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## The Words that Enslave and the Words that Liberate in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Why read Toni Morrison's 1987 *Beloved*? It should be clear that it is not sufficient to claim that we are looking for the "meaning" that lies supposedly somewhere within the pages of the novel. What's the point of taking hold of a meaning, whatever that word... means? On the other hand, it is undeniable that something is constructed inside our minds as we perceive, connect and elaborate upon textual details and their possible implications. Texts affect us and these affects depend upon a large number of factors, notably whether we are prepared to be affected, and also whether we are free enough – physically and mentally – to be affected. All texts will be read and will produce affects in an infinity of contexts. *Beloved* is still read today 25 years after its publication, it is read by black people and by white people, and also by people who have never been to the United States and know perhaps very little about its history. Yet, they construct their own interpretations of the book, their lives may perhaps in some cases be changed by reading it, all these things depending upon their education, their reading habits, and the subservience to the various ideologies and habituses to which their minds and their bodies are subjected. I offer that *Beloved* is not a text about the past. It is a book about our future, a book that may open to us new possibilities of life.<sup>1</sup>

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1. There are hundreds of scholarly articles on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, not counting books and dissertations. I'd just like to mention two of them which I found particularly enlightening. This essay, which owes a great deal to them, focuses on offer an analysis of the possibilities of language. It, however, tries to go further using a different theoretical background. See Kate Cummings:

### **In the beginning was the sound**

“In the beginning was the sound.” (259) Toni Morrison warns us. St. John had it wrong. It’s the other way round and it is therefore crucial that we free ourselves from the tradition that wants us to believe that some God imposed his Word, or Logos, upon us, expecting us to accept the inevitability of the links He established between words, ideas and reality. John places us in a universe that is completely finished and in which presumably we all have a place whether we like it not. Toni Morrison, on the other hand, seems to suggest that it would seem preferable for readers to follow the evolution of her character Denver in the novel. She is mute for more than a decade following a traumatic shock, then she returns to spoken English until she finally starts learning how to read and write. Later, we are told, she will enroll at Oberlin College as a student. There she will have access to the world of books. The Word will become her weapon. Toni Morrison knows that books provide knowledge, which sometimes include knowledge that has been the object of censorship, they enable us to compare our situation to other possibilities of life, and they also encourage us to exchange ideas with other readers. Perhaps, it is time to remember that that possibility of exchanging and discussing ideas is what Hannah Arendt called politics.<sup>2</sup> Becoming a political agent implies that we are, if we so want, in a position of changing the society in which we live – by choice or not, and if we can escape the shackles that limit our freedom. The universe is – partially at least – open and the Word is always to be constructed.

This problem constitutes the object of the fascinating speech Toni Morrison delivered in 1993 in Stockholm at the occasion of her Nobel Prize ceremony.<sup>3</sup> Her presentation is a veritable treatise on linguistics, semantics and of course pragmatics.

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“Reclaiming the Mother(s) Tongue: *Beloved*, Ceremony, Mothers and Shadows,” and Jean Wyatt: “Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.”

2. See her seminal 1958 *The Human Condition*. The concept of politics implies the possibility of public debate in which everybody can freely take part without any exclusion.

3. See Toni Morrison’s published text of *The Nobel Lecture in Literature 1993*.

Starting from an old children's story, she chooses to "signify" upon it and reveal some of its hidden riches. At bottom, she explains that the way we look upon language (or, more accurately, upon discourse when it is interpreted in a variety of contexts) can be understood between two extreme positions. On the one hand, language can be power, that is to say an instrument to control people's bodies and minds. In other words, reading is to a large extent akin to slavery: we take what is said in the text for granted and we wouldn't dream of questioning our place in the world or in society, let alone ourselves. On the other hand, language can be regarded as potential, and reading can lead us to the discovery of possibilities present in ourselves and in our environment. What matters in this case is our fundamental freedom and the ability that we possess of always trying to look at the future and (re)invent ourselves.

The novel *Beloved* exemplifies these two dimensions of language in a striking way. Sethe is a slave who in 1855 escaped from a Kentucky plantation called Sweet Home which had been ruled by a ruthless overseer nicknamed schoolteacher ever since the death of its former owner, the paternalistic Mr. Garner. She eventually settles in a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio, but the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law allows slave owners to track down their escaped slaves in the North and return them to their plantations. When schoolteacher catches up with her, Sethe kills her eldest (and still nameless) daughter rather than see her lose her freedom. Eighteen years later, Paul D, the last surviving male slave of Sweet Home, discovers her in the Cincinnati house where she lives with a ghost and her other daughter, Denver. Paul D tries to express his sexual desire towards Sethe, but an unknown young woman appears. She calls herself Beloved and she would be the same age as the murdered child, had it lived. Sethe adopts her and slowly becomes convinced that she is her daughter returned from the dead. The young woman takes possession of the house, separates Paul and Sethe, confiscates all the food, with the consequence that Sethe almost starves to death. Denver who has been mute ever since she was a child understands that she needs to seek the help of the community that has shunned and been shunned by Sethe all those years.

Beloved is then as it were exorcised and it would seem that Sethe will now start a new life with Paul.

### **The language of slavery**

*Beloved* is a book about slavery. Slavery has of course to do with chains and whips, but also with language. The novel shows how, long after abolition, a number of former slaves begin to understand the way slavery in the United States really worked. They needed two decades to revise their superficial conceptions of what being a slave implies. Fundamentally, slavery has to do with words. It begins with the fact that slaves virtually have no names. On the plantation, they are called Paul A Garner, Paul B Garner... Garner is the name of their owner and the fact that they all have the same first name indicates that it is as if they didn't have any personal identity. Strangely enough, the rooster has a name: Mister... If slaves are not looked upon as human beings, animals are apparently almost human...

The name of the plantation also plays an important role. It takes the surviving slaves a lot of time to realize that Sweet Home has been anything but sweet. It was not a home, it certainly wasn't sweet, and it was not a place for a family. The name produced, however, illusions in the slaves who almost thought that they could be happy there as slaves. In fact, Garner wanted them to believe that they were "men," that is that they were strong and virile. It is only later that they understood that these two qualities do not define what a man is, but precisely describe the very qualities required of a slave! The words that are used to convince the slaves that they are "men" and the place a "sweet" "home" prove in fact much more efficient than chains when it comes to preventing them from running away and also to convincing them to... work more, and more efficiently as well... What should be clear is that language is used and controlled by the masters. When for instance Paul D is punished, he is made to wear a bit in his mouth like a horse. We understand that slaves are not supposed to speak, even if without them slave-owners would not be able to express themselves: the ink used by schoolteacher for his infamous note-book is made by Sethe. It

is a well-known truth: the master depends on the slave, which obviously doesn't mean that they are equal or interchangeable.

The language of slavery contains its own logic. Its power over bodies and minds didn't cease with the advent of physical freedom and it is still pregnant even in the north in 1873. Its action is a question of semantics. The meaning of a number of essential words and their implications are biased. As a result, former slaves are unable to control the use of these words, which severely affects their behavior. The most famous example in *Beloved* is the equivalence which Sethe's mind is led to establish between love and death. If I love my daughter, I have to kill her. There is no escaping that logic. In other words, the meaning attached to the word "love" is not hers. It is true that Sethe's body has escaped slavery, but her mind is still the prisoner of it. She then proceeds to saw off the baby's head in the shed as the slaveowner watches her before slowly leaving the place. "He took a backward step with each jump of the baby heart until finally there were none." (164) The effect is that of a mirror. It looks as if he was collaborating with her and as if, true to the logic of slavery, they were both of them killing the baby at the same time.

This episode took place in 1855, that is before the war. One is tempted to assume that, following the official ending of slavery, former slaves would then be "free." That would however be an extremely naive illusion. Eight years after the war, *Beloved* appears outside Sethe's house who then adopts her and starts to believe that the young woman is her dead daughter come back to life. It is entirely possible to interpret the novel without any reference to ghosts and the supernatural.<sup>4</sup> Apart from Sethe, Denver and Paul D, no one actually sees *Beloved*. In other words, she could very well be considered as a part of their minds. She literally embodies their conflictual relationship to slavery and also probably the need they unconsciously feel that they have to free themselves of the past. To use Toni Morrison's

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4. The narrator tells us that, not far from Sethe's house, an old man has just died. He was living with a young black woman whom he treated as some sort of sexual slave. We may imagine that this information explains the fact that *Beloved* is the woman who suddenly escapes from her prison and finds herself outside Sethe's house.

concept, *Beloved* belongs to the realm of “sound,” whereas the novel eventually shows us that we have to reach for the “word,” that is for a rational use of language based on information and a critical exchange of ideas. This is especially perceptible in the three monologues – *Beloved*’s, *Sethe*’s and *Denver*’s – at the centre of the novel in which each of the three characters repeats “She’s mine.” Language disintegrates, punctuation is completely absent and spaces between words become inordinately large as if no links existed between words. It is as though readers suddenly entered what could be called a pre-oedipal universe made up of the chaos originally pertaining between the mother and her new-born baby, that is a world adults have lost for ever. It is as a matter of fact a world before language (the text of the novel experiments with words in order to present readers with some sort of equivalent of that absence of language) and more generally before the infant becomes aware that it is part of society. In particular, pronouns no longer have any reference: who is “I?” who is “she?” (“She laughs and I am the laugher.”) More generally, any kind of rational logic no longer obtains. Chaos is contagious, as is possession, and possession is exactly what the monologues express. “Sound” indicates here that the characters are becoming more and more the prisoners of the logic of slavery.

“Sound” thus appears to be the contrary of life and it can only lead to silence and madness. Halle is the first character who becomes engulfed by madness when he saw the two nephews steal *Sethe*’s milk back at Sweet Home. He subsequently disappears from the novel as if one could not go on living after such a trauma. After killing her baby, *Sethe* finds herself too on the verge of madness as her eyes become entirely “white.” Her mind then remains a blank for practically eighteen years as she is only able to cope with the basic necessities of life. Baby Suggs, as for her, stops being a preacher. She retires to her room never to leave it. She also stops speaking. Lastly, *Denver* also becomes mute after a traumatic question asked her at school about her mother.

Silence and madness are a temptation. Stamp Paid rightly objects to Baby Suggs “Listen here, girl. [...] You can’t quit the

word.” (177) Relinquishing reason in favour of the “sound” means remaining enslaved to the logic of slavery, and eventually death. That is the essential lesson that the characters learn in the course of the novel. After much suffering caused by the arrival of Beloved, Sethe, Denver and Paul D will apparently return to a hopefully normal life in society. Denver will even openly choose the Word when she decides to go to university.

### **The crypt and the phantom**

The characters’ freedom to control language and more generally to be themselves is always at the mercy of a series of hidden impediments which are all the more powerful as they are unconscious. Broadly speaking, in Sethe’s case, there are two areas which escape her consciousness and block it at the same time. They could be called the crypt and the phantom.<sup>5</sup> The crypt is constituted by the trauma of the baby’s murder. When the novel begins, in 1873, Sethe has no access to it, that is no access to its possible meaning and implications. Her mind stopped working immediately after the murder, and to some extent it could be said that the dead child has not been properly buried and that mourning cannot take place. Eventually, Sethe identifies to Beloved, who we are supposed to assume stands in that instance for the dead past, and she tortures herself without understanding the reasons for her suffering. She is both ‘I’ and “she,” dead and alive, without being able to identify to a stable self and to express who she is and what she desires. She then seems to go on living in a totally mechanical way as she is unable to look for new objects of desire.

The phantom is perhaps even more important than the crypt. It refers to an unconscious which this time is not Sethe’s own. Her actions and her words are denied freedom by a past which belongs to another place and to another generation. Sethe killed her daughter, an act for which she is at least partly responsible – that is her inaccessible crypt –, but also for which she is entirely

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5. It is difficult not to think here of the important psychoanalytical research Nicolas Abraham carried out with Maria Torok. I borrow the two concepts of crypt and phantom from their *L’Écorce et le noyau*.



innocent: she did not create slavery in America. Yet, she is the prisoner of both the baby's death, as well as of two centuries of slavery, and the latter constitutes the phantom that continues to haunt her. She understands the logic behind the action of phantom though. "If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened." (36) You are affected by things you did not see yourself. Sethe's body and mind thus suffer from the consequences of the whole history of slavery in America. The long monologues about the Middle Passage are a good case in point. American people by and large seem to have completely forgotten about it, but it still determines what they are two centuries after. For individuals like Sethe, it could almost be said, as William Faulkner famously put it, that the past isn't dead, it isn't even the past. *Beloved* embodies that system and violently forces Sethe, Denver and Paul D. to deal with it, that is to say either starve to death or be free. Sethe is thus not only a ghost, but a phantom coming from the former slaves' unconscious.

It could also be said that for Toni Morrison the problem is more general. She is obviously not writing for people like Sethe, who in any case could not not read. If we assume that her novel contains a lesson, it is aimed at end-of-the-20th century readers, but also at future readers, both black and white, American and foreign. We all have our personal phantoms. To limit ourselves to American people, they all are still today controlled by the past and the problems of modern American society as it is today cannot be understood without reference to slavery, even though it was abolished one century and a half ago. In other words, Toni Morrison has always had her own agenda: the construction a new America, which will be possible only if one first confronts the past, however painful that proves.

## **New possibilities of life**

Language can be used as an instrument of power over bodies and minds. On the other hand, it is also possible to look upon it as a facilitator enabling people to discover new potentials in themselves and in the world. Put another way, words may in some cases help us understand what choices are available to us and then how to make them ours. Our attitude towards language has of course to change. Power is bound up with uncritical repetition of set words and phrases. New possibilities appear however when one starts experimenting with discourse. In this respect, Toni Morrison resorts to the old practice of “signifyin’,” so dear to the Afro-American community. Novelist Edgar J. Wideman used to say that language is at bottom “carnival and a mine-field,” adding that “[s]ignifyin’ is a sign that words cannot be trusted, that even the most literal utterance allows room for interpretation.” (3)<sup>6</sup> Deciphering and revising texts is an open-ended process, which is the guarantee of our freedom, and that is what the characters of *Beloved* start doing with the scraps of discourse they manage to salvage from their past. They build up new meanings, discover in them new implications for them and their environment, at the same time as they begin establishing relationships with others. That process is of course not reserved to Black people. Mr. Bodwin, the white abolitionist, also understands its necessity. After killing her baby, Sethe was accused of infanticide and would have been hanged after her trial if Bodwin had not reversed the charge and convinced the northern white community that her act should be looked upon as a case in favour of abolition. What matters is a problem of semantics, or more precisely of pragmatics: the way reality is named can change its consequences.

At its simplest level, signifyin’ begins with naming. Characters change the names they were given as slaves. Stamp Paid is quite clear about it. “They called me Joshua,” he said. “I renamed myself,” explaining that his new name expresses an act of self-creation: “I have already given all I could. I no longer owe

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6. Cf. Wideman’s *New York Review Times*’s review of H.L. Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey*.

them anything. I am free now.” Baby Suggs displays a similar attitude. When her son purchases her freedom, Mr. Garner tries to explain to her that she can no longer use that ridiculous name of hers. She should properly be called Jenny Whitlow. She objects that that would be using the name of her first owner, whereas Baby Suggs is the name given to her by a man she loved and who loved her. It makes sense for her. It is the sign of a relationship, however lost now, and personal identity is partly made up by the relationships into which we enter (as Sethe and Paul will finally understand). Sixo, as he was burnt to death by schoolteacher, laughs because his son will be called Seven-O. The name is highly symbolic for a man like Sixo who refused to speak English and has a (presumably) African name. Seven-O means that one cannot stop life and Seven-O will survive his father. It also means that the future will be made up together by the whites and the blacks, or at the very least it will be richer because Seven-O will be part of the two communities as he possesses a name that is half African and half English. The same could be said of Denver whose first name is the last name of a white servant whose family came from Scotland.

Signifyin’ and more generally using language with a view to liberate possibilities of life imply that a number of conditions are necessary. The context is crucial and an individual cannot escape the bondage the logic of power keeps imposing upon him or her. Only some sort of shock will start destroying the deadly cycle of repetition and the walls of the crypt that paralyse that individual’s body and mind. Sethe is a good case in point. She starts evolving when Paul D arrives in Cincinnati after a separation of 18 years, and changes in her begin to be perceptible with the appearance of Beloved. Beloved assuredly constitutes a trickster figure. She questions everything and never provides any answers. Her role is literally to get people to change. She cannot however tell them in what way they should change. In that respect, she is a radically ambivalent figure representing both death and life, or, if one prefers, death by starvation or freedom from the past as well as successful mourning for Sethe. That dual aspect can probably be explained by her name, since the phrase “Dearly Beloved” is used in church both at the

beginning of a wedding and at the beginning of a funeral: life or death... In the novel, her status is thus that of a ghost, or, if one prefers, a projection of Sethe's past and guilty conscience. She arrives at Sethe's house not long after Paul D, as if it was at that moment that she had a role to play. With Beloved and Paul D, Sethe will rediscover the past, or rather, as she puts it, "rememory" it. That notion means that she is not just going to recall past events as they literally were. Rememory is not copy. It is invention, revising, rewriting. Basically, it is not about the past, but about creating a past that will make my future possible. She is thus not going to repeat the past, but to establish new links between signifiers, signifieds and the world. And, to quote Amy Denver, "anything dead coming back to life hurts." (35)

Sethe is the most interesting of the three characters as regards the very slow process through which power is vanquished and new possibilities of life manage to come to light. She suddenly feels that she has to confess to the murder of the baby, that is to say face it and also name it. She needs to produce the signifier, but also the signified, the meaning, the implication of its tragic death, which proves a most daunting task for her mind. The incentive she needed to start this mental process was the fact that Paul D has reappeared. He reveals to her some aspects of the past that concern her. Sethe understands that she too has to start confronting the past and she can only do so in an indirect way. The text says that she starts "circling" in the room. Her body first attempts to get to the truth. In her case, a physical reaction seems easier than using her mind which is paralysed. In fact, her movements indicate that approaching the trauma can only be tentative and, when she starts speaking, she begins using figures of speech, first metonymies, and then metaphors.

There was this piece of goods Mrs. Garner gave me. Calico. Stripes it had with little flowers in between. 'Bout a yard – not enough for more 'n a head tie. But I been wanting to make a shift for my girl with it. Had the prettiest colors. I don't even know what you call that color: a rose but with yellow in it. For the longest time I been meaning to make it for her and do you know like a fool I left it behind? No more than a yard, and I kept putting it off because I was tired or didn't have the time. So when

I got here, even before they let me get out of bed, I stitched her a little something from a piece of cloth Baby Suggs had. Well, all I'm saying is that's a selfish pleasure I never had before. I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out. (162-163)

Sethe alludes first to something inessential, a piece of cloth, that is something that doesn't look dangerous for her mind as it is then, something small for the baby, a small pleasure for her. The connection with the dead daughter is thus established thanks to a metonymy and the link is only contiguous, not direct. It is as if it didn't really matter. Sethe also implies: I took care of my baby, I cared for her, and in this manner the logic that keeps her mind prisoner starts its terrible action. I cared for her, I loved her, I killed her, all these things are synonymous. "I couldn't let all that go back." (162-163)

Sethe then resorts to metaphor in order to try to give meaning to the murder. "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe." (164) What is the meaning of the word "safe"? It is as a matter of fact the second time she has used a metaphor. Killing as a way of expressing love was already one. The action she is about to take / she has taken has to make sense: "Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them." (163) Whether she uses metonymies or metaphors, Sethe tries to find words when there are no words to express what is too horrible in itself. Her mind however cannot at that stage go any further as she has reached the limits of language: "No, no, nono, nonono." (*Ibid.*) Paul D refuses to accept that type of logic. He probably doesn't understand that evoking – however in a circling, indirect way – the murder of the baby is only a first step for Sethe. After eighteen years, she first needs to confront the trauma. Then, her process of mourning and liberation will slowly take its course. At the end of the novel, she no longer considers that her children are her "best thing." *She* is her "best thing," or, to put it in another way, "motherlove" is not something infinite. It requires limits.

### **The invention of the word**

Paul D follows a similar path from bondage to freedom. When he finally makes his escape from the south, his body is free, but his mind remains the prisoner of the logic of slavery. The process begins on a musical level. He starts singing songs, first in the prison camp in Georgia, then in Sethe's house. "He couldn't go back to 'Storm upon the Waters' that they sang under the trees of Sweet Home, so he contented himself with mmmmmmmmm, throwing in a line if one occurred to him." (40) Just like Sethe, Paul will have to move from sound, mmmmmmmmm, to word and he intuitively understands that he has to renounce the songs he used to sing with the other slaves back on the plantation. At that time, they were under the illusion that they were free. He first attempts singing again when he is in the chain-gang in Georgia, but in a very tentative way, just like he "loves small," a blade of grass, the tiniest star in the sky, as he knows that loving anything bigger, let alone a human being, would "break" him. It seems however that, at that time, he discovers the power of language which can be considered as a medium on which one can experiment, manipulate words, confer new meanings upon them. Paul D in his own way invents the art of signifyin'. The prisoners communicate in English, the language of their guards, but they do so in a way that is entirely personal. "They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings." (108) In other words, the connections between signifier and signified are arbitrary, as Saussure put it, and it is always possible to create new connections in a different context in order to express oneself. At that stage, the slaves can momentarily be themselves when they use language. They will need physical freedom and they will also need to construct new signifying practises, a new use of language and new relationships with others and the world.

Liberation for Paul D will come through words. He will discover the possibilities of language. He too has to confront the past. It is only after doing so that he will be able to start a new life without being alienated. In a crucial scene, Beloved (or, more

probably, the ghost of Beloved in his mind) practically rapes him and forces him to have sex with her. More importantly, she tells him "Call me my name," (117), which he eventually does. At that moment, his tobacco-tin, which he had kept upon his heart and hadn't opened for eighteen years so that its lid was rusted, bursts open. Beloved's name is love. He had been afraid of loving another human being lest he be destroyed. He now has to accept that virility (linked to his tobacco-tin upon his heart: only men smoked then) is not just physical strength (that defines a slave, not a man...). Being a man means establishing relationships with others. In the end, Paul D accepts Sethe, which he had been unable to do so far. When he arrived in Cincinnati, he was surprised to find that she had changed and that she did not look the way she was in his memories: she had murdered her daughter, she had grown old and her breasts were sagging. That certainly was not the way his desire had been dreaming about her all those years. Worst of all, her back was covered with unspeakable scars. They were literally unspeakable, the chaos they formed was meaningless and put off Paul D's amorous impulses. At the end of the novel, however, he understands that the solution has to do with language, and more specifically with metaphor. As Amy Denver had suggested, Sethe's back *is* a chokecherry tree. Understand that trees are synonymous with fertility, they grow, they establish connections.

Denver also discovers through language what it can possibly mean to be herself. Even though she craved a sense of identity, for a long time her mind was the prisoner of alienation. This is clear when she repeatedly asked her mother to recount how she was born. She seemed to believe that if she could take hold of her origins, she would know who she is. The problem is that these accounts are always in the third person. Denver will have to discover how to use the first person pronoun to talk about herself. In her case, it is an extremely long process as she has been mute for twelve years and as she refuses to go out. In her case too, alienation started with a trauma when at school a boy named Nelson Lord asked her a question about being in prison with her mother. Twelve years later, she understands that she now has to leave the house in search of help as Sethe and she are

starving to death. She encounters Nelson Lord by chance and this time he kindly says to her: "Take care of yourself, Denver" (252). She then realizes that "that is what language is made for," (*ibid.*) that is to say to talk to and about others. When the novel ends, Denver has changed. She says hello to Paul D. She now accepts him as a member of the family.

The turning point that makes the *dénouement* possible is what could be called the exorcism scene. The women of the community meet again outside 124 Bluestone Road after having avoided the house on account of what it had represented: excess of food, love, violence, and more generally, as Stamp Paid calls it, "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken." (199) The scene consists in the description of a process of regression. The community goes back in time to a period when they used to go to the house and were happy. They intuit that they have to return to the instant immediately before the conflict took place and start the process again in a completely differently way. Sethe too repeats her gestures, except that this time she tries to kill the man who is about to steal her children (or rather the man she mistakes for schoolteacher). The point is that her priority is now different. The logic inside her mind has radically changed.

It is language that destroys *Beloved*, or perhaps we should say that Sethe's mental evolution is accompanied by the adoption of a new attitude towards language, as it could be argued that *Beloved* doesn't truly exist. Sethe finally succeeds in getting over an inability to mourn that was caused by the fact that her separation with her daughter did not take place naturally. Up to that moment, Sethe was still the prisoner of some sort of lethal relationship with her dead daughter – or the image of her dead daughter, referred to as "Crawling already baby?" since it did not have a name yet. It didn't speak either yet. It belonged to the world of "sound," an irrational universe from which her mother could not break free. With the help of the community, when Ella starts to holler, Sethe goes back to baby language to a period when words did not exist.

[...] the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words.



Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

It takes a sound to beat a sound, a louder sound, a stronger violence. Then and only then can Sethe be born again – baptised, as it were, – in other words, have access to the Word, that is to say become fully part of society as well as use language in order to communicate in a rational way.

### **The sense of a beginning**

If we assume that *Beloved* contains a lesson, it certainly is that readers are meant to confront and get rid of their illusions about the past in order to construct a vision and an understanding of what the future could be like. The fundamental problem is access to the Word. Clearly, Toni Morrison hopes that her readers will achieve a rational way of expressing that creative vision. In order to reach that stage, they have to submit to the unreadability and the violence that the text imposes upon them. “[L]anguage has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. Then we (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience.” (“Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” 164).

Obviously, the novel is about the black community in the United States. To a large extent, Toni Morrison does what her character Ella does in *Beloved*. Ella listens to “holes”: “the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask. Listened too for the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind.” (92) That is the first part of the novelist’s enterprise: (re)construct the discourse of generations of slaves who were not allowed to read and write and who in any case would not have been able to leave archives behind them. Toni Morrison’s project is an attempt at finding the missing words and the forgotten (repressed?) meanings of slavery with their implications, beginning with bringing out of oblivion the “Sixty million and more” (first

epigraph of the novel) who died during the Middle Passage on the ships between Africa and America.

The second part of the enterprise concerns the future. The second epigraph of the novel is a quotation from Saint Paul's *Romans*: "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved." (9:25). What we should understand is that you are a people when you are called a people. Your identity as a people requires the use of the word "people," and that it be applied to the group of human beings (accepting of course the fact that they are human beings) to which you belong. This epigraph is a good example of Toni Morrison's personal manner of signifyin'. In the same manner as the apostle Paul revised what the Old Testament said, the novelist rewrites American history. Paul knew that so far only the Jews constituted the people. That "people" had been elected by God (or at least that was what they claimed) and, outside that community, other individuals, other groups had no name, no existence. They did not constitute "peoples," but outcasts, refuse, fragments of chaos deprived of identity. The same could be said of the blacks in America. Toni Morrison's use of the Word grants them existence as a people, in the same way as Paul brought recognition to the despised Christians. More importantly, saying that one belongs to a people implies a projection into the future, as the painter Paul Klee used to say: "Uns trägt kein Volk."<sup>7</sup> We are missing a people, a people doesn't exist yet. Klee wisely uses the indefinite article. It is *a* people, not *the* or that people that we know and that is an already identified (usually self-appointed) people with its identity and its mission. On the contrary, a people has to come. Its role is yet unwritten.

Readers of *Beloved* often identify with Denver. Her life and her story have yet to be written. Both literally start after the the novel has ended. It is up to the reader to imagine what they will be like. We know that she will going to Oberlin College, that is to say that she will start using language in a radically different way from that of schoolteacher with its contagious

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7. Paul Klee. "Übersicht und Orientierung auf dem Gebiet der bildnerischen Mittel und ihre räumliche Ordnung."

logic of power over bodies and minds. Denver will (hopefully) discover and develop the possibilities of life inherent in words. At that stage of her life, let us offer that she would certainly concur with Friedrich Nietzsche who wrote about literature as well as about life in generally, "If only someone could rediscover 'these possibilities of life!' [...] There is as much invention, reflection, boldness, despair and hope here as in the voyages of the great navigators; and to tell the truth these are also voyages of exploration in the most distant and perilous domains of life." (*Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen*, introduction).

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