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Ethical Magic: Traumatic Magic Realism in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Abstract: Focussing on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* this article sets out to show the possibilities magic realism offers to negotiate the difficulties of representation in narratives of trauma. In spite of the common demand for mimetic accuracy, magic realism's potential for ethical representation lies precisely in its denial of a single coherent reading. By impelling the reader to accept the narrative's irreducible contradictions, magic realism offers means to express the excess that marks traumatic experience. The bodily presence of the past in *Beloved* can therefore be read as a literal manifestation of trauma that demands a confrontation of the contradictory needs to forget and to remember. By exploiting analogies between trauma and magic, *Beloved* points to the ethical necessity of acknowledging the Other as Other and attempts to narrate the Other without defining and fixing it through narration itself.

I

> In trying to make the slave experience intimate, I hoped the sense of things being both under control and out of control would be persuasive throughout; that the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead; that the Herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive. (Morrison 2005, xiii)

With these words, Morrison describes the central aim of *Beloved* in the novel's foreword. The story sensitively traces the deeply conflicting demands of the living and the dead, the violent struggle that results from the need to forget the horrors of the past clashing with the need to remember past injustices and injuries. How can one remember and face a horrible past and still go on living? This dilemma is analogous to the struggle between what Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* calls the "twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy" faced by traumatised victims of violence. When secrecy prevails, says Herman, "the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom" (Herman 1992, 1). This is precisely what happens in *Beloved*. The ghost in the novel is the symptom of a lack of narrative. Similar to a traumatic flashback it recalls and imposes the trauma intrusively and, due to the inescapable confrontation with its embodiment of the past, it defies attempts to transform it and work it through. With its very presence, the returned child therefore acknowledges demands which cannot chiefly concern psychologists treating traumatised patients, but are indeed generally of central importance to literature: the clamour of the dead, their claim to be remembered in spite of the need to forget which the living might experience. Thus the novel's

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careful consideration of the contradicting claims of the dead and the living are acted out by means of an introduction of supernatural elements into its fictive treatment of the traumatic repercussions of slavery. By taking recourse to magic realism, I claim, the novel intimately links antirealist aesthetics associated with postmodernism with deeply ethical concerns and aptly exploits the ethical potential offered by the inherent contradictions within the magic realist mode. Before the specific nature and thrust of this ethical potential can be further explored, however, some consideration of a more general nature concerning trauma, ethics and postmodern aesthetics, as well as the role deconstruction can play in a reconsideration of their mutual relationship, seems to be in order.

Postmodern aesthetics and theory, with its diffusion and deconstruction of stable values and its rejection of unambiguousness, seems to fundamentally undermine the possibility of ethics and ethical readings. Since its most central agenda is to expose the void that necessarily lies at the centre of every construction, it can serve to question every attempt to create a stable system of values and directives that would seem to be a necessary basis for any evaluative judgment. If there is no unquestionable truth, no stable point of reference beyond the symbolic system and not even a pre-supposed subject of enunciation, an independent agent, how should it still be possible to justify and determine ethical positionings?

At the same time these postmodern destabilizations have almost from the very beginning been closely allied to and appropriated by critical positions concerned with decentred discourses such as gender and queer studies as well as post-colonial theory. Centrally focussing on the struggle for empowerment of the margins, these highly political movements readily make use of the subversive and destabilizing potential deconstruction offered. Though the subaltern and marginalised has thus been able to find a voice in the disintegration of master discourses, deconstructive theory precludes any attempts to supplant the overthrown systems with new ones. It is only disintegrative and offers no basis for a new beginning. Precisely this deconstruction of the *grand récits*, this questioning of traditional values and the facing of the void which lies at their centre therefore results in a reinforced urgency in the demand for ethical considerations. If values are not a given anymore, if they can no longer be easily taken for granted, the need to turn to ethics seems to become even more pressing in order to check deconstruction's nihilistic tendencies. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that ethical considerations have already been of central concern to some of the galleon-figures of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, long before the so-called "ethical turn" in literary criticism and theory started to gain importance in the 1980s (Eskin 2004, 559). In its wake some literary critics rejected deconstructive theory and advocated a return to an Aristotelian approach or favoured moral philosophy (MacIntyre 1984; Nussbaum 1985 and 1992). Others attempted to reconcile deconstruction and ethics by exploring their commonalities (Gibson 1999; Harpham 1992). This latter approach can, in my opinion, prove to be of value in a consideration of the ethical potential of a literary strategy such as magic realism with its affinities to marginal discourse and a postmodern destabilisation of representation. In this context I

want to take up in particular the differentiation between what has to be seen as two contrasting moments informing every pivotal decision, namely the ethical and the moral. Morality is here understood as a stable value-system implying closure, however temporary that closure may be, that is a practical necessity for our daily interaction in our condition as social, historical and political beings. Ethics, by contrast, exceeds morality, constantly deconstructing it and keeping it open. That is, if morality imposes itself as a set of rules that are established socially, ethics is the force that is needed to prevent these rules from becoming exclusive, inflexible and despotic. Ethics, as defined here, is therefore an inherently deconstructive movement that prevents morality from settling into a stability that would make it unethical. It precedes morality and authorizes it while it is at the same time negated by it. As Geoffrey Harpham puts it in *Getting it Right*:

> Ethics places imperatives, alternatives, and possibilities of redescription on a balanced scale; by itself, it sustains an august reticence, a principled irresolution to which, nevertheless, the limited and precise prescriptions of morality, which Foucault called the 'code' or 'prescriptive ensemble', must refer for their authority. Ethics, the strictly undecidable, suffers determination by morality, a further imperative nested within the ethical whose business is to activate the chain of command, to pull the trigger. Morality both realizes and negates ethics, as death both realizes and negates life. (Harpham 1992, 55)

Resorting to a conception of ethics based on the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas, ethical attitude must be thought of in terms of a radical responsibility towards the Other. This Other, Levinas insists, is not simply that which borders and delimits the same but must be understood as an absolute or "metaphysical" Other that "is not the simple reverse of identity, and is not formed out of resistance to the same, but prior to every initiative, to all imperialism of the same. It is other with an alterity constitutive of the very content of the other" (Levinas 1969, 39). It is an Other that necessarily remains unattainable, forever completely alien and extraneous, altogether ungraspable in its excess of the self and of representation. As such, ethics must remain forever indefinable, a law that can never be stated, that must underlie every morality but is never simply manifest and contained in it, or, in the words of Andrew Gibson: "Ethics is the excess that cannot be known positively within any given system of morality, the *aporia* that limits any attempt to collapse the good into positive knowledge" (Gibson 1999, 16).

If one thus thinks of ethics and morality in terms of two interdependent but contradictory movements or two sides of one coin, deconstruction can be understood as inherently ethical. Ethics is precisely that which always exceeds discourse, which keeps it in flux and denies closure, it is an endless movement arguably rather similar to Derrida's constant deferral of meaning. Nonetheless this is not to say that it is completely arbitrary. Though constantly deferred and shifting, ethics, just like linguistic meaning, is not completely without boundaries. In each utterance it is simultaneously realized and negated. If one were to take this analogy between ethics/morality and deconstruction/structure even further, one would be led to the conclusion that ethical deconstruction is simultaneously realized and negated by structure, a structure that is inevitably and immediately subject to further deconstruction. Ethics is, then, the position from which every moral judgment can

be questioned or deconstructed, while it is at the same time the prerequisite of every moral judgment in the first place. As can be seen, both ethics and deconstruction are inherently preoccupied with the void that lies at the very heart of every system of representation, the absence that is the very condition of presence while at the same time fundamentally threatening and constantly undermining it.

In various ways these issues are closely interrelated with debates about literary representations of trauma. In trauma theory one finds, once again, that same deep anxiety with regard to the attempt to contain something within representation that invariably exceeds it, that lies forever out of reach, beyond meaning and the scope of symbolic systems. This is not to generalize, as Cathy Caruth seems to be doing when she implies that as beings caught up in linguistic structures, we are, all of us, already and inevitably traumatized (Caruth 1996). The parallels drawn here between deconstruction, ethics and trauma can, however, serve to reconsider the quandaries that have to be faced in the representations of traumatic events and their reception. It is precisely because the traumatic event needs to be addressed in its immensity and tangibility as a violent historic moment that it brings these quandaries to the fore.

Trauma theorists and psychologists seem to agree that the traumatic event as such can always only be approximated in representation. It remains a void, a rupture at the very centre of narration. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue:

> The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of 'otherness', a salience, a timelessness and an ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. (Felman / Laub 1992, 69)

As a result of this excess every representation of trauma finds itself in a double bind. On the one hand it faces the necessity of integrating the traumatic event into a coherent narrative in order to move beyond the pathological, and to embed it into social and juridical discourses,[1] a demand that I would like to call 'moral'.[2] Here, truth and accuracy in representation have to be considered as absolutely imperative since not only the mental health of the victim is at stake but also retribution, justice and compensation. In those cases in which the traumatic experience is shared collectively this demand for truthfulness of representation appears to be even more intransigent. Deeply felt concerns about collective memory and identity have to be taken into account as well as the obligation to be respectful towards the victims, political concerns regarding power-relations, retribution and commemoration. This moral demand seems to be essentially inimical to literature's fictionality. The heated controversies about the possibility of adequate representation of the

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1 Psychological practice has emphasized this need, a fact that certainly contributed to the attraction of trauma as a concept for literary scholars (Felman / Laub 1992; Herman 1992; van der Kolk / Hart 1995).

2 I take my cue here from Saul Friedlander who postulated a "moral imperative" (Friedlander 1996, 54) that restricts aestheticization of the Holocaust.

Holocaust and of the emotional and political investment that marked this debate are a case in point (Friedlander 1996; Lanzmann 1995; Langer 1977; Wiesel 1990 [1977]).

On the other hand, the narrative integration of the traumatic experience into a framework of meaning implies a twofold loss. The process of healing from a therapeutic point of view is accomplished when integration of the traumatic event allows it to be forgotten, when it has lost its haunting power and no longer intrudes on the traumatised person's life. The event loses its importance and – this is the obvious therapeutic aim – ceases to be a constant presence. Though such a disappearance of trauma must certainly be central to therapeutic endeavours, considered from a perspective foregrounding the need to remember there are some obvious reservations concerning such a loss. Furthermore narration threatens to entail another loss, "the loss, precisely, of the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its affront to understanding. [...] The danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what it cannot understand, but in that it understands too much" (Caruth 1996, 154). The moral demand for accuracy and truth to facts in all representation of the traumatic event is here opposed by a contradicting demand which I would like to call 'ethical,' a demand for an acknowledgement of the event's immensity, its excess of representation. The ethical demand thus resists integration and healing if that implies forgetting, it perpetuates the event's disruptive and disturbing power by respecting its absolute Otherness and resisting its assimilation into the same.

These two contradictory demands are also present in the cautionary words with which Cathy Caruth prefaces *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*:

> The difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story, is a problem that remains central to the task of therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists, and filmmakers alike. (Caruth 1995, vii)

The task of facing the contradictory ethical and moral demands is here extended to the recipient. It is not restricted to the production of representation but has to be a central concern in every reading and interpretation of such. At both these levels the victim's call for empathy, for justice and redemption demand unequivocal judgments that seem to make a postmodern stance of radical relativity impossible, while at the same time an ethical representation of trauma presupposes a motion of constant deferral, the impossibility of closure. It defies realistic representation and urges the recipient into a movement towards the absolute Other.

In terms of literary representation these contradicting impulses might well be translated into an opposition of a demand for mimetic realism versus a demand for postmodern openness. Thus, though Saul Friedlander once called it a "moral imperative" to adhere to certain undefined limits in the representation of a massive trauma such as the Holocaust and found it to be "particularly at odds with what may sometimes appear as the playful experiments of post-modernity" (Friedlander 1996, 54), the ethical possibilities that representations of collective trauma can offer which go beyond strict realism need to be reconsidered.

One instance of those "playful experiments" which seem to run counter the demand for sobriety, truthfulness and authenticity usually raised in connection with representations of human suffering, seems to be magic realism.[3] Nevertheless, it has frequently been adopted as a literary strategy by authors from widely differing backgrounds in an attempt to come to terms with incisive violent events in the past of their culture or community. This is not only the case for many of the South American representatives of magic realism, but also for authors as diverse as Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie, Jonathan Safran Foer and Toni Morrison, to name just a few.

In the remaining part of this article I read Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* as a magic realist text that allows for an exploration of the potential magic realism seems to offer in the struggle for representation of traumatic events. A close analysis of the text indicates that magic realism opens ways to address and negotiate the quandaries located in the intersections of ethics, trauma and postmodern deconstruction.

II

It has been claimed that the supernatural elements of *Beloved* serve to evoke traditional African myths and emphasize the cultural roots of the African American community described in the novel (Handley 1995; Levin 2003; Okonkwo 2008). Such a reading, though undoubtedly pertinent, sometimes tends to obscure other functions the supernatural aspects fulfil within the text.

According to Maggie Ann Bowers, magic realism

> has become a popular narrative mode because it offers to the writer wishing to write against totalitarian regimes a means to attack the definitions and assumptions which support such systems (e.g. colonialism) by attacking the stability of the definitions upon which these systems rely. (Bowers 2004, 4)

Though I would argue for a wider perspective on magic realism that does not have its main focus on magic realism as a post-colonial literary strategy of 'writing back,' Bowers rightly emphasizes its disruptive and destabilizing potential. While the claim that actual power systems might be undermined by these means is perhaps somewhat utopian, magic realism does unsettle conventions of representation that have structured western reader expectations for more than 200 years. By including magical events in an otherwise realistic narrative, general assumptions about discursive rules of literary realism and its relation to the extratextual world are called into question. In the case of *Beloved*, this unsettling is strongly interwoven with the novel's traumatic topics and serves as a testimony to trauma's powers of disruption.[4]

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3 Though I'm aware of the prolonged debates about the definition of magic realism, I use the term here to describe a mode of writing that combines a setting which is explicitly situated within historical reality, both locally and temporally, with fantastic occurrences that disrupt the expectations raised by conventions of realism. For a more detailed discussion and an overview over the history of the term see Wendy Faris (2004) and Maggie Ann Bowers (2004).

4 Of course, a text can only be read as a magic realist text under the premise that a difference between the magic and the realist mode is actually perceived. From a reader perspective that

The central magical element in Morrison's novel – the ghost, both in its immaterial form and in its incarnation as Beloved – is closely connected to the various traumatic events, both individual and cultural that lie at the core of the protagonists' life. It is the embodiment of the repressed past that returns to haunt their lives and to force them to confront their most painful memories. For Sethe, Beloved is her murdered child. As a symptom she embodies on the one hand Sethe's pathological wish of a return to the pre-traumatic past, of the traumatic event being undone, and on the other hand the insistent reminder of what has happened and the compulsion to relive the past constantly. When Sethe first comes to the conviction that Beloved is her murdered child she is elated, because she thinks her return would make it possible for her to forget: "I have to remember nothing. I don't even have to explain. She understands it all" (Morrison 2005, 216). This hope soon turns out to be false, however. Instead, Sethe increasingly becomes entangled in a circle of memory in which "her mind was busy with the things she could forget" (Morrison 2005, 226), a circle which starts to emaciate and to obsess her. While Beloved grows constantly more demanding and bodily present due to her advancing pregnancy, Sethe starves and loses herself in a never-ending effort to explain something that is not explainable. The past – embodied in Beloved – dominates and threatens to obliterate the present and future in a process of deterioration described in the terms of materiality and the body:

> [Beloved] took the best of everything – first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair, and the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through for her children [...]. None of which made the impression it was supposed to. (Morrison 2005, 284)

The magically returned ghost child uncannily consumes the mother because the traumatic event remains beyond grasp, while at the same time it has to be constantly faced as a tangible presence, unforgettable and uncontrollable.

While the presence of the past becomes ever more oppressing and dominating, Sethe is reduced to childlike passivity and abandon. She is governed and controlled by a past that in its prominent alterity defies any attempt to assimilate or ignore it.

> The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved's eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. [...] She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. (Morrison 2005, 294-5)

At the very moment when a happy union of Sethe, Paul D and Denver actually seems possible for the first time, at precisely the point when "[i]t had begun to look like a life" (Morrison 2005, 79), the disruptive appearance of Beloved faces both Sethe and Paul D with memories and experiences they constantly struggle to repress.

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does not see such a difference it would make no sense to talk of a text being magic realist. The very use of the term therefore entails a foregrounding of a certain reader perspective which I will take as the basis for my argument here without aiming in any way to imply a devaluation or discrimination of other, differing readings.

Paul D is effectively emasculated by Beloved. He is driven from the house and succumbs to her apparently against his will. Even their sexual intercourse does not re-establish his virility, but faces him with a twofold realisation: the rusted tobacco tin he thought he carried around in his chest is still a red heart (Morrison 2005, 137) and as a sentient human being he once more has to ask himself the traumatic questions that lay at the core of his slave experience. His inability to resist Beloved's sexual temptation confronts him again with

> [a] truth that waved like a scarecrow in the rye: they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race. Watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke. His strength had lain in knowing that schoolteacher was wrong. Now he wondered. [...] If schoolteacher was right it explained how he had come to be a rag doll – picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his daughter. (Morrison 2005, 148)

Slavery questions the humanity of the slave and it is precisely those moments in which Sethe and Paul D feel their very humanity starting to crumble that are the most traumatic ones. For Sethe it is not the cruel whipping which turns her back into a numb mass of scars that constitutes the most serious trespass on her. It is the taking of her mother's milk, the fact that she is milked like a cow, which hurts her deeply and radically threatens her self-understanding, both as a human being and as a mother (Morrison 2005, 19-20). Such constantly threatening metamorphoses of human into animal are at the core of those memories the protagonists desperately repress, but which insistently return. Sethe's realization that schoolteacher is classing them as animals (Morrison 2005, 228) and Paul D walking past the roosters, feeling that they are better than him (Morrison 2005, 85) are further examples. Yet this metamorphosis, one suspects, is itself only a metaphor, a circle around the traumatic core that remains inaccessible. It serves as a proxy for what remains beyond grasp, for the untold and untellable horrors of the past.

Trying to make Paul D understand her attempt to kill her children, Sethe realizes the futility of explanation:

> If they didn't get it right off – she could never explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle robes and wells. Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. (Morrison 2005, 192)

The simple truth here appears to be that language cannot communicate the traumatic experience. The metamorphosis into a hummingbird serves only to emphasise the unbridgeable gap in understanding, it marks the site of absence and silence. The gap in communication occurs both on the level of discourse and diegesis, since Sethe's explanation to Paul D breaks off at precisely this point because understanding can never be achieved if it is not already previously established. That communication fails here becomes plainly evident when Paul D reproduces the traumatizing processes by asking Sethe to count her feet. By questioning her

humanity he takes an easy escape-route, avoiding the responsibility of facing her action as that of a desperate human mother with all its implications and consequences. By projecting his doubts about himself onto Sethe and thus displacing his own anxiety of animality, he effectively exiles himself from the life in 124 and rejects his responsibility towards the other.

None of these instances of threatening or actual metamorphosis of human into animal are described as magical. On the contrary, they are all too painfully real. Still, they defy reason and understanding even more than the text's actual magic elements like the haunted house or the returning dead. According to Judith Herman, traumatic events "undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis" (Herman 1992, 51). In this state, it becomes ever more difficult and pointless to differentiate between what is magical and what is real. A ghost haunting a house or a child returning from the dead seem to be barely more inconceivable than the actual horrors of slavery. The text thus evokes and exploits an analogy of traumatic pathology to the magical or supernatural on various grounds. Since both magic and trauma exceed established symbolic systems and concepts of reality, both resist integration into coherent and unambiguous meaning and narrative. Both also question the extent of potential individual agency. Magic is uncontrollable and exceeds normal human power, just as a traumatic event implies a loss of control and the resulting pathology deprives the victim of the mastery of his or her psychological reactions as well as memories.

It is precisely at this point, then, that the magical framework reveals its dangers and limits. If supernatural powers which restrict agency are involved, responsibility can be denied. Thus for Paul D, the declaration that Beloved must be a ghost with supernatural powers conveniently helps him to reject any guilt he might feel for betraying Sethe with her young inmate (Morrison 2005, 149). Ascribing his misdemeanour to magic influences frees him from facing his own lust and serves as a welcome excuse that allows him to refrain from taking responsibility for his actions. For Sethe Beloved offers the longed-for chance for redemption and denial. The magical return of her murdered child proves her action right and absolves her from her guilt and doubts. She hopes to have finally found in Beloved someone who has that previous understanding which makes further explanation both possible and unnecessary. Strikingly, neither of these interpretations work out for the protagonists, however. Though explanation should have become unnecessary it becomes compulsory instead, driving Sethe into a spiral of deterioration, while Paul D is effectively driven out of the house and exiled at least as much by his own guilt and fear of Beloved as by his knowledge about Sethe (Morrison 2005, 277). It follows that succumbing to a privileging of the magical interpretation and completely neglecting the realist one is not the appropriate course to take, but neither can the actual presence of magic be denied. The coexistence of both frameworks serves to balance the problematical claims of each.

Since the past magically returns in the body, it is emphatically intrusive and neither Sethe nor Paul D can ignore or repress it, precisely because of its insistent bodily presence. The past can neither be forgotten, nor worked through and accepted since it is actually and manifestly faced as an Other on a continual basis – an Other that evades and exceeds language, that is ever present and never governable. Yet, it is precisely their inability to resist the attempt to define the Other that lead Paul D and Sethe into the deadlock situations in which they find themselves towards the end of the novel and from which they are unable to free themselves on their own. Because Paul D is unable to move beyond his definition of Beloved as a ghost and *femme fatale*, he actively contributes to what he fears most. It is precisely when he fails to confess to Sethe, when he "could not say to this woman who did not squint in the wind: 'I'm not a man'" (Morrison 2005, 151), finding an excuse for it in Beloved's uncanny powers, that he is effectively unmanning himself. When he then asks Sethe to count her feet, thereby presumptuously taking it upon himself to judge Sethe's action and to define her by it, he effectively isolates himself from further social contact and willingly excludes himself from the community, preferring to live on his own in the damp cellars of the church (Morrison 2005, 257-73). Committing a similar error, Sethe insists on her belief that Beloved is her returned child and is unable to accept the fact that her child is irretrievably lost to her. She needs Beloved to define herself in the mother-role she has willingly reduced herself to and therefore sees her only in her function as a daughter, taking possession and reducing her, assimilating her to the dictates of the self-same: "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine" (Morrison 2005, 237). Sethe's whole being is centred on and confined by this fixation with no more consideration for the outer world which ceases to exist for her, leaving her just as isolated as Paul D. Defining the Other and trying to contain and to keep it within stable definitions turns out to be the central mistake.

The imperative necessity to resist such "imperialism of the same," as Levinas (1969, 39) aptly termed it, and to retain interpretational flexibility is also constantly evoked by the novel's narrative structure. By continually merging various voices, perspectives and opinions, allowing past and present, the magical and the realist modes to intersect and mingle to a point where they become indistinguishable, the text makes it impossible to arrive at clear conclusions about the events it portrays. Is Beloved really the returned baby child? At first this seems to be confirmed not only by Denver's and Sethe's conviction, but also by her very name, by the scar on her neck, her ability to move soundlessly and disappear at will as well as her apparently intimate knowledge of Sethe's past (Morrison 2005, 88, 137, 144, 206). Still, Beloved's own memories, which are displayed in an enigmatic stream of consciousness, do not quite match this interpretation, since she seems to remember a violent abduction and the strains of the Middle Passage. This might point towards the alternative interpretation of Beloved's identity which is offered when Stamp Paid mentions a young runaway slave-girl that had been kept locked up by a white man and had escaped recently (Morrison 2005, 277). Is Beloved, then, an abused and mentally disturbed former slave, who, having lost her mother on

a slave ship, mistakenly thinks she found her again in Sethe? Does Paul D succumb to the supernatural powers of a ghost or to his own lust? Has Beloved really disappeared into thin air at the end or rather crept away while all attention was on Sethe, and did the exorcism really drive out a malignant ghost or rather cruelly evict a vulnerable, highly pregnant woman, probably doomed to perish on her own? Does magic occur at all or is it all just superstition and psychopathology?

None of these questions provoked by the narrative's intermingling of the magic and the real can be answered in a definitive way. By offering different possibilities of interpretation that both do not quite work out coherently, the text uses the tension between the magic and the real and their mutual disruption of each other to unsettle each reading. The text only ever circles its traumatic core just as Sethe is circling both her subject and the room in her confession to Paul D. It is precisely this vagueness and ambiguity that constitutes the ethical dimension of the text. The reader is urged into an ethical stance by the need to constantly revaluate his or her interpretations. The incongruities in every interpretation reveal the gaps at the core of the narrative and reading is turned into the task of feeling for the unsaid. Like Ella listening to fugitive slaves, the text invites one to "listen [...] for the holes – the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask. Listen [...] too for the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind" (Morrison 2005, 108). The reader is not called upon to fill those gaps and thereby obliterate them, however, but rather to face and accept the indefinability and the excess of the Other, the elusiveness and incomprehensibility of the traumatic past, to accept that it cannot be reduced and confined to any single and non-contradictory symbolic framework.

Contrary to many trauma theorists who see narration as a prerequisite for healing, *Beloved* thus expresses a certain scepticism towards the healing potential of narrative, or rather, about the narrative integration into a clearly defined framework of meaning. While healing is and must be the main aim of therapy, literature's task has to be understood differently. The ethical struggle here is precisely a struggle against the effort to contain the past, to define and explain it and thus to put it away and forget it. The "Herculean effort to forget," though understandable, should not prevail against the "memory desperate to stay alive" (Morrison 2005, xiii), rather the ethical solution is a constant struggle. In order to avoid such a struggle ending in an emaciating circle of failed explanation which leads nowhere, the confrontation with the past must allow for its otherness and must not try to contain it in order to instrumentalize it for self-justification or self-identification. In *Beloved* it is by means of the tension between magic and realism, which serves to disrupt and disturb a unitary discourse and opens it up to alterity, that such a perpetual struggle is realized. By facing the past in this way as the tangible presence of an Other, a Levinasian approach is suggested. The Other is not to be assimilated, not to be tamed, and it constantly demands responsibility and reaction. In its excess of interpretation a perpetual reconsideration of readings and evaluations is necessary, each of which raise as many questions as they manage to answer and open as many wounds as they close. Thus, ethical narratives neither provide closure nor make it possible to forget. They do not heal: they hurt.

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