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Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels by
Jean Wyatt (review)

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Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels. Jean Wyatt. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017. 248 pp. Review by Todd McGowan.

There is no shortage of critical attention directed at Toni Morrison's novels, but this critical attention has seldom invoked psychoanalytic theory. The one conspicuous exception to this truism among Morrison's critics is Jean Wyatt, the author of the most important essay on Morrison's most important novel—"Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (1993). In her new book *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels*, Wyatt has returned to the conjunction of psychoanalytic theory and Morrison's novels with a most welcome result. Not only does Wyatt advance the cause of understanding Toni Morrison with this book, but she also shows how Morrison's novels themselves function as the source for psychoanalytic revelations.

The theoretical point of departure for Wyatt in this work is Jean Laplanche. Taking up Laplanche's understanding of *Nachträglichkeit* (which Wyatt translates as afterwardsness and which others have rendered as belatedness), as well as his concept of the enigmatic signifier, Wyatt shows us a Toni Morrison who sheds new light on the relationship between trauma and love and who provides an alternative way of thinking about community, one compatible with psychoanalytic theory despite its inherent suspicion of the possibility of subjects coexisting together.

The premise of *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels* is that a major shift occurs in Morrison's literary career with the publication of *Beloved*. Almost universally acclaimed as Morrison's greatest novel, *Beloved* reveals the historical trauma of slavery as a fundamental barrier whose distorting power never ebbs. Slavery inserts itself within the dynamic of the mother and child, with the result that this relationship suffers from either a traumatic break or from an over-proximity deriving from the attempt to compensate for this break. Once slavery enters into the maternal equation, there is no way out.

Morrison paints a radically pessimistic picture of the chances for love in *Beloved*, but the novels that follow, as if

in response to the bleakness of *Beloved*, become much more sanguine. According to Wyatt, Morrison begins to see love emerge as a possibility because we have the ability to re-signify the past. The past may be determinative, but it is always open to change through the process of *Nachträglichkeit*. This concept, first developed by Freud and then expanded on by Laplanche, concerns a traumatic encounter that the subject experiences as insignificant when it occurs. It is only afterward, when the subject develops a symbolic framework, that the encounter becomes traumatic, or more specifically, that the subject actually experiences it as such, as if the trauma had hung in the air waiting to be activated by the changed situation.

Whereas Freud sees *Nachträglichkeit* only in cases of trauma and its belated effects, Laplanche, following the lead of Jacques Lacan, recognizes it in every childhood encounter with the other. The initial encounter with an other always involves a fundamental ambiguity about the other's desire, and it is only subsequently that we resolve this ambiguity into some sort of signification. Laplanche states, "What is crucial is the fact that the adult world is entirely infiltrated with unconscious and sexual significations to which *adults themselves* do not have the code. Furthermore, there is the fact that the infant does not possess the physiological or emotional responses corresponding to the sexualized messages it is being offered; in short, the child's means of constituting a substitutive or temporary code are fundamentally inadequate" (1992/1999, p. 127). The child experiences a desire without a signification and only later can make sense of it. As Laplanche sees it, the traumatic past does not determine the future. It is the future signification that gives sense to the past that precedes it. This has, Wyatt contends, radical implications for how we conceive of love.

Love is possible because we can change the past, because we can, through *Nachträglichkeit*, break from the determinations that seem to emanate from the traumatic past. This does not mean that we can overcome trauma and simply live happy lives—a vision completely out of touch with psychoanalytic thought. Instead, Morrison's novels, according to Wyatt, open up the possibility of a rewriting of the past in a way that integrates trauma into our present existence without allowing it to cut off our present possibilities.

The conclusion that Morrison arrives at in her later work is that love is the only experience that has the power to rewrite the past. Wyatt concludes *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Novels* with a claim about the role of love. She writes, "Jazz's call to create innovative new ways of loving reverberates through the sequence of later novels—and perhaps through the life experiences of Morrison's readers" (p. 194). Through love, the past does not just disappear. Instead, Morrison's later novels show that love enables us to integrate the traumatic past into our subjectivity rather than repressing the trauma.

Wyatt arrives at this position through a detailed reading of Morrison's novels from *Beloved* to *God Help the Child*. *Beloved* marks the pivot point between the earlier novels that severely critique the possessiveness of love and the later ones that celebrate love as a moment that radically disrupts our possessiveness. The valence of love undergoes a complete shift, and it is through *Beloved* that this shift happens.

In *Beloved*, Sethe is a character who refuses substitution and responds to the trauma of slavery with over-proximity. This refusal of substitution is a refusal of the effects of the signifier. In *Beloved*, language is unable to provide difference for Sethe; it is unable to perform the basic task of language. The result of this failure is a mother who is too close to her children. The novel, as Wyatt sees it, provides a critique of Sethe's over-proximity, even though it locates this over-proximity as a response to the trauma of slavery. On the plantation, one's time is not one's own. As a result, a mother does not have the time for her children that she would if she were not a slave. When she escapes the horror of slavery, Sethe wants to be fully present as a mother, to be there for her children completely without any lack. This image of love, as Wyatt reads it, leads to *Beloved*'s exclusion from language. Wyatt's interpretation enables us to make sense of the problem that *Beloved* poses for the reader: her name does not exist precisely because Sethe's over-proximity has barred her from an encounter with the signifier. Love fails in *Beloved* because it takes total possession as its model.

Though psychoanalytic theory typically understands trauma in terms of the traumatic encounter, for which the encounter with the signifier provides the paradigm, Wyatt here shows that

an even greater trauma takes place when subjects do not have this encounter. Through the character of *Beloved*, we see the trauma of not being able to experience a structuring trauma, of being so close to the object that one cannot experience it as lost. This insight makes sense of the problems of Morrison's novels (like *Beloved*'s lack of a name), while enabling the reader to recognize the different ways that trauma can manifest itself.

Morrison invents various forms of love in *Jazz*. Wyatt's groundbreaking claim in her chapter on *Jazz* is that Morrison installs the city as the hidden narrator of the novel. This narrative strategy enables Morrison at once take a long view on the characters and immerse herself in their perspectives. In *Jazz*, Morrison begins to conceive of love as necessarily taking us by surprise, a way of conceiving love that she will carry over into her later novels. In the next novel, *Love*, Morrison reveals how trauma—personal trauma in this case—distorts temporality. The main characters, Heed and Christine, seem to hate each other throughout the novel. But as death approaches, the past undergoes a change, and they see—along with the reader—that they have really always been in love with each other. This ability of the present dramatically to transform the past is on display in this novel more so than in any other. Not only do the characters undergo a complete shift in their relation to each other—one that alters the past—but the reader's sense of what occurred in the past also changes. The structure of Morrison's novel challenges the typical trajectory of love stories. Most love stories offer us a male perspective in which the women function as the object to be loved. Here it is the man who is not only the object but also the barrier to love between the women. It is only when the perspective of the man is completely out of the picture that the love that has existed between the women can reveal itself.

As in *Beloved*, *A Mercy* shows how slavery prevents a mother from attending to her child. But here, in contrast to the earlier novel, it is not the over-proximity of the mother but the break from the mother that is the source of the trauma. In the chapter on *A Mercy*, Wyatt shows how Morrison takes up Laplanche's notion of the enigmatic signifier and develops this notion even further than did Laplanche himself. The violent insertion of

the enigmatic signifier, Morrison says, creates acts of stunted communication, as we see in *A Mercy*.

The ending of Morrison's novel *Home*, in contrast to earlier novels like *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, suggests that love can somehow enable us to come to terms with trauma. Like Morrison's other late novels, *Home* stresses the importance of *Nachträglichkeit*. It presents us with the image of severed body parts that do not make sense until much later in the novel. But in the case of *Home*, the discovery of the sense of the trauma also leads to the possibility of love. In this novel, Morrison evinces her belief in the possibility of constituting a home, but we can only do so as long as we integrate un-homeliness within that home. Home is no longer an impossible utopia that functions only as evidence for our alienation. It becomes instead the possibility of living with alienation without longing for something else.

Wyatt's chapter on Morrison's novel *God Help the Child* is a tour de force. When it appeared, this novel received much greater criticism than any of Morrison's novels because of its happy ending. The novel ends with a successful love relationship, which led many critics to see Morrison as succumbing to sentimentality. But Wyatt rightly contends that this novel actually represents a major breakthrough for Morrison. Rather than giving in to sentimentality, Morrison comes to see that we can have love only by moving beyond the determinations of childhood trauma.

Though Laplanche, following on the heels of Freud and Lacan, did more than any other theorist to develop the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, he never thought to link this concept to the possibility of love. That is what Wyatt, with the aid of her interpretation of Morrison's late novels, accomplishes in this book. Few works of literary criticism provide genuine theoretical advances. Wyatt's book on Toni Morrison is one of those. Even for readers with little interest in the fiction of Toni Morrison, there is much of value to be found here.

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