Emilija Dimitrijevic – *Università di Perugia*

The characters of love: the case of *The Time Traveler's Wife*

dimitrijevic@unisi.it

> "Take your time. You've got all day. And," she added with more of a smile, "All tomorrow as well."
> Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*

The Characters of Love is the title of a 1960 book by John Bayley, in which the author argued that love is a condition of a character, in so far it enables the writer to develop an interest in other personalities and explore them. In a period when literature was accused of paying attention primarily to the writer's own consciousness, making it the centre of characterisation, and becoming, as a result, increasingly solipsistic and self-referential, Bayley set out to criticise this mode and encourage alternative approaches. In this article, I will borrow Bayely's polysemic term to make a different point with reference to *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2005) [1]. I will argue that in this novel the characters are only too exclusively characters of love: love is at once the novel's theme, plotting device, and a crucial aspect of characterization. What is lacking is an independent background that transcends the characters conceived in this way. The result is a different form of solipsism and self-referentiality. The story fails to fill out the narrative space, create a vivid reality, or raise questions about the ways in which this reality relates to ordinary life. These issues are closely related to the model of romantic love the story chooses to endorse, which will, therefore, be examined in some detail.

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[1] Since its first publication (San Francisco, MacAdam/Cage, 2003), *The Time Traveler's Wife* has been hailed as a truly original and convincing love story, and it soon became an international bestseller. The essay's initial interest in the novel was due to this fact, and, later, to the disproportion between the general acclaim and textual/cultural evidence.

The plot of *The Time Traveler's Wife*, a début novel by Audrey Niffenegger, is as follows: Niffenegger's protagonist, Henry De Tamble, suffers from a genetic disorder called chrono-displacement. At certain moments, which he cannot predict, cause or prevent, Henry literally disappears from the present. He leaves behind a pile of clothes and materializes at some other point in time, past or future, stark naked. What he does then are basically two things. His first concern, which counterbalances the extraordinariness of time travelling, is the rather banal and practical need to find some clothes and food and occasionally to avoid danger. His second major concern is the love of his life, Clare Abshire. The narrative follows the couple through several phases. These include the first encounters, from the moment when the thirty-six-year old Henry materializes for the first time at Meadowlark House and meets the six-year-old girl who is to become his wife. During this period, which lasts twelve years, Henry learns more about Clare's childhood, and she about her future. After a two-year pause, the two meet again in the "real" present and get married. Henry is thirty, Clare twenty-two. Now it is she who knows about his future time travels into her past, and it is her turn to tell him about it. Much of their time from then on is dedicated to trying to cope with Henry's chrono-disorder on a different scale. Their life is complicated not only by Henry's occasional vanishings, but also by Clare's difficulty in sustaining pregnancy due to Henry's atypical genetic code. The two, in the end, manage to have a child, but, simultaneously, time-travelling becomes more random and dangerous. First, a serious accident confines Henry to a wheelchair, and, soon after that, he dies during another time-travel. Having lost Henry, Clare turns to her memories, and finds him again through this other kind of time-travelling.

Henry's capacity to time-travel is crucial to the plot and decisive for characterisation; and love is relevant to both. In the first part of the novel, when Henry visits the past and meets his future wife as a child and adolescent, this helps to unfold the plot and at the same time to enliven the characters. The first encounters consist mainly of basic explanations addressed to a little child about Henry's coming from the future and knowing Clare *there*. At the beginning Henry provides simple explanations about himself; gradually, as Clare grows up, these become more complex. For instance,

> "[…] I mean, I myself am thirty-six, but somewhere out there […] I'm twenty. In real time."
> Clare strives to digest this. "So there are two of you?"
> "Not exactly. There's always only me, but when I'm time traveling sometimes I go somewhere I already am, and yeah, then you could say there are two. Or more."
>   (Niffenegger 2005: 66)

As a result, we begin to picture Henry as a distinct character, extraordinary in one sense, but, at the same time, simple, kind, and caring. Simultaneously, Clare comes to life as clever, lovely and, as time passes, lovable.

There is no passion as such in these episodes, since Henry can do little more than avoid scaring the girl and try to make some sense of his presence. Yet this part of the novel is suffused with emotion. For one thing, love is the reason why Henry finds himself in the Meadow. And, once back in the present, in another frame, Henry delights in the experience he has just had of seeing his wife as a child. In that other, present time frame, the story becomes a fully-fledged romance and predestination finds its complete expression in the passion and commitment of an extraordinary relationship.

Predestination and passionate commitment are just two of the many characteristics of romantic love in which the novel abounds. The notions of self-fulfilment, privacy, and permanency, the idea of commitment and of the uniqueness of the loved-one, to mention just a few, are other typical elements of this model. It is thus worth recapitulating part of the history of romantic love in order better to understand why it forms the core of *The Time Traveler's Wife*.

The ideal of romantic love, which is still seen as relevant to self-fulfilment and the good life in general, started to emerge in the second half of the seventeenth and, especially, in the eighteenth century, in an unprecedented manner. It provided a new form of life-narrative for the individual, whose terms of self-situation now began to link the notion of self-determination to emotional fulfilment. Which is not to say that before the eighteenth century love, marriage and the family were of little account, or as influential social historians like Lawrence Stone (1977) and Alan Macfarlane (1987) have argued, that there was no individualism. On the contrary: "The idea that adult men could choose their own way of life," emerged as early as the twelfth century, and "acquired a grip scarcely conceivable a century earlier". (Brooke 1981: 28) During the same period, the Church also ordained that marriage should be based on consent and affect. The criteria of consent, mutual attraction, and correspondence in the age and social status of the spouses had existed even earlier, at least in those classes where marriages didn't involve complex property arrangements. Nevertheless, it was in the twelfth century that these criteria were institutionalised. Subsequently, in the sixteenth century, marriage was elevated to the status of a sacrament, which defined and validated it in a novel way. The idea of mutual love continued to be a part of the early-modern view of marriage just as it would remain a part of the eighteenth-century model, though for rather different reasons. The Renaissance celebrated love and marriage because these were ordinary ways of celebrating God and participating in

his ends, whereas later, sentiment took on importance for itself as a means of self-determination and self-fulfilment. While becoming differently meaningful for individuals, it also rendered them more accountable. As Charles Taylor (1989) observes with reference to the eighteenth century,

> What changes is not that people begin loving their children or feeling affection for their spouses, but that these dispositions come to be seen as a crucial part of what makes life worthy and significant […] The difference lies not so much in the presence/absence of certain feelings as in the fact that much is made of them. It is of course true that beginning to make something of them also alters these dispositions. But this is far from saying that they didn't exist all before. (Taylor 1989: 292)

Specific to the romantic conceptualisation of love was the notion of personal choice and self-fulfilment through the other. This notion, which derived from Christian love and the idea that through the quest for, and devotion to God one could come to know and realise oneself, was now translated into the terms of sexual relationships. It incorporated the idea of passionate love, which it subordinated to the sublime, mystical relationship between man and woman. The new model of intimacy, as Anthony Giddens (1992) has pointed out, both enabled and necessitated a greater degree of reflection on self-identity and the relationship itself. The question of personal character, the choice of a partner, and the creation of a shared emotional history needed to be examined more thoroughly than before, becoming at once "constitutive of the reflexive narrative of self," and "the means whereby the relationship is reflexively organized". (Giddens 1992: 74, 194)

Turning back to *The Time Traveler's Wife*, we find many of these notions at work. Like any romantic love that respects itself, this love involves a special, unique other: from the very beginning Clare and Henry see themselves in these terms. The opening of Clare's part of the Prologue reads:

> CLARE: It's hard being left behind. I wait for Henry, not knowing where he is, wondering if he's okay. It's hard to be the one who stays.
> I keep myself busy. Time goes faster that way.
> I go to sleep alone, and wake up alone. I take walks. I work until I'm tired I watch the wind play with the trash that's been under the snow all winter. Everything seems simple until you think about it. Why is love intensified by absence?
> Long ago, men went to sea, and women waited for them, standing on the edge of the water [...]. (Niffenegger 2005: 1)

The problem of loss and Clare's feeling that it is "hard" to be "left behind" and "alone", set the tone of her words, contribute to her characterisation, and do so by means of special reference to Henry. As a result, the notions of the special

other, of loss and of suffering, all of Christian derivation, take on a different signification. They are followed by the question "Why is love intensified by absence?", which explicitly links them to the idea of love. The question is rhetorical, and it is promptly followed by an image of journeys and separations of earlier times. Like the tone and the references to Henry, loss and love, the question is not there to be answered but to define the characters and the relationship they are involved in. Nevertheless, loss does intensify love in the novel in several ways. As regards the characters, it conditions them to "think about it" more than usual. The passage quoted above is the most explicit example. As regards the narrative, it "intensifies" this in a different way. When lovers are, as Henry puts it, "often insane with happiness," it is hardly likely that the narrative will have more to offer them, or us, in the way of happiness. In this case, the only way to "intensify" such happiness is artificial – by impediment and delay; in other words by making the characters "also very unhappy for reasons neither of [them] can do anything about. Like being separated". (Niffenegger 2005: 411) Or like being unable to have children. Such difficulties give the story its momentum, as well as earning the characters the reader's sympathy.

Like Clare's, Henry's identity also hinges on that of the beloved. In his part of the Prologue, Henry first illustrates how he feels when time-travelling: the sensation of physical sickness and psychological unease that usually accompany it. He is not in the least in control of what happens to him. Besides, Henry describes himself as someone rather content with ordinary life:

> It's ironic really. All my pleasures are homey ones: armchair splendour, the sedate excitements of domesticity. All I ask for are humble delights. A mystery novel in bed, the smell of Clare's long red-gold hair damp from washing, a postcard from a friend on vacation, cream dispersing into coffee, the softness of the skin under Clare's breasts, the symmetry of grocery bags sitting on the kitchen counter waiting to be unpacked. I love meandering through the stacks at the library after the patrons have gone home, lightly touching the spines of the books. These are the things that can pierce me with longing when I am displaced from them by Time's whim. (Niffenegger 2005: 3-4)

Yet, behind the unasked-for adventures of time-travelling, and the ordinary, enjoyable homely satisfactions, we glimpse the person who "summons" (or, to use the fashionable word, interpellates) Henry in a special way. Or rather, the one on whom he bestows special attention and who becomes the centre of his own identity:

> And Clare, always Clare. Clare in the morning, sleepy and crumple-faced. Clare with her arms plunging into the papermaking vat, pulling up the mold and shaking it so, and so, to meld the fibres. Clare reading, with her hair hanging over the back of the chair,

massaging balm into her cracked red hands before bed. Clare's low voice in my ear often.

I hate to be where she is not. And yet, I am always going, and she cannot follow.

<div align="right">(Niffenegger 2005: 4)</div>

Like Clare in the passage cited above, Henry also defines himself basically in terms of a special other. As a result, even though Clare is an artist and Henry a librarian, we rarely see her at work or him "meandering through the stacks at the library". Their private world is circumscribed and cut off from the rest of the world throughout the novel. In the first part of the novel, where the focus is centred on the Meadow, the rest of the world glides imperceptibly past it. In the second part, the couple continue to dwell in "splendid isolation", now because they are overwhelmed by the actual experience of a love of such mythic dimensions. Family, friends, work, all take second place, and history is recorded merely through references to rock concerts.

This perspective is also a part of the ideal of romantic love and is related to the fact that, at a certain point in time, romantic love began to be conceived as having a special place in everyday life. The differentiation between love, family and other forms of ordinary life dates back as far as the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century, the creation of new economic and labour markets influenced, for better or for worse, the separation of the "new" family from the "old", extended one. As a result, the "new" family and marriage began to be viewed as separate from work and relatively independent from other forms of close relationships such as parental bonds, kinship and friendship. Moreover, even within the new domestic life other private spaces were being created for the family, and distance was being established from the servants who belonged to the same household. The new middle-class could look for other spaces in which to cultivate family and marriage, and found them not only in private family life but also in the novel. In the new genre, feelings acquired new significance, and their importance was reinforced in general, although at the cost of sharpening the differentiation between private, "inner" experience and public, "outer" experience. According to Taylor,

> What seems to have happened is that, in the latter part of the century, in the upper and middle classes of Anglophone and French societies, the affectionate family undergoes an intensification and comes to be seen self-consciously as a close community of loving and caring, in contrast to relations with more distant kin and outsiders, which are correspondingly seen as more formal or distant. The family is on the way to becoming that "haven in a heartless world" which it has come to be for so many in the last two centuries. Of course this last development presupposes industrialisation, the break-up of earlier primary communities, the separation of work from home life, and the growth of a capitalist, mobile, large-scale, bureaucratic

world, which largely deserves the epithet "heartless". But the paradigms of family sentiment and self-enclosure were laid down before industrialisation swept the mass of population in its train, and in classes which were not brutally displaced. (Taylor 1989: 292)

Considering the long romantic tradition and the systematic assessment of love and family as special places of emotional fulfilment and support, and as what actually makes life worth living, no wonder *The Time Traveler's Wife* chooses to pay special attention to the private life of its protagonists. As a result, after almost four hundred pages of almost total absorption with each other, we still find Clare and Henry deciding to celebrate his birthday alone, in an "apartment [...] transformed into a restaurant with only one table" especially for that occasion. (Niffenegger 2005: 434) The narrative's pausing here to go into the details of atmosphere, food and love-making seems intended to render the moment especially sensuous. In addition, there is also a brief exchange between Henry and Clare in which she alludes to what has just happened as a Faustian moment of complete gratification. Only, it is difficult to see anything exceptionally indulgent in this episode, since it tends rather to confirm that there is only one mode of relationship available to these characters. It recalls another occasion, in which the couple win a lottery thanks to Henry's time-travelling and buy a new apartment and studio for Clare. Their taking advantage of Henry's condition in this sense is an exception, but the message is just the same as that conveyed by the birthday episode: they are absorbed in their own, private life, and interact with the world around them only intermittently. Taken together with the fact that Clare and Henry need not fall in love, because, they have, in a sense, always been in love with each other. The story offers the characters a chance of living a timeless, ardent love, but makes them live it effortlessly, depriving them of signifying agency, motivation, and responsibility.

As my brief sketch of romantic love and *The Time Traveler's Wife* go to show, eighteenth-century affirmations of the self-reliant individual and the self-contained relationship are long-lasting ideas. Niffenegger's novel seems to underwrite them with conviction. This is not only a matter of showing "the inner life of an enduring relationship as only its protagonists can know it." (Weinberger 2003: 5) The novel seems to draw a line between the love story and the "outer" world in terms of value, intensity, and their relevance to each other. This kind of structuring is, in part, typical of romance, the genre which has helped to register, and consolidate romantic ideals, and which lends *The Time Traveler's Wife* other terms of self-designation. Since the history of romantic love is closely related to that of its inscriptions, it is worth looking at how *The Time Traveler's Wife* is related to this genre.

Romance is a literary genre that, as Gillian Beer (1970) observes, characteristically,

> oversteps the limits by which life is normally bounded. The world of romance is ample and inclusive, sustained by its own inherent, often obsessive laws. It is not an entire world; it intensifies and exaggerates certain traits in human behaviour and recreates human figures out of this exaggeration. It excludes some reaches of experience in order to concentrate intently upon certain themes until they take fire and seem to be the flame of life itself. (Beer 1970: 3)

Other characteristics of romance include:

> the themes of love and adventure, a certain withdrawal from their own societies on the part of both reader and romance hero, profuse sensuous detail, simplified characters (often with a suggestion of allegorical significance), a serene intermingling of the unexpected and the everyday, a complex and prolonged succession of incidents usually without a single climax, a happy ending, amplitude of proportions, a strongly enforced code of conduct to which all the characters must comply. (Beer 1970: 10)

Beer also distinguishes between "the romance" as a literary genre, and "romance," as a revolutionary impulse, which seeks to give voice to the desires and fears of an age, and, in particular, to sentiments that cannot find expression in conventional literary forms. Romance is, in this sense, what Belsey, following Lyotard, calls "a feeling in quest of an idiom. [...] What is not able to be said [...] [and] presses to be given form." (Belsey 1994: 686)

When examined in these terms, the rise of the medieval romance can be seen as bearing witness to the desire to bring ordinary life closer to the ideals of courtly and Christian love. Only few centuries later, when ordinary life became valued for itself, the medieval romance and its concerns went out of fashion. Forms of the romance, such as religious, criminal and French heroic romances, were still popular, but its central themes – such as love, combat and quests – found more "adequate" forms of expression in the novel, and in more introspective characters. With the rise of the novel and the decline of the traditional romance, the impulse which "forms itself about the collective subconscious of an age" found new expression in the Gothic novel, and, later, in the Romantic ideal of the "marvellous" (Beer 1970: 58). Subconscious emotions found expression in day-dream, allegory, horror, folk and fairy tale, in other words, in forms which did not directly represent contemporary experience. In the nineteenth century, however, the notion of romance underwent an important reconceptualisation. As personal psychology and cultural phenomenology began to be perceived as more closely connected, it became possible to see romance

not as a means of conceiving an alternative world, but as an instrument of analysis of the contemporary one. Victorian experimental literature thus turned to medieval content and form as "the form in which modern consciousness shaped by work and labour sees, experiences and desires, to be what it imagines and the myths it needs to imagine with." (Armstrong 1993: 236) This made a major difference and facilitated the passage towards modernist fiction. Eventually, after romance had traversed the vast lands of medieval romance, Gothic castles, and the "marvellous", it began with modernist fiction to enter the depths of the individual consciousness as such.

In the case of postmodernist fiction, the relationship between psychological and social experience has once again been re-negotiated. The novel has allowed significantly more space to the individual consciousness, while magic realism began to weave even closer bonds between the worlds of fantasy and reality. Romance in magic realism was no longer a world to which to aspire as an alternative to this world, an interior world of desire, or stifled, repressed consciousness. The point of magic realism was not to draw attention to different realities, but to bring out the extraordinary realities that are already part of ordinary life.

In a way, this was made possible also thanks to new, sociolinguistic articulations of the relationships between the individual consciousness and society. The works of the Bakhtin circle, of Wittgenstein, and later thinkers like Ricoeur, called in question the division of "outer" and "inner" experience central to humanist philosophy by showing that both make use of the same semiotic medium. As Voloshinov points out,

> That which has been termed "social psychology" and is considered, according to Plekhanov's theory and by the majority of Marxists, as the transitional link between the sociopolitical order and ideology in the narrow sense (science, art, and the like), is, in its actual, material existence, *verbal interaction*. Removed from this actual process of verbal communication and the interaction (of semiotic communication and signs in general), social psychology would assume the guise of a metaphysical or a mythic concept – the "collective soul" or "collective inner psyche," "the spirit of the people" etc.
> Social psychology in fact is not located anywhere within (in the "souls" of communicating subjects) but entirely and completely *without* – in the word, the gesture, the act. There is nothing left unexpressed in it, nothing "inner" about it – it is wholly on the outside, wholly brought out in exchanges, wholly taken up in material, above all in the material of the word. (Voloshinov 1986: 19)

The emphasis now was not on "a feeling in quest of an idiom", but rather on an idiom in search of a configuration, and, in theory, on the conditions that regulate this process.

Consequently, the postmodernist romance did not simply strive to recreate a particular literary form which could appeal to the reader subterraneously and through "sensation" – it tried to render the choice of this form more *explicit* and to involve its reader more *directly*. This meant more than establishing "misrule" and the "ex-centric" as the new values of the day because of their resistance to the existing social order, as was emphasised in some contemporary criticism. More importantly, it meant examining the ways in which social discourse is structured. The point of employing fantasy form to underline aspects of reality was that this method objectified both and rendered them more open to analysis. And narratorial interventions like, for instance, the following passage from Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), further underlined this concern:

> I think it was Rilke who so lamented the inadequacy of our symbolism – regretted so bitterly we cannot, unlike the (was it?) Ancient Greeks, find adequate external symbols for the life within us – yes, that's the quotation. But, no. He was wrong. Our external symbols must always express the life within us with absolute precision; how could they do otherwise, since that life has generated them? Therefore we must not blame our poor symbols if they take forms that seem trivial to us, or absurd, for the symbols themselves have no control over their own fleshly manifestations, however paltry they may be; the nature of our life alone has determined their forms. (Carter 1982: 5-6)

In sum, in the course of its long history, the romance has consistently helped to register the relations between social conditions and individual psychology. In the last few centuries, it has also become a means by which reality can be represented and analysed from a specific, more self-conscious point of view. As regards postmodernist fiction, this has given rise to a number of important works. But in such a context, *The Time Traveler's Wife* doesn't come off particularly well. On the one hand, romance elements, notwithstanding the spectacular effect of the time travel, do not "take fire" and become "the flame of life itself." Over-frequent explanations about the phenomenon of time-travelling itself make this impossible. Moreover, notwithstanding the abundance of details of passionate love, the characters, who are always, given the circumstances, in love with each other, fail to develop. Their love may be passionate and eternal, but they themselves are strangely "frozen" in it. This is a result of the focus on the two characters and their love: it is too close-up, and thereby fails to give strength to the theme. It loses sight of the fact that if a relationship *is* special, it is so only because it exists *within* a larger context, whether romantic or realistic, and within the space in which literary form and ordinary life *inform* each other. Much of *The Time Traveler's Wife*'s popularity since it was first published in 2003 is due to the novel's setting of a traditional theme like

love in a science-fiction world where, through phenomena such as genetic mutations and time-travelling, true love can arise and shine as resplendent as ever. Perhaps even more so, as the book seems to imply that real love succeeds and matters even when other things are mutable. The sentiment is, no doubt, laudable. But it might have been pursued more interestingly if genetic modifications had been made not just an aspect of a character but of life at large. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, which was published in the same year, provides a good counter-example as it explores a Huxleyan world in which changing life conditions and genetic experiments influence characters and their world alike. By contrast, *The Time Traveler's Wife* chooses to be "romantic" in the traditional sense, and aims to create a highly stylised symbol that will contrast with the bleakness of ordinary life. It joins forces with some other contemporary novels which similarly distinguish between "Empty space and points of light." (Winterson 1989: 144) Which is fine, on condition the symbol actually comes fully to life. This, however, is a matter of working out and interpreting, not the symbol as such, but the forms of relationships that involve the characters, the fictional world and ordinary life.

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