also implicitly signals her aversion to sex: anything other than twin beds, she thinks, was ‘almost indecent’. Maurice’s perspective is endorsed by an encounter following an earlier argument:

When Maurice came cautiously into the room, her bedside lamp was still on, and she was lying high up on the pillows, her fair skin a mother-of-pearl pink in the shaded light ...

He smiled at her, and said frankly:

‘I’m sorry I was so bad-tempered this evening.’

That sudden and unexpected apology disarmed and softened her, making it easier for her to do what she meant to do, what she had determined to do to try and put things right between them. She pushed back the bedclothes, and said to him with a gesture of invitation:

‘Maurice. Come here, darling.’

Later, when they were each lying in their own bed, Maurice, drowsy after the physical release, thought clearly. But she didn’t really want me! (ibid.: 288)

The bedroom had long been understood as a female-defined terrain, its style and furnishings chosen by women. Charles Eastlake had noted this in his

influential *Hints on Household Taste*: 'A lady's taste is generally allowed to reign supreme in regard to the furniture of bed-rooms' (1869: 191). Hermann Muthesius confirmed it at the turn of the century: 'In English opinion the bedroom belongs essentially to the woman and it might almost be said that the man enters it as her guest' (1979: 92).¹ And the evidence of Godber's *Twin Bedsteads* and Anderson's 'The Footsteps of Doves' suggests that it remained a feminine domain through the twentieth century. Evelyn is therefore sparring with Maurice in circumstances of her choosing, not his. He is already on the back foot, positioned by her choices as supplicant to her for the satisfaction of his own. The discordancy of their desires and values are made visible by their twin beds.

Evelyn takes back control where she can – in the bedroom. When the narrative is from her point of view, as it occasionally is, it becomes clear that there is indeed control to be retaken, for her marriage to Maurice – who is undoubtedly the more sympathetic of the two – is largely on his terms. The novel is organized through values identified with a series of dwellings – the old house versus the new, the free-living virtues of a flat in London, the contempt for the suburban villa – but characters are placed regionally as well as architecturally. The novel is set in the north of England, but Evelyn is a southerner who has moved north when she marries and so is separated from her family, for whom Maurice has little liking and no respect. Her husband is no tyrant, neither in the home nor beyond it. He is an unusually affectionate father as well as a still loving husband. He is a socialist, though one who feels compromised by the necessity of small-scale ruthlessness in his professional life. Nevertheless, his marriage is lived out fully on his territory, and underpinned by his extended family whose house he still calls 'home' – the home with the double bed about which he reminisces. That bed may have afforded him the intimate spontaneity for which he longs, but its location in the home from which he has failed to separate, to which he endlessly compares the house he lives in with his wife and child, also identifies the rose-tinted memory as an aspect of his continuing nostalgic idealization of his childhood. Evelyn may be brittle, materialistic and calculating, but her isolation in the north, in the midst of Maurice's ever-present family, makes her insistence on calling the shots in the bedroom – her choice of twin beds and the sexual manoeuvres they entail – seem less manipulative or unfeeling. Required by Maurice to be fully integrated with his family and separated from her own, Evelyn, in her twin bed, takes back for herself a small piece of autonomous sovereign territory.

Scenes such as these offer a slightly different perspective on *The Way Things Are* and Laura's desire for twin beds. Perhaps her wish was not simply to literalize the distance between herself and Alfred, but rather to set and control the sexual agenda as Evelyn had. Is this what lies behind her sense of twin beds as the predilection of women rather than men? It is

in their gift precisely to eliminate Maurice's preferred scenario, the double bed's facilitation of sex 'without arranging and calculating'. Their introduction of a space requiring negotiation, invitation and refusal not only appeals to Evelyn, but might also enable Laura to imagine a place in which a different kind of marriage could unfold. Far from confirming Lehmann's characterization of twin beds as inevitably signifying a 'counter-erotic nuptial intimacy', they instead expose the complexities of that intimacy's nuanced, and gendered, negotiation.

Dorothy Whipple's *They Were Sisters* (1943), a study of the contrasting marriages of the sisters Lucy, Charlotte and Vera, reframes the erotic and intimate associations and interventions of twin beds still further. The painfully dysfunctional marriages of the bullied and terrified Charlotte to the sadistic Geoffrey, and of the spoilt and highly strung Vera to the uxorious and lachrymose Brian, are variously furnished. Geoffrey and Charlotte share a double bed, from which, during a furious argument, he throws her out: "'Get out of my bed," Geoffrey burst out again. "Go on. Get out. What man would want you in his bed?"' ([1943] 2005: 92). Vera, for her part, has long ago relegated Brian to a makeshift single bed in his dressing room: 'This was the bed he slept in. It was hardly more than camp, it had been meant to be temporary, but it had become permanent. Night after night now, he extended his large frame on this bed' (ibid.: 232). Only the third sister, Lucy, married to William, is happy; indeed, 'Lucy was so happy that she sometimes felt she ought not to be' (ibid.: 30). Her happiness is not unalloyed: they have not been able to have children, and Lucy finds William's self-absorption irksome. It is this marriage, however, that is both successful and twin-bedded: 'Lucy, propped on her elbow, considered William's long, sardonic cheeks in silence. Then she leaned over him from her bed' (ibid.: 52). The sisters' different sleeping arrangements epitomize the marital dynamics of each. Geoffrey and Charlotte's shared bed contributes to their disturbingly sado-masochistic mutual dependence; Brian's bed fails to accommodate him adequately, suggesting the short shrift that Vera accords him and which he is prepared to tolerate, however self-pityingly; while twin beds allow William a degree of detached obliviousness, and enable Lucy to see him clearly and whole. None of these three marriages is perfect – far from it. But the one that embodies not just contentment but an enviable degree of clear-sighted happiness is the one in which the spouses sleep in twin beds.

Happiness in a well-established marriage might be quite easily reconciled with twin beds, particularly one where the husband is somewhat emotionally semi-detached. Lucy and William's harmony and intimacy is precisely predicated on their more general occupation of separate territories, at the breakfast table as well as in the bedroom. However, it is E. M. Delafield, like Whipple interested in the mores of middle-class marriage, whose work most

thoroughly undoes the familiar association of twin beds with a counter-erotic companionship or disconnection. Even in *The Way Things Are*, when the conjugally disappointed Laura gazes at the taciturn Alfred sleeping on 'the far side of the double bed', it is striking that for Laura the double bed has a 'far' side. She knows that proximity alone, without an intimacy sustained elsewhere, will not close the gap between them. Indeed, for her the double bed opens up a greater distance, intensifying an absence of which she is already acutely aware.

This observation is made still more starkly in Delafield's *Gay Life* (1933), set among the bored and wealthy British holidaying at a hotel on the French Riviera. Among them is Mary Morgan, another Delafield wife married to a silent and semi-detached husband. Disillusioned but still 'a romantic at heart' (1933: 115), she meets a quiet American who takes her to a firework display in a nearby village while her husband is away. Mary returns alone to her hotel room:

Feeling suddenly very tired, Mary went into the double bedroom, and sat down on the edge of the bed without troubling to turn on the switch near the door. ...

She had wondered, when the American said good-night to her, if he wanted to kiss her.

For a brief moment, before she sprang to her feet and switched on the light, she wished very much that he had done so. (ibid.: 258)

The double bed and Mary's position on its edge bring together a reminder of the promise of marital intimacy and of its evaporation in the reality of the lived relation, her disappointment restimulated by the romantic frisson of the evening. The double bed is as poignant an image of conjugal disillusion as twins are in other authorial hands.

If doubles can so succinctly figure marital loneliness, so too for Delafield twin beds can indicate a relation very different from that of a marriage gone wrong. Two examples suggest the availability of twin beds as open and flexible indicators of marital sexuality. In *Nothing Is Safe* (1937), the ten-year-old protagonist, Julia, is dealing with her mother's divorce and remarriage to 'Uncle Tom'. One night, Julia hears her brother being sick: 'At home in the old days, she would have gone straightway to fetch mummie. Now, she hesitated. Uncle Tom, she supposed, would be there – in mummie's new, fine room with the two beds – and the thought of seeing him in bed made her feel extremely shy' (Delafield 1937: 51). The thought of the marital bedroom induces an unfamiliar feeling of shyness in Julia – a feeling which, Elspeth Probyn argues (quoting Sylvan Tomkins), is on a continuum with shame and operates 'only after interest or enjoyment has been activated' (2005: ix); shame

'highlights unknown or unappreciated investments' (ibid.: 14). For Julia, the thought of Uncle Tom in his twin bed activates the shyness, making visible her registration of the sexual charge of the new relationship. Far from signifying a 'counter-erotic nuptial intimacy', twin beds' invocation here generates a quite contrary sense of the interesting if disturbing and unarticulated force of parental sexuality for children.

The second instance is found in one of a triptych of Delafield novellas published in *Three Marriages* (1939). All three concern troubled marriages: the first in the high Victorian moment of 1857, the second in 1897, the era of the New Woman, and the third in 1937. In the final story, 'We Meant to Be Happy', the protagonist, Cathleen, in a contented but emotionally abstinent marriage to Philip, goes into their bedroom: 'The sight of the neat little twin beds, each with its green silk eiderdown, made her think – as it almost always did – of the marriage relation. How very odd it was' (1939: 318). On this occasion, she is prompted not only to think about sex, but to reflect on the ebbing of her husband's sexual appetite. Early in the marriage she had been surprised by sex's importance for Philip; now, however, he 'never sought any greater intimacy with his wife than a single passionless kiss, night and morning' (ibid.). Her reflections on his equally incomprehensible sexual enthusiasm and later indifference combine with her own sense of how 'odd' the marriage relation was. For her, sex is both baffling and peculiar; she finds it 'faintly disagreeable and very tedious' (ibid.). Its oddness, however, also hints at the unevenness of desire and experience between the spouses, prompted perhaps by the identical twin beds, suggestive of similarity or comparability. Cathleen acknowledges, but does not yet understand, this disparity between them. Constant, however, in the midst of these ebbs and flows, presences and absences of desire, are the twin beds with the green silk eiderdowns. Far from acting as metonyms of the emotional distance now characterizing their marriage (and which for Cathleen has always done so), they stand instead as steady witnesses of the mysterious flux of sexual desire. In Delafield's economy of sleep, the two modes of marital sleeping – double and twin – are refused the comfortable simplifications whereby the former signifies healthy marital intimacy, the latter marital malaise. In her fiction, emotional distance can just as easily be signified by the double bed, and sexual intimacy, however variable and unfathomable, by the twins.

Marie Stopes's was the twentieth-century voice that spoke out the earliest and loudest against twin beds, damning them as signs of a marriage in trouble. For her, they represented a misguided modern refusal of the proper physical and metaphysical merging of the married couple. But hers was also the voice of a passionate polemicist with an agenda deriving from a particular, if idiosyncratic, political analysis: liberal and feminist with regard to sex in marriage and birth control, patrician and conservative in her ideas about class

and population. Polemic, for all its vigour and clarity and persuasiveness, is by nature partisan and monolithic. It makes its case not through the accommodation of doubt or ambiguity but through their banishment. It is in other literary forms – the novels and plays whose territory was the domestic, the familial and the marital – that the conversation about twentieth-century marriage, its pressures, problems and possibilities, admitted to light and shade, to ambivalence and complexity, to uncertainty, paradox and unpredictability.

Some novels certainly speak as unequivocally of the perniciousness of twin beds as did Stopes. Godber's *Twin Bedsteads* is uninterested in complicating the picture unduly, relying on a neat polarization of the merits and dangers for marriages of doubles and twins, and attributing the current taste for twins to fashion and folly. Yet comedy rarely works by pushing at an open door, and the mere presence of *Twin Bedsteads* testifies not only to these beds' cultural visibility and widespread adoption, but also to the sense that their choice was not without consequence. They might be introduced in innocence or in error, but even so those sleeping in them would suffer.

For novels working beyond the bounds of slapstick, the problems of intimacy in marriage were not so easily categorized or resolved. Even texts situating twin beds critically within the marital *mise-en-scène*, such as *The End of the Affair* or *The New House*, do so within a domestic emotional geography characterized by dark corridors, blind turnings, forgotten corners and hidden rooms. In these novels, twin beds bear witness to a marriage's emotional disjunctures but they are not made to bear responsibility for them. In other texts, such as *The Way Things Are* or 'Twin Beds in Rome', twin beds initially seem to confirm a habitual bedroom iconography of marital distance and malaise, but, returned to the entirety of their narrative trajectories, ultimately contribute to the undoing of these more predictable associations, and may even be imagined as contributing to a solution to the problem of marital distance. Some fiction, such as 'We Meant to Be Happy', allows twin beds to prompt reflection on the complexity of conjugal desire, and others, such as *Nothing Is Safe*, even invoke twins to conjure the disturbing sexual intensity of a new marriage. The beds themselves are not empowered to enforce or destroy conjugal intimacy, but they are allowed to comment on it. They are neither innocent nor neutral, but nor is their effect predetermined or inevitable. In themselves, they mean nothing. Whatever meanings they accrue accumulate narratively, within a broader complex of domestic landmarks and emotions.

Common to all these fictional engagements is a sense of the unnerving precariousness of a marriage conceived as a site of long-term intimate fulfilment. Stopes had suggested that enduring passion could be secured through a mix of physical proximity and separation; spatial reorganization could steady that which was too often found to be unstable or transient. In restructuring the proximity of the spouses, twin beds testify to a similar desire to manage or

re-engineer emotional intimacy, but as part of a literary engagement with the emotional economy of marriage, they cannot effect its utopian redistribution. Proximity, distance and intimacy were certainly entwined with each other, and might even be negotiated across the space between twin beds, but they prove resistant to the absolutist solutions advocated by Stopes. Their ambivalence, or multivalence, is found in the 'oddness' of the marriage relation as formulated by Cathleen, in Maurice's post-coital recognition that Evelyn didn't really want him, in Natalie's conclusion that married people 'presumably' enjoyed sleeping together. However these married people organize their nocturnal selves, their desires – often inchoate, beyond their own reach – resist attempts to secure them simply by rearranging the furniture. To be together or apart was a matter that went far beyond the choice of double or twin.