
Continuity and Its Limits: Toward a Critical Theory of Literary Topology in Shakespeare

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Abstract

Literary topology has emerged as a promising interdisciplinary method for analyzing narrative space, continuity, and transformation in literary texts, particularly within Shakespearean studies. Drawing on mathematical concepts such as deformation, invariance, and continuity, recent scholarship has demonstrated topology's capacity to illuminate how identities and ethical structures persist despite displacement. This article offers a methodological reflection on what literary topology can and cannot do. Rather than advancing new plot-based readings, it critically examines the differential performance of topological analysis across Shakespearean genres. Romance narratives, oriented toward delay, suspension, and restoration, are contrasted with tragic structures defined by rupture, irreversibility, and terminal collapse. The article argues that topology functions most productively in narratives that permit continuity without sameness, while tragedy exposes the limits of topological repair, revealing spaces where deformation becomes non-homeomorphic, and continuity fails. By articulating these constraints, the paper consolidates literary topology as a rigorous critical framework and clarifies its scope as a theory responsive not only to structural coherence but also to structural breakdown.

Keywords: Literary Topology, Shakespeare, Narrative Space, Genre Theory, Romance and Tragedy, Continuity and Rupture, Methodological Reflection

1. Introduction: Why Literary Topology Needs Self-Reflection

Topology is not a metaphorical language of resemblance, but rather one that posits formal relations that are intelligible despite deformation (Nourian, 2020, p. 6). In the last two decades, literary topology has emerged as a very promising, though still slightly uncertain, form of literary criticism (Lou and Liu, 2021). Borrowing its principal terminology from mathematics, topology offers a philosophy of form that emphasizes continuity, relation, and transformation, as opposed to measurement, or position (Lewin, 1936, p. 11; Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 38-39). This philosophy of form has proved particularly captivating to thinkers preoccupied with space, structure, and the persistence of meaning despite deformation. It promises, at least in theory, a means of accounting for how literary worlds stretch out, deform, and reconfigure themselves without lapsing into complete disarray. Yet the very speed at which this terminology has caught on in literary studies has also resulted in a certain imbalance between application and reflection, as questions of scope, limits, and genre-sensitivity have remained largely implicit (Mousley, 2010; Haque et al., 2025).

The attractiveness of topology as a central concept is not difficult to understand. Topology, as a branch of mathematics, is

concerned not with the appearance of a thing, but rather with what is invariant under bending, stretching, or moving the thing (Gomel, 2014, p. 3). When this concept is translated to the field of literary studies, the focus is no longer on the narrative trajectory, nor is it on the psychological depth of the characters. Instead, the focus is on the way space is connected, the way identity is preserved, and the way narrative design is preserved. Topology is almost eerily well-suited to the study of Shakespearean literature. Shakespeare's life is marked by movement, from center to periphery, from power to exile, from order to chaos and back again. Topology allows scholars to think about this movement without falling into the trap of seeing this movement as either moralistic or historical determinism.

Recent research has confirmed the potential of this kind of approach. By using the concepts of topology, scholars have been able to gain insight into the way the space functions in Shakespeare's dramatic works, the way power relations function, and the way the ethical functions even as the narrative does not. This kind of research has allowed scholars to think beyond the hierarchical, linear models of thought that have constrained literary studies for so long. Nevertheless, literary topology is an emerging field rather than a theory. The concepts of topology have been metaphorically applied, sometimes rigorously, sometimes loosely, but seldom examining methodologically what such an application implies (Rieck & Leitte, 2016). Two main tendencies can be discerned in the existing research: the first uses topology in a largely metaphorical sense, as a vocabulary of complexity, fluidity, or relationality. In these works, a term like "loop" or "space" is likely to be used metaphorically, without any deeper structural implication. By contrast, a second set of works strives for a more rigorous approach, directly importing concepts from mathematical topology in order to describe narrative structures in terms of relational invariance. The current article attempts to locate itself between these two extremes, without using topology in a decorative or metaphorical fashion, nor attempting to make direct mathematical transpositions, but instead understanding topology as a rigorously structural analogy, in terms of the recoverability of relational coherence in the text. What topology does when it succeeds has been demonstrated with increasing sophistication. What topology fails to do has not been examined.

This unevenness suggests that there is an even larger issue at hand. Literary topology has often been viewed as if it is universally applicable to works, genres, and forms of narratives, as if continuity, deformation, and invariance are equally at play in all cases. Dramatic genres are not neutral forms. As Kermode writes, "We still need the fullness of it, the *pleroma*; and it is our insatiable interest in the future that makes it necessary for us to relate to the past, and to the moment in the middle, by plots" (Kermode, 2000, p. 52). As Frye similarly argues, "The four mythoi that we are dealing with, comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony, may now be seen as four aspects of a central unifying myth" (Frye, 1957, p. 192). They have varying structural needs, varying resolutions, and varying relationships to time, space, and loss. To assume that topological thinking can explain these varying relationships risks losing the very complexity it seeks to respect. Topology seems to be working unevenly, at times succeeding and at other times failing. The question, then, is not whether literary topology has any utility, but under what conditions it retains any analytic significance.

The present article takes the unevenness of the field as a point of departure. Rather than adding yet another Shakespearean text to the topological canon, the article stops to ask the more basic question: where does literary topology succeed, and where does it fail? The question is not meant to imply that the questioner is dissatisfied with the results that topology produces. Rather, the question is meant to ask where the structures that topology seeks to describe are compatible, and where they are not. Some narratives seem to call out for topological interpretation, offering a kind of continuity across disruption that can be reconfigured. As Kermode suggests, narrative form depends on "the establishment of a significant relation between the moment and a remote origin and end, a concord of past, present, and future" imposed upon mere succession (Kermode, 2000, p. 50). Other narratives do not. They seem to call out instead for the kind of rupture that topology seeks to describe.

By "failure," however, this article does not suggest the failure of topology as a theoretical project. Instead, failure describes a limiting concept that might be formal, involving the inadequacy of topological notions like continuity or loop to capture the structural organization of the narrative's structure. It might be epistemological, involving the excess of the assumption of retrievable relational coherence over the possibilities offered by the text. It might be ethical, involving the excess of the assumption of retrievability over the kinds of unassimilated loss that the narrative insists upon. Such clarifications help to refine the methodological issues at stake here. Topological limits are not accidental but rather the result of the structural logics of the genres that topologies encounter.

Shakespeare's works offer a particularly appropriate testing ground for this investigation, not because Shakespeare's works are in any way in need of further investigation, but because Shakespeare's works offer a body of sharply contrasting dramatic logics within a single oeuvre. Romance and tragedy, for instance, offer sharply contrasting structural inclinations. Romance narratives typically allow for delay, suspension, and restoration; romance narratives typically allow for temporal lapses and spatial displacements without sacrificing the possibility of restoration. Tragedy, on the other hand, typically inclines towards a closure that is different, a closure that is marked by exhaustion rather than by restoration, that is marked by endings that do not allow for return rather than endings that do allow for return.

The current article does not attempt new close readings of individual plays or evaluate the merits of existing readings. Its focus is methodological rather than exegetical. Shakespearean romance and tragedy are treated as conceptual reference frames rather than as case studies to be excavated for data. The move away from narrative detail has the potential to evaluate the effectiveness of topological thought at the level of narrative form and genre logic. What kinds of narrative are topology well-suited to describe? What are the limits to its descriptive power? Such an inquiry has implications for literary theory more broadly. Theoretical methods, like literary works, have their own histories and their own limits. They are the product of particular critical needs and flourish in particular conditions. A theoretical position which fails to recognize these limits risks

losing focus or becoming rhetorically inflated. Literary topology, precisely because of its conceptual sophistication, risks such an inflation. The focus on continuity runs the risk of neglecting those moments where continuity is precisely what is not achieved. The rhetoric of deformation risks being stretched to accommodate the irreparable rupture. Such an investigation does not weaken the argument but makes it stronger by grounding it more securely in the formal conditions of literature.

The argument advanced in this piece is limited in scope but expansive in its implications. Essentially, it is proposed that literary topology is best utilized in narrative forms that are geared towards continuity, delay, and restoration. In such forms of literature, concepts of topological thought are best used in understanding the way in which identity, ethicality, and spatiality endure even in the face of displacement. Of course, tragedy reveals the limitation of such an approach. In forms of literature in which the logic of narrative dictates that loss can never be recuperated into the structure of the narrative itself, concepts of topological thought necessarily fail. These are not errors of interpretation but rather indications of the boundaries of methodology. In short, an awareness of these boundaries is necessary in order to bring literary topology out of enthusiasm and into critical maturity. In this way, this piece of scholarship aims to contribute to the development of literary topology as a self-aware methodology that is sensitive to genre. In short, it is proposed that topology is not a key that unlocks all doors or even a metaphor that will necessarily pass into common usage. Rather, it is a methodology that necessarily requires calibration in order to be effective. Only in this way can it be seen as having the potential to be a meaningful way of approaching literature.

2. Literary Topology as Method: Claims, Promises, and Assumptions

If literary topology is to be understood as anything other than an attractive but essentially vague mode of literary analysis, then it must be grasped as a practice informed by a particular set of intellectual assumptions. Such assumptions are not aesthetic choices, but rather structural assumptions about the organization of the narrative. Topology, as a theory of relations, assumes most fundamentally that some relations persist even when deformation does not imply dissolution. When topology is extended to literary analysis, its assumption carries tremendous promise, as well as tremendous danger. To evaluate when topology is successful, and when it fails, it is necessary to begin by understanding the assumptions of literary topology. The basic concepts of literary topology are those of continuity, deformation, invariance, and loop/return, which are often used as interchangeable metaphors (Lury et al., 2012). However, they are part of a conceptual whole, the logic of which is internally dependent on the following assumption: that the structure of the narrative is, at least in principle, retrievable. Literary topology does not assume the absence of deformation, nor does it assume the absence of problematic statics. It assumes that deformation occurs within a space of relations that is not torn apart.

2.1. Continuity

The concept of continuity is at the very heart of topological thought. The concept of continuity as a mathematical event or process refers to a situation where constant change occurs but where a break in essential connectedness does not. The concept of continuity as a literary event or process does not refer to a narrative that flows easily, a story that has a strong moral dimension, or a character that has a strong psychological dimension (Kermode, 2000, pp. 50-52). Rather, the concept refers to a relational structure that maintains its presence even when the character is exiled or his or her identity obscured or when power shifts. The concept of continuity in a topological reading of a literary text allows a critic to transcend linearity. Instead of asking how cause leads to effect in a narrative, a topological reading allows a critic to ask how character relations persist even in a narrative in which change is constant. This concept of continuity has been particularly productive in reading narratives that postpone resolution, postpone recognition, or disperse identity across multiple spaces. The concept of continuity is thus a way of referring to coherence rather than similarity (Zheng, 2009). It allows a critic to describe a narrative in which change is constant but in which no break in essential connectedness takes place. However, the concept of continuity is not a neutral one. The moment a critic invokes the concept of continuity, she or he assumes that a relational structure persists in a narrative world (Carr, 1986). But if no such relational structure persists, then the concept of continuity is no longer a tool of analysis but an imposition.

2.2. Deformation

Deformation is the means by which continuity is enabled. In topology, deformation is the process by which an object is bent, stretched, or translated. Literary topology uses the same logic to describe narrative transformation that changes form while preserving relational structure (Ricoeur, 1984, pp. 66-68). Deformation explains changes in social status, physical movement, and ethical positioning without assuming elimination or substitution. This concept has enabled literary critics to escape the dualities of loss and recovery. Exile is not seen as negation; disguise is not seen as falsification (McCarthy, 1995, p. 40). Deformation is the means by which narrative tension is created, not fragmentation. Fragmentation is the tension that is placed on structures that are still continuous. Deformation, on the other hand, is the means by which continuity is enabled. An object can be deformed only so far before it is no longer the same. In other words, there is a point at which deformation turns into rupture. Literary topology alludes to the point at which narrative transformation turns into rupture without ever explicitly defining the term. This is particularly problematic when discussing narratives that foreground the end. Deformation is a transformative change in which relational intelligibility is preserved; identity changes, power relations change, time delays resolution, yet structural intelligibility can be retraced in a coherent manner. Rupture, on the other hand, designates the moment in which relational intelligibility itself becomes undone. At this moment, the relations do not deform; they can no longer be retraced to their origin without distortion. It is at this threshold that the distinction between topology and loss becomes apparent.

2.3. Invariance

Invariance is the stabilizing principle of literary topology. Invariance refers to those features, ethical stances, relational positions, or structural positions that endure through deformation. What is crucial to note is that invariance is not about unchanging features or essential qualities. Rather, it refers to the structural positions that retain a certain identifiable form even as the form of their expression changes. In literary criticism, the notion of invariance has been evoked as a way of speaking about the continuity of the centrality of characters even in the aftermath of displacement, or the return of morality even after long periods of distortion (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 13). This notion of invariance has proven especially productive in studies that cannot be reduced to psychological or sociological explanations. Invariance enables literary critics to posit the possibility that the meaningful does not reside in, nor result from, the context. Nevertheless, the notion of invariance carries a potent methodology, namely, the presumption that there is something to conserve. In other words, it assumes that the identity of the narrative is not entirely contingent, that there exists a structural continuity that resists erosion. This presumption is comfortable in the context of a narrative of repair or reconciliation but less so in the context of a text that emphasizes exhaustion, extinction, or moral vacancies. If invariance cannot be established, then topology risks confusing the desire for knowledge with the facts of the case.

2.4. Loop and Return

The idea of a loop or a return gives meaning to the spatial-temporal logic of deformation (Ryan, 2015, p. 175). In topology, a loop or a return is not repetition, but a return that makes a circuit without going back. This idea of a loop or a return was adapted from topology to refer to a narrative that leaves a point of origin and returns to it in a new form (Levine 2015). This return does not erase what happened in between; it's a means of incorporating change in a new form. This idea was very important in the topological analysis of a narrative that delays closure, puts off recognition, or distributes power before reconfiguring its form. This loop enables critics to account for the ending of a narrative that's neither restorative in a simplistic fashion nor tragic in its ending. However, the loop remains the most troublesome part of literary topology. Not all narratives have a loop, but some end in stasis, some end in collapse, and some end in dispersion. Assuming a loop that doesn't exist is to assume a coherence that's retroactively imputed. The promise of a return, like the promise of a continuity, must be earned by the narrative.

2.5. Topology as Method, Not Metaphor

Literary topology is not just a metaphor for dealing with complexity. It is a theory of structure that presumes recoverability. It presumes that relations in a text, no matter how distorted, can be understood. There is deformation, but deformation is within limits. And so, literary topology differs from theories of affect, trauma, and nihilism, where deformation is absolute. What is powerful in literary topology is its presumption of recoverability. What is powerful in literary topology is its limitation. Literary topology's limitation is its boundary. When narratives do not allow for recoverability, when deformation is absolute, there is resistance to literary topology. Its concepts do not cease to exist. They simply cease to be effective as a theory. And so, to admit this is not to diminish literary topology as a theory. It is to clarify literary topology as a theory. A theory that knows its own boundaries is a better theory. So, the question is not to stop using literary topology when it no longer works. It is to understand why literary topology no longer works as a theory of structure. And so, to understand why literary topology no longer works is to understand something about structure in narratives in general. As a theory of structure, literary topology presumes that structure in a narrative is recoverable (Gomel, 2014). Its fundamental concepts of continuity, deformation, invariance, and return can only be understood as concepts when relations in a text can be reconstructed following deformation.

3. Romance and Topological Repair

Among all the genres that can be identified in the works of Shakespeare, the genre of romance offers the most favorable setting for the application of topological thinking, not despite but precisely because of the disruption that it causes for its own sake. The genre of romance can be distinguished by its narrative of delay, suspension, and return as opposed to acceleration, immediacy, and replacement. As Northrop Frye has famously said, "The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and its typical elements are the hazardous journey, the critical battle, and the final recognition" (Frye, 1957, p. 187). The characteristics of the genre of romance are quite close to the fundamental ideas of literary topology. Topology can be most convincingly used as an analytical tool when it is used with reference to a narrative that has a non-terminal concept of time, space, and ethics. The genre of romance in the works of Shakespeare can be best exemplified with reference to *The Winter's Tale*.

3.1. Deferred Time and Structural Elasticity

Another of the important features of romance is the suspension of time. Unlike tragedy, in romance, there is a suspension of time, and there is a period of time in which there is no satisfaction and no destruction. Time is not only passing in romance, but it is actually increasing, creating a period of time in which there is no destruction. As Kermode puts it, there is a "charged with past and future: what was chronos becomes kairos" (Kermode 2000, 46). From a topological point of view, this suspended time is important in that it acts as a buffer against destruction, allowing relationships to continue despite disruption by including change in time and hence allowing for reconnection despite the impossibility of resolution in the present.

3.2. Ethical Suspension and Restoration without Reversal

If deferred time concerns the elasticity of narrative structure, ethical suspension concerns the postponement of judgment within that structure. The ethical suspension is another concept closely related to the concept of deferred time which is part of the romance narrative. There is a postponement of judgment in romance narratives, as these narratives do not conclude the

ethical relationship at the time of the transgression or loss. Instead, the ethical relationship is not annulled, but rather suspended. Cavell argues, “disowned knowledge is not ignorance, not an absence, but the presence of something” (Cavell, 2003, p. xv). This is not a matter of ethical neutrality, but rather a matter of structural patience, where the ethical relationship is preserved in an intact form until such a time that reconfiguration is possible. From the topological perspective, this allows for the restoration of the relationship without reversal. What is returned at the conclusion of the romance is not the original state, restored as a whole, but rather a structure that is changed by the passage through loss, distance, and uncertainty. The romance returns a loop, not an erased deformation, a configuration that is changed yet continuous with its origin.

3.3. Continuity through Delay

This concept of repair is one of continuity through time, rather than a firm grip on control. Romance is not held together by a firm chain of command or by relentless authority. It is an embracing of drift, of misalignment, and of provisional chaos. It is an embracing of the idea that bonds between people will hold even when things are hidden away in the shadows. While tragedy finds meaning in the moment that encompasses all else, romance finds meaning in the idea that meaning is necessarily provisional. So, romance is arguably a topology-friendly genre because its logic is one in which structure is flexible rather than brittle, time is possible without severing the link, and return is possible without destroying transformation. By bringing topology to bear on Shakespearean romance, by using *The Winter's Tale* as a representative type rather than an individual instance, critics are responding to a deep structural affinity. Topology does not bring its logic to bear on romance; rather, it speaks to a logic that is already inherent within romance. This is not to be mistaken for the idea that romance is somehow universal. The very factors that make romance topology-friendly are also the factors that define its boundaries. The factors of delayed time, ethical suspension, and the loop of restoration that topology finds so useful are not universal characteristics of drama. The identification of romance as the primary location for topology also serves to clarify, rather than extend, the universe of literary topology. It is a precursor to the more challenging question of what happens when such conditions are not met.

4. Tragedy and the Limits of Topological Continuity

Romance is the genre that plays with the power of explanation of literary topology the best, that is, the genre that shows the power of literary topology at its best. Tragedy, on the contrary, is the genre that tests the power of explanation of literary topology to the limit. In tragedies, not only is the topology of continuity distorted, but the very existence of the latter is negated. This does not mean that tragedy lacks formal coherence; rather, it preserves structural intensity while negating recoverability. Romance allows for the bending of time, for the suspension of loss, for the return of the lost. Tragedy, on the contrary, prescribes the conclusion of loss, the exhaustion of the lost, and the deformation that does not lead to a new topology, but to exhaustion. Tragedy is the exception, the setting where the topology of continuity, the topology of the same, the topology of the recoverable are pushed to the limit.

4.1. Irreversible Rupture and Terminal Loss

The symbol of tragedy, from this perspective, is the presence of ruptures. The actions of tragedy are concentrated around ruptures that can't be healed, ties that are broken beyond repair, powers that fall apart and aren't remade, and ethics that are overwhelmed by the violence they attempt to manage. It's not a disruption within a space, but a disruption of the terms by which relation occurs. From a topological perspective, the events of tragedy are un-deformable, don't stretch or distort the space of the narrative, but rather tear it apart, leaving unbridgeable gaps that can't be crossed without sacrificing some part of who we are and what the story means. Irreversibility rushes directly to total loss. The story of tragedy doesn't simply reflect loss, but closes off the narrative means by which loss might have been remade into something survivable. The ending of the tragedy doesn't complete a cycle, but freezes movement, halting the onward flow of the narrative. Terminal loss presents a basic problem from the point of view of literary topology: if there is no return of meaning, then continuity is merely abstract. As Stanley Cavell observes in his reading of *King Lear*, the play is structured around resolved critical crises, culminating in the question, “Why must Cordelia die?”, a question that resists narrative reintegration and marks the limits of restorative coherence (Cavell, 2003, p. 43). Similarly, Bradley insists, “Shakespeare's was the tragic point of view”, one that resists any attempt to soften catastrophe into moral restoration (Bradley, 1904, p. 318). Here, tragedy intervenes and challenges this presumption by staging a series of events in which the frameworks of relations disintegrate under the weight of their contradictions. Authority disintegrates without being reconstituted, kinship becomes a source of violence and not continuity, and recognition does not lead to reconciliation. One might think of the dynamic of this process through the lens of the tragic genre and the play *King Lear*. The losses in *King Lear* do not simply accumulate; they add up to a last, irrecoverable one. *King Lear* systematically disassembles relationships, power, and recognition, and it does not allow them to be reassembled in a new way. Lear's world does not change in a small way under pressure; it disintegrates. Power is not reorganized in a clearer form; it becomes meaningless. Relationships of fatherhood, loyalty, and power do not stretch beyond a breaking point; they are severed. And this severing is not temporary. Instead, hope for return is never realized.

4.2. Non-Homeomorphic Transformation

This manifests especially in non-homeomorphic transformations. In mathematics, two shapes are topologically equivalent if you can bend or stretch one of the shapes to look exactly like the other. Unfortunately, the tragic transformation creates a world that is not equivalent to the starting world. It fails to maintain continuity in the transformation. Instead, it creates a new world that cannot be flattened back into the previous world. It also cannot be mapped onto the previous world without distorting the new world. In a sense, the use of topology as a literary device can be used to explore whether identities remain constant

even if hidden or camouflaged, or whether moral bonds endure even in exile. Yet, the topology fails to capture the tale that demands extinction, not endurance. Tragedy does not merely challenge continuity but negates it. The loss presented in a tragic work of art is not the type that can be worked out but the type that must be endured. As Levinas reminds us, “Totality and the embrace of being, or oncology, do not contain the final secret of being” (Levinas, 1969, p. 80), suggesting that certain forms of loss exceed structural integration rather than awaiting narrative repair. Similarly, Butler argues, “mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance” (Butler, 2004, p. 21). The recuperation of the tragic collapse as latent repair is to neutralize the very force that defines tragedy.

4.3. *From Deformation to Tearing*

The distinction between deformation and tearing is important here. Deformation is limited to the realm of the elastic, whereas tearing is beyond the boundaries of the elastic limit. In the context of literature, tearing happens when the transformation of the narrative is so great that the relation of equivalence is no longer possible. As Cathy Caruth observes, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Similarly, Sara Ahmed writes, “Rather, in the face of the otherness of my own pain, I am undone, before her, and for her” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 31). The post-catastrophe world is no longer a transformed version of what came before it, but a new kind of space altogether. This is the moment when the narrative moves from the realm of topology to something else. Where deformation is concerned, there is the possibility of a map, but with tearing, there is the need to consider loss. There is no need to consider the narrative in relation to its origin, but it is insisting on its discontinuity at this juncture, and the language of topology is no longer a language of analysis but of consolation.

4.4. *Naming the Breakdown: Toward a Critical Vocabulary*

In order to further develop literary topology as an approach, it is important to identify these breakdowns rather than glossing over them. Three concepts will be proposed as diagnostic tools rather than totalizing concepts: topological exhaustion, where relations have been stretched to their limits; non-repairable space, referring to those environments in a narrative in which damage cannot be repaired or integrated in a renewed form; loss as a reorganization of space in a way that creates absences that cannot be filled or repaired to create continuity; and structural entropy as referring to the gradual erosion of relational structure. Entropy is an accumulation: authority disappears, and coherence disappears without creating a new form of stability. Entropy is not chaos; rather, it is an irreversible process. These concepts do not replace topology; they define its limits. They indicate when topological thinking must be abandoned in favor of other forms of analysis, such as an ethics or an affect or an existence approach to understanding terminal breakdowns.

4.5. *Breakdown as Methodological Insight*

Significantly, the awareness of where the theory of topology falters does not indicate any deficiency of the theory itself. On the contrary, it is the mark of maturity. A theory which is unable to recognize its own limits risks being decorative. Conversely, the recognition of the limits of reversibility, death, ethical surplus, and tearing makes the method more precise. The great contribution of topology is to specify the conditions under which narratives hold together. The failure of topology shows the conditions under which holding together is no longer the question. Tragedy does not disprove topological analysis but shows the conditions under which it fails. The identification of the limits does not weaken but enhance the concept of literary topology. It is no longer the search for the universal grammar of narrative but the recognition of the precise character of the analysis.

5. **Toward a Bounded Theory of Literary Topology**

Tragedy is not beyond analysis, not beyond theory, but rather it requires a different set of tools, tools that are sensitive to excess, to negation, and to the limits of the structure. Tragedy reveals where our method fails, where our method fails to hold up, where the concepts of continuity, deformation, invariance, and the loop begin to fail us. In the words of Foucault, “we don’t swim in a void that can be tinted with many lights; we are in a network of relations that defines the sites that are not reducible to one another and are absolutely not interchangeable” (Foucault, 1986, p. 23). Where the narrative cannot be fixed, where the comfortable narrative fails, topology sets out to question its own presuppositions and to make a clear and distinct division between deformation and destruction, between continuity and ruptured continuity. Tragedy does not negate literary topology; it disciplines it. By making us aware of the point at which topological thinking fails to shed light on the narrative, tragedy makes us aware of the proper boundaries of the method. It reminds us that not all structures are recoverable, that not all changes are provisional, and that not all changes preserve equivalences. By doing so, tragedy gives us a sharper sense of the conceptual boundaries of the method of literary topology. The foregoing sections have shown that the explanatory power of literary topology is best felt in those narratives that presuppose the possibility of retrievable structure. Romance provides this presupposition almost by definition, while tragedy reveals the limits of that presupposition. These claims have not been made in error; they have been made at the structural limits of the presupposition of continuity, deformation, and invariance. To identify them is to identify what cannot be done by literary topology and why. For literary topology to be taken seriously as anything more than an interesting and desirable inter-disciplinary metaphor, it must be defined as a theory with limits that identify both its strengths and the limits of its proper application. The foregoing sections have identified the strengths and the limits of the application of topological analysis.

5.1. *When Topology Should Be Used*

Literary topology seems to work most effectively when the text assumes the recoverability of structure. This does not necessarily imply a restoration of the past in a simplistic way, nor does it imply a moral or ethical harmony. Rather, it assumes that the relationship, whether ethical, spatial, or symbolic, can be traced. Texts that allow delay, displacement, and deformation without insisting upon terminal loss are most productive of topological thought. In those texts, continuity doesn't mean staying the same; it means lasting through change. Identities remain invisible, power shifts around, and values get negotiated. Still, you can find a thread of connection that you can follow. Topology has a special affinity for structures that allow suspension—where judgment is delayed, decisions are put off, and time can figure into meaning. Here, topological concepts such as deformation, invariance, and loop help you understand how meaning can endure through change. Topology therefore works best when it's brought to bear on structures that embody the flexibility of the text rather than after the fact.

5.2. *When Topology Should Not Be Used*

The acknowledgment of the instances is equally important, where topology should be applied with caution, if at all. Tales of irreversibility, extinction, and ethical transgression are not appropriate for topological analysis since these do not offer room for the recovery that the methodology assumes. In the words of Caruth, "not fully assimilated as it occurs" (Caruth, 1996, p. 5) refers to the rupture that cannot be folded into a continuous structural field. There are losses that cannot be recuperated, deaths that signal termination, and ethical transgressions that exceed the limits of structure. In these cases, topology is structurally reductive because it imposes recoverability where it does not exist; ethically, because it risks translating irreparable loss into a topology of continuity. Here, the issue is not interpretation but incompatibility. The application of the continuity of topology to narratives of space as unrecoverable is not a clever move of reading against the grain; it is an incompatibility of the concept with the logic of the narrative. Thus, the circumscribed theory of topology must also consider the instances where the methodology should be applied sparingly, if at all.

5.3. *Genre Sensitivity and Methodological Calibration*

Genre appears as a critical factor in the calibration of topological analysis. Genres carry pre-existing assumptions about time, resolution, and loss that precede the actual narrative. As Fyre notes, "Agon or conflict is the basis or archetypal theme of romance, the radical of romance ... Pathos or catastrophe ... is the archetypal theme of tragedy" (Fyre, 1957, p. 192), indicating that genre encodes a prior structural logic that shapes the trajectory of narrative before any particular event unfolds. Romance, in its openness to delay and return, lends itself to topological analysis. Tragedy, in its insistence on finality and collapse, tests the limits of the method. This is not to suggest that genre is a rigid or monolithic concept. It is fluid and internally complex. However, the distinction remains instructive. A theory of literary topology will be limited in that it will not reduce a narrative to genre. Instead, genre will be a structural probability that influences the methodological approach. The issue will not be the genre to which a narrative belongs, but the assumptions that the narrative makes that are consistent with the possibility of a recoverable structure. Genre sensitivity will be a critical diagnostic feature in determining whether topology clarifies or distorts narrative form.

5.4. *Toward Hybrid Approaches*

Acknowledging the limitations of topology does not require the rejection of the approach but, on the contrary, opens the way for hybridization. Topology may meet its limits in ethical excess, affective saturation, and trauma; here, other theories may help to provide the lacking explanation of the unrepresentable. As Levinas reminds us, "the idea of Infinity is transcendence itself, the overflowing of an adequate idea" (Levinas, 1969, p. 80). Such hybrid theories may help to maintain the accuracy of the explanation provided by topology while acknowledging its limitations. Thus, for example, the deformation of narrative space may be explained by topology, the intensity of the experience may be explained by affect theory, the persistence of trauma may be explained by trauma theory, and the issue of responsibility may be addressed by ethical theory, where the invariance of space has failed. In such cases, there is no competition between theories; the spatial approach of topology simply serves as the background for the other theories.

5.5. *Toward Methodological Accountability*

A limited literary topology must be answerable in its methodology. Critics must be answerable for not just what they examine, but how and why they examine it. Topology must be used because it fits the formal logic of the narrative, not because it presents an exciting form. Accountability refines the methodology: it guards the methodology from being overly ambitious and keeps it self-aware. By defining when topology should be used, when it should be avoided, and when it can be productively combined with other tools, this section seeks to advance literary topology as a rigorous methodology. This limited form of literary topology is not less ambitious; it is more convincing. It begins with the fact that literary structures are complex and that a suite of various critical methodologies must be used to fully engage with them. This is not a dismissal of critical theory but an extension of it.

6. Conclusion

As this article has demonstrated, literary topology is most effective when understood not as a general-purpose tool of literary analysis, but rather as a genre-specific analytical tool whose effectiveness depends on the structural conditions it encounters. Through an examination of the possibilities and limitations of topological thought within the genres of romance and tragedy, this article has hoped to provide a clearer sense of what can and cannot be explained through this method, and to provide a firmer foundation for this mode of literary analysis. Literary topology is most effective at providing a clear vocabulary for the expression of structural continuity in narratives where such a possibility exists. Topology's vocabulary of continuity,

deformation, invariance, and loop provides a powerful vocabulary for narratives in which delay, suspension, and re-configuration can occur without a corresponding loss of coherence. In such narratives, disorder and order are not necessarily at odds, but rather aspects of a continuum. Topology provides a powerful vocabulary for narratives in which meaning and identity survive deformation and change, and in which ethical structures can be maintained through transformation.

Meanwhile, this study has argued that topology must engage with collapse. The tragic narrative reveals the context in which deformation becomes tearing, continuity becomes irreversibility, and return is no longer possible. Here, death, terminal loss, and ethical surplus indicate the points at which structure ceases to be recoverable as such. In such contexts, topological thinking is not just difficult; rather, it is inappropriate. Continuing to chart continuity, while the narrative itself insists on non-repairable space, is to mistake methodological desire for formal necessity. Recognizing this limitation of literary topology, however, does not weaken the method but rather clarifies its purpose and function. A method that cannot recognize its own failure to function risks becoming both decorative and coercive. In this way, a bounded topology, one that is conscious of genre, sensitive to irreversibility, and open to hybridization with affective, ethical, and trauma theories, reveals itself as a method that is both disciplined and credible.

Topology after restoration is not a theory of total explanation but rather a theory of qualified coherence. It reveals to us the ways in which narrative holds together, and the precise points at which holding together is no longer the issue. In this way, literary topology provides us not with a universal grammar of narrative form but rather a calibrated approach to narrative relation, transformation, and loss. Literary topology, then, is best understood not as a master key but rather as a diagnostic tool, one that achieves its critical force through a knowledge of precisely where and how to operate and precisely where and how to withdraw. The greatest strength of literary topology, then, is that it reveals to us both the persistence of structure and the points of its exhaustion. In this way, attending to both structure and exhaustion is not only to improve the method but rather to honor the formal intelligence of literature itself.

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