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## BELOVED & THE EROTICS OF TEMPORAL MUTILATION

Ruba Habli  
*none*, rubahabli2@gmail.com

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## BELOVED & THE EROTICS OF TEMPORAL MUTILATION

### Abstract

'Snatched and yanked' the readers begin a journey in *Beloved's* extravagant and meandering narrative—a narrative filled with repetitions and returns that mutilate time beyond recognition. This paper aims to map time in *Beloved*, to understand its narrative insurgence, and feel the foreign terrains it leaves the reader in. I depend on Peter Brooks' essay "Freud's Masterplot" to contextualize the patterns of repetitions and returns that mutilate time in the text through a psychoanalytic understanding. Crucial to the psychoanalytic understanding of the narrative is the comprehension of narrative desire, precisely how the death instinct can be at work in the narrative. Given the controversial status of the death instinct in psychoanalysis, I also rely on Matte Blanco's "The Four Antinomies of The Death Instinct" to elucidate how the death instinct takes root in the narrative and interacts with time. This maimed temporal map of *Beloved* takes the reader from three-dimensional reality on an ever-deviating spiral downwards to reach the purest, undifferentiated mode of being.

### Keywords

temporal mutilation, narrative desire, death instinct, repetitions, returns, Morrison's *Beloved*

## PREFACE

A ghost is not a spirit fettered to the wrong temporal coordinates; a ghost is a spirit that disidentifies the existing temporal coordinates, thereby mutilating them. Time-mutilated is grotesque in the life it brings about, reeking of death yet perpetually unfinished. To tell a story is to coordinate time, to linearize that which is otherwise unintelligible. To tell a ghost story is to give way to narrative mutiny.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) weaves a narrative that rebels against the existing narrative structure and against itself. We are 'snatched and yanked' (1988) in the first minutes of the novel, yet we are not abandoned. After extravagant temporal meandering, we arrive at terrains inaccessible in ways that are simple and straightforward. My interest in the narrative lies in its emotional temperament: its' agitation, disruption, compulsions, desire, and the peculiar place it leaves the reader, and how all of this interacts with the narrative's temporality. This paper aims to map time in *Beloved*, to understand its narrative insurgence, and to feel the foreign terrains it leaves the reader in. This is done through a framework that favors what Susan Sontag called the "erotics of art"<sup>1</sup> rather than hermeneutics.

Narrative is intrinsically temporal. Not only does the process of reading take time, but it also takes time and organizes it in ways unavailable in life: it gives knowledge of a clear end. Such ends are an impossibility for us in life; for the second we reach them, we are already gone. Narrative is meaning-oriented—end-oriented, for meaning "stands on the far side of the end, in human terms on the far side of death" (Brooks, 1984, p. 95). While this gives the end the greater authority in narrative, the middle remains a curious and attention-seeking case as it propels the reader towards the finishing line. In his essay "*Freud's Masterplot*" (1984), Peter Brooks probes this remarkable narrative period and highlights its deviance and difficulty.

This inescapable middle, writes Brooks, is suggestive of the demonic (Freud's *Masterplot*, p. 100). In his study of several nineteenth-century narratives, he finds patterns of repetitions and returns in their middles that extravagantly take the text away from itself in an attempt to find it. These middles are more concerned with peripheries that try to give way for a center than with the center itself. And linear temporality is constantly threatened. That is true for *Beloved*: the repetitions and returns that pervade the middle destabilize the fixed points of past, present, and future. That, in return, gives immediacy to all of them, therefore, disrupting any attempt at creating temporal structures.

Brooks relates in the same essay that he discovered in Freud's '*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*' (1920) a Masterplot underlying the processes of the psyche that can explain these textual peculiarities when applied to the plot. In what follows, I will be elucidating the process of temporal mutilation present in *Beloved*'s narrative. Then I will contextualize this process in Freud's *Masterplot*.

### 2. THE PROCESS OF TEMPORAL MUTILATION

The story is about Sethe, a woman who escaped SweetHome, where she was enslaved, 18 years before we first meet her, with a killer motherlove, and a dedication to the serious work of beating back the past (*Beloved*, p. 86). She has a daughter, Denver, and two sons who ran away, Howard and Bugler. When we meet her, she lives with Denver, and the memory of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, in spiteful 124, with no news about her husband, Halle, and the venom of her 'crawling-already?'-baby whom she murdered. That is, until Paul D, kin from SweetHome, returns, and remains.

The energies of the text immediately heighten at Paul D's arrival. His return incites temporal chaos as the characters incessantly move from one point in time to another. Sethe established as an isolated and insulated character is stripped bare, the past sprouting on her back (pp. 18-20). Still, Paul D insists on being a protective presence to 124, one offering a future. The tension rising

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<sup>1</sup> In her essay "Against Interpretation" (1996) Sontag writes, "What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more... In place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art."

from his presence drives the ghost away from the house (p. 22). Now, as unhoused in place as it is in time, the ghost is set up to wreak havoc. Oblivious to what Paul D had started, and trying to map a future by going to the carnival in the guise of a family (pp. 56-59), Sethe, Paul D, and Denver encounter a peculiar stranger as they return to 124 (p. 61).

This demanding, present moment jerks Sethe back into the past, filled with water. She relives the agonizing labor she went through to give birth to Denver, “the water she voided was endless...like flooding the boat when Denver was born...there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now” (p. 61). When she is released from that moment, the present offers Beloved: a seemingly adrift, colored woman.

Beloved is voracious. She devours food and sweets. She is insatiable. However, her appetite is for far more than just food. Beloved asks for stories she seems to have heard before; she demands a retelling. She asks for stories about diamond earrings tucked in oblivion (p. 69); she asks about abandoning mothers (p. 72); she asks about birth stories (p. 90). Relentless, she seemed to be toying with Sethe, and in return, tossing, not only her but the whole narrative in temporal delirium. Under her effect, Paul D relives with Sethe the night of her escape, Halle’s derangement, and the bit he had in his mouth (pp. 81-85). At this point, the authority of the present moment is gone, and there are no longer any hierarchies in the time periods. While Sethe remains diligent in the days’ “serious work of beating back the past” (p. 86), the past is not housed in a strict temporal order any more.

Denver is a curious case here. The forlorn child, still unfamiliar with time, surrenders to the temporal chaos through her connection to Beloved, suspecting that she is the reincarnation of her dead sister. The time they spent separate from each other and the rigor of the time they spent together radically changed the basis of their relationship. We see this happen when Denver is initiated into the role of Beloved’s surrogate mother as they reenact Denver’s birth: “the monologue became... a duet... and the two did the best they could to create what really happened” (p. 92). Metaphorically, in that instance, it is Denver giving birth to Beloved. Beloved was inside Denver from the moment she drank Beloved’s blood with Sethe’s milk (p. 179). Only through maimed time, however, was she able to finally release Beloved from her body, and tap into Time-unbounded.

The characters still try to seek familiarity in this chaos. Sethe takes her children and visits the clearing where Baby Suggs held her sermons (p. 105). Sethe relaxes into the moment when Baby Suggs is still alive, there, and massaging her neck. Beloved, however, infiltrates this moment and renders it hostile and unrecognizable as she adds her hands to her mother’s neck and chokes her (pp. 112-113). The chaos intensifies. While Beloved is solidifying in temporal chaos, Paul D is being stretched too thin. Already weary and half-eaten, Paul D could not resist Beloved’s attempt to have sex with him—to overpower him (p. 137). Afterward, he became a “rag doll—picked up and put down anytime anywhere by a girl young enough to be his daughter” (p. 148). Still, Paul D tries to demarcate time to anchor himself in it. So, when he meets Sethe again, he tries to outline a future by asking her to have a baby with him. Sethe didn’t say yes, but she, too, clings to the possibility of a defined time to come (pp. 151-156).

Nevertheless, this is a ghost story; the narrative is restless and rebellious. Any line drawn must be crossed out. At one point, during this time, we see Beloved back in the cold house where she was murdered. She “bends over, curls up and rocks” (p. 146), and says, “this is the place I am” (p. 146) and in the darkness, she sees her face. Now she is the sole recognizable site in the mayhem she incited. Soon after, Time-now is invaded by the Time of Beloved’s murder (pp. 174-180). Stamp paid tells Paul D how Sethe frantically gathered her children and hid in the shed when Schoolteacher and his men came to get them, and how she murdered Beloved (p. 186). When he confronts her about it, she doesn’t deny it. Horrified, he leaves 124 (pp. 193-195).

With Paul D leaving, the narrative coup is safe from time bounds, and Beloved revels in the disorder. This propels Sethe to finally recognize Beloved as her daughter (p. 207). Denver becomes more protective of Beloved, fearing her mother will kill her again. Beloved and Sethe become enmeshed in a parasitic type of relationship, with Beloved as a parasite and Sethe as a host.

### 3. THE MASTERPLOT BEHIND THE MUTILATION

The mechanism of this temporal mutilation is repetitions and returns. The past returns, lugging behind the embodied ghost and Paul D forcefully disrupting the present. Events repeat themselves as the narrative tries to move past them. The mere idea of a future collapses under its proximity with the disordered present. In “*Freud’s Masterplot*” (1984), Brooks recognizes that repetitions and returns are the main features of the “deviant middles” noting that they are “perverse and difficult” (p. 100). To investigate this phenomenon, Brooks seeks to find a dynamic model to explain the workings of the plot. His intention is “to superimpose psychic functioning on textual functioning” in an attempt to “discover something about how textual dynamics work and something about their psychic equivalence” (p. 90). Brooks comes to an understanding of psychic functioning by relying on Freud’s work in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). He finds in Freud’s work a ‘Masterplot’ that controls the psyche, noting that the intertextual reading of Freud’s Masterplot with fictional plots is useful. In what follows, I will explain Freud’s Masterplot, and how it makes sense of the temporal mutilation outlined above.

According to Freud, repetitions and returns happen to achieve mastery over traumatic events. Trauma occurs when the outer layer of our mental apparatus, which acts as a shield against excitation, is breached. This flood of stimuli disrupts the organism’s instincts. “An instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things.” (Freud, 1920, p. 41)—the state of inertia. Trauma stimulates the organism into partaking in repetitions “as a process of binding toward creating an energetic constant state situation which will permit the emergence of mastery.” (Brooks, 1984, p. 101); mastery is the guarantee that such floods of stimuli will never happen again. Brooks likens the starting point of the plot which is “the moment at which the story, or “life”, is stimulated from quiescence into a state of narratability, into a tension, an irritation which demands narration” (Brooks, 1984, p. 103) to Freud’s conception of trauma experienced by an organism.

As the story is stimulated into life, desire comes into play. The desire of a narrative is a desire for meaning, and meaning is made possible by “the anticipated structuring force of the ending” (Brooks, p. 93). Brooks writes, “All narrative may be in essence obituary in that the retrospective knowledge that it seeks, the knowledge that comes after, stands on the far side of the end, in human terms on the far side of death” (Brooks, p. 95). That makes the desire for meaning, a desire for an end.

That relates to Freud through what he established about the organism’s wishes to remain inert and its’ “seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths alike old and new.” (Freud, 1920, p. 41). This ancient goal is a supreme state of inertia that can only be identified as death. That leads Freud to boldly claim, “The aim of all life is death.” (Freud, 1920, p. 46) Thus, the quest for meaning is, essentially, a quest for the end; the dominating desire is the desire for the end operating through what Freud calls the *death instinct*.

This drive towards annihilation, however, does not seek simple movement forward. The tension created by external forces drives the living substance to “diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated détours before reaching its aim of death... The organism wishes to die only in its own fashion.” (Freud, 1920, pp. 46-47). The Masterplot that binds this Freudian conception of the psyche posits ends (release, meaning, death) against beginning (trauma, stimulation, tension). It also necessitates that the central desire created in the space in-between, the desire for an end, seeks an arabesque temporality to achieve the proper release. It must delay, retard, and repeat.

In fictional narrative, this means that the plot deviates, postpones, and squiggles through what is “perverse” and “difficult” to achieve mastery over what stimulated it into narratability and to avoid a short circuit that would not provide the proper release—the proper meaning. In this mayhem, the narrative perverts time to reach meanings set on the far end of death. *Beloved’s* narrative immerses itself completely in the perverse and difficult; it refuses simple movement forward. Yet, its’ ending is still more peculiar than its middle. The following section will focus on *Beloved’s* ending and its relation to Freud’s Masterplot.

#### 4. UNCOVERING THE DEATH INSTINCT

After the deviant middle, Denver, in the end, is alienated from Sethe and Beloved who, together, morph into a dense temporal singularity she cannot enter. So, she moves forward. She gets out of the house, out of the time delirium, gets a job, and asks for help. Thirty women respond to her call for help and come to exorcise 124 from the spiteful ghost that for so long had wreaked havoc on it. Denver saw them come while she stood on the porch waiting for Mr. Bodwin, the white man she worked for, to pick her up. Sethe and Beloved came out to the porch when they heard the women approach. The women saw Beloved as a tall naked pregnant woman, and Sethe looked like her small child.

Sethe sees the women and Mr. Bodwin approaching simultaneously. Temporally lost, she leaps towards the white man, mistaking him for Schoolteacher, and repeats what she had done many years ago, but this time she aims for what she takes as the right target. The women rush to pull her away and break the scene. Beloved was last seen by a little boy running through the woods (p. 315). The narrative ends with a muted sense of delirium that spreads over the novel's population. The delirium is coupled with a restless sense of paranoia that orients the people towards silences, shifts, footprints, water, and what is down there (p. 324). The temporal chaos centralized in 124 is not stopped; it is released and dispersed everywhere.

In the end, Beloved runs, but not toward oblivion. She runs through the woods where Baby Suggs held her sermons, where the heart of the community is. Denver is "thinner and steady in the eyes" (p. 313). She found an afternoon job along with her night work at the Bodwins. She is saving up for a future and taking care of her mother. As for Paul D, he returns to 124, after finally being able to feel and hold his weight in the chaos. Now suspicious of temporal order but still persistent on remaining in life, he tells Sethe "we need *some kind of tomorrow*" (my italics) (p. 322). Sethe became bedridden after the incident. Through her talk with Paul D, she slowly begins to recognize herself; her last words in the narrative are: "Me? Me?" (p. 322). The narrative and its characters become more rooted in life than ever, seemingly ignoring any notion of the death instinct. Even the loneliness is alive and roaming, a soundful "dry and spreading thing." (p. 323).

The death instinct is a controversial concept in psychoanalysis, often dismissed but not useless<sup>2</sup>. In his paper "*The Four Antinomies of The Death Instinct*" (2005), Matte Blanco suggests that "the concept of the death instinct is one of the most profound expressions of the relationship between the modes that underlie conscious and unconscious logic" (p. 1463). The main technique used in this paper to feel and understand *Beloved's* narrative is the superimposition of Freud's understanding of psychic functioning on textual functioning. However, as I have pointed out, Freud's understanding of the psyche falls short when it comes to *Beloved's* ending. Still, I believe this technique to be valuable and instructive, so in what follows, I will rely on Blanco's work to gain a deeper understanding of psychic functioning. This deeper understanding is what I will superimpose on *Beloved's* end to reveal its textual functioning.

Freud described the unconscious as characterized by: displacement; condensation; timelessness; the confusion of (inner) fantasy with (outward) reality; the absence of negation, and of the principle of non-contradiction (Blanco, 2005). This means that the logic of the unconscious operates through a symmetrical mode: treating every relation as identical to its inversion, and treating opposites as identical ( $A = \text{not}A$ ). Consciousness, however, operates through an asymmetrical mode: it's unable "to express itself other than in terms of its own nature" ( $A \neq \text{not}A$ ) (Blanco, 2005). This asymmetrical mode allows the consciousness to discern time and space. If  $a$  is before  $b$ , then  $b$  follows  $a$ ; if  $c$  is to the right of  $d$ , then  $d$  is to the left of  $c$  (Blanco, 2005).

The unconscious, however, being symmetrical and therefore indivisible, is atemporal and aspatial. The unconscious's inability to conceive time makes it incapable of conceiving death. In a later work, Freud wrote, "the unconscious seems to contain nothing that could give any content to our concept of the annihilation of life" (*Inhibitions Symptoms And Anxiety*, p. 94). A person, however, perceives the unconscious through conscious thought, which is asymmetrical; the "atemporality-aspatialness is perceived as absolute stasis, and this in turn is confused with death"

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<sup>2</sup> See 'The Death Instinct Revisited' (Chessick, 1992).

(Blanco, 2005). Matte Blanco explores in his paper the death instinct as an expression of the paradoxical nature of the unconscious filtered through the symmetrical mode of consciousness rather than an instinct for annihilation. He writes:

*The Freudian concepts of the life instincts and the death instincts become possible in the mind via a process of translating or duplicating the immobile unity of life-death that exists in the symmetrical mode into opposing terms and into terms of space-time. These concepts, because of their spatio-temporal implications... cannot belong to the deep unconscious which is a homogenous and indivisible mode of being. They are expressions... of the purest symmetrical mode of being.* (Blanco, p. 1474)

Blanco, in the same boldness that led Freud to write “the aim of all life is death” (1920, p. 46), concludes his investigation of the death instinct and the unconscious by a simple equation: in the depths of the unconscious, Life=Death (p. 1471). There is no distinction between growth and annihilation deep inside. Superimposed on the narrative, this implies that the earlier state of quiescence pre-narratability that the narrative deviates to under the mandate of its desire is not death; it is a point farther still: it is life and death simultaneously forgotten and enmeshed.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Release, meaning, and mastery over the traumatic have been posited to lie with and within death. That is where *Beloved* dissents. Death was useless to Beloved; she came back. While dealing with the traumatic and partaking in the demonic, the narrative does not pervert time to seek death. By relying on Blanco, we can understand that it mutilates time to go to another mode of being. *Beloved* starts after death, and the road it takes the reader on zigzags and spirals downwards “to the purest symmetrical mode of being” (p. 1474) where life=death—where Sethe=Beloved.

The writing acts as a séance, inviting the dead, and domesticating them in the text. In this alien space, *Beloved* conceives a meaning through integration; it roots its characters and opens them to life, death, other, and more. In the end, through all the temporal mutilation, the characters *become* and remain. Toni Morrison deftly transports us from our three-dimensional world, where time is easily discernable, and life excludes death, to a multi-dimensional depth, where everything we know by difference dissolves and becomes one. There, being harnesses death, and one need not separate the wind from the breath, and the weather from the clamor for a kiss (Beloved, p. 324).

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