

## Reflections on “Love, Jazz, and a Sense of the Holy”

Maxine Greene

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

I am, of course, gratified that Hilary Davis’s and my “salon” a few years ago infected others with an interest in the relationships between philosophy (or, in Milligan’s case, philosophy of education) and imaginative literature. I must say, at the start, however, that we were not motivated by a belief that “Morrison’s art is worthy of the serious attention of philosophers of education” or that a judgment like that was a justification for inserting a work of art into the proceedings. Viewing Toni Morrison as one of the great literary artists of the century, we would scarcely have had the *hubris* to claim that she was “worthy” of our attention because she had something to say to us particularly, or because (strangely) her novels evince a specific concern for teachers or the educational process.

For me, at least, an artist like Morrison deserves the attention of anyone who takes seriously literature and the arts, anyone willing to risk the insights, the disclosures, the enhanced perceptions made possible by such work. And, indeed, it is the purpose of the literary artist (as Joseph Conrad said many years ago) to make us see “according to our desserts.” We are asked not to discover a representation of any concept or objective reality to which the book refers. Rather, we are asked to lend our lives to Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, Denver, Schoolteacher, Beloved, and the other created figures so that they will come alive in reader consciousness. Coming alive, they may arouse suppressed images, fragmented memories, unanswered — perhaps unanswerable — questions; they will open windows in the actual, the taken-for-granted to the “as if,” to the possible.

I believe that a novel only becomes a work of art when it becomes an object of a particular kind of experience, when it is grasped by a reflective consciousness, a perceptual consciousness, an imaginative consciousness thrusting into the world. Working together, acts of consciousness can take hold of what is presented to the live being against the background of a biography, lived experience, a history of literary encounters. *Beloved*, according to this view, is achieved as meaningful when a reader confronts what is happening in the text from the vantage points of the various characters as well as her/his own.

For Jean-Paul Sartre, a novel addresses itself to a reader’s freedom and (certainly in the case of *Beloved*) to a reader’s indignation. That happens, however, only when a reader sets aside the ordinary, the mundane, and taken-for-granted world and sets aside as well the hoped for predetermined meanings somehow inhering in the work. It is most likely to happen when the reading is carried on in a dialogical situation, when what is sought is talked about by people who have come together in an interpretive community. The metaphors discovered, the heteroglossia attended to: all this signifies, more often than not, what is called a reorientation of reader consciousness, an experience distinctly different from the registering of information or any sort of critical analysis.

To speak of Morrison as a philosopher of education or a public intellectual is to come to her novel with a very different state of mind than the one I am describing. For one thing, it leaves me uncertain about what is meant by philosophy of education. I am willing to admit that Morrison's work on American literature in relation to the African-American experience, her Nobel Address, her response to the O. J. Simpson verdict, her various essays in *The New Yorker* may suggest that she is using her literary prominence as a justification for presenting arguments for certain moral and political points of view. If so, based on her non-fiction work, she may be called a "public intellectual." But Dr. Milligan is discussing a novel here and paying only minimal attention to the arguments and affirmations of her non-fiction works.

Where philosophy of education is concerned, he seems to me to regard it as primarily a clarification of concepts, especially those like "teacher" utilized in pedagogical discourse. However, when he locates his endeavor in the context of feminist philosophy (which he does not really define) he does not explain what he means by that or contrast his undertaking with what it would be like if he used John Dewey, for instance, or Richard Rorty, Richard Peters, Max Van Manen, or Paulo Freire. Also, when he places emphasis upon a participatory approach to reading, he ignores or may be unacquainted with the so-called "reader response" approach to reading literature, certainly an approach increasingly relevant in the teaching of the language arts, what with the interest in what is called "whole language."

If Morrison herself had made explicit an interest in schooling or education or announced any intention to intervene in "certain philosophical discourses that have been influential in our conceptualization of 'teaching,'" it would have been evident to educators engaging with her text. We need to remember that she is an active member of the Princeton faculty, offering workshops in writing and literature. She cannot be totally removed from problems confronting professors of the liberal arts or of ethnic studies; and, if she had contributions to make to our ongoing dialogue, I am sure we would have known.

It seems to me that Dr. Milligan arrived at his reading of *Beloved* with three preconceptions of the concept, "teacher," and that he found a way of matching these with three examples, three fictive characters in the novel. I may be insensitive to it, but I must say that I have not noted any "consistent concern with formal education and its effects." Nor have I found any subtext dealing with the "effects of white normative aesthetic values on African Americans." It is true that Toni Morrison was born, grew up, and was educated in this country and within this country's traditions. If she has indeed been influenced by "white normative aesthetic values" as long-time editor, speaker, writer, and artist, she certainly made her own use and the very best use of them. When we turn to the novel at hand, there is much to be found about white domination and resistance to it. Still, I find it difficult to regard Sethe or baby Suggs or Paul or Denver as in any way similar to those Du Bois called the "talented tenth," even in their resistance. Nor do I find a break with Western novelistic forms in the setting forth of the characters' integrity, courage, and fidelity toward each other.

As far as the slaveowner called "Schoolteacher" (perhaps at the height of irony) is concerned, it is difficult to respond to him as an example of what we now call a

“technicist,” as the servant of “capitalistic commodity culture,” and at once similar to Plato’s and Rousseau’s conceptions of the teacher. “Schoolteacher,” after all, is a portrayal of someone committed to the perpetuation of slavery and the dehumanization it required. Of course we realize that there are teachers today who prefer to mold rather than empower, who see their students as human resources to be used in a free market system. But the imposition of a modern or postmodern framework does not, it appears to me, clarify the meaning of an authoritarian teacher. Nor does it connect with any of our current notions of how effective teachers behave. What does such a figure have to do with “positivist social science?” Does anything in the fictional universe constructed and illuminated by Morrison suggest such a thing?

After all, the world of *Beloved* is “unreal,” an invented world with the capacity to make readers summon up what they know about slavery in this country and, hopefully, the sense of outrage and the desire for change that ought to accompany what they know. Engaging with this fictional world, we have to achieve the details, the particularities. Lady Jones (another of Milligan’s examples of a teacher) who must be understood as “mixed,” out of her own suffering reaches toward the children who are forever “unpicked,” alienated, excluded. (“She had married the blackest man she could find, had five rainbow-colored children and sent them all to Wilburforce” after teaching them all she knew.) It is out of her own felt estrangement that she was so “indiscriminatingly polite” even when she suspected that people laughed at her hair. She is marked for “saving her real affection for the unpicked, affection for the unpicked children of Cincinnati.” Somehow, for me the specificity and concreteness of this abandoned and suffering woman are obscured by the teaching role imposed on her by Dr. Milligan. He thinks less of her, he writes, because she does not offer an existential response to evil. In this judgment, the text is subordinated to the writer-reader’s purposes, and somehow we lose more than we gain.

I must admit that I was moved by Dr. Milligan’s description of and entry into the celebration or the sermon uttered by Baby Suggs, reaching into a store of biblical imagery and promise for words that will enable her audience in the woods and fields to love themselves and, because of that, enter in a community. It is beautiful, certainly; and in some sense it relates to what is known today as an ethic of love. But how can such an ethic and the community it brings into being possibly be enough to overcome slavery (even in “rememory”), poverty, manipulation? Poetry, yes, and aesthetic experience shared with others. But there remains the need for critical consciousness, marches, struggle, and the capacity to name what has happened and what might happen. I cannot regard Baby Suggs as a teacher, nor the holy as an ideal for those engaged in pedagogy. Finally, using some lines from Cornel West that pertain to jazz (without any reference to teaching), Dr. Milligan does not pursue it. He may or may not have Morrison’s novel, *Jazz*, in mind. The title of his essay misleads in consequence. Jeffrey Milligan seems to be concerned for the religious and his title may refer to his conclusion, his hope. I respect that; in some sense, I yearn towards it. And I certainly admire his writing, his knowledge. We differ, clearly enough. But out of the difference, out of the dialogue, there may be new awakenings, new conceptions of the possible.