



WRITING THE SACRED *Beloved's Poetics of Life*

RÉDOUANE ABOUDDAHAB

Université Lumière Lyon 2

In their world, aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace. It was not for them to expel or annihilate it. They would no more run Sula out of town than they would kill the robins that brought her back, for in their secret awareness of Him, He was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew quite well that He had four, and that the fourth explained Sula.

—————Toni Morrison, *Sula* [118]

The Creator has made the earth for the living, not the dead. Rights and powers can only belong to persons, not to things [...]. The dead are not even things.

—————Thomas Jefferson

Letter to Major J. Cartwright,
June 5, 1824 [1493]

Beloved is a poetical and sacred performance that *rhythms* the historically split being into vitality and beauty again. Drawing on the disruptive truth of repetition, the novel lets in the discourse of the unconscious, both a bodily and verbal complex whose energetic drives and phonemes are poetized,¹ and myth, the presence of which tallies with the eruption of the sacred.² The interactive play between semiotics and energy on the one hand, and myth

* This work is dedicated to the late Barbara Christian.

¹ For a theoretical analysis of the interaction between unconscious energy and the sign, see the works of J. F. Lyotard, especially *Libidinal Economy*, trans. I. H. Grant (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993). See also J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia UP, 1984).

² M. Eliade showed how myth is fundamentally linked with the sacred [Eliade, 1963, 15].

and the sacred on the other, creates a dynamics of ideality that takes up anew the now flabby aesthetics of postmodernism based on the metonymic propagation of banality, and on the pure play of the signifier.³ At the risk of making a generalization, one might say that the postmodernist project is underlain by the transgressive desire of belittling the symbolic and ethical dimension of the sign, of emptying it down of its "values," and propagating instead a purely individualistic project: *one's* story, *one's* desire, *one's* attempt at edifying a personal space set against the violence of society. Here, the self is fundamentally a lonely self, victimized by the manipulative and absurd violence of the military (Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*), by the dark optimism of the American Dream (Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*), by the dispossessing power of consumerism and the anguishing and endless expansion of simulacra (Steven Millhauser, *The Knife Thrower*), or by the equally endless expansion of financial and military power (William Gaddis, *Carpenter's Gothic*). Paul Auster's hero in *Moon Palace* tries to act upon his destiny but is forced to scapegoat his own body and self. The healing process he goes through leads to a final cathartic resolution, but the self remains lonely. There is nothing to run after anymore except through writing. But then, it is *one's self* that the writer is after.

On the whole, Western culture examines death from the negativist point of view [Jankelevitch 54-55], while Morrison's concern, I believe, is the recognition of death as the basis of the symbolic pact, as a sacralized, formalized, and necessary fact determining human relations.⁴ Hence, Toni Morrison's work is marked with the discontinuous variation of the structure (the signifier's play, the glitter of the surface...), and yet it is open to the continuity of the sacred (an exacting sense of symbolic values, community feeling and life, the healing power of spirituality...). In this perspective, the quest for an authentic self is manifold. The protagonists have to assume their singular desires, confront and name their repressed and traumatic memories. This process of transformation of one's thus far unnamed

³ J. Baudrillard observes how modern art has "failed to realize the utopian aesthetics of modern times, to transcend itself and become an ideal form of life. [...] Instead of being subsumed in a transcendent ideality, art has been dissolved within a general aestheticization of everyday life, giving way to a pure circulation of images, a transaesthetics of banality" [Baudrillard, 1993, 11].

⁴ Toni Morrison draws undoubtedly on African culture where death is symbolically exchanged among the living. See L.-V. Thomas, *Cinq Essais sur la mort africaine*. Freud-Lacanian psychoanalysis stresses the presence of death not only in the living organism, but also and especially in language, i.e., at the core of the symbolic order: "The death instinct is only the mask of the symbolic order [...]. The symbolic order is simultaneously non-being and insisting to be, that is what Freud has in mind when he talks about the death instinct as being what is most fundamental—a symbolic order in travail, in the process of coming, insisting on being realized" (Lacan, 1988, 326). The intimate relation between the death instinct or, rather, the death drive and the symbolic order is clearly presented in the founding *myth* of psychoanalysis as discussed by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*: the murder of the sexually greedy father by the primitive horde, and the subsequent prohibition of incest as a founding law. See also Freud's crucial essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." Freud discovers the paradoxical nature of life whose aim, as analyzed through the unconscious compulsion to repeat, is death [46]. Moreover, "the pleasure principle, strangely enough, seems actually to serve the death instincts," [77]. The "mystery" of the death drive remains such in Lacan's attempt to theorize the Freudian *das Ding* as a paradoxical object of desire: "Right at the beginning of the organization of the world in the psyche, both logically and chronologically, *das Ding* is something that presents and isolates itself as the strange feature around which the whole movement of the *Vorstellung* turns" [Lacan, 1992, 57].

suffering into a story that can be heard and shared, i.e. a story of suffering and healing that can be exchanged with others, this process of symbolization only succeeds when the self defines itself historically. The catharsis occurs collectively thanks to the recognition of a shared heritage and a shared set of values and beliefs.

In *Beloved*, difference and non-difference interplay. Consequently, the critical reader cannot confine himself or herself to highlighting exclusively the differential relations in the novel and their binary pattern along the line of race, society, gender... This can only curtail dramatically the range of this challenging novel, and reduce its complex thematic intersections, to the *structure*. And we know that the structure, at the anthropological and psychoanalytical levels, wipes out the sacred,⁵ and likewise the continuous and the non-differential.⁶

Beloved re-mythicizes modern discourse and endows it with a sense of rigorous, unsentimental dignity. What is more, it revises not only the white official history of slavery, but also black history. Margaret Garner's story of suffering and horror, which functions as the historical referent of the novel, is raised to the dignity of a symbol, i.e. a founding and unifying law. Revised through the truth of fiction, the historical shaping forces, black and white, are revisited and finally revalued. The narrative traces its fable-time back to the past in order to restore the human truth of the slaves, to reveal retrospectively the spiritual density of the lives of those who were considered as commutable objects, whose *value* was exclusively monetary. This said, *Beloved* is not a historical novel precisely because the revision of history and the past highlights what social reality, then and now, should not deny: the energetic presence of death at the core of life, the fertile presence of evil at the core of love.

Beloved manifests the necessary presence of heterogeneity at the heart of homogeneity, of difference at the heart of resemblance. It is a verbal poetic *surface* where myth (the sacred as a form of continuity) and the unconscious (the differential chain of signifiers) interact. The transparency of the binary system of classification is wrought into havoc by the oxymoronic interconnectedness of opposites. In this perspective, the novel's is anthropological aesthetics. Literature, through poetics, reveals here what is fundamental: the vitality of death. Yet the novel does not only retrieve anthropological and historical truths but also sublimates them thanks to a language voluminous with its signifyin(g) connotations, ambiguous with the wake left by the death drive *in travail*, mysterious on account of the active and productive presence of the Dead as an other, as a necessary partner. This plural network provides the texture of the narrative with poetic density and opens its realm to what lies beyond the symbolic limit. In effect, the repetitive and rhythmic outbursts of the unconsciously memorized African myths and beliefs, as well as acquired Western myths,

⁵ A. Cook observes that "the procedure of analyzing the sacred [...] is carried by Lévi-Strauss to the point of absence or neutralized immanence [...]. Lévi-Strauss's system provides the relational calculus among items in a myth's story. However, in his system we lack—he would say we must lack—a specific meaning for, or even a flexible relation between, the elements of a story and the sense of mystery that accompanies the sacred" [17-18].

⁶ See R. Girard, especially chapter IX.

interplay and re-actualize, in discourse, the “Middle Passage” and its tragic effects.⁷ The historical range, the journey, revisited, emerges out of *Beloved’s* fictive world as a founding myth connecting the socially *and* individually split self.

But let us be more precise: *Beloved’s* magnetic intensity derives from the fact its narrator is not satisfied with writing about slavery, i.e., wearing for a while a historical identity. The narrator *becomes* the sum of what slavery was, and it is in this sense that writing reveals here the essential.⁸ The narrator’s enunciative stance is announced, from the start, by the voice of the absolute Other’s: one that calls the *people* and names the *individual*. The epigraph to the novel, from Romans 9: 25, expresses the power of continuity operating through paradox: “I will call them my people, which were not my people, and her Beloved, which was not beloved.” Along this authoritative and exacting line, the narrator produces a discourse that partakes both of negation and affirmation, the inside (inclusion) and the outside (exclusion). The source of production lies beyond the realm of common human faculties. It flows from an ambiguous place that testifies to a *state of sacredness*, i.e. the conscious feeling of being within and without at the same time, within the self and beyond it. Morrison’s is indeed “the glare of an outside thing that embraces while it accuses” [271]. Only the cruel purity of writing can render and consequently transform the violence of the historical situation into a *gift* of life.

Morrison does not ground the narration of history on a factually chronological scale of time, but marks the historical referent with the odd “timelessness” of myth and the unconscious.⁹ The effective reading the novel implies is accomplished by the means of repetition: the characters relive their past through the mechanism of transference, and *the* past through the myth of “the eternal return.”¹⁰ What matters in this discussion is

⁷ This is how the African-American poet Robert Hayden calls the African slaves’ journey through the Atlantic, a “voyage through death, / voyage whose chartings are unlove” [257].

⁸ It is useful to quote *in extenso* Morrison’s definition of writing, where the notion of being or becoming is important: “I am interested in what prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from—and in what disables the foray, for purposes of fiction, into corners of the consciousness held off and away from the reach of the writer’s imagination. My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world. To think about (and wrestle with) the full implications of my situation leads me to consider what happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society. For them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*” [*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 4].

⁹ As C. Lévi-Strauss clearly puts it, “a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago. But what gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future” (Lévi-Strauss 209). As for the timelessness of the unconscious, Freud says: “Unconscious mental processes are in themselves ‘timeless’. This means in the first place that they are not ordered temporally, that time does not change them in any way and that the idea of time cannot be applied to them” [Freud, 1961, 31-32].

¹⁰ M. Eliade specifies that “everything begins over again at its commencement every instant. The past is but a pre-figuration of the future. No event is irreversible and no transformation is final. In a certain sense, it is even possible to say that nothing new happens in the world, for everything is but the repetition of the same primordial archetype; this repetition [...] constantly maintains the world in the same auroral instant of the beginnings. Time but

to see how the unconscious and myth interplay and keep transforming themselves in, through, and thanks to language.

From the beginning, *Beloved's* discourse works at intertwining the body and its unconscious drives with a supernatural force. The very first pages highlight the repetitive eruption of the unknown as a supernatural substance: "A pool of red and undulating light that locked [Paul D] where he stood" [8].¹¹ The incipit and the opening paragraph produce a ravishing effect by means of ambiguous associations between substance (traces) and incorporeity (signs), familiarity (home) and absolute otherness (a living dead). Abstract adjectives dissolve into body anchored statements producing through antithesis a rupture that sets off an excess of meaning: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" [3]. The phrase "lively spite" [3] interconnects two paradoxical paradigms unveiling, thus, the work of the death drive which is both a psychical mark and an energetic substance. The energetic charges of the "baby's venom" leave on the surface the marks of their manifestation and become a sort of self-referential *scripture*: "hand prints," "a heap on the floor," "soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line" [3], "gusts of sour air" [4] testify to the unregulated playful, albeit chaotic, facilitation of the drive. It is noteworthy that the "haint" leaves on the surface of the visible world traces that might presently be semiotized. At this point, the urgency lies in the advent of an unknown yet necessary meaning. It is only with the arrival of Paul D, who plays here a fatherly role, that the death drive will be attached to a signifier, and, as shall be discussed later, a basic one, too. Being a symptom, i.e., a repressed unconscious desire,¹² the substance has no definite signifier that would represent it and symbolize it into an exchangeable signified. Therefore, calling it a "ghost" is as vain as Sethe and Denver's attempt to call it forth, because calling is not naming. The naming process occurs only later:

Sethe and the girl Denver did what they could, and what the house permitted, for her. Together they waged a perfunctory battle against the outrageous behavior of that place. [4]

The energetic substance, in search for a symbolizing name, is for the time being polymorphic. It is in turns a "ghost," a "spell" [4], a supernatural being flooding the vicinity with so much fright that "outside a driver whipped his horse into the gallop local people felt necessary when they passed 124" [4]; it is a dead little baby's "rage," a "spirit" [5], and a "haint" [15]. In other words, it falls simultaneously within the realm of certain African beliefs, the fantastic, and the uncanny. The structure is running amok from the start.

makes possible the appearance and existence of things. It has no final influence upon their existence, since it is itself constantly regenerated" [Eliade, 1954, 89-90].

¹¹ The excessive and disordered activity of the drives in the opening lines, echoes the African cosmology where the notion of chaos as a pre-existing substance is presented at the origin of sacred narratives [Holas 76].

¹² "The symptom has its origin in the repressed, it is as it were the representation of the repressed in relation to the ego; the repressed is a foreign territory to the ego, an internal foreign territory, just as reality is an external foreign territory" [Freud 82].

The opening of the narrative presents us with two distinct and interactive series. The death drive at work in the body-like house—"A person rather than a structure" [29], as Denver believes—is the externalization of a mnemonic mark which has to do with the dead. It is the effect produced which is of primary importance. In this perspective, the "lively spite" is a lively memory keeping to the surface, refusing to become the *sign* of an absence, playing havoc, therefore, with the symbolizing process that rules "normal" reality. It is important to note here that this "spite" is harmless, the aim being self-manifestation, an absence playfully pointing to itself as such, refusing the symbolic mediation of the sign, i.e., "the one word that matters" [5] engraved on the headstone.

The supernatural presence functions first and foremost as the symptomatic reminder of an absence inscribed in the characters' minds. The wildness of its manifestation points to the tragic urgency of remembrance, to the equally tragic necessity of memory's survival. For in *Beloved* all the main characters have *their* dead whether these are real or virtual: Paul D's is Sixo (and, to a lesser extent, his half-brother), Ella's is her "white hairy thing," Stamp Paid's is Vashti. Absence is thus equated with death: Sethe's are her two sons, Denver's is her father. In this sense death and absence are not abstract notions; they are materialized into the absent, the dead whom some try to forget and some others to remember or to wait for.

What Toni Morrison has achieved in *Beloved* is quite original and new: giving the structure and its shallowness spiritual depth. The novel voices the pre-verbal infant¹³ and, so doing, highlights the specific and complex love relation between mother and child. But what is of the first and foremost importance lies in the fact the pre-verbal infant is a dead child's pre-verbal *knowledge*, too. Being the conjunction of the death drive (a psychic energy) and the dead (a spiritual metaphysical energy), the "baby's venom" becomes then the association of the continuity of the imaginary phase and the continuity of the sacred. This association evinces, symptomatically at this phase of the narrative, both the lost unconscious knowledge and the equally lost mythical one. Something lying at the core of the minds of the living is awakened by the presence of the dead. Self-realization, the narrator shows in the end, can only be accomplished thanks to the recognition of the truth embodied by *Beloved*:

First minute I saw her I didn't want to be nowhere around her. Something funny about her. Talks funny. Acts funny." Paul D dug his fingers underneath his cap and rubbed the scalp over his temple. "She reminds me of something. Something, look like, I'm supposed to remember. [234]

The narrative unveils progressively the different psychic knots the main three characters have to sort out. At this stage, the thing to be sorted out appears to be the very effect of the irrational presence at work in 124. Of

¹³ *Beloved* is the spirit of a dead little girl who was killed by her mother when she was still an infant.

course it is Sethe who is mainly concerned with the "outrage." What she desires most is "a conversation," "an exchange of view" so that she "could make it clear to her" [4]. Sethe's then is a feeling of guilt which, she thinks, had *already* been expiated:

She thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on, the anger in his face so old; the appetite in it quite new. That should certainly be enough. Enough to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust. [5]

Sethe explains to Denver that the daughter she killed was "too little to understand. Too little to talk much even" [4]. Denver's answer is very telling: "Maybe she don't want to understand." The pronoun *she* is ambiguous here for if we take into account the mirror effect between the two sisters, it might as well refer to Denver and her refusal to understand what her mother had done. Denver who is "ten and still mad at Baby Suggs for dying" [4], takes refuge in autism as a means of protection against her own mother who appears in her anamorphous mirror as the image of the godlike mother, one who pours down love but also cruelty, one who gives birth (forces out the fetus from the womb) but also death (swallows back the ousted body).

Paul D who is, at the symbolic level, the metaphorical substitute for the absent father and the absent grandmother as he occupies the third and vacant place in the triangle, rids the house of its excess thanks to the family-structured pattern he forges out with Sethe (the mother) and Denver (the daughter). The circular continuity of excess has been transformed into a symbolically meaningful triangle: "The three of them, Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, breathed to the same beat, like one tired person. Another breathing was just as tired. It was gone" [18-19]. Paul D's "loud male voice" [37] *utters* what Sethe could only think but never give voice to. The uttered word is of paramount importance. It is, I believe, the key word in the novel:

"God damn it! Hush up!" Paul D was shouting, falling, reaching for anchor. "Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!" A table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle and, holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house. "You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!". The quaking slowed to an occasional lurch. [18]

The word "enough" has a double meaning: the first one is quantitative, the second one qualitative; the first one partakes of the real, the second one of the symbolic. As we shall see in a moment, the novel operates a major progressive shift from the real meaning of suffering to its symbolic meaning, because the meaning of "enough" is only accomplished thanks to the symbolic recognition by the other. Paul D, too, had had *enough* who, "locked up and chained down," trembled "for eighty-three days in a row" while his "hands shook so bad he couldn't smoke or even scratch properly" [18]. The trembling, which testifies to a limit-situation where the physical boundaries are reached, functions both as a reminder and a challenge for

Paul D who “had not trembled since 1856,” i.e., since Alfred, Georgia.¹⁴ So now he is trembling not out of worry but on account of the material manifestation of the supernatural presence. It is a different trembling, just like the one he undergoes with Beloved later, as he is placed in a limit-situation of quite a different sort: it leads him to formulating with Stamp Paid the most crucial question of the novel: the metaphysical meaning of suffering, of getting *enough*:

“Tell me something, Stamp.” Paul D’s eyes were rheumy. “Tell me this one thing. How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. How much?” “All he can,” said Stamp Paid. “All he can.” “Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?” [235]

Return of the spirit, return of the repressed, the supernatural instance comes back for Denver to understand, for Sethe to expiate, and for Paul D to measure the range of this seemingly simple but so complex word “enough”—that has taken the metonymic form of a tobacco tin—by providing it with its metaphysical scope, for the Gods, too, are playing in the drama.

Not unlike Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, not unlike Baby Suggs, Paul D is able to read “signs” that partake of a quite different level of reality. Reading here is not an intellectual operation; it is rather an emotional activity where an unconscious knowledge is involved. Sethe’s back, for instance, is *read* as a living text, a “sculpture” he rubs “his cheeks on,” learning “that way her sorrow” [17]. On the way to the carnival, he is the first one to smell the “doomed roses” [47] calling, therefore, “everybody’s attention” to this sure sign of truth: the tight link between life and death, or more specifically, life heralding death and death drawing on life. The limit of language is transcended by the paradoxical synesthetic association of sound and scent:

The closer the roses got to death, the louder their scent, and everybody who attended the carnival associated it to the stench of the rotten roses. [...] All, like Paul D, were in high spirits, which the smell of dying roses (that Paul D called to everybody’s attention) could not dampen. [47]

The interplay of life and death at the level of nature is utterly metamorphic. It has no referential meaning. At this point there is no distinction between life and death but one vital flux dramatically transmuting itself into two seemingly distinct energies. At the level of the real, outside any arbitrary symbolic organization or imaginary reshaping of the self (for instance “life” as the “good sign” that Sethe perceives [47]), death and life are associated into the same metamorphic process. The binary classification into negative and positive sets, does not make sense inasmuch

¹⁴ The healing virtues of voice overcoming the unbearable thanks to the power of naming, is well dramatized in a scene where Paul D and his chained companions rely on their mere voices for accomplishing miracles. In the following example, the oxymoron outranks the semantic limit to inscribe the urgency of survival: “Singing love songs to Mr. Death, they smashed his head. More than the rest, they killed the flirt whom folks called Life for leading them on. Making them think the next sunrise would be worth it; that another stroke of time would do it at last. Only when she was dead would they be safe” [109].

as the association of two contradictory paradigms is continuous, never antinomic: “doomed roses”, “rotten roses” (and later “roses of blood”), the “abundance” [47] of which dramatizes the vital flux.

Death is hence a vital element that generates beauty. The moment of epiphany is also a moment of death (“the closer... the louder...”). Likewise, the “spell” produces a “red light.” In this perspective nothing is wasted as everything is necessary, part of a cyclical, self-generative energy. From the vital energy of rapidly crawling roses, one infers the amazing vitality of an “already crawling” baby whose spirit still clings to life. The metamorphosis in travail reminds us that “nothing ever dies” [36], that the expelled spirit of the dead baby is now in the process of being transformed into a visible human figure.

From the outset we are presented with the tragic figure of petrification associated to light. The cold headstone is “sprinkled with glittering chips” [5], “pink gravestone chips” [39] which are both figuratively and literally the transfiguration of blood into intense figures outranking the ordinary, connoting the powerful will for life of the self-sacrificed mother:

Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby’s fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil. [5]

The signifiers “blood” and “red” refer to the infanticide but also and especially to the fall of the ideal that Baby Suggs, who “slipped in a red puddle and fell” [152], used to represent for Sethe and the community, before the newly-born feeling of spiritual communion is choked off by Sethe’s lethal act. What is enunciated through the living memory as a figure, is the attempt to elevate the fallen ideal and reestablish it in its symbolic function. The liquidity of blood, the “red puddle,” the paradigm of matter, is sublimated into “a pool of red and undulating light” [8] that connotes the heights just as the *star* chips do. But, at this stage of the narrative, the process of sublimation along with the process of memorization are a mere outline. The “living activity of the dead” corresponds also to the living activity of the death drive as an excessive energy not yet channeled into a semiotic system, that is, the symbolic order where the flux of energy would be controlled by the chain of signifiers. The whole book strives to re-inscribe the failure of the original carnal (through exploitation) inscription: B.E.L.O.V.E.D. The “star chips” [5] (light/sky) and their “sprinkling” quality (water/earth) are now raised to the rank of an autonomous figure that yields its own meaning, drawing the code of reality to it, subjecting it to its foreignness—the “magical appearance” [123] of a sensual star-like goddess; black Venus stepping out of water:

A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree. All day and all night she sat there, her head resting on the trunk in a position abandoned enough to crack the brim in her straw hat. Everything hurt but her lungs most of all. Sopping wet and breathing shallow she spent those hours trying to negotiate the weight

of her eyelids. The day breeze blew her dress dry; the night wind wrinkled it. Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by. If they had, chances are they would have hesitated before approaching her. [50]

The focus is laid on the luminosity of darkness. The strange beauty of Beloved, whose body connotes the depths of water as a figure of the origin and creation,¹⁵ reaches the full meaning of her mythical dimensions when her face radiates fully the light of the sun:

The rays of the sun struck her full in the face, so that when Sethe, Denver and Paul D rounded the curve in the road all they saw was a black dress, two unlaced shoes below it, and Here Boy nowhere in sight. [51]

The process of creation has a double movement. It operates at the level of myth as we have examined; it also functions along the line of the verbal chain. The signifier "venom" mentioned in the opening scenes, has released a connoted implicit signifier, "Venus," bearing in mind that both words are cognate.¹⁶ The narrator restores hence words to their original meanings and concurrently revises them or rather enriches them with other religious or mythical beliefs.¹⁷ Indeed, sexuality and love are not opposed to but tightly connected to the notion of evil through Beloved, who subverts the Manichaeian division between good and evil. Beloved, whose "shine" is "so pronounced" "in the evening" [64], is an ideal figure of the heights; but her "shine" becomes also purely sexual and subversive when she seduces Paul D into a more or less incestuous relation.

Paul D, "the last of the Sweet Home men," stands for reason and moral courage. He incarnates the symbolic law and voices the rational power of the word and its classifying taxonomic capacities.¹⁸ This order of things (reason, courage, resistance...) succumbs utterly to the mystery of evil as an erotic and energetic intelligence that communicates a sense of death, that releases a sense of the absolute, i.e., the *suspension of discontinuity*. The surface is shuttered by the call of the deep; reality as a principle of reason and coded discourse, of which Paul D has been a symbolic warrantor

¹⁵ Cf. M. Eliade (1963) who defines myth as a sacred story telling how, thanks to supernatural beings, a cosmic reality or simply a fragment came to be as they are. In other words, it is always the story of a "creation."

¹⁶ *Venom*, from *venenum*, means etymologically "love philter," "magic potion," "poison." It is cognate with the word *venus* that means originally "love" and "sexual desire." See *Webster's Word Histories* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1989) 492.

¹⁷ In the US, the literary use of Western mythology is part of a political debate whose implications go beyond the frame of our discussion. See J. De Weever who observes that "Greek mythology appears easily available to Black-American novelists, critics, and artists, largely because of educational programs in literary history and the Western imperialist agenda that, until only very recently, have excluded most of the world's mythologies from college curricula, a circumstance not without an ideological agenda. Even now, when that agenda is the focus of discussion, the debate rages over the wisdom of teaching students only works from Western European civilization" [De Weever 6].

¹⁸ As it has been suggested above, Paul D's accumulated layers of suffering are lodged in a "tobacco tin" that serves as the synecdoche of his experience and his laboriously ordered memory: "It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open" [113].

(“when good people take you in and treat you good, you ought to try to be good back. You don’t... Sethe loves you” [116]), yields not to the power of the pleasure principle (Paul D mistakenly believed that having sex more often with Sethe would protect him from Beloved’s manipulative moves), but to what might be called the *astrological power* of Beloved who, from above, “move[s]” him (“looking at me; she is right over my head looking down through the floor at me” [164]) and leads him finally out of the house. But here again evil produces vitality as Paul D’s fall leads to the rise of true love in the end. Until then, he has to make his own passage through death; before coming back to life, to true love, he has to *die*:

She moved him. Not the way he had beat off the baby’s ghost—all bang and shriek with windows smashed and jelly jars rolled in a heap. But she moved him nonetheless, and Paul D didn’t know how to stop it because it looked like he was moving himself. Imperceptibly, downright reasonably, he was moving out of 124. [114]

The passage brings into light the gradual displacement of Paul D, and, concurrently, his gradual loss of phallic power based on the principle of reason. The highest point of this loss is dramatized by the incapacity of looking the shining power of “sin” in the eye, the omnipotence of evil coming now into view on the stage like a dark goddess, while the “voices of [the] dying landscape” are as “insistent and loud” [116] as the “dying roses” [47] he could *read* on the way to the carnival:

In Ohio seasons are theatrical. Each one enters like a prima donna, convinced its performance is the reason the world has people in it. When Paul D had been forced out of 124 into a shed behind it, summer had been hooted offstage and autumn with its bottles of blood and gold had everybody’s attention. Even at night, when there should have been a restful intermission, there was none because the voices of a dying landscape were insistent and loud. Paul D packed newspaper under himself and over, to give his thin blanket some help. But the chilly night was not on his mind. When he heard the door open behind him he refused to turn and look [116].

Tellingly, Paul D is associated to the power of the letter (though he cannot read and write), as the newspapers stand for the authority of reason he is helplessly folded in, shuttered by an absolute power that opens out into the depth of myth:

As long as his eyes were locked on the silver of the lard can he was safe. If he trembled like Lot’s wife and felt some womanish need to see the nature of the sin behind him; feel a sympathy, perhaps, for the cursing cursed, or want to hold it in his arms out of respect for the connection between them, he too would be lost. [117]

The continuity of the sacred, suggested by the vertical and powerful gaze of Beloved that manipulates Paul D from above *and* from within (“it looked like he was moving himself”), takes precedence over the discontinuities of reason, its taxonomic logic.

What is presumably an ideal is good. The instance which is culturally elevated is the good star that distributes from above love as an everlasting care. With *Beloved* it is the purity of evil, the innocent cruelty of childhood which is placed in this position before the course of the story displaces and replaces it eventually with something else undefined, yet lying beyond the limited dichotomy that encodes reality through a clear-cut Manichaean division: “[Paul D] can’t put his finger on it, but it seems, for a moment, that just beyond his knowing is the glare of an outside thing that embraces while it accuses” [271]. Hence, binary systems of analysis are not helpful insofar as the structure is disturbed by the continuous work of the gyratory heterogeneity of a foreign element that sets constantly into motion the machinery of meaning, stitching therefore the structural cut with excess: *Belovedevil*.¹⁹

The novel’s *tour de force* lies in the aesthetic and ethical revision of preconceived discourses at different levels. History is not only revised in terms of rectification. What is called in question is the notion of history, i.e., the modern perception of time and death, and, consequently, the notion of the symbolic system as conceived by modernity, namely the counter-productive denial of death.²⁰ Morrison’s scope is the crisis of modernity in its entirety, yet her immediate aim is the African-American identity, as myths, superstition, ancient beliefs are no longer transmitted to the younger generations. Transmission is the keyword as concerns the symbolic exchange, for it provides the subjective reality with an original signifier, and, thus, with an ancestral background, be it fictitious, for what matters is the value of meaning, not the exactitude of fact.

In *Beloved* repetition functions both at the aesthetic and thematic level. The repetitive devices, which abolish the metonymic linearity of realistic discourse, match with the metaphorical repetition of the unconscious that reveals the death drive, and the repetition of myth as an eternal return, both repetitions abolishing the linearity of chronological time,²¹ the time of the

¹⁹ Not unlike the Egyptian myth of evil, *Beloved*, the “devil-child” [261], is defeated at the end of the story but not destroyed. Set, god of evil in the Egyptian mythology, is defeated by Horus, who stands for good, but who does not destroy him though he could: “In the sphere of the eternal where there is no duality, Set and Horus are one; that is, death and life, darkness and light, are one force. In Egyptian religion this [the battle between Horus and Set] has been called ‘the secret of the two partners,’ referring to the hidden understanding between the two combatant gods. Set who represents strife is perennially subdued but never destroyed by Horus who represents peace. There is reconciliation in the end” [Mercatante 144]. See also L.-V. Thomas. According to this anthropologist, African religions focus on the problem of life, insofar as everything has to do with the “power of renewal” [7], bad and good included. Anything that increases the vital element is good. In this sense African culture is “pan-vitalist” [9].

²⁰ See J. Baudrillard (1976). The author analyzes modernism in terms of this lack of the symbolic exchange: death is nowadays *the* taboo, and is no longer exchanged in society, that is, it is excluded and symptomatically denied.

²¹ The crucial action of *Beloved* in the novel is not to make the characters (especially Sethe) remember their past, but repeat it in order to change its meaning. Let us observe for the moment with Freud how repetition of the unconscious is more than mere remembrance: “The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to *repeat* the

drive being, on the philosophical and psychoanalytical plane, “reversible” [Juranville 172-75] just as mythic time is.

The individual suffering, repeated, i.e. lived once again, becomes a tragically necessary “middle passage;” at the same time the collective past is sacralized thanks to the revision of historical suffering. The microcosm and the macrocosm interplay constantly: the infanticide is historically determined, yet Sethe transformed history with that very act. Revised through mother-love *and* child-love, the Middle Passage is raised to the dignity of a sacred founding myth that will now repeat itself eternally in language thanks to... forgetfulness.

Two historical facts are reinterpreted. At the microcosmic level, the infanticide is, retrospectively, re-inscribed as a symbolic pact now binding the community together (while the act of infanticide, devoid of any symbolic meaning, caused a rift among the community). On the macroscopic plane, the Middle Passage is raised to the rank of a sacred myth. Hence revised, the journey through an Atlantic of horror and death, becomes a symbolic passage toward life.

The novel dramatizes the notion of the limit both as an experience of the ultimate and the impossible, and as a cultural or inter-cultural frontier. The Atlantic Ocean is certainly a vast geographic space lying between America and Africa. But the Middle Passage means also the transformation of that space into an inter-cultural frontier: the bloody and yet merging frontier between African and Western ethics. In the novel, it is not Venus as a specific myth which is important. What is taken up anew is the mythological and cultural concept referred to by Venus, i.e., beauty, good, and law. Greek tragedy, generally speaking, draws on Law and on Reason. The aim is setting up the sovereignty of good via the reaffirmation of Law: Reason remains the underlying principle. Beloved's is the interplay of beauty and evil. Law is transgressed and what emerges, then, is the vital and cruel beauty of death:

“You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name.” [...]

“Beloved.” He said it, but she did not go. She moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it. What he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying, “Red heart. Red heart,” over and over again. Softly and then so loud it woke Denver, then Paul D himself. “Red heart. Red heart. Red heart.” [117]

Beloved is beyond the limit in the sense she is beyond the code of reality. In this novel, reality is multi-layered. The members of the Black community know it and act accordingly. Their symbolic encodings recognize the existence or, rather, coexistence of the world of the dead and the world of the living. The spiritual geography of the two worlds in question is not clear, yet what is evident is the interconnection of both worlds. What is unequivocally stated instead, is, as Ella has it, the necessity

repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past” [Freud, 1963, 18-19].

of a “communication” between these two worlds. Though the “other” world is not explicitly named, it corresponds at least to “something,” to some level of reality that shapes, out of necessity, familiar reality.

It is the work of this *something*, this *more* which accounts, I believe, for the novel’s uniqueness. This unnamable element is extradiegetic and appears in the narrative only through the effects it leaves in the text. So we have to take a further step and try to measure how paradoxically this *something*, while lying at the heart of the protagonists’ reality, remains *simultaneously* outside its realm, beyond the range of discourse and meaning.

In *Beloved* and with *Beloved* regression is, geometrically speaking, never a *going back* to the past; it is a *coming back*. The paradoxical and therefore original aspect of the novel is to be grasped at this point where good sense is utterly reversed. Once the paradox at work perceived, the opaque conclusion of *Beloved* becomes intelligible: “forgetting in order to remember.” The novel’s moral thematic core can be apprehended in one major trait: there is no definite line delimitating good and evil insofar as one draws its meaning from the other. The aesthetic ideal of the novel lies in this ethics of cruelty that breaks the Manichaeic system of thought and the binary system of analysis.

The philosopher G. Deleuze, conscious of the limitations of structuralism, tried to expand the range of the discipline when he warily added to the well-known common points between “structuralists,” a major notion: “Authors referred to as ‘structuralists’ by recent practice may have no essential point in common other than this: sense, regarded not at all as appearance but as surface effect and position effect, and produced by the circulation of the empty square in the structural series” [Deleuze 71]. There exists hence an “empty square” that can never be reduced to/by the system binary, differential, relational in structure, inasmuch as it passes from one series to the other, producing sense in excess.²²

From the purely logical point of view, *Beloved* corresponds to the criterion of the empty square, and indicates its structuring scope. In this sense, *Beloved* cannot be isolated in one series (for instance, as has been so much insisted on, the mother-infant dyad), but in two series and more, whatever their seemingly contradictory relation might be. She cannot be reduced to one sense because she is a production of sense. A supplemental element, *Beloved* is the *more* at work in the narrative, and without which the *enough* could not be elucidated at all. The novel dramatizes successfully what we have to call the paradox of three plus one.

On the way back from the carnival, the structure formed in a triangular pattern where culture indicates the roles that each one has to hold. A distance is created between three subjects; yet the relation lacks in

²² “The two heterogeneous series converge toward a paradoxical element, which is their ‘differentiator.’ This is the principle of the emission of singularities. This element belongs to no series; or rather, it belongs to both series at once and never ceases to circulate throughout them. It has therefore the property of always being displaced in relation to itself, of ‘being absent from its own place,’ its own identity, its own resemblance, and its own equilibrium. It appears in one of the series as an excess, but only on the condition that it would appear at the same time in the other as a lack. But if it is in excess in the one, it is so only as an empty square” [*Ibid.* 50-51].

consistency. Only when the triangle is eventually connected to Beloved as the gyratory fourth element, will the roles be elucidated. In effect, Beloved displaces in the triangle the pre-established roles: sexuality sets off an interrelationship between Paul D, Beloved, and Sethe from which Denver is excluded. Then it is Sethe's turn to be excluded from the pattern when secrecy, knowledge tie Denver, Paul D, and Beloved into one triangle. The triangle is also exclusively feminine (Paul D is consequently out). On the other hand, Beloved is never excluded from the structure. She lies at the core of the structure as an unstable and yet productive element, that paradoxically creates meaning through disorder and excess.

Paul D, under the action of Beloved, betrays Sethe and then leaves her because he cannot face the nonsense he has been propelled into by Beloved. He has been incapacitated by this nonsense which is in reality *his*. Paul D is now unable to cope with the infanticide. How could he while, now, he could not handle his own past? Yet, that nonsense he passes through leads him to true love, that is, not loving oneself in the other, but loving life with and thanks to the other, and making her or him livelier. Love is a vital energy, a gift of life. This is what Sixo seems to have well understood:

Suddenly he remembers Sixo trying to describe what he felt about the Thirty-Mile Woman. "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind." [272]

Yet, the intensity of life draws on the recognition of death as part and parcel of existence. The sacred gives life its intensity in the sense it endows it with something that comes from the other side of the limit. Beloved is the form of this *something*. This is why she is beyond any moral and profane judgment. Her sacredness lies precisely in the acts of transgression she initiates.²³ In this case how can the symbolic other, "the unquestioned mother whose word was law" [242] resist the flow of what over-determines the symbolic system? It is no surprise then that Paul D, the substitute for the absent father whose presence changes the unbearable duality into a triangle of life, should surrender to the mysterious power of Beloved's call that projects him into a death-like ecstasy.

With Beloved it is not only the cultural law which is broken, but the very law of nature. This law gives in to the power of the sacred, the power of what lies beyond codes and limits. Therefore, bodies shift forms; the mature and the puerile exchange their real substance:

Then it seemed to Denver the thing was done: Beloved bending over
Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child, for other than those

²³ See G. Bataille who points out that transgression "opens the door into what lies beyond the limits usually observed, but it maintains these limits just the same. Transgression is complementary to the profane world, exceeding its limits but not destroying it. Human society is not only a world of work. Simultaneously—or successively—it is made up of the profane and the sacred, its two complementary forms. The profane world is the world of taboos. The sacred world depends on limited acts of transgression. It is the world of celebrations, sovereign rulers and God" [Bataille 67-68].

times when Beloved needed her, Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became. [250]

Beloved is the sacredness of the interdict. In this sense she is guilty of nothing. She *is* guilt. She is Sethe's love unto death, the community's passivity, Paul D's recent secret, and Denver's too, for she is the one who makes maternal hatred speed up to the surface. Beloved installs guilt at the core of 124, then at the core of the neighborhood. Being a mythical figure that voices the national responsibility for the Middle Passage, the whole country's guilt is enunciated through her presence. Mr. Bodwin, for instance, standing in front of her, "looking at her" [262], is "reflected in her eyes" as the man who haunts her monologue. Mr. Bodwin, in this crucial passage about expiation, is about to pay for the fathers' guilt, too.

At the origin there is a power in the child which is hampered by the laws of the pleasure principle then by the laws of the reality principle. This power, *Beloved* shows us, has to do with death and evil as a knowledge on the living. Both death and evil, once connected to love, are in the novel dazzlingly beautiful and pure, both vital elements lying at the core of life. And what is more, only when Beloved started to rule in 124, when she became supremely free that life became possible again, that Denver could grow into a separate self, and Sethe and the community of women expiate the ancient fault.

Beloved's beauty reaches its peak point when she appears as the incarnation of childish innocence and evil. At this precise moment, she *is* the sublime figure of Sethe's guilt (Beloved's body swollen by Sethe's guilty signifiers), Paul D's (now in her belly), and, retrospectively, the community's. Beloved's last appearance in the narrative connotes the fertile ambiguity of the sacred as the merging point between evil and good, both radiating the same light:

The singing women recognized Sethe at once and surprised themselves by their absence of fear when they saw what stood next to her. The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunderblack and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus, her smile was dazzling. [261]

Evil, hence, is strangely familiar and innocent; "it" does not frighten the women, nor is it the opposite of good. It is only an excess of beauty and love that breaks the natural and cultural orders. The community admits the heterogeneity of evil as long as it serves as a partial element. Ella, at one point, becomes the mouthpiece of Morrison when, speaking for her, the narrator specifies that "she didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion" [257]. Ella understands that what is at stake is the danger of the *sovereignty* of evil: "She could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy" [256].

The "extra," that Baby Suggs tried to regulate during the period preceding the infanticide [87], is semiotized at the crucial moment of expiation thanks to the *rhythmic* capacity of language: "In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew

what the sound sounded like" [259]. On the mythical plane, we are presented with a cosmic repetition thanks to which the members of the community regenerate themselves. The regeneration is accomplished by forcing out evil, that is, by *recognizing sin*.²⁴ With the women, it seemed to Sethe that "the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves" [261].

The Clearing is tied up to the memory of Baby Suggs. The orphaned community reinvents the meaning of the Clearing and along with it the symbolic figure of the Ancestor. Repeating the ancestral act, transmitting it effectively can only be accomplished through reinvention. This is exactly what Baby Suggs tried to preach: "She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine" [88], "for this is the prize" [89]. Baby Suggs became immediately an ancestral figure and that is why she was weakened. The issue is not to have the Ancestor incarnated, for that leads to the oppressive figure of the One:

Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone. [137]

True and effective transmission is, therefore, repetition as reinvention. Not unlike the members of the community who semiotize the excess of the "devil-child" by its symbolic recognition, Baby Suggs' voice, repeated, reinvented, commands that Denver "know" that there is "no guarantee in life," that the protective One "exists" only as an abstract and, hence, symbolically effective instance. Once absence and, hence, death recognized, life releases its possibilities:

Remembering those conversations and her grandmother's last final words, Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn't leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked—and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. "You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my."
But you said there was no defense.
"There ain't."
Then what do I do?
"Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on." [244]

The community dislodges the devilish and childish excess thanks to the repetition of the ancestral act embedded in a mythical cosmic frame. The second repetition is the repetition of the unconscious through transference. Individual catharsis becomes an effective healing process thanks to the presence of the cosmic and collective voice. Sethe is reborn as a subject. Her liberation, and that is the main difference with psychoanalysis, is realized in

²⁴ For the myth of regeneration through the "expulsion of 'evils' and confession of sins," see M. Eliade (1954) 74-75.

the presence of the community represented here by the women, who re-actualize the original myth and reshape the figure of the Ancestor. These elements are so powerful that language becomes purely metaphorical drawing on cosmic images to convey the truth:

The voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. [261]

Beloved, a unique achievement, never leaves out the historical element. Myth, with its cosmic and ancestral components, intersects with the unconscious as a logical structure along with the supernatural presence incarnated by *Beloved*, and with the historical knot. The unconscious knot can, thus, only be resolved mythically *and* historically:

It is when she lowers her eyes to look again at the loving faces before her that she sees him. Guiding the mare, slowing down, his black hat wide-brimmed enough to hide his face but not his purpose. He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing. She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand. [261-62]

The repressed element, it should be specified here, is not schoolteacher. Sethe has never forgotten schoolteacher nor the infanticide. What is repressed is the generic figure of the mother's rapist, the one who forces enslaved women into infanticide. The final message delivered by *Beloved* points to the collective dimension of the individual act. The narrator uses one of *Beloved*'s recurrent phrases to name who Bodwin *really* is at that precise moment, not who he *actually* is: "They make a hill. A hill of black people, falling. And above them all, rising from his place with a whip in his hand, the man without skin, looking. He is looking at her" [262].

The "wide-brimmed hat" is a cultural sign. It is part of the white man's cultural system. It is, too, a reminder of slavery labor. Mr. Bodwin disappears as such under two metonymies: he becomes a hat and a whip, and Sethe an ice-pick. The figure of the white man as One, as hallucinated here, placed tellingly above, is to be liquidated as a symptom, i.e., as a fraction of real that haunts the conscience. This poisoned bit of real is the incapacity of uttering the death of Sethe's own mother. The ice-pick Sethe is holding in the cathartic moment, becomes a liberating instrument, an object enhanced to the status of a signifier about to be liberated; the signifier of liberation through language: "I speak."

The advent of the signifier of speech *fixes* truth in language along with the death drive, places it in the system as a forgettable fact, i.e. as a fact detachable from the self. Sethe's was the dynamics of denial not forgetfulness, in which case a signifying absence is substituted for the Thing, a blank space that makes one remember unconsciously without being overwhelmed by the memory of the ultimate:

[Paul D] walks to the front door and opens it. It is stone quiet. In the place where once a shaft of sad red light had bathed him, locking him where he stood, is nothing. A bleak and minus nothing. More like absence, but an absence he had to get through with the same determination he had when he trusted Sethe and stepped through the pulsing light. [270]

The final passages focus on the loss of the other and the consequent metaphorical substitution that will enable the forgotten element to always come back, but in a different guise and be, therefore, symbolically effective.²⁵

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss. [275]

Beloved is the unforgotten truth that came back in order to be forgotten, to be lost by the excessively loving mother ("She left me [...]. She was my best thing" [272]) and enable other symbolic losses (" 'I don't know,' said Denver. 'I think I've lost my mother, Paul D' " [266]). Beloved's paradoxical logic is to make one forget in order to remember, to make one lose in order to find again. Therefore, Denver discovers her self, that is, the sense of her existence, when she loses her mother. Losing the mother means forgetting her as *the* mother, and it is Beloved who started to mark the absolute mother's body with the sign of fallibility, that is, humanness. Only when Denver started to perceive this mark, now a sign, that she could understand finally, forget the constructed fantasy about the all-embracing mother [251].

Beloved is a novel that challenges preconceived ideas about "reality." Reality is in fact deconstructed and other levels of reality are revealed. *Beloved* is not a fantastic novel; it is realistically *deep*, spiritual in theme and thought, and modernly *flat* in structure. The sacred and its continuities is treated as a surface phenomenon, as a discontinuous form that connotes nonetheless the continuity of the absolute. The novel calls our attention to the necessary reinterpretation of our own modern reality in the light of the symbolic exchange. It highlights the necessary recognition of the symbolic place of the absent, the heterogeneous, the negative. It is thanks to Beloved, who stands for *flattened depth*, that the characters now evolve in life. It is the foreign element that enriches the structure and makes it hold. Beloved is the surface that makes visible the fertile role of evil and violence as structuring vital and sacred energies.

The novel presents us with an initial structural dysfunction: the belief that one's own story belongs to oneself. At this point, the meaning of the

²⁵ Regarding the scrutiny of Nazism and the Holocaust, J. Baudrillard notes that paradoxically "the more carefully we study details with a view to identifying causes, the greater is the tendency for them to cease to exist, and to cease to *have existed*, confusion over the identity of things is thus a function of our very attempts to substantiate them, to fix them in memory. This indifference of memory, this indifference to history, is proportional to our efforts to achieve historical objectivity" [Baudrillard, 1993, 91-92].

story is reflexive and its scope restricted to the sphere of the Ego. Neither Paul D nor Sethe recognize in the beginning the necessity of inscribing their stories into the symbolic, historical chain that binds people's stories into one and yet multi-chaptered story. Whatever the violence Sethe has been victim of, the suffering and violently loving mother is forced into tying in her story with the other women's stories and with Paul D's, too. Freed from the grip of the suffering and proud self, projected into the wider realm of collective identity, Sethe's violent act of killing appears, retroactively, as a founding act, not only at the individual level (catharsis in the psychoanalytical sense), but especially at the collective level. The *meaning* of the act becomes evident then: not the literal murder of a baby by the angry, humiliated and loving mother, but the very sacrifice of the mother's feeling of omnipotence.

Beloved hyphenates Africa and America, the past and the present. The Western heritage is read by the persistent African cultural energy. Venus, love and beauty incarnate in the Western canon, thus reinterpreted as the heterogeneity of evil, is introduced at the core of these ideals. The tragic petrification of the mother's dead back, and the substitutive father's stoned heart (Paul D), or petrified gaze (Halle), melts, through the action of *historical and metaphysical* remembering, into a lively rhythm that creates a space for hope and reconciliation. The *stone* becomes a *tone* for the beloved:

Stone blind; stone blind.

Sweet Home gal make you lose your mind. (263)

From *Bluestone Road* to a *blues tone ode*. For the living. And the Dead.

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