



## Toni Morrison: Beloved

Paul Carmignani

### ► To cite this version:

Paul Carmignani. Toni Morrison: Beloved. Master. Université de Perpignan-Via Domitia, France. 1993, pp.21. hal-03105686

**HAL Id: hal-03105686**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03105686>**

Submitted on 11 Jan 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Copyright

## TONI MORRISON

### *BELOVED*

By way of introduction to the study of *Beloved*, I'd like to say a few words about the author, the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of African American literature; for further information concerning the author's politics, philosophy, aesthetics or poetics, I refer you to the article "Toni Morrison in dialogue" published in *Profils Américains* N°2 (1992). Toni Morrison is a pen name; the author's real name is Chloe Anthony Wofford but she married a Jamaican architect, had two sons, got a divorce in 1964 and kept the family name of her former husband when she started her career as a writer in the 70s.

She was born in 1931 in Lorain (Ohio), an industrial town not far from Cleveland. She grew there during the aftermath of the 1929 crisis: her father was a workman and her mother a militant fighting for the rights of the underdog. Toni Morrison was educated first at Howard, a black university, from 1949 to 1953 then at Cornell where she wrote a Ph. D. on "The theme of suicide in W. Faulkner and V. Woolf." As far as literary influences are concerned, I'd like to quote H. Gates's opinion *viz.*:

"While she is clearly influenced by the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Márquez and his Latin American contemporaries, Morrison and Márquez meet independently at a common ancestor, William Faulkner. Grounded in Faulkner, and informed by James Baldwin's densely lyrical experiments with a fictional prose rooted in the religious vernacular (the spirituals and gospel music, King Jamaican biblical cadences and allusions, the spoken Black prophetic voice) as well as jazz, blues, and the whole range of Black secular vernacular speech rituals and discourses, Morrison has evolved a register of representation that we might think of as magical naturalism." (Gates, CP, IX).

I'll revert to the notion of magical naturalism later in the course.

While at university, she was a voracious reader of Tolstoy, Dickens, Jane Austen and Emily Dickinson. Her professional life combines writing and teaching: she was a teacher in a black school from 1957 to 1958 then quit to work for Random House Publishing Company where she was in charge of "black literature" (she recommended the publication of the autobiographies of Muhammad Ali and Angela Davis); at university, she lectured on black writers. She currently holds the Schweitzer Chair at the State University of New York. With Alice Walker, she is the most popular black novelist in Europe. She published her first work *The Bluest Eye* in 1970; *Sula* came out four years later. Both were "books she had wanted to read and no one had written them yet". *The Song of Solomon*, considered to be her best novel, was a big hit in 1977 and was followed by *Tar Baby* in 1981. *Beloved* was awarded the Pulitzer prize in 1987: she's become a classic, as witness her being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

The first four novels are set in contemporary small Midwestern communities; only in *Beloved* did she go back to slavery times. However even in her earlier fiction, she had started to exple the "useful past" in an effort to "clarify the role that had become obscured and to recognize and rescue those qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity" that might nurture and uphold the members of her community. Born in a family where the "dream book" (a book interpreting the meaning of dreams) was in regular use and "brought up on ghost stories" Morrison always insisted on the decisive and necessary role of folk superstitions, traditions, beliefs and magic. Women were quite instrumental in the emergence of her literary talents and themes: "my life seems to be dominated by information about black women. They were the culture bearers, and they told us [children] what to

do." (*Crit. Persp.* 398). On the question of the influence of women, I'd like to quote what she goes on to state in the interview where I culled this information:

"If it is generally true that contemporary black women writers consistently look back to their mothers and grandmothers for the substance and authority in their voices, I suspect that this is an important and distinguishing element of black women's approach to their art. In contrast, many white women writers say that they are inventing the authority for their own voices pretty much from scratch in an effort to break the silence of Shakespeare's sisters. Black women writers--having the example of authoritative mothers, aunts, grandmothers, great-grand-mothers--have something special to contribute to the world. They have a distinctive and powerful heritage. It is not white, and it not male." (*Crit. Perspectives*, 399).

Her novels relate tales of individual and familial tragedies, but upheld traditions and communal values while providing occasion for the individual to transcend and defy group restrictions. In most of her novels, Morrison develops stories of personal fragmentation and dislocation set in black communities which have lost their orientation and cohesion and are threatened by stagnation or destruction:

"Her themes are often those expected of naturalist fiction – the burdens of history, the determining social effects of race, gender, or class – but they are also the great themes of lyrical modernism: love, death, betrayal, and the burden of the individual's responsibility for her or his own fate" (H. L. Gates).

T. Morrison was educated and then embarked upon a career as a fiction-writer at a time that witnessed the coming of age of the Blackamerican. It was a period of unrest, agitation and intellectual effervescence. The ideologists of the Black cultural nationalism movement claimed that the real function of art was to make revolution using its own medium, that art must be from the people and be returned to the people, that the Black artist could find no better subject than Black people, etc. Even if, Morrison seems to be opposed to "contemporary developments in Black ideology such as African roots, soul or slogans like Black is beautiful" (*Profils*, 23), she is too aware of what is at stake in the situation and production of a Black novelist to be dismissed as a non-political writer. I, for one, have doubts about the possibility of considering any form of Black art in the States as something other than "*art engagé*", a contention that Morrison herself bore out when she stated that: "All good art has always been political" (26) and that artists "clarify our past, make liveable our present and are certain to shape our future" (27). Though Morrison never subscribed to any specific ideology, she never excluded any of the political theories that were liable to contribute to a better understanding of the situation of her people and she at least complied with the second political tenet mentioned above viz. the assertion that her writing fulfills a social function since she defined it in terms of "village literature...peasant literature for my people":

"I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. Peasant literature for my people... I think long and carefully about what my novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured . they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; they ought to give nourishment." (*CP*, 370).

No wonder Morrison has come to be seen as a mouthpiece for the Black community, a twentieth-century female griot.

*The Bluest Eye*, her first novel was composed when Black Power was on the wane and the following books show a widening divergence of views between the author and black extremists. If Morrison aims to bolster black pride and confidence and to affirm the existence of a black identity, she apparently refuses to condone any absolute indictment of "Whitey" or violent confrontation between the two races. Such assertion and defence of a black identity entails, in her opinion, unearthing the archives, the repressed chapter of black history, some sort of archeology bringing to light the secret strata of her own history and her people's. Her work can be seen as a response to attempts

by the dominant group to deny or belittle Black consciousness and an incentive for black people not to forget their values, their past, their contribution to American culture at large and above all their distinctiveness. She tries to do justice to the Black heritage in Afro-American culture and to encourage a double solidarity: a horizontal solidarity (in space) and a solidarity in time. By exploring the inner depths of "rememory", T. Morrison endeavours to reconstitute the history of all those who were "disremembered and unaccounted for" hence her concern for a mode of writing capable of conveying "the language of the unheard" and "le grain de la voix" of Black people, their original speech-rhythms and images:

"I wanted to restore the language that Black people spoke to its original power. [...] I like to dust off these clichés, dust off the language, make them mean whatever they may have meant originally." (CP, 371)

Her revival of the "old verities", her rediscovery of the spiritual resources of black folk traditions and myth motivates her study of the present and reveal a sense of time both "cyclical and expansive". However Morrison's work is not limited to an exploration of the condition of the Negro "it is always symbolic of the shared human condition, both engaging with and transcending lines of gender, race, and class." (Gates, CP, XI).

Another important feature of her art is its reliance on symbolic patterns and its use of sounds, color, shapes and volumes in highly complex metaphorical networks. Her texts remain innovative aesthetic experiments and make her one of the most creative novelists of our time.

Last characteristic: "the participatory nature of her novels" (31). *Beloved* is a perfect illustration of what R. Barthes calls, in contrast with *readable* works (*i.e.* texts restricted to a single, harmonious and authoritative reading, objects for passive consumption), *writable* texts where the conventional antithesis between the genders is transgressed, where statements are of indeterminate origin and no single discourse is privileged. The *readable text* is merchandise to be consumed, while the *writable text* calls for the involvement and participation of the reader in the process of its production and the emergence of its plurality of meanings. Her narratives which offer a curious blend of "*écriture à haute voix*" (R. Barthes) – in support of my reference to "*écriture à haute voix*," I'd like to quote the author who claimed that she strove to "make aural literature--A-U-R-A-L... It has to read in silence and that's just one phase of the work but it also has to sound...right' (CP. 418) – and of highly sophisticated poetic forms, must have "holes and spaces so the reader can come into it" (31), so the reader can in a way identify with what he reads and be confronted with a fundamental existential choice *viz.* that "Being black now is something that you have to choose to be. Choose it no matter what your skin color" (24).

## THE NATURE OF *BELOVED*

I propose to give you the necessary information for a thorough discussion of such essential and complex questions as: is *Beloved* a novel ? a romance ? a realistic romance ? a novel with a purpose ? a magic-realistic novel ? a gothic novel ? – in short, what is the nature of *Beloved* ?

To give you just an instance of the complexity of the subject, let me point out that part of the novel also raises the much-vexed question of the relationship between music and literature. All art, according to Walter Pater, aspires to the condition of music and nowhere is this contention truer than in the African-American tradition. Morrison, like Langston Hughes for example, has attempted to use music – from the blues to jazz – as the structuring principle for her writing so that one may actually wonder if her work belongs to literature or "*Orature*" (a portmanteau word combining "oral" and "literature")

*Beloved* is also to be situated in the wider context and tradition of "slave narratives" (the two most popular classics were Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* [1845] and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* [1861]). Most of those slave narratives adhere to the same conventions *e.g.* they begin with the three words "I was born" and proceed to describe the journey from slavery to freedom and woman/manhood. H. Jacobs also describes the sexual exploitation that challenged the womanhood of slave women and tells the story of their resistance to that exploitation. *Beloved* contains some of these characteristics with several signifying differences; cf. what M. S. Mobley writes on the subject:

While the classic slave narrative draws on memory as though it is a monologic, mechanical conduit for facts and incidents, Morrison's text foregrounds the dialogic characteristics of memory along with its imaginative capacity to construct and reconstruct the significance of the past. Thus, while the slave narrative characteristically moves in a chronological, linear narrative fashion, *Beloved* meanders through time, sometimes circling back, other times moving vertically, spirally out of time and down in space. Indeed, Morrison's text challenges the Western notion of linear time that informs American history and the slave narrative. It engages the reader not just with the physical, material consequences of slavery, but with the psychological consequences as well. Through the trope of memory, Morrison moves into the psychic consequences of slavery for women, who, by their very existence, were both the means and source of production. In the words of the text, the slave woman was "property that reproduced itself without cost." Moreover, by exploring this dimension of slavery, Morrison produces a text that is at once very different from and similar to its literary antecedent with its intervention in the cultural, political and social order of black people, in general, and of black women, in particular. What the reader encounters in this text is Morrison as both writer and reader, for inscribed in her writing of the novel is her own "reading"--a revisionary rereading--of the slave's narrative plot of the journey, from bondage to freedom. [...] Unlike the slave narratives which sought to be all-inclusive eye-witness accounts of the material conditions of slavery, Morrison's novel exposes the unsaid of the narratives, the psychic subtexts that lie within and beneath the historical facts.

So much for the slave narrative genre. Now to return to my starting point, let me remind you that it is customary to divide American fiction into two categories: the novel and the romance. The distinction dates back to Hawthorne's preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) in which he defined romance in terms of the "latitude both as to fashion and material" which it affords the author. Since then the definition of romance has become much more elaborate; in his now classical study *The American Novel and its Tradition*, R. Chase states that *romance*:

"signifies besides the more obvious qualities of the picturesque and the heroic, an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development and continuity; a tendency towards melodrama and idyl; a more or less formal abstractness and on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness..." (Introduction).

The plot of the "prose romance emphasizes adventure, and is often cast in the form of the quest for an ideal, or the pursuit of an enemy; and the non-realistic and occasionally melodramatic

events are sometimes claimed to project in symbolic form the primal desires, hopes, and terror in the depths of the human mind, and to be therefore analogous to the materials of dream, myth, ritual and folklore" (M. H. Abrams, 112).

Conversely, the *novel* is characterized:

"as the fictional attempt to give the effect of realism, by representing complex characters with mixed motives who are rooted in a social class, operate in a highly developed structure, interact with many other characters, and undergo plausible and everyday modes of experience." (*Ibid.*)

The distinction between the two fictional modes seems eventually to lie in their respective attitude toward actuality as R. Chase makes perfectly clear:

"the main difference between the novel and the romance is in the way in which they view reality [...] Being less committed to the immediate rendition of reality than the novel, the romance will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical and symbolistic forms" (12-13).

The last quotation brings up the much-vexed question of *realism*. First of all, avoid all confusion between reality and realism; realism is used to designate a way of representing life in literature: the realist sets out to write a fiction which will give the illusion that it reflects life as it seems to the common reader; take care not to take literature – as inexperienced readers do – as transcript rather than interpretation of life. A thorough-going realism involves not only a selection of subject matter (emphasis on the everyday aspects of existence, preference for the commonplace, the average etc...), but more importantly, a special literary manner as well: the subject is represented or rendered in such a way as to give the reader the illusion of actual experience. However one should not let oneself be taken in by such a realistic illusion; it is just an artifact, an effect achieved through literary means: even the very "*slice of life*" of the naturalist is constructed according to artistic conventions. It must be borne in mind that the fundamental distinction is not between reality and illusion but between differing conceptions of reality, between different modes of illusion. It is always a question of degree, not of nature. How does the realist go about creating the illusion of actual life or, to put it differently, what are the defining characteristics of realistic discourse ? This is a moot question but the following points are sure to bulk large in any typology of realism as literary genre:

A) the strategy of *mimesis* (means "imitation" in Greek): the literary is viewed as an imitation of the world and human life, and the primary criterion applied to a mimetic work is that of the truth of its representation to the objects it describes = the novel is mere imitation of extra-literary reality. According to E. Auerbach whose study *Mimesis* (1946) has become a classic of modern literary criticism, a realistic text is characterized by the fact that it is a) serious, b) that it merges various stylistic registers, c) that it does not rule out the possibility of describing any social class or milieu whatever, d) that it makes significant use of "*hypotaxis*" (syntactical subordination of clauses by the use of connectives), e) that it integrates the evolution of the characters within the larger framework of history. Mimetic intention relies on *verisimilitude* as a decoy to give the reader the illusion of actuality (literature is thus seen as the very mirror held up to real life);

B) emphasis on *locale/topography* (importance of places, place-names) that anchors fiction in the palpable physical world;

C) fictional time is underpinned by *historical time*. Narrated time *i.e.* the chronology of the events related in the text is systematically geared to the chronology of the period in which those events take place;

D) *anthropomorphism* of the characters: the realistic novelist deals with ordinary, average characters the reader can easily and really identify with. Romantics and heroics are both excluded from the province of realism;

E) *motivation*: it is necessary for the realistic narrator not to alienate the sympathy or adhesion of his readers and he does so by referring – to lend plausibility and credibility to the events he describes – to a set of beliefs, assumptions, opinions, psychological explanations etc. that is common to both author and reader. This is what R. Barthes calls "*Doxa*" = some sort of ideological and

rhetorical code that is shared by the members of the same cultural community. The realistic novelist tries to naturalize fiction;

F) *transparency*: realistic fiction tends to eliminate all forms of ambiguity (the fantastic, the enigmatic are quite outside its realm), to reduce polysemy and to abolish all distinction between seeming and being.

To conclude this tentative definition of "realism", I'll quote what a French specialist stated in his professoral dissertation:

Le réalisme qui repose donc sur une idéologie de la représentation littéraire, serait en dernière analyse, un ensemble de réponses techniques à des contraintes narratives. Sommé d'être à la fois vraisemblable et véridique, le récit fictif doit tout expliquer : « l'historien des mœurs doit rendre tout probable, même le vrai », écrivait Balzac dans *Les Paysans* ; les procédés du discours réaliste ont donc la double fonction d'assurer la véracité de l'énoncé, c'est-à-dire sa conformité au réel qu'il désigne, et leur propre vraisemblance, c'est-à-dire leur « naturalisation ». Le roman réaliste est donc, à la limite, le type même du récit « motivé », ce qui implique l'omniscience du narrateur, « l'effet de réel » étudié par R. Barthes venant à propos combler l'absence de motivation (A. Denjean, 151).

Such an approach rightly points up the necessity of never losing sight of the "*literariness of literature*" i.e. the fact that it is a verbal construction. In a successful work of art, the materials are completely assimilated into the "form"; what was the world has become language: a case in point being the status of the a character in a novel, who differs from a historical figure or figure in real life in that it is made only of the sentences describing him or put into his mouth by the author. Art is indebted to the natural world for its materials but its adds to nature new arrangements which reveal significances; there is constant interplay between the actual inserted in an imaginary context and the imaginary inserted in an actual context. Consequently, we must disabuse our minds of another fallacy: the opposite of *fiction* is not *truth* but *fact* or time and space existence.

After such a detour, but it was unavoidable and necessary, we can now return to the two chief modes of narrative fiction that obtain in American literature: the *romance* and the *novel*. R. Chase maintains that romance is a kind of border fiction:

"the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle. Romance does not plant itself, like the novel, solidly in the midst of the actual. Nor when it is memorable, does it escape into the purely imaginary." (19).

Secondly, the best American novelists have found uses for romance far beyond the escapism, fantasy and sentimentality often associated with it; the evolution of American literature manifests *a gradual assimilation of romance into the substance of the novel* which points to "the power of romance to express dark and complex truths unavailable to realism" (IX). Consequently, "the history of the American novel is not only the history of the rise of realism but also of the repeated rediscovery of the uses of romance..." (XII).

Now what about the novel with a purpose ("*le roman à thèse*") et "*la littérature engagée*"? As its name suggests, this category raises the problem of involvement or rather commitment in literature: its function is to put forward, vindicate or illustrate a thesis, to heighten the reader's political or social or again historical consciousness and eventually to invite him to adopt a position of struggle vis-à-vis something which is marked in the text as non-fictional, as existing outside discourse, in the world. R. Wright for instance claimed that novels are "*weapons*". So the function of this type of fiction is not just to entertain the reader but also to instruct him, to make him conscious of certain aspects of the world or society he seemed to be previously unaware of. As Chinua Achebe (a good example of "*l'écrivain engagé*" and an intellectual whose situation in contemporary Africa is close to that of a black writer in America) stated in his essay "The Burden of the Negro writer":

"the writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of reeducation and regeneration that must be done" and also "my novels are designed to be educative at the same time as enlightening and amusing and all the other things literature is supposed to be".

According to Achebe, "any good novel should have a message, should have a purpose" and it so happens that the message conveyed by his fiction is very similar to Morrison's *viz.* that to understand the present and face or shape a future, it is necessary to know and explain the past. As A. Césaire put it: « *the shortcut to the future is via the past* »; « the past needs to be recreated not only for the enlightenment of our detractors but even more for our own education ». Achebe goes on to say that "the worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost... After all the novelist's duty is not to beat this morning's headline in topicality, it is to explore in depth the human condition", a programme that Morrison carries out to the bitter end. Another authority worth quoting: R. Ellison who stated: "I think the function of literature, all literature that is worthy of the name, is to remind us of our common humanity and the cost of that humanity."

As far as Morrison is concerned, the objective of her literary efforts is the "reclamation of the history of black people":

The reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance because while you can't really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it. There's a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours. It's a serious responsibility and one single human being can only do a very very tiny part of that, but it seems to me to be both secular and non-secular work for a writer (C.P. 413).

This is a perfectly clear political purpose.

I come now to the last two categories referred to in my introduction: *magic realism* and *gothicism* (there is an obvious link between Gothic romance and magic realism; the former paved the way for the emergence of the latter). Originally, the epithet "gothic" was applied to a type of fiction set in a medieval setting and making plentiful use of ghosts, mysterious disappearances and other sensational or supernatural occurrences. By exploiting mystery, cruelty and a variety of horrors, gothic romance eventually opened to fiction the realm of the irrational and of the perverse impulses and the nightmarish terrors that lie beneath the orderly surface of the civilized mind. The term "Gothic" has also been extended to denote a type of fiction which develops a brooding atmosphere of gloom or terror, represents events which are uncanny, or macabre, or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states (after M. H. Abrams). To illustrate the gothic dimension of *Beloved*, here is what E. Béranger states in "*Amour et mémoire in Beloved*":

« Toni Morrison a choisi d'écrire cette histoire sur le mode gothique sans toutefois renoncer à une écriture réaliste. On sait que le gothique a servi depuis le XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle à représenter les zones sombres de la psyché à la frontière de la conscience. [...] En utilisant la convention gothique du fantôme qui déplace les meubles, colore la lumière en rouge sang, fait sursauter Hereboy et fait horreur à Paul D., pour représenter les tourments de Sethe et de Denver, l'auteur rend d'autant mieux compte de tout ce que représente la petite révoltée, l'abandonnée violemment coupée de la mère en raison d'une loi inhumaine. La revenante, comme les mauvais souvenirs, est d'autant plus présente qu'elle est absente, mais dès qu'elle revient les gardiens de la vie la chassent. Elle force le passage, messagère de la mort. Le gothique permet de rendre compte de cette dynamique des forces de vie et de mort dans la psyché. Le fantôme de l'enfant morte est, au plus secret des acteurs de cette histoire, cet autre de l'ombre dont on ne cesse de rejeter la mémoire, dont on voudrait se détacher pour pouvoir enfin restaurer son intégrité, mais qui n'est jamais loin et revient toujours, agressive, violente par désespoir de ne pouvoir se faire accepter. »



The term "*magic realism*" is repeatedly associated to Morrison's work and requires explaining. First of all it originated in South American literature where such writers as Alejo Carpentier or Borgès gave it wide currency. The notion is to be distinguished from the fantastic (belonging to the realm of fancy, imaginary, irrational) and from plausible realism (« *le réalisme vraisemblable croyable, conforme à la raison et aux normes de la toute-puissante mimésis* »); it is an oxymoronic formula combining in poetic synthesis mutually exclusive terms: if verisimilitude characterizes realism and the supernatural the fantastic then the strange and the marvellous underlie magic realism. In South America the notion assumes an archaic and rural connotation and abolishes any distinction between the visible and the invisible worlds, the living and the dead, reality and the language conveying it. In the case of T. Morrison, magic realism assumes the form of a dialogue between black mythology or folklore and realism: « *Elle fait cristalliser des images onoriques autour de ses notations réalistes* » (M. Chénétier). But the purpose of magic realism is not escapism or evasion of the harsh realities of life: it is to defamiliarize the reader before taking him back to reality with a new perspective, a heightened perception of its potential and significance. As M. Chénétier puts it « *ses fictions sont autant de sauts éloignant du réel pour mieux y ramener* ».

Now to revert to my inaugural question: how does *Beloved* fit into these categories ?

My contention is that it fits none perfectly but straddles several categories and partakes of various genres. It is a romance novel in that it is grounded in actuality, in the contradictions of American experience and is interspersed with connotators of mimesis (references to places, names, dates, facts etc) and yet all these elements are transmuted into something that goes beyond realism, they are transfigured into myth, symbolism, magic: *Morrison's work achieves a successful merging of the actual and the poetic/magic: it is realism beyond realism*. If "the novel is a form which attempts to deal with the contradictions of life and ambivalence and ambiguities of values" then it is quite natural for a writer to experiment with forms and techniques generally unused by the writer of hard-fact realism. Hence the categorization of Morrison's works as "*fantastic earthy realism*" because they are deeply rooted in history and mythology, and resonate with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror.

Now, in fairness to the author, it must be pointed out that Morrison sometimes objects to having her work described as magic realism and claims that: "I write what I suppose could be called the tragic mode, in which there is some catharsis and revelation. There's a whole lot of space in between, but my inclination is in the tragic direction" (C.P. 374). Here is for instance what she said against the application to her work of the notion of magic realism:

I was once under the impression that that label "magical realism" was another one of those words that covered up what was going on. I don't know when it began to be used but my first awareness of it was when certain kinds of novels were being described that had been written by Latin American men. It was a way of not talking about the politics. It was a way of not talking about what was in the books.

[...] My own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people that I knew. In addition to the very shrewd, down-to-earth, efficient way in which they did things and survived things, there was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities. It formed a kind of cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting, and so it seemed impossible for me to write about black people and eliminate that simply because it was "unbelievable". (CP, 414).

However, in another interview, Morrison described what she tried to capture in her fiction in terms that came very close to a definition of "magic realism":

I also want to capture the vast imagination of black people. That is, I want my books to reflect the imaginative combination of the real world, the very practical, shrewd, day to day functioning that black people must do, while at the same time they encompass some great supernatural element. We know that it does not bother them one bit to do something practical and have visions at the same time. So all the parts of living are on an equal footing. Birds talk and butterflies cry, and it is not

surprising or upsetting to them. These things make the world larger for them. Some young people don't want to acknowledge this as a way of life (CP 409).

After examining such contradictory evidence, the obvious conclusion is – in the words of D. H. Lawrence – "*never trust the artist, trust the tale!*".

If Morrison, willy or nilly, resorts to magic realism by weaving the threads of the outlandish, the extraordinary, into the normal fabric of her characters' worlds it also because the reality the Negro was – or still is – confronted with is in itself ambiguous, 'out of focus' and 'out of joint' so that magic realism isn't just a question of narrative strategy or fictional technique, it is – as it were – 'in-built' in the outlook or vision of the Negro. As another famous Black novelist stated: the artist is a man who must be capable of "descending into the deeper level of his consciousness," thus opening himself to an "inner world where reason and madness mingle with hope and memory and endlessly give birth to nightmare and to dream".

Linked to this aspect of the novel is the use of Afro-American folklore: jokes, blues, sermons, etc. in order to help people find themselves and to remember who they are: "Morrison's purpose is not to convince white readers of the slave's humanity, but to address black readers by inviting us to return to the very part of our past that many have repressed, forgotten or ignored." (CP. 363).

If Morrison's novel bears out R. Chase's contention that "the American novel has been stirred [...] by the aesthetic possibilities of radical forms of alienation, contradiction and disorder," it also demonstrates that "Reconciliation after all is the business of art" (I. Hassan, *Radical Innocence*, 69). Its heroine tries to "mediate between self and world in that imaginary dialectic form we have agreed to identify as the novel" (Hassan, 4); Morrison's novel is thus an attempt to heal the split in American experience. Like poetry, it strives "to make Black people citizens by anticipation in the world they crave."

## LITTÉRATURE ET SOCIÉTÉ

La littérature des années 1945-1990 a été profondément marquée par les horreurs de la guerre et de l'Holocauste et s'est développée en grande partie sous la menace de la fin possible de l'humanité et de la civilisation (« syndrome de *Thanatos* »). La *Pax Americana* et la période de prospérité qui suivirent la fin de la 2<sup>e</sup> guerre mondiale n'ont été en fait qu'une période d'illusion collective dont l'optimisme a été miné par l'existence de la guerre froide et la crainte paranoïaque d'un complot international et de la subversion intérieure (McCarthyisme). La conscience de cette menace a dans un premier temps amené les Américains à resserrer les rangs et induit une sorte de consensus national autour des valeurs de l'*American Way of Life* et de la société américaine. Mais, comme toujours, une réaction s'ensuivit : les rebelles de la *Beat Generation*, les laissés-pour-compte du capitalisme américain sont venus rappeler aux Babbitt de l'Amérique majoritaire que le Rêve avait aussi un revers peu reluisant et qu'il existait une autre Amérique, peu conforme aux stéréotypes entourant celle que les Américains appellent parfois avec trop de complaisance *God's Own Country*.

Les années soixante virent s'instaurer une certaine crise de confiance dans le système et débiter les luttes pour les droits civiques, l'égalité, la liberté sexuelle et ensuite le retrait des troupes américaines du Vietnam. On peut voir dans cette conquête d'une nouvelle égalité par les minoritaires de tous ordres (les femmes, les Noirs, les Hispaniques, les Indiens...) la dominante de ces années de contestation, qui furent aussi marquées par l'émergence des *contre-cultures*.

La fiction des années 60 a naturellement enregistré cette brusque accélération de l'histoire et mis l'accent sur l'aspect inhumanisant de la société moderne, la violence, le chaos, l'entropie, etc., bref, tout le paradigme du conflit entre l'individu et la société. Au fond, on assista alors à une sorte de retour du refoulé : ce qui était invisible (la minorité noire) devint visible (cf. R. Ellison, *Invisible Man*), ce qui était tapi "*underground*" (blessures, frustrations) remonta à la surface et « L'afemme : zone de silence » (Luce Irigaray) donna de la voix. La littérature des années 70 témoignera également de cette résurgence. L'exploration de l'entre-deux – cette zone indécise entre l'imaginaire et le réel, la folie et la raison, l'espoir et la désespérance, la mémoire et l'oubli – deviendra son terrain d'élection. Le langage lui-même n'échappera pas à cette remise en cause généralisée des fondements, des moyens et de fins de la société, du pouvoir politique, du savoir et de la création artistique (prémices du « postmodernisme » dont nous reparlerons). Une précision sur le féminisme, donnée incontournable de la période que nous passons en revue : il faut se garder de transposer les schémas du féminisme blanc sur celui des femmes de la minorité noire parce que :

« Leur culture a été marquée par le matriarcat de la plantation où le père souvent écarté de l'éducation des ses enfants laissait la place à une cellule familiale où régnait la grand-mère. La culture de la pauvreté [...] a paradoxalement amplifié cet aspect des relations entre hommes et femmes. L'absence du père et l'aliénation dont souffre l'homme noir pris dans un réseau inextricable entre chômage et assistance ont aussi contribué à féminiser une culture du ghetto où l'univers relationnel des enfants gravite également autour de la délinquance et de la drogue » (*Histoire de la culture américaine*, 311).

À ce sujet – et bien que la question soit très complexe –, j'aimerais citer l'opinion de Marianne Hirsch qui écrit dans "Maternal narratives" (*Crit. Perspectives*, 261) :

In 1976, Adrienne Rich wrote that the "cathexis<sup>1</sup> between mother and daughter--essential, distorted, misused--is the great unwritten story." Since that time, feminist writing and scholarship has explored motherhood and mother-daughter relationships from a variety of personal and disciplinary perspectives. Yet nearly all of those perspectives have belonged to daughters. In 1987, the "great unwritten story" remains the story of the mother herself, told in her own voice. Feminist writing and scholarship, continuing in large part to adopt a daughterly perspective, could be said to collude with patri-

---

1. Twofold meaning: 1. the investment of emotional significance in an activity, object or idea. 2. The charge of psychic energy so invested.

arch in placing the mother into the position of object and thereby keeping mothering outside of representation and maternal discourse a theoretical impossibility.

Morrison comble en partie cette lacune, car elle est représentative de cette "*generation of female/feminist writing just in the process of defining itself in relation to a maternal, largely oral past*" (261) et M. Hirsch ajoute que :

Much more than white women writers, they find it necessary, however, "to think back through their mothers" in order to assume [...] the "authority of authorship" and to define themselves identifiably in their own voices as subjects. Their public celebration of maternal presence and influence and their portrayals of strong and powerful mothers, on the one hand, combined with the relative absence of fathers, on the other, makes this uniquely female tradition a particularly interesting one in which to explore issues of maternal presence and absence, speech and silence. If maternal discourse can emerge in one particular feminist tradition, it may not be surprising that it should be one that is in itself marginal... » (*Ibid.*).

Autre dominante de cette période : la question fondamentale de *l'identité* et de *l'aliénation*. Rappelons d'ailleurs à ce propos que, comme l'écrit P. Dommergues : « *le problème de l'identité n'est pas seulement un problème noir ; c'est le grand problème de l'Amérique* » ("*The nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are. It is still a young society and this is an integral part of its development*"). Mais il est particulièrement aigu pour les Noirs et il convient de rappeler quelques évidences premières d'une importance capitale quand il s'agit d'étudier l'œuvre d'un écrivain comme T. Morrison.

Comme l'écrit P. Dommergues :

« Être noir dans l'Amérique d'hier et d'aujourd'hui [...] est une expérience fondamentalement différente de celle qui consiste à être juif, catholique ou radical... Le Juif, le catholique, l'Irlandais – l'homme blanc – quelle que soit son appartenance ethnique ou religieuse se voit offrir, à court ou moyen terme, l'occasion de pénétrer dans le courant principal de la vie américaine » (vol. I, 88)

Ce n'est pas le cas pour les Noirs. Qu'est-ce qu'un Noir aux États-Unis ? Un homme de couleur ("*a man bedecked by a black skin*") ? Non, car la négritude ne s'ajoute pas au concept d'humanité mais le met radicalement en question et même le nie ou disons plutôt l'a longtemps nié, à preuve ce qu'en disait William E. B. Dubois, philosophe et romancier noir contemporain de R. Ellison : "*somewhere between men and cattle - God created a tertium quid<sup>2</sup> and called it a Negro*". L'état fondamental de non-humanité qui a caractérisé le sort de l'esclave se prolonge actuellement par une double aliénation culturelle et économique. Le Noir a paradoxalement souffert d'un excès de fausses identités imposées par l'homme blanc à chaque époque de l'histoire : il y a eu d'abord le stéréotype de *Sambo* (*Zambo*, mot d'origine espagnole signifiant « aux jambes torses », désigna un personnage de comédie, 1795), le Noir bon enfant, simple d'esprit et placé sous la protection de l'homme blanc (Le stéréotype figure dans le roman à la page 313 : fonction symbolique, même les Bodwin, pour tant partisans de l'abolition, n'ont pas su résister au "charme" de ce personnage caricatural et l'on peut voir dans cette présence une sorte de menace latente : même les brave gens peuvent créer des situations susceptibles de heurter la sensibilité des Noirs et puis c'est un rappel d'un passé humiliant), puis celui de *l'Oncle Tom* (H. B. Stowe, 1852), doux comme un agneau et mû par l'esprit de sacrifice pour son bon maître, *Oncle Remus* (Joel Chandler Harris, 1880) l'ex-esclave plein d'humour, de bonne humeur et surtout qui reste à sa place ; puis il y a eu *Jim Crow* (chanson de Thomas Rice dans un "*minstrel show*") et ultime avatar dans les années 40 (R. Wright, *Native Son*), *Bigger Thomas*, le Noir enragé et rebelle dont les accès de violence meurtrière menacent l'édifice social. Quelles sont les conséquences de cette situation ? Une conscience aiguë de l'isolement spirituel de l'individu et une contradiction interne insupportable ("*the condition of double consciousness*") :

---

2. Something intermediate between two things.

This contradiction of being both Western and a man of color creates a distance, so to speak, between me and my environment [...]. Me and my environment are one, but that oneness has in it, at its very heart, a schism (R. Wright).

Écho que l'on retrouve chez W.E.B. Dubois quand il déclare : "*One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro*" et cette division est parfaitement exprimée par ces deux vers d'un poète noir : "*Got one mind for white folks to see, / 'Nother for what I know is me*". Cette dualité se traduit aussi par le sentiment d'aliénation qu'éprouve le Noir contraint de vivre dans un état de dépendance par rapport à la classe et à la culture dominante. Que faut-il entendre par aliénation ? Ceci :

« En commun dans la condition d'aliéné, la dépossession, (de soi, de ses sentiments, de ses gestes, de ses actes, de sa production) ; la dépossession par l'Autre (Dieu, le père, le patron, le colon, le bourgeois, l'organisateur de loisirs) ; la rupture de la communication avec le monde, autrui et/ou soi-même ; l'embarquement dans un monde irréel » (P. Dommergues, *L'Aliénation dans le roman américain contemporain*, vol I, 13).

D'où, inévitablement, un irrésistible sentiment de haine : il faut ici rappeler ce qu'affirme l'Homme Invisible : "*Maybe freedom lies in hating*", haine qui répond à celle du blanc pour le Noir obligé de vivre "*in the shadow of that looming mountain of white hate*" (*Native Son*, 268). Un intellectuel noir a déclaré que : "*to hate white people is one of the first emotions the American Negro develops when he becomes old enough to learn what his status is in American society*" (NBV, 399), mais cette haine affecte la personnalité du Noir car elle est destructrice et à double tranchant (haine de soi-même) ; c'est en tout cas pour de nombreux intellectuels la donnée de base de la conscience de soi : "*the answer to the question of identity lies in an exploration of one's true emotions, starting at that elementary first principle of denigrated humanity : I hate*" (*New Black Voices*, 537). Notons que si cet aspect est présent dans l'œuvre de Morrison, le point de départ de l'exploration que décrit *Beloved* serait plutôt l'amour, l'oblativité, mais ce n'est pas contradictoire vu la complémentarité de l'amour et de la haine. Cf. ce que l'auteur a déclaré :

"Actually, I think, all the time that I write, I'm writing about love or its absence. Although I don't start out that way... I write about love, and how to survive...whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure victims of something".

Morrison explore donc :

« les problèmes que pose l'amour, qu'il soit maternel, filial, sexuel, conjugal. Mais le questionnement s'inscrit dans une problématique précise, puisque les Afro-Américains qui sont ses personnages restent marqués par le drame originel de l'esclavage qui leur interdisait l'amour. Que veut dire aimer, en effet, quand on n'a pas d'identité ou d'image de soi autre que celle que le maître vous renvoie, qu'on est regardé comme inférieur, ravalé au rang d'animal ? Peut-on se permettre d'aimer quand on n'est pas responsable ni de soi ni des autres, que peut-on donner quand on ne s'appartient même pas, quand l'âme est dévitalisée ? » (E. Béranger, "Amour et mémoire dans *Beloved*").

Puisqu'il est question d'amour, notez que *Beloved* peut s'entendre également comme *Be loved!* une injonction qui n'est pas sans rappeler le message de Baby Suggs aux membres de la congrégation qu'elle exhorte à s'aimer les uns les autres mais aussi et surtout à aimer leurs corps. La citation tronquée (Épître aux Romains, 9 : 25) que l'auteur a mise en exergue : « J'appellerai mon peuple celui qui n'était pas mon peuple, et bien-aimée celle qui n'était pas la bien-aimée » confirme l'importance du thème de l'amour. Quant à la suite de la citation – « Et au lieu même où on leur avait dit : "Vous n'êtes pas mon peuple", on les appellera fils du Dieu vivant » –, elle fait du peuple noir, le peuple élu de Dieu.

Revenons en à la notion d'aliénation : si l'on en croit P. Dommergues, quatre possibilités s'offrent au Noir pour faire face à son destin, pour sortir de l'impasse :

Faisons un instant le bilan des voies possibles pour le Noir aliéné par le système colonial américain : 1) la soumission passive au mode de vie, à la culture, à la réalité de l'Amérique majoritaire et ses conséquences (exploitation et infériorisation) 2) la fuite dans l'imaginaire (l'univers fantastique de la danse, de la musique, de l'art de la magie) ou dans l'agression tournée vers les siens (délinquance infra-raciale). Dans les deux cas le colonisé quitte ou croit quitter une aliénation pour s'installer dans une autre qu'il construit lui-même. 3) L'activisme illusoire qui conduit au mieux au mode de vie de la classe moyenne... Aucune solution n'est trouvée. Le problème est seulement déplacé. 4) La prise de conscience nationale noire. Seul ce comportement permet une analyse lucide de la situation ; seul il propose une stratégie d'ensemble ; seul il donne accès à tout ce que tout Noir recherche – (une forme d'identité individuelle et/ou collective) ; seul il permet en principe de modifier les rapports de personne et de classe. » (148)

T. Morrison, de par sa qualité d'intellectuelle et d'écrivain, échappe au manichéisme de ces choix en proposant, notamment par le recours à l'imaginaire, non pas une forme d'*escapism*, mais une prise de conscience renouvelée des valeurs originales et positives qu'implique le concept de négritude. Cependant, et c'est là ce qui fait la grandeur et la valeur universelle de l'œuvre, si le roman prend appui sur la culture noire (histoire, folklore, musique, etc.), il ne s'y enferme pas ; à l'instar de *Invisible Man* de R. Ellison, il brasse également des éléments tirés de la Bible (les quatre cavaliers qui arrivent au 124 rappellent ceux de l'Apocalypse) ou de la mythologie classique (image de la Méduse, à la fin du roman) ou orientale (rôle des couleurs, mythe d'Osiris).

Ce qui, d'une certaine manière, revient à dire que cette œuvre très personnelle a une portée universelle de même qu'une indéniable dimension politique car elle :

- « pose le problème brûlant d'une identité souvent bafouée et d'un rêve éternellement différé » ;
- « explore ce qui a échappé à la conscience et au regard des historiens et des spécialistes comme parfois à l'imaginaire de ses prédécesseurs » ;
- « retrouve le sens du tragique et du sacré » ;

Oui, « le défi suprême de *Beloved* », comme l'écrit C. Fabre, à qui nous devons les observations précédentes et la suivante, « est celui qui est lancé au silence et à l'oubli ». Et sa modernité réside entre autres dans le fait que l'écriture romanesque s'y affirme *lieu de mémoire et de résistance*.

## THE CHARACTERS OF *BELOVED*

With the obvious exception of white people, all the other characters in the novel are essentially determined by their condition of slaves or former slaves ; though *Beloved* is not a disquisition on "*the peculiar institution*" and its attendant evils but a *literary work*, a piece of fiction, it is nonetheless grounded in history and consequently, one cannot ignore certain facts about slavery (the Underground for instance, cf. p. 85) and the period in which the story unfolds, all the less so as there are many references to the times cf. p. 212: "No more discussions...at a small victory".

*Beloved* presents several variants of racism and slavery: first of all there's the exception prevailing on Sweet Home, the Garners'plantation. As stated in the text on page 173: "The Garners ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor...". Mr. Garner's ideas on how to deal with slaves are quite subversive for the times; cf. p. 12 : "Y'all got boys...you'll want you niggers to be men too." However, there cannot be « *un îlot de justice dans un océan d'iniquité* » : Sweet Home is "a wonderful lie" because "Garner announced them men but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave" (271) ; outside the plantation, the five Garner men are faced with the usual form of racism: "One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race [...] humans spoke" (155). Sweet Home Negroes are men only by the grace of their good master, but as the narrator aptly puts it : "definitions belong to the definers--not the defined" (234).

There is also racism based on the pseudo-scientific data that Teacher enters in his notebook, taking measures and listing "human characteristics on the left and the animal ones on the right" (237). With his measuring string, Teacher "breaks into children what Garner had raised into men" (271). It is worthy of note that Teacher is in favour of the practice of "breeding" *i.e.* keeping Negroes not to operate a plantation but to foster their reproduction and sell them for a profit on the domestic market (279). Cf. 173.

The denial of the Negro's manhood is however carried to the extreme on the chain-gang at Alfred, Georgia, where slaves are treated according to their lawful definition as "chattel" (movable articles of property) if not cattle (cf. 131-132 et seq.).

Last but not least, we get the everyday type of racism, all the more damaging as it is subtle and diffuse as witness the example of Edward Bodwin, the abolitionist, the soldier of Christ, "the bleached nigger" (319) whose kitchen is graced by the statue of a grinning Sambo (313).

Whatever its type, the effects of slavery were always the same and the novel goes through an appalling list :

- disruption of family ties: the members of the same family are dispersed, sold to the four corners of Dixie (which makes the exception mentioned on page 269 all the more noticeable). See for instance what happened to Baby Suggs's children: "...men and women were moved around like checkers...didn't mean a thing" (29).

- commodification of the slave: slaves treated like items of commerce: cf. distinction between value and worth on page 278: "Paul D. hear the men talking...his future." The slaves'bodies = objects of desire (cf. 289) or expendable items.

- violence: use of the bit (cf. Paul D. and Sethe's mother 250). Sethe is milked like a cow (cf. 246) and whipped, cf. "chokeberry tree".

- self-dispossession cf. example of Joshua (Stamp Paid) (227)

- denial of identity: no names (Sixo; cf. Joshua p. 286)

- ignorance: it was illegal to teach slaves to read or write (cf. 125).

- brutalization: "It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them" (245)

– forcing them to behave illegally: cf Sixo, p. 234

– denial of human feelings including pleasure: cf. “Grandma Baby...had eight children with different men. Slaves no supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own...” (257)

– perhaps the most damaging consequence: the slaves are forbidden to experience love cf. (56): “For a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous...”. Cf. Paul D. (199): “So you protected yourself and loved small...split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia.”

Even if The Civil War officially put an end to slavery, the situation did not improve much for former-slaves and the Reconstruction made matters worse with the emergence of the Klan (“the Dragon”, p. 82), lynchings, etc. cf. description on page 221: “1874 and white people were still on the loose...letters delivered by hand.” Cf. also p. 81: “During, before and after the War...”. Everyday racism remains as widespread as before: “she just didn't want the embarrassment of waiting...” (233).

The 13th Amendment did grant freedom to the slaves but it did not give them “a self to look out for and preserve” (310). This deprivation or denial was the main damage caused by slavery: “That anybody white...and couldn't think it up” (308).

So the preceding panorama, however sketchy it may be, constitutes the unavoidable, inescapable background against which the personality of the various black characters must be assessed. This being said, don't expect an in-depth treatment of each character: I'll just point out the essential features of each of them and the way they relate to each other.

Of the five Sweet Home men (“One crazy, one sold, one missing, one burnt and one licking iron”, p. 89), Paul D. is the one we get to know best. He is a good illustration of the destructive and dehumanizing power of slavery. After trying to kill Brandywine (130), his second master, Paul D. is sent to Alfred, Georgia, to serve his sentence. He who is particularly sensitive to the question of manhood and self-definition (cf. 271: “It troubled him that concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point. Oh he did manly things, but was that Garner's gift or his own will?”) is submitted to the most degrading treatment and reduced to the status of an animal (“I had a bit in my mouth”, 86) or perhaps not even that since Mister, the rooster, seems to be freer, stronger and better than Paul D. (89). More important than physical abuse is the psychic mutilation produced (51) by such ill-treatment: Paul D. is forced to deny his manhood and human nature and to curtail his capacity to love: “You protected yourself and loved small” (199) cf. 272: “Loving small and in secret. His little love was a tree”. The tobacco tin buried in his chest (89) takes the place of his heart; there he'll bury Alfred, Sixo, school teacher, *i.e.* all his secret wounds and suffering (139). Repression function as a form of strategy ensuring survival (“Paul D. dropped 25 years from his recent memory”, 25); however his encounter with Sethe will unlock this repressed experience. Paul D. himself acts as a catalyst releasing, bringing to light all that she endeavours “to keep at bay” (52): “she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe” (7). Paul D's arrival will “fill up the empty space of not knowing about Halle” (117) and “add something to her life” (*Ibid.* full quotation).

But Paul D. doesn't just make her reminisce about the past, he gives her back her body by kissing her chokecherry tree-like scar (232) and more important still, he tries to “convince her that there is a world outside and that she can live in it” (224). “She wants him in her life” (121) because he not only brings her “trust and rememory” (121) but a future as well: “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (335). Not by the way that if P. D. is a catalyst, Sethe is to him a sort of cohesive agent, a cementing force, bringing unity out of dismemberment: “She gather me, man. The pieces I am...a friend of your mind.” (335). Hence P. D.'s poignant entreaty: “Don't you die on me !” (334).



Sethe's personality is also totally determined by the past, not only the recent past but also the remote past, and part of her quest is to achieve a present and a future. By remote past I mean the life-story of her own nameless mother, who was branded and hanged (76), and from whom she inherited her "wildness" (87) and "rebellious brain" (86), but not the African language, which became for Sethe "a code she no longer understood" (77). Her mother seems to have set a pattern that Sethe will follow e.g. her rejection of the children who were not, to use an old-fashioned phrase, the fruits of love (78); the only exception being Sethe ("You she gave the name of the black man"). Sethe is a fighter (cf. "Sword and shield...Don't study war...Her heavy knives of defense against misery", 105), full of violence and hate, but she is also a fountain of love. She manages to take "every bit of life she had made...through the veil" (200, the veil = evil = slavery); "I got us all out" she says on p. 198 and her crime was a way of "putting her babies where they'd be safe" (201). The scandal involved in such a horrible deed is that it was both a challenge ("She was trying to outhurt the hurter" 298) and a monstrous expression of love ("what she had done was right because it came from true love", p. 309); as such it transcends all our moral principles and escapes judgment. Its inhumanity just answers the inhumanity of the peculiar institution of which she was the victim (cf. 247 "they handled me like I was a cow"): the very act she performs is also "on the other side" (296); it baffles analysis and ethics: hence her defiant refusal of "forgiveness" (309-10) and the paradoxical assertion that in spite of everything "the best thing she was, was her children" (308). Sethe is obviously one of those indomitable women that W. Faulkner described in *The Unvanquished* and so dubbed.

If, as far as Sethe is concerned, Paul D. plays the rôle of a helper ("*un adjuvant*" in Greimas's terms) and a catalyst, Beloved obviously is both a catalyst and an opponent ("*un opposant*") preying upon her, almost devouring her ("Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes", 71). First of all, it must be pointed out the young woman of 19 or 20, who one day comes out of the blue, may not be the embodiment of Beloved, the child Sethe killed: there are doubts about her identity and background cf. 289: "Was a girl locked up...she was a pup". Conversely, it is certain that she is a walking reminder of the past, a succubus intent on making Sethe pay for her sacrilege (308) and she almost deprives Sethe of her substance through her insatiable demands cf. 295: "Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire". See also the strange phenomenon – reversal of rôles and transfusion of strength from one woman to the other – described on p. 307: "Beloved bending over...became". The complicity between the two characters is such that it is sometimes hard to "tell who was who" (296). Beloved, "the devil-child" (321), is opposed to Denver who tries to protect her mother from her evil and harmful influence, but there is at least a positive aspect to this character: she enables Sethe to perform a sort of catharsis – not exactly in the sense of a purgation of passions but of a purgation of the past – a settling of accounts cf. *Profils américains* :

« L'enfant – incarnation d'un souvenir qu'il faut oublier, enfant mutilée et "*disremembered*" – exige un amour que sa mère ne peut lui donner qu'en affrontant "à son corps défendant" ce passé » (p. 16).

Note also that through her lust, Beloved arouses "a life hunger" (324) in Paul D. and helps him to take a new hold of life. Be that as it may, both Sethe and Denver will have to run away from her in order to escape the past and plunge into the world and the present.

As for Denver, who "took her mother's milk along with the blood of her sister" (187), she is also a "charmed" child (258), a guardian angel to her mother, a kind spirit trying "to protect Beloved from Sethe...and her mother from Beloved" (298). Unlike the other characters "the present alone interests her" (147) and Denver does not hesitate to face the dangers of the outer world to save her mother and escape the atmosphere prevailing in 124: "she was ready to be swallowed up in the world beyond the edge of the porch" (299). Leaving 124 is likened to a sort of voluntary sacrifice: "So it was she who had to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn't, they all would" (293). This death is followed by a symbolic (re)birth on p. 304: "it was the word baby that

inaugurated her life in the world as a woman". What Denver actually discovers is the new experience and "new thought [of] having a self to look out for and preserve" (310), and what is particularly important is that she makes this discovery at an early age thus, she embodies hope and possible adjustment to life.

There is absolutely no doubt about the symbolic status and function of Baby Suggs (a curious name "which was all she had left of the 'husband' she claimed", 175): she's definitely "*unadjuvant*", a helper, one of the *Unvanquished*, an embodiment of Nature's bounty and vitality ("she smelled like bark in the day and leaves at night", 23), an *axis mundi* around which the world of Black community revolves: "Why is she and hers always the center of things?" (168). Baby Suggs is characterized by her "heart"; the word repeatedly crops up in the descriptions of her: cf. p. 106 "she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart"; "what to do with the heart that started beating the minute she crossed the Ohio River", 181 or again p. 193: "Baby Suggs's bounty and her big old heart". She is sometimes given to excess and displays "reckless generosity" as witness what is said on the occasion of the feast given in celebration of Sethe's arrival: "she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" p. 170.

The review/summary of her life mentioned on page 217 stresses the hardships she had to suffer, the most gruesome of which being the disruption of her family and dispersion of her successive children. Having eight children with different men sets her apart as an object of scandal (257: "Grandma Baby said people look down on her...love it"); this vindication of the body is, by the way, Grandma Baby's most subversive tenet and the sermon she delivers in the clearing urges the attendance to claim possession of their own "flesh" and to love it: "Here," she said...their deeply loved flesh"). It is quite paradoxical yet characteristic to hear Baby Suggs vindicate the human body in a religious or spiritual context, for she is best defined by her midway position between couples of opposites; as witness her definition as "an unchurched preacher" (106) and the comparison – "[she was] the mountain to his sky" (209) – Baby Suggs is essentially a link between two different spheres: humanity/inhumanity; love and death (cf. "suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead...", p. 4); the sacred and the profane; instinct/feeling and intelligence, etc. Hence perhaps her devotion to harmony (210) and quest for peace, which are conveyed through her meditation on (217) "the colors of things...which she never had time to see, let alone enjoy before" (247). There's hardly any doubt that Baby Suggs, as people wonder, "really was special, blessed in some way they were not" (193).

Among the other characters, I'd like to point out the importance of Halle who, though he mysteriously disappears rather early in the story remains, like the "angel man" that he is (256) a lingering or hovering presence and embodiment of love ("he scared her the way he loved things", p. 256); Sixo is the rebellious spirit and upholder of life (cf. 278: "Seven-O"); Stamp Paid the Underground railway agent, the Soldier of Christ, is the Negro militant, well-meaning but not always well-advised.

Among white people, it is interesting to oppose the Bowins, who abolitionists though they are, unconsciously give credence to racist stereotypes, and Amy the po'white trash who, though overtly racist, offers true Christian charity to a black woman in distress. This should warn you against the twofold danger of stereotyped responses, and of seeing things, if I may play upon words, in black and white. *Beloved* also aims to disabuse the reader's mind of some received ideas and to destabilize him.

## MOTIFS, THÈMES, IMAGES ET SYMBOLES

### 1) *Memory/rememory*

Noter référence à "rememory", p. 44 : "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory, etc." où l'on peut voir une instance moins passive que la mémoire, une remémoration (dynamique), "an archeology of the imagination" (*Profils américains*, 28).

Association oubli/refoulement = survie : "she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious" (7) ou encore p. 90 : "the day's serious work of beating back the past". Le roman « dit ce passage de la relative quiétude de l'oubli aux affres de la remémoration » (*Profils américains*, 11) et le « défi suprême de *Beloved* est [bien] celui qui est lancé au silence et à l'oubli ». =/= *Disremembering* (*Beloved*, 146) : *appears as an exercise of exorcism to retain one's sanity* (*Profils américains*, 40) ; *the state of disremembering is tantamount "to inner paralysis and dislocation"*. Noter qu'on peut appliquer la remarque d'Amy "anything dead coming back to life hurts" (43) aux souvenirs, au passé dont le retour est source de souffrance ("every mention of her past life hurt", 72). Comme nous y invite la ressemblance phonique, on peut associer "disremembering" et "dismemberment", diverses images de fragmentation, éparpillement associées à l'évocation de certains personnages, notamment Paul D. (335), et qui s'expliquent par le fait que sans passé reconnu, accepté et/ou transcendé, il n'est pas d'identité possible.

Refus de l'oralisation, de la parole, mais expression indirecte, oblique par le chant : "*I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul*" (88).

À relier à la question du langage : comment dire ce passé indicible ("*unspeakable*", 72), comment exprimer "*the things neither had word-shapes for*" (121).

### 2) *Nature/Images*

Rôle des arbres en fleurs = balises sur le chemin qui mène à la liberté et à la vie (138) : l'errance de Paul D. est aussi un parcours de l'animalité à l'humanité retrouvée (*Profils américains*, 55). Elle le conduit également vers une autre arbre : celui qui est inscrit sur le dos de Sethe : "*a revolting clump of trees*" (26). Cette cicatrice « ne prend sens que quand un autre la découvre et de ses mains ou par la lecture vient en déchiffrer l'inscription » (*Profils américains*, 56).

Ce passage illustre aussi fonction symbolique de l'arbre auprès duquel l'opprimé trouve réconfort : "*his choice he called Brother*". À Alfred Georgia c'est l'amour pour des arbres qui permettra à Paul D. de conserver une parcelle d'humanité : "*His little love was a tree, but not like Brother...*" (272). Les arbres sont aussi le refuge où Sixo va exécuter quelque rite secret à l'abri des regards cf. 31.

Il est intéressant de noter que c'est par l'image d'une forêt se dressant entre Paul D. et Sethe que le narrateur évoque l'abîme qui sépare les deux personnages quand ils en viennent à discuter le crime de Sethe (202).

Évoquer enfin l'arbre généalogique : emblème de la littérature afro-américaine = "*one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of black presence in America*" (*Profils américains*, 142).

Des arbres au monde végétal le lien est évident : relever diverses comparaisons avec plantes et fleurs (79) = lien avec vie, nature ; Baby Suggs, par exemple, sent comme les feuilles et l'écorce des arbres : c'est l'*eunodia*, la bonne odeur, indice de bienveillance et de sainteté et on pas la comparer à son contraire, la *dysosmie*, l'odeur infecte qui signale l'être mauvais, cf. 170 : "*she smelled another thing. Dark and coming*" (cf. aussi p. 181).

Les images tirées du monde animal sont également très nombreuses : Denver est comparée à une antelope (37), animal gracieux et gracile tandis que sa mère est décrite comme un faucon ("hawk", 193), plus conforme à sa nature altière, rebelle et belliqueuse. Notez à ce propos la référence aux "*sword and shield...Don't study war*" p. 105) et, puisqu'il est question d'images et de comparaisons, comment Sethe est, par touches discrètes, associée à l'idée d'une arme tranchante (187 "*her profile knife-clean*" ; "*her heavy knives of defense against misery*", 105).

Si Sethe est, nous l'oublions pas, traitée "*like a cow*" (247), si sa mère et Paul D. portent un "mors" comme un cheval de trait, les autres esclaves, les hommes se voient dénier toute virilité par une série de comparaisons animales ("*watchdogs without teeth, steer bulls without horns, gelded workhorses*" (155).

Rappelons pour être complet, que Beloved, que les hommes appellent "*bitch*" dans l'obscurité (296) est dite être "*wild game*" (297 ; à comparer à Denver) et se métamorphose à la fin du roman en "*naked woman with fish for hair*" (328).

Cette dernière référence nous fournit une transition facile avec un élément fort important dans le roman : l'eau, que l'on va retrouver sous divers avatars. Commençons par l'Ohio qui a historiquement marqué la limite et le passage entre esclavage et liberté (cf. 110). La protagoniste elle-même est curieusement associée à l'eau à divers moments du récit : elle perd naturellement les eaux au moment même où elle approche du fleuve (p. 102) et Denver naît dans un canoë. La vie de Sethe est par ailleurs décrite comme "*her walk-on-water life*" (p. 118). L'arrivée de Beloved, marquée par la pressante envie d'uriner qui saisit Sethe (p. 63), est doublement placée sous le signe de l'élément liquide puisque Beloved est présentée comme émergeant du fleuve (62), puis comme étant victime d'incontinence (67) ; s'est-elle échappée d'un bateau ? (263 : "*I see me swim away*" etc.) nul ne le sait, mais son ultime métamorphose lui donne l'apparence de "*a naked woman with fish for hair*" (328).

### 3) Corps/Identité/Nom.

« Les images liées au corps au corps abondent dans l'oeuvre de Morrison : images d'allaitement, images de viol et violence. Les corps sont à la fois grotesques, parce que marqués du stigmate de la couleur, et sublimes, parce qu'ils suscitent les émotions les plus incontrôlées. C'est dans les corps que se joue incessamment la lutte entre la vie et la mort--vie et mort que des mères démiurges ont le pouvoir de prendre et de donner. C'est à travers les corps que se livre le grand combat pour la liberté ; entre eux enfin que se tissent les liens biologiques et symboliques qui fondent les filiations et les généalogies » (*Profils américains*, 13).

Importance du corps féminin :

« lieu où s'inscrit une irréductible différence – exprimée souvent par un stigmate ou une marque – et une volonté de résistance. Pour ces corps censurés, effacés ou meurtris, l'amputation, l'auto-mutilation qui peut aller jusqu'à l'infanticide, sont autant d'actes d'insoumission, de façons de répondre aux violences infligées par l'autre—viols, châtements corporels. [...] Le corps est enfin le lieu où s'inscrit la mémoire et où est inscrite la véritable mémoire des esclaves. C'est le "corps-texte"... » (*Profils américains*, 13).

Revendication/réappropriation du corps cf. épisode central du sermon où Baby Suggs invite les fidèles à apprendre à aimer leurs corps et à y obéir (p. 257) ; cf. aussi Sethe p. 174 : "*These hands belong to me*".

On peut lier aussi à cette question l'adoption d'un nom "propre", c'est-à-dire librement choisi et non imposé par autrui, le maître cf. p. 175 : Stamp Paid "*Born Joshua, he renamed himself...*".

## DECONSTRUCTION IN *BELOVED*

The notion of deconstruction is often associated with Morrison's novel *e.g.* M. Diedrich claims that *Beloved* represents:

"Morrison's deconstruction and demystification of those 'wonderful lies' in which WASP historiography and literature have encoded race relations in the US as well as her defiance of the self-protective taboos which were erected by African-Americans" (*Profils américains*, 39).

What is deconstruction? As a starting-point, one might say that it is a constant reminder of the etymological link between crisis and criticism, it is also "a vast will to unmaking" (I. Hassan, 269). The notion is inseparably linked to the concept of postmodernism. What is postmodernism? Obviously an artistic and philosophical movement that took place after modernism. What is modernism? It's a term often used to identify the distinctive features of sensibility, form and style since WWI. The "modernist" revolt against traditional subjects and modes of expression manifested itself strongly after the catastrophe of WWI that shook men's faith in the foundations and continuity of western civilization and culture, cf. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), the "modernist" paintings of Cubism, Futurism and Abstract Expressionism or the new harmonies and rhythms of composers like Stravinsky and Schoenberg. In the novel it meant breaking away from the conventions of earlier prose fiction as well as with the traditional syntax and coherence of narrative language.

A) Postmodernism is about language; about how it controls and determines meaning and how we try to exert control through language. It originated in the awareness that we are born into and thus shaped by the language which we like to think we control. It deals with how we constitute and are constituted by language.

B) The postmodern moment is an awareness of being within, first, a language, and second, a particular, historical, social, cultural framework. Hence there can be no such thing as objectivity: all of our definitions and understanding of all that has come before us must pass through our historical, social, cultural being, as well as through our language – all of which precede us and constitute us, even as we insist on our own control.

C) Postmodernism lays stress on Difference rather than on Identity, emphasizes Multiplicity rather than Unity. People and societies are perceived of as sites of difference, and not as centers from which pure knowledge emanates and to which absolute Truth may be made known.

D) Postmodernism is also about History but not the kind of History that lets us think we can know the past. History in the postmodern moment becomes histories and questions. It asks: Whose history gets told? In whose name? For what purposes? Postmodernism is about histories not told, retold, untold. History as it never was. Histories forgotten, hidden, invisible, considered unimportant, changed, eradicated. It's about the refusal to see history as linear, as leading straight up to today in some recognizable pattern – all set for us to make sense of.

Postmodernism is a rupture in our consciousness; it originated in the realization that "the time has passed when an identity was believed to exist between the structure of language, the structure of logic, and the structure of reality" (I. Hassan, 10). Its definition lies in change and chance; it deals with how we read the present, as well as how we read the past; it interrogates the logic of naming and representation and refuses to accept as natural the one-to-one mimetic relationship of things with words; it resists totalizations, absolute Identity, absolute Truths. Postmodernism also highlights the fact that "each interpretation involves choices that we make, but more importantly reflects choices that we don't know we make".

In fiction, the postmodernist attitude holds that the author is but "a moment of convergence of different voices which flow into a text [...] a somewhat fortuitous crystallization of language" (Hassan).

"Deconstruction" is so to speak postmodernism applied to literary interpretation:

"the word 'de-construction' is closely related to the word 'analysis,' which etymologically means 'to undo' – a virtual synonym for 'to de-construct.' The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or generalized skepticism, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself" (J. Derrida, [Marshall, 47]).

In what way does *Beloved* share some of the above-mentioned postmodern concerns *i.e.* a critique of representation, a critique of subjectivity, an awareness of intertextuality, an interrogation of received histories through counter-memory?

– *Beloved's* narrative structure pertains to "magic realism" and disregards the natural or physical laws which we have come to see as normal...The logic of the narrative is the logic of the fantastic. Magic realism is a critique of the possibility of representation in that it blurs the boundaries between what is "magic" and what is "real" and thus calls into question accepted definition of either. Hence the lack of distinction between the spirit world and the material world. cf. T. Morrison's statement: "One of the things that's important to me is the powerful imaginative way in which we deconstructed and reconstructed reality in order to get through" (Marshall, 181). T. Morrison tries to blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other (Marshall, 187).

– it highlights the simultaneous complexity and paucity of language, which is incapable of reproducing lived experienced...

– a commentary on the inexplicability of the world in which we live...

– *Beloved* also contains a critique of subjectivity; it shows how the subject (*e.g.* the heroine) is determined or constituted by those effects which are exterior and anterior to her but which cannot be thought of as separate from her being: the workings of biology, economy, language. This is also conveyed by the blurring of the distinction between self and others, cf. p. 164: "Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began": the world is in the subject and the subject is in the world. Cf. also Baby Suggs's listing of the absences in her life that constituted a self that was no self (Marshall, 189). *Beloved* is an examination of the subject as constituted by absence.

– *Beloved* bears obvious traces of a reflection on History, cf. Horvitz: "*Beloved* is so grounded in historical that it could be used to teach American history", true, but whose historical reality? *Beloved* is a chapter in the mostly untold history text of slavery. Hence the reference to "counter-memory" and "rememory". But what is particularly noteworthy is that in *Beloved* "the reclaiming of history and of the self are the same" (Marshall. 191).