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TONI MORRISON'S (HI)STROYTELLING – THE USE OF HISTORY IN *PARADISE, LOVE* AND *A MERCY*

Introduction

There are writers for whom the past, historically framed, becomes essential in weaving their stories. Toni Morrison is certainly among them, as national history, confined within specific time frames can be found in the background of her major works, be it *Beloved*, *Jazz* or *Sula*. She intertwines individual life stories with African American history, making national, communal and individual histories complete one another and overlap. It is so in the case of her three latest novels; namely *Paradise* (1998), *Love* (2003) and *A Mercy* (2008), which I intend to analyse herein in an attempt to discuss the ways in which Morrison historicises her narratives.

The History of Paradise

Paradise, when published, was said to belong to the trilogy of Morrison's historical novels, *Beloved* and *Jazz* being the other two. Complex narration-wise, the book received varied reviews – some critics loved its complexity, others claimed it was too confusing. Morrison herself claimed in an interview by Charlie Rose, back in 1998, that it was her best work, due to very intricacy (Rose 1998). She once said that: *[...] we experience life as the present moment, the anticipation of the future and a lot of slices of the past* (Mulrine 1998) and that is what she gives us in *Paradise* – the slices, the pieces of the puzzle constituting both communal history and individual life stories.

Although the main plot of the novel is set in Oklahoma in the 1970s, it goes back to 1889, to the Reconstruction times, as Morrison presents the community of Ruby, a fictitious all-black town and its 60-year history. As in the case of all her novels, Morrison had conducted thorough research in the history of all-black

communities in the US to see how they functioned and whether they were successful. Her Ruby eventually fails. It was founded in 1949 by grandsons of the founders of Haven, a black town in Oklahoma established by a group of former slaves. As Morrison puts it, the suspicion of outsiders revealed by the inhabitants of Ruby is a legacy from the founding fathers of that first town. The identity of the inhabitants of Ruby is historically constructed, based on the story of the founding of Haven, then Disallowing (being rejected by light-skin inhabitants of another black Oklahoma town) and the eventual foundation of Ruby. The grandfathers, who in their quest for a place to live in the West were rejected by inhabitants of Fairly, being perceived as too black and too poor to settle there, *internalized the shame and hatred they experienced and, through storytelling, passed on a determination to their descendants to become even more exclusive and intolerant than their persecutors* (Romero 2005). Hence, the citizens of Ruby develop a dislike for any person with less than 'blue black' skin colour (cf. Romero 2005). The twin brothers, Deacon and Steward Morgan, who control both money and power in the town:

> *[...] have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened – things they witnessed and things they have not [...] and they have never forgotten the message [...] especially the controlling one told to them by their grandfather. A story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves.* (Morrison 1998:13)

They live in the past, and out of this past, family history and community history, they mould the present moment. They have created that past and control the history of the town, aiming to control its present, every aspect of the town's life. In Ruby *there is no history except as it is composed* (Davidson 2001). Hence, the history of the founding of the town is idealized, or even idolized. A good example of it is the way in which that history is mingled with the life of Jesus in the annual Christmas pageant. Schoolchildren, the young ones, present the version of the narrative which becomes a myth in itself.

The town of Ruby, thought to be safe and rightful, possesses its binary opposition – the Convent, a place inhabited by women, misfits helping other misfits. As Dalsgard rightly points out, the African-American community Morrison creates in *Paradise* lives *its own version of the exceptionality narrative* (qtd. in Romero 2005). As paradise by definition necessitates exclusion of those, who break the law imposed by the creator, existance of any type of paradise means exclusion of some. Morrison tries to explore how the specific Paradise created by the disallowed, by the excluded themselves, functions and fails. Ruby is formed and develops on the grounds of exclusive nationalism which leads the town nowhere, which verges on the danger of in-breeding (not accidentally at the end of the novel we have reference to sickly children been born). What is captivating, Morrison deconstructs the myth of unity and perfection in black

society relieved of white oppression (cf. Kubitschek 1998:179) suggesting, that oppression remains in the oppressed until they understand it. As Romero (2005) notices, *until it comes to terms with its traumatic past a community created in opposition is destined to repeat exclusions similar to those of the community it is reacting against.*

The two worlds, of Ruby and the Convent, had to collide, eventually, as the past weighs on the current population of Ruby. Shooting the women at the Convent, ironically, is the most effective solution to the problem the Convent women created for the ruling men of the town. Extermination certainly means permanent exclusion. Morrison makes the bodies of the women shot disappear, to both the readers' and other characters' distress, but focuses on the consequences of the assault: *[...] the story was being retold; […] people were changing it to make themselves look good [...] enhancing, recasting, inventing misinformation* (Morrison 1998:297). This process of handling inconvenient information detrimentally impacts on the readers' credulity towards the inhabitants of Ruby, as initially we get to know the community as holding firmly to the truth, and to the unchangeable facts constituting the community's history. If their own history at this moment is being manipulated, maybe it was so before as well. The assault ends the era of Ruby's uniqueness: *Unbridled by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby, it seemed to* [Misner] *was an unnecessary failure […] Soon Ruby will be like any other country town* (Morrison 1998:306). Death has no access to Ruby until the raid on the Convent takes place. The assault, like original sin, results in the end of Paradise with the symbolic first funeral within the town borders.

Romero (2005) calls America *the macrocosm of Ruby*. The history of the town can be perceived as an allegory for the way the United States as a country was formed, starting with the Puritan settlement in New England, excluding the infidels, through the Founding Fathers establishing the democratic system in which a vast percentage of the population was deprived of any rights, and finishing with the 20th century practices of social and political outcasting of racial minorities. The comment Morrison seems to pass, though, as Romero (2005) suggests, is that *African Americans themselves [...] are responsible for continuing to condone inequality because their concept of community and nation building are predicted on Biblical exclusions based, i.e. on superiority and exceptionalism*. The communities built on such grounds eventually collapse.

The development of Ruby mirrors some of the changes taking place in the outside world through decades. In the 1970s the "Founding Fathers" of Ruby have to face a certain rebellion within their "ideal" in-bred community. The ferment comes from the young. The youngsters rebel, secretly at first. The evidence is provided on The Oven, whose inscription changes from the original *Beware of the Furrow of His Brow* through *Be the Furrow of His Brow* to become finally *We Are Furrow of His Brow*. An exchange between Roy

Beauchamp (representing the young) and Deek Morgan and Richard Misner (representing the older generation) illustrates the change which the community finds itself upon the verge of. The discussion quoted below concerns the meaning of the inscription once some of the original syllables have been lost:

[Deek]
"[...] nobody is going to come along some eighty years later claiming to know better what men who went through hell to learn knew [...]"
[Misner]
"Seems to me, Deek, they are respecting it. It's because they do know the Oven's value that they want to give it knew life"[...]
[Deek]
"They don't want to give it nothing. They want to kill it, change it into something they made up.".
[Roy]
"It's our history too, sir. Not just yours," [...]
[Misner]
"Then act like it. I just told you. That Oven already has a history. It does not need you to fix it."(Morrison 1998:86)

That exchange between the generations illustrates the transformation which is already taking place. The fact that the inscription on the Oven eventually changes its meaning signifies the shift in control of Ruby and the change in the African American communities which took place in the 1970s. When the sign of a fist appears on the Oven, it causes a hustle among the original inhabitants. The fist and the evolving inscription suggest the search for something beyond what Ruby could offer. *Kids need more than what's here* (Morrison 1998:117).

In *Paradise* Morrison for the first time seems to question some aspects of the overall achievements of the Civil Rights Movement:

> *Since the murder of Martin Luther King, new commandments had been sworn, laws introduced but most of it was decorative: states, street names, speeches. It was as though something valuable had been pawned and the claim ticket lost […] In any case, if they* (the young) *couldn't find the ticket they might break into the pawnshop. Question was who pawned it in the first place, and why.* (Morrison 1998:117)

She returns to that period in African American history and re-analyses its significance and consequences in her next novel, namely *Love.*

History in Love

What was compromised and lost during the Civil Rights Movement is the question which seems to have bothered Morrison for at least three decades. In

her essay entitled "Rediscovering Black History," first published in 1974, she states that:

> *In the legitimate and necessary drive for better jobs and housing, we abandoned the past and a lot of the truth and sustenance that went with it. And when Civil Rights became Black Power, we frequently chose exoticism over reality [...] In trying to cure the cancer of slavery and its consequences, some healthy as well as malignant cells were destroyed.* (Morrison 2008b:41)

That very problem is being discussed in *Love*. While in *Paradise* the history of the community, mirroring the history of the country, is almost a character itself, in *Love* it is the background for the poignant story of a complex network of relationships. The two novels share a part of their time frame, since *Love* is set between the 1940s and the present times, with the historical significance of the 1960s stressed. Here, much more specifically, Morrison analyses the impact of the Civil Rights Movement, its influence on individual lives and the price that had to be paid for it, using the Cosey family (a black family once comfortably rich) as an example. Re-examining the traumatic history of African Americans, this time she, more explicitly than ever before in her fiction, articulates certain harsh truths about the Civil Rights Movement, apparently departing from the *normative triumphalism discourses* (Neelakantan 2007).

The novel presents in retrospect the history of an affluent pre-WWII black community. Bill Cosey is a successful entrepreneur, running a hotel which flourishes, giving employment to one group of African American inhabitants of the town, making another group proud of the fact that so many wealthy people were coming to visit the place: *[…] all felt a tick of entitlement, of longing turned to belonging in the vicinity of the fabulous, successful resort controlled by one of their own. A fairy tale that lived on even after the hotel was dependent for its life on the people it once excluded* (Morrison 2003:42). After desegregation those affluent people could go anywhere, and apparently did. The hotel deprived of its former wealthy visitors was degraded and eventually had to be closed.

Although Morrison is far from idealising the Coseys, she presents the process of the hotel's decline as *the passing of a legacy that defined the integrity of the black community* (Neelakantan 2007). Bill Cosey, May, L., Christine – all those characters become immediate victims of the altered situation. To May the Civil Rights Movement becomes a threat leading her into hysteria. Christine falls a victim of what May, her mother, calls *misguided political radicalism*. Actually for May Christine's commitment to the movement is an act of betraying her race, accepting the anarchic ways. She feared the impact of the movement and, *worst yet, the riots of the 1960s: this kind of behavior, she feared, would give whites the excuse to close down Cosey's* (Wardi 2005). Morrison illustrates that fear with the memories of Heed and Christine:

1964? 1965?[...] May enters the kitchen with her own cardboard box[…] She is frantic with worry that the hotel, that everybody in it are in immediate danger. That city blacks have invaded Up Beach, carrying lighter fluid, matches, Molotov cocktails; shouting, urging the locals to burn Cosey's hotel and Resort to ground and put the Uncle Toms, then sheriff's pal, the race traitor out of business. […] May was beyond discussion assigning herself the part of the resorts' sole protector. (Morrison 2003:80)

May's emotional insecurity and the eventual breakdown seem to dramatize the conflict between the 60s and 70s mentality and an older mentality:

Once she had been merely another of the loud defenders of color-owned businesses, the benefits of separate schools, hospitals with Negro wards and doctors, colored-owned banks, and the proud professions designed to service the race. Then she discovered that the convictions were no longer old-time racial uplift, but separatist, 'nationalistic'. Not sweet Booker T., but radical Malcolm X. In confusion she began to stutter, contradict herself. (Morrison 2003:80)

Christine with her life experience personifies a certain defeat of the young generations directly involved in the movement and its aftermath. Morrison makes her fall in love with one of the radical activists (Fruit, who quickly convinces her that her grandfather was a bourgeois traitor) and join in. With Fruit she becomes involved in the movement: *The urgency planted in 1955 had blossomed in 1965, and was ripe with fury in 1968. By 1970, sapped by funerals, it seemed to wane for her* (Morrison 2003:1964). Christine sacrifices herself, her possible maternity (becomes *unsentimental about her abortions*), as *the good work of civil obedience and personal obedience went on* (Morrison 2003:1967). By 1971 she grows older, the movement changes, and as she is no longer needed neither by her lover, who is eight years her junior, nor by the movement (*not educated enough for the college crowd, not shallow enough for television* (ibid)) she moves back to the Cosey's, with a great sense of bitterness. As Wyatt (2008) puts it, in *Love* the characters' *severance from their past is a personal, not a world-historical event an individual rather than a collective trauma.* The source of Christine's trauma is not the movement and its consequences, but Bill Cosey, the grandfather who disrupted her process of growing up by marrying her eleven-year-old friend. That certainly was not a world-wide event.

A Historical Mercy

Morrison comes back to the process of rewriting African American history in her latest novel. As she admits, writing *A Mercy* was preceded by thorough research, as the novel is set in 17th century colonial America, which constitutes the most remote setting of all her texts so far. As in the case of the two texts

discussed above, in her latest novel Morrison again explores American history, but this time a relatively unpopular aspect of it. She decides to go back to the times when slavery was deprived of its racial context by showing similarities between white indentured servants and black slaves. As she said in an interview: *The only difference between African slaves and European or British slaves was that the latter could run away and melt into the population. But if you were black, you were noticeable* (Morrison 2008c). Although some historians would argue against being more noticeable as the sole quality constituting the difference in the situation of white and non-white indentured servants, Morrison proves her point by populating her narrative with a variety of characters who are deprived of personal liberty on a variety of grounds. As she claims *separating indentured servants from slaves, legally, and giving indentured servants a kind of power that slaves did not have was much, much later the hierarchy of race between black and white had not existed* (Morrison 2008d). Among the unfree we find two white male indentured servants, an English girl, Rebekka, bartered into marriage, Lina, a Native American survivor whose tribe was wiped out by smallpox, Sorrow, a half-mad orphaned girl of unspecified ethnicity and an African American slave girl, Florens. They form an eclectic type of extended family for John Vaark, a Dutch settler who marries Rebekka and gradually takes in the other members of his household.

The novel is multi-vocal, as we are told the stories of individual characters by means of a third person limited narration, having access to their thought and fears. There is, though, one first person narrator, speaking for herself – Florens, whom Morrison calls *the driver of the narrative* (Morrison 2008d). Although consequently the main focus is on her as the leading character, and the title act of mercy refers mainly to Florens' experience, to her being actually not sacrificed (as she thinks) by her mother, but saved from what was perceived as a greater evil, the scope of the novel is much wider. As Romano (2008) notices, Morrison *invests more in character here than in historical critique, eager to explore the thoughts of almost every person on Jacob's farm.* Hence, the title act of mercy somehow refers to almost all the characters who are, or become, victims in different ways. As Mantel (2008) puts it

> *The America that Morrison depicts is not a land hungry for freedom, but a land that is jittery and repressive, fixated on profit and punitive by instinct. Fate and economics bring the characters together, and hold them together only for as long as it takes to recognise common victimhood.*

The little community functions until Jacob's death. This death of the master leaves the women entirely vulnerable and leads the "extended family" to disintegrate. As long as he lives, that entity functions, despite the obvious discrepancies. The wilderness, against which the first settlers led their struggle, turns out to be less hostile and cruel than the approaching civilisation with its

norms and regulations, religious arguments, violent uprisings and eventual exclusion of every non-white. The widowed Rebekka joins a religious community, probably getting remarried, to survive as *[...] unmastered women [...] alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone* (Morrison 2008a:58). The coloured women Rebekka used to live with become marginalised due to the altered situation.

In the interviews conducted around the time of the novel's appearance, Morrison most frequently mentions the fact that she tried to refer to slavery *as a universal phenomenon. Many white people are descendants of slaves* (Morrison 2008c). It suggests an attempt to create a usable past, a potential common ground, by describing a time period before scientific notions of racial difference on which slavery was justified were established. Some critics would call *A Mercy* a *softer version* of *Beloved.* As Morrison says, she *was interested in not what the clerics were doing or the merchants or even the armies but what the people who sort of seemed to me to never appear in the history* (Morrison 2008d).

Conclusions

Morrison has been known and admired for her historicising of literary texts, and widely praised for having been able *to combine deep psychological insight with a vigorous and original critique of American history* (Rustie 2008). In an interview for *The Guardian* she explains how she starts the creative process:

> *My books are always questions for me. What if? How does it feel to ...? Or what would it look like if you took racism out? Or what does it look like if you have the perfect town, everything you ever wanted? And so you ask a question, put it in a time when it would be theatrical to ask, and find the people who can articulate it for you and try to make them interesting.* (Morrison qtd. in Rustie 2008)

Having asked the questions, Morrison provides us with the perfectly structured, multi-voiced answers. What answers do we get in the three novels discussed above, then? The all-black town based on exclusion and distrust fails to meet the expectations of its community. Rethinking the ills of the Civil Rights Movement and its aftermath from the early 21st century African American perspective helps one to notice some new aspects of the impact the movement could have had on individual lives. Making white people in America realise that some of them might have white slave ancestors enriches the historical discourse. Morrison uses her unquestionable talent once again to tell the stories yet untold. Why does she bother? Because that is, in her understanding, the role of the writer. Very recently she has defended *sacredness of books against censorship*, ending her letter with the following words:

Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination. (qtd. in Flood 2009)

American history is full of such traumas, yet to be turned into meaning, possibly into what can be called *a usable past,* aimed at eventual unifying, not separating the nation.

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