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Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

“It was not a story to pass on”

Beloved is no less obsessed with narratives and narration than are the other novels analyzed in my study. It poignantly dramatizes a tension between the blocking of storytelling and its eruption, exploring the access potential of narration in recovering the repressed past, retrieving memory, and fighting the suppression of individual and communal voice.

Nor is *Beloved* naive about the possibility of representation. On the contrary, it is as fully aware as the other novels of the problematic nature of stories based on previous stories, themselves deriving from still earlier stories, as well as of the elements of creation and fictionality which necessarily characterize any attempt to recover a past.¹ Similarly, the novel is painfully conscious that subjectivity is fragile in general and becomes even more so under the cruel conditions of slavery. Out of this predicament (and because of it?), however, *Beloved* attempts a hesitant rehabilitation of representation and subjectivity via narration. Indeed, it does not try only to rehabilitate subjectivity, but to go beyond it. From the position of subjects, in the ruthless and racial sense of being “in subjection,” the characters yearn for what the

novel—in a deliberate approximation to the humanist view—calls a “self.” Whereas *Thru* and *Company*, each in its own way, moved from self to subject, *Beloved* dramatizes subjects in search of selves.²

In this complex attempt at a retrieval that incorporates destabilizing insights, *Beloved* employs many modernist and postmodernist techniques of narration for purposes different from theirs.³ As we have seen, the multiplication of narrative levels often enacts a doubt about the possibility of reaching reality and constituting a self. But in *Beloved* the multiplication of levels (and near levels) operates instead as an access to self.⁴ Similarly, ambiguity, the genre of the fantastic, and magical realism are often employed in modernist and postmodernist novels for nonrepresentational, self-reflexive purposes. By contrast, in *Beloved* these strategies are subordinate to the attempt (and the difficulty) of making believable the unbelievable horrors of slavery, of trying to represent an unbearable reality.

The endeavor to regain previously dismantled possibilities is not a return to a position before doubt but rather an inclusion of the destabilization and an attempt to transcend it. To support this claim, let me begin by showing how the use of narrative levels both subverts a certain relationship between narrating voice and person, and very subtly suggests that narration may become a basis for a birth into self.

Beloved is related by an extradiegetic narrator who, on the whole, delegates the role of focalizers—and sometimes also of second-degree narrators—to various characters in the novel. Characters seem to become first-degree narrators only in the three interior monologues that follow the discovery of Beloved’s identity and culminate in a kind of chorus, fusing Sethe’s, Denver’s, and Beloved’s voices in a ritual-like unification (200–217). These four chapters can support the interpretation that it is the discovery of the other—as well as the experience of loving the other—that endows Sethe, Denver, and Beloved with a voice (I)

and a self. But the monologues often convey experiences denying the self (e.g., Beloved's incapacity to dissociate herself from Sethe) or undermining the love (e.g., Denver's suspicion that Sethe might kill her the way she killed Beloved). And the fusion anticipated by the chorus of the three voices turns out to be a debilitating *folie à trois* from which only Denver successfully extricates herself. Moreover, the possibility of an affinity between saying "I" and having an I is probably illusory, even on the grounds of narrative strategies. Bearing in mind the end of the preceding chapter of the novel, one realizes that the monologues may be conceived of as quotations by the extradiegetic narrator, rather than autonomous as they seem to be.⁵ True, there are no quotation marks, which is misleading at first—but the last sentence before the monologues is: "Mixed in with the voices surrounding the house, recognizable but undecipherable to Stamp Paid, were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (199; end of chapter). The monologues, we now realize, can be seen as the narrator's verbalization of the characters' unspeakable and unspoken thoughts. Thus there is no easy and direct connection between narration and originating self in *Beloved*.

Despite the lack of a direct connection, however, the novel does assign narration a crucial role in the constitution of self—but indirectly, through a network of narrative levels. Within this network, I shall focus on a few scenes whose subject is birth and rebirth, because the association between access to self and birth clearly suggests a stance that goes beyond the problem of subjectivity. Furthermore, the conjunction between birth and rebirth metaphors and the presence or absence of narrative levels gives rise to a differentiation between characters who gain access to a self and those who do not, a differentiation that—not surprisingly at this point—hinges on the role of storytelling.

There is an intriguing chiasmus between the narration of birth and of rebirth in *Beloved*. The birth is Denver's; the rebirth, Beloved's. Contrary to expectation, birth, a primary, originary

event, is rendered through layers of storytelling, while rebirth, a second coming, is accorded primary narration. By pursuing the unfolding of this paradox and trying to interpret it, we may, I hope, glimpse the relation suggested between narration and self.

Denver's birth is told twice, and it is a highly dramatic event. Sethe is all alone in the woods, running away from Sweet Home, where her back was cruelly pulped and her milk taken away from her in a rapelike scene performed by two whiteboys. Her legs are swollen, she can hardly walk, and she is terrified by a premonition that either she or the baby or both are about to die. Then, with the help of a whitegirl, she reaches a lean-to and later a boat on the river, where her water breaks—as if to join the water of the river. Denver is born there and is named after the whitegirl. This dramatic event also seems to take the dramatic form of a scene. It is presented in great detail, with many dialogues between Sethe and the whitegirl, creating an effect of vividness and immediacy.⁶ So strong is the sense of immediacy that the reader often experiences the scenes as a “first narrative”⁷ told directly by the extradiegetic narrator, who seems to be quoting the dialogues. The reader thus forgets the multilayered distancing through which the scenes reach him or her. But distancing is prevalent both in the temporal organization and in the handling of narration and focalization in the two renderings of Denver's birth.

The first birth chapter (28–42), although seemingly part of the narrative present, is in fact doubly analeptic. It starts as a flashback, an iterative summary of Denver's secret feasts in her secluded bower in the woods. The iterative gives way to the singulative, and one intimate scene in the boxwood is narrated in which Denver finds herself in snow and then returns home to experience a vision of her mother praying while a white dress kneels next to her in a gesture of tender embrace. Both the snow and the kneeling dress evoke memories in Denver: “And it was the tender embrace of the dress sleeve that made Denver remember the details of her birth—that and the thin, whipping snow she was

standing in, like the fruit of common flowers” (29). The birth event, then, is an analepsis within an analepsis, doubly distanced from the narrative present, which deals with the union between Sethe and Paul D.

A similar distancing occurs in the handling of narration and focalization. Although the chapter is told by the extradiegetic narrator, the narration of Denver’s birth is filtered through Denver. It is Denver who remembers the scene, and through her memories (verbalized by the narrator) the reader experiences it. But what Denver remembers is not the event itself but stories Sethe used to tell her about her birth: “a thin and whipping snow very like *the picture her mother had painted* as she described the circumstances of Denver’s birth in a canoe straddled by a whitegirl for whom she was named” (29; emphasis mine). The birth scene is a memory of a story, and the narrator often reminds us of this by using such expressions as “Sethe told Denver” or by referring to Denver in the third person: “And now the part that Denver loved the best.”³

The first birth chapter is told by the extradiegetic narrator, although the narration is filtered through Denver’s memories of stories she has heard. In the second chapter (74–85), however, even the narration is not primary. The birth events are told (and focalized) by Denver, an intradiegetic narrator whose narrative becomes metadiegetic. “‘Tell me,’ Beloved said. ‘Tell me how Sethe made you in the boat’” (76), and Denver tells. Her narrative is further distanced by being constructed “out of the strings she had heard all her life” (ibid.). Denver constantly reminds us of this by acknowledging Sethe as her source: “The whitegirl, she said, had thin little arms but good hands. She saw that right away, she said” (76); “she cried, she said, from how it hurt” (77). The similarity between this technique and the attribution of stories to their original tellers in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* is striking. Let me recall only two examples out of many. Mr. Compson tells Quentin: “I have this from something your grandfather let drop one day and which he doubtless had from Sutpen himself in the

same accidental fashion" (49). Shreve, who hears the story only from Quentin, constructs parts of it with him and says: "And yet, this old gal, this Aunt Rosa, told you that someone was hiding there" (216).

The birth chapters *seem* like scenes because of the abundance of detail and dialogue, producing an effect of vividness and immediacy, but they are distanced in time, narration, and focalization. Strangely enough, however, the distancing does not make the scenes lose their scenic character, but transposes the scenic quality from the birth event itself to its reliving in the present. In the first birth chapter Denver not only *remembers* stories she heard about her birth, but "easily she *stepped into* the told story that lay before her eyes on the path she followed away from the window" (29; emphasis mine). Here Denver "sees" her pregnant mother "walking on two feet meant for standing still" (*ibid.*), just as in the second birth chapter "Denver began to see what she was saying and not just to hear it: there is this nineteen-year-old slave girl—a year older than herself" (77).⁹ Like Quentin and Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!* reenacting the Sutpen saga in the present of their own lives, Denver relives her birth as an event in the present: "Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through *Beloved*. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked" (78).

The complex oscillation between immediacy and distancing is very different from the effect produced by *Beloved's* reappearance, an uncanny event cast in terms of a rebirth and inviting comparison with Denver's birth. Denver's birth is rendered in great detail, but nothing is said about *Beloved's*. It is *Beloved's* return, not her original coming, that the novel dramatizes. This "miraculous resurrection" (105) is associated at the time with Sethe's full bladder: "And, for some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity" (51). At first this may seem only an indication of excitement (or perhaps even a vague

recognition of Beloved), but the association with birth-giving becomes gradually stronger as the text unfolds: "The water she voided was endless," and "there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now" (ibid.). The association between voiding water and giving birth becomes even more specific as Sethe compares her reaction to the unknown/half-known figure of Beloved with her experience of giving birth to Denver: "But as it went on and on she thought, No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born" (ibid.), an analogy reinforced by Sethe's recollection at this point of a brief exchange between her and Amy, the whitegirl, during the delivery. In both scenes, water is not only evacuated but also imbibed in great quantities. Beloved drinks cup after cup (ibid.), and Sethe drinks and asks for more following Denver's birth (90).¹⁰ The returning Beloved has soft, smooth skin, like a newborn baby (50, 52). In a further analogy between the scenes, Beloved's return becomes a realization of a figurative expression used by Amy. While massaging Sethe's swollen feet, Amy warns her: "It's gonna hurt, now. . . . Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (35; see also 77, 78). Denver, remembering this part of the story, silently comments: "A truth for all times" (35). What is Beloved's return if not a "living" example of something dead coming back to life? And isn't "hurt" both an intransitive and a transitive verb, just as the returning Beloved hurts both herself and others?¹¹

The analogy with Denver's birth suggests that Beloved's return is indeed a rebirth. This return "in the flesh," however, is itself a repetition of Beloved's earlier haunting of 124 as a ghost, so that her second coming becomes a third coming. Note how this nonprimary event is narrated: "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. . . . Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by" (51). If nobody saw her emerge, the only possible focalizer and narrator of her return is

the extradiegetic narrator, and this remains the telling voice throughout the chapter, although focalization is sometimes delegated to characters.

This brings me back to my original perplexity concerning the birth and rebirth scenes: Why is a nonprimary event accorded primary narration, whereas the originary event of Denver's birth is rendered through layers of storytelling? The narrator makes this statement about Sethe's awareness of the meaning of freedom: "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95). By analogy, one might say that being born is one thing; claiming ownership of one's birth is another. It is through memory (as focalizer) and storytelling (as narrator) that Denver claims ownership of her own birth and gains access to a self. The reawakening of memory is particularly important in the light of its repression in Denver's childhood. Early in her life, one of the boys at Lady Jones's asks Denver a question about Sethe's murder of *Beloved*. This question puts an end to Denver's social life, to her reading lessons, to her capacity to hear. Deafness is Denver's defense against unacceptable knowledge. But knowledge, and memory, are necessary for the constitution of personal history, and Denver gradually begins to show an interest in the past, at least in that portion which relates to her own origin. Since she cannot remember her own birth, Denver must cease to be deaf and begin to listen, as she constructs her own history through stories she hears from Sethe: "Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about" (62).¹² Denver rehearses the memories in her mind as she constructs, rather than reconstructs, a coherent pattern out of "the strings she had heard all her life" (176). However, to be fully creative, narration to the self has to be complemented by narration to the other. When telling the story of her birth to *Beloved*, Denver gives "blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat" (78). Thus, narration

becomes most strongly a creation, and most strongly a way of claiming ownership of the self, when the construction is shared: "The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved . . . and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it" (*ibid.*).¹³

The layering of focalization and narration in the birth scenes is necessary because it is through memory and storytelling that the fact of birth is transformed into a claiming of ownership and a birth into a self. Toward the end of the novel, Denver's accession to a self is explicitly formulated: "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252).

Recast in the negative, the foregoing statements can also explain the primary narration of Beloved's return. Beloved's rebirth is not rendered through her memories (as focalizer) or her retrospective telling (as second-degree narrator), because these would have constituted her self, and Beloved does not have a self. But as psychoanalysis has taught us, her incapacity to remember the event causes her to reenact it unconsciously, to return to the world from which she was expelled as a baby.

Let us examine these hypotheses a little further. Although Beloved enjoys listening to stories, much more so than does Denver (see, e.g., 58), she cannot use them to construct a personal history because she has no memory. Indeed, Sethe believes that "Beloved had been locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes, and never let out the door. That she must have escaped to a bridge or someplace and rinsed the rest out of her mind" (119). To be sure, not everything is rinsed out of Beloved's mind: Sethe, and her earrings, are very much there, as is the scene of separation, and the boat full of half dead, half dying slaves, from which her mother escaped into the water. If I may phrase the point somewhat paradoxically, the problem is not that Beloved does not remember the

past, but that she does not remember it *as a past*: “it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching . . . it is the crouching that is now always now” (210–11). Such an obliteration of temporality negates (personal) history and memory as memory.¹⁴ “Those who cannot remember their past,” says Santayana, “are condemned to re-live it.” And *Beloved* relives her past by returning, by being reborn into the world, but not into a substantial self.

Beloved's lack of self has an objective correlative in physical fragmentation. On losing a tooth, she thinks:

This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up one day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams: exploding and being swallowed. When her tooth came out—an odd fragment, last in the row—she thought it was starting. (133)¹⁵

This experience of the “body in pieces”¹⁶ is the inverse of the association established elsewhere in the novel between an integration of parts and a claiming of the self. When Baby Suggs discovers her freedom, for example, she also discovers that parts of her body cohere into a whole—the whole being her newborn free self: “But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, ‘These hands belong to me. These my hands.’” Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing” (141). Sethe similarly links the stirring of memory (in spite of its painful aspects) with a regaining of the body: “Paul D dug it up, gave her back her body, kissed her

divided back, stirred her rememory, and brought her more news” (189). And the connection between such integration and love is also emphasized by Paul’s memory of Sixo’s attitude toward 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” (272–73).¹⁷ While remembering the past is associated with re-mem-bering the body, its disre-mem-bering is mirrored by physical dismem-bering.¹⁸

An additional aspect of an unintegrated self is the lack of disso-ciation between it and an other.¹⁹ Beloved experiences herself as indistinct from Sethe: “I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too” (210). The fusion is often reenacted by the pronouns “my” and “mine” in ex-pressions like “my face” or “the face which is mine,” which in the context can mean at least three things: her face, which resembles mine; her face, which belongs to me, since she is my mother; my face, which is on her shoulders. The following is one example of many:

I drop the food and break into pieces she took my face away
there is no one to want me to say my name . . .
. . . I see her face which is mine . . . I have to have my face . . .
I follow her we are in the diamonds which are her earrings
now my face is coming I have to have it I am looking for
the join . . . now I am her face my own face has left me . . . I
want to be the two of us . . . I want the join. (212–13)²⁰

Note the association between fusion and fragmentation. Since for Beloved, she and Sethe are one, her mother’s disappearance leaves her without her own face. Looking for the join is therefore both a desire to integrate fragmented parts of herself and a longing to re-unite with Sethe, a reunion that culminates in expressions like “You are my face, you are me” (216); “Why did you leave me

who am you" (*ibid.*); or "Will we smile at me?" (*ibid.*). A self that is totally dependent on fusion with another is neither a distinct unit (a self of one's own) nor a unified whole (an unfragmented self, or in-dividuum). In short, it is not really a self.

At the end of the novel, *Beloved*, who could not remember, is disremembered by others (as well as dismembered); she who had a claim, but could not claim herself, is unclaimed by anyone, and all traces of her disappear into the weather: "Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has a claim, she is not claimed. In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away" (274). *Beloved* is swallowed away. And her story? Her own story she could not narrate, but even stories made up about her cease after a while. A story of one who is reborn without ever being born into a self is as insubstantial as the creature who "wander[s] out of the yard just the way she wandered in" (67).

Some might object that I make too much of *Beloved's* insubstantiality, which could be seen as part and parcel of her supernatural mode of existence instead of as an indication of her incapacity to gain access to a self. Indeed, my whole comparison between *Denver* and *Beloved* might be questioned on the grounds of the difference in their ontological status. However, I would argue that *Beloved* is not unambiguously supernatural. There are enough clues in the novel for a "natural" reading and hence for a "legitimate" comparison between her and *Denver*. The ambiguity of *Beloved's* mode of existence, however, goes far beyond legitimating the comparison between *Denver's* success and *Beloved's* failure in crystallizing a self. This ambiguity is crucial both for the novel's problematization of the possibility of gaining access to reality and for its tentative retrieval of representation. Here again,

as in the case of narrative levels, *Beloved* uses destabilizing modernist and postmodernist strategies to re-engage with reality.

Since 1990, when the first version of this chapter was written, numerous critics have explored *Beloved*'s identity in ways that partly overlap with mine. I will therefore start by outlining the main directions of the later studies, subsequently sharpening my own emphases within this context. Many studies discuss the enigmatic title character as a double symbol, operating simultaneously on a personal (or psychological) and a collective level. On the personal level, *Beloved* is variously seen as a condensation of Sethe's daughter and her African mother (Horvitz 1989, 158); a projection of the needs and desires of the other characters (Wilt 1989, 161–62); the return of the repressed (Ferguson 1991, 113); "the incarnated memory of Sethe's guilt" (Rushdy 1992, 578); the pre-Oedipal child who desires a merger with her mother (Wyatt 1993, 480); and "all the babies in the womb" (Homans 1994, 10–11). On the collective level, most critics—with differences in nuance—interpret her as symbolic of "a whole lineage of people obliterated by slavery, beginning with the Africans who died on the Middle Passage" (Wyatt 1993, 474; see also Horvitz 1989, 157; Ferguson 1991, 115; Rushdy 1992, 571; Homans 1994, 10–11).

My own concern is much more elementary. I am puzzled by who *Beloved* is at the level of the events. An attempt to figure out the story seems to me logically and narratologically prior to symbolic interpretations, though it often invites these interpretations by the difficulties it presents. Is *Beloved* the flesh-and-blood reincarnation of Sethe's dead baby, the ghost returning as a person (a supernatural being), or a stranger who comes to 124 after horrendous tribulations, mistaking Sethe for her lost mother (a natural being)? Most critics explicitly or implicitly opt for one of the possibilities. Initially, reviewers conceived of *Beloved* as univocally supernatural (see Crouch 1987, Edwards 1987, Rumens 1987, and Thurman 1987). Many of the symbolic interpretations men-

tioned above take a similar view: Deborah Horvitz talks about “the powerful corporeal ghost” (1989, 157); Rebecca Ferguson, about “the supernatural at work in the ‘world of common reality’” (1991, 113); and Ashraf Rushdy, about a “ghost” and a “reincarnation” (1992, 571). Elizabeth House flies in the face of this consensus by developing an equally univocal but opposed interpretation. She sees the novel as “a story of two probable instances of mistaken identity” (1990, 22). *Beloved*, according to her, is not a supernatural being but a young woman who herself suffered the horrors of slavery (*ibid.*, 17) and who, haunted by the loss of her dead parents, comes to believe that Sethe is her mother. Analogously, Sethe’s longing for her dead daughter makes her rather easily convinced that *Beloved* is the child she has lost (*ibid.*, 22). The conflict between supernatural and natural interpretations seems to call for choice, but the novel renders choice impossible, offering supporting clues for both alternatives and maintaining an ambiguity that some critics recognize (e.g., Wilt 1990; FitzGerald 1993; Phelan 1993; Homans 1994) and which I would like to describe in detail now.

Many details dispersed throughout the novel support *Beloved*’s identity as a supernatural, flesh-and-blood reincarnation of Sethe’s dead baby. Most prominent perhaps is her name, which is not even a proper name. In the rebirth scene, it is *Beloved* who says her name, and Sethe’s reaction is unnerving: “Sethe was deeply touched by her sweet name; the remembrance of glittering headstone made her feel especially kindly toward her” (53). This somewhat cryptic remark becomes clearer at other points in the novel where we learn that “*Beloved*” was the one word Sethe had engraved on the tombstone of her dead baby (5, 184), a word for which she had to pay by yielding her body to the engraver.²¹ Another link between the returning *Beloved* and the dead baby is the “three vertical scratches on her forehead” (51), which Sethe later identifies as “my fingernail prints right there on your forehead for all the world to see. From when I held your head up, out in the

shed" (202–3). An even stronger connection is the scar on Beloved's neck, identical to the cut caused by the handsaw in the murder scene. The scar constitutes an indissoluble bond between Sethe and Beloved, a bond Denver experiences as exclusion: "But once Sethe had seen the scar, the tip of which Denver had been looking at whenever Beloved undressed . . . once Sethe saw it, fingered it and closed her eyes for a long time, the two of them cut Denver out of the games" (239; see also 120, 176). Similarly binding are the earrings, about which Beloved inquires very soon after her return: "Where your diamonds?" (58); and "Tell me your earrings" (63). "How did she know?" (*ibid.*) is both Sethe's and the reader's question, for Beloved's insistent interest in the earrings clearly suggests that she knew Sethe earlier. The earrings, we learn—crystal, not diamonds—were given to Sethe by her Kentucky lady as a wedding present (58), and she kept them through all her suffering. When she came to 124, Baby Suggs found them (94), and "Sethe jingled the earrings for the pleasure of the crawling already? girl, who reached for them over and over again" (*ibid.*). "Crawling already?" is an expression recurrently associated with the baby whom Sethe later murders, and Beloved's questions about the earrings may therefore be interpreted as memories of a far past to which she has now returned. She keeps emphasizing that she has come back in order to see Sethe's face (e.g., 75). (Incidentally, the earrings are no longer with Sethe, as the jailer has taken them to prevent her from harming herself [183].) The name, the scratches, the scar, and the earrings all lead up to the final click of recognition, which comes when Sethe hears Beloved softly humming a song Sethe herself had made up for her children (176). Beloved's acquaintance with a song that "nobody knows . . . but me and my children" (175) becomes for Sethe the final confirmation of Beloved's identity as the dead baby come back to life.

That the dead baby who first returned as a ghost has now come back in the flesh is unquestioningly accepted—though often re-

sented—by various characters in the novel, as is the supernatural character of her return. For example, Denver “was certain that Beloved was the white dress that had knelt with her mother in the keeping room, the true-to-life presence of the baby that had kept her company most of her life” (119); Paul D thinks, “But what if the girl was not a girl, but something in disguise?” (127); and Ella, who explicitly associates Beloved with the devil, “didn’t mind a little communication between the two worlds [as in the case of ghosts] but this [a return in the flesh] was an invasion” (257).

The invasion, I am afraid, cannot be so unquestioningly accepted by the reader, not because of a modern skepticism about supernatural events but because of conflicting evidence within the novel. Contradictions focus on two details: the separation between Beloved and Sethe, and the presence (or absence) of an iron circle around Sethe’s neck. Both in her monologue and elsewhere, Beloved remembers with acute pain how her mother jumped alone off a boat of dead and dying slaves on which they were crouching together: “they do not push her she goes in” (212; see also 75, 211–13). Sethe, on the other hand, has very different memories of the way she parted from her daughter (and sons) during the escape from Sweet Home: “When the signal for the train came, you all was the only ones ready. I couldn’t find Halle or nobody . . . So I sent you all to the wagon with the woman who waited in the corn” (197–98; see also 9–10, 159, 191). And when Sethe reaches Baby Suggs and 124, her “crawling already? girl” is there, having been rescued as planned. The two versions of this crucial event also involve Sethe’s earrings: According to Beloved, the earrings—the diamonds—were in the water Sethe jumped into (75, 211); according to Sethe—and it may be significant in this connection that she speaks of crystal rather than diamonds—they were with her until she reached 124.²²

The second contradiction concerns the presence or absence of an iron circle around Sethe’s neck.²³ Thus, Beloved: “The woman is there with the face I want the face that is mine . . . if I had the

teeth of the man who died on my face I would bite the circle around her neck” (211). In retrospect, this can illuminate her strange behavior and enigmatic explanation in the scene in the Clearing where Denver accuses her of having tried to strangle Sethe: “I kissed her neck. I didn’t choke it. The circle of iron choked it” (101). Confusingly, however, at no other point in the novel is there any mention of an iron circle around Sethe’s neck, and it is hard to imagine that such a humiliating and painful experience would not have come up in Sethe’s own memories.

These contradictions support a reading that may explain Beloved’s identity in a natural, rather than a supernatural, way. Is it possible to imagine that Beloved is not Sethe’s dead baby, not Sethe’s daughter at all, but the daughter of some other slave who had an iron circle round her neck and who jumped off the slave boat into the water, leaving her daughter behind, with an unquenchable yearning for her smile and her earrings? Is it then possible to imagine that the abandoned Beloved was taken over by some white man for his own purposes, as Sethe believes (119), and as Stamp Paid later suggests to Paul D: “Was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek. Found dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that’s her. Folks say he had her in there since she was a pup” (235; see also 215, 241). Could it be then that after the man’s death Beloved ran away, and, remembering something her mother had whispered about a house (213), she identifies it with 124, certain that she has come home to the woman who had left her? If this is a possible story, how do we explain Sethe’s, Denver’s, and Beloved’s conviction that the returning creature is Sethe’s dead baby? It seems to me—and I am glad to find a similar interpretation in House’s essay—that the conviction can be explained by the overwhelming emotional hunger all three share: Beloved’s hunger for her mother, for love, for “the join”; Sethe’s hunger for her daughter, for expiation; Denver’s hunger for company, for love, for someone who will help her wait for her daddy (208). This would be a non-supernatural version of

Beloved's story. And it is perhaps to leave room for such a reading that in the rebirth scene the extradiegetic narrator does not designate the returning creature as "Beloved," only as "the woman," thereby leaving her identity unverified.

Unlike House, I have no desire to suggest that the natural explanation is preferable to the supernatural one. On the contrary, I believe that the novel oscillates between these two alternatives in an insoluble ambiguity. In generic terms, and in Todorovian parlance, I am suggesting that the novel is neither Marvellous (as it would be in the supernatural reading) nor Strange (as it would be in the natural interpretation), but Fantastic (Todorov 1970).²⁴ In the language of James Phelan's rhetorical reader-response orientation, the phenomenon can be described as "the stubborn." As distinct from the difficult, which is "recalcitrance that yields to our explanatory efforts," the stubborn is "recalcitrance that will not yield" (1993, 714). *Beloved* is, according to him, "a paradigm case of the stubborn" (ibid.). The distinction, as well as the characterization of *Beloved* as "stubborn," makes experiential sense, but (as Phelan knows) it is also open to criticism on account of its relativism: What is stubborn for one reader may be only difficult for another. A description of structures like ambiguity, paradox, and the Fantastic may be one way of grounding the stubborn in the text, although from Phelan's point of view, this may be too objective-sounding, too grounded in the text and not sufficiently attuned to the experience of reading. Whether we remain with "the stubborn" or prefer "ambiguity," Phelan is quite right that an encounter with the phenomenon shifts the interpretive task "from explicating it to explaining the purpose of its recalcitrance" (ibid., 715).

What, then, are the purposes of the ambiguity (or stubbornness) surrounding *Beloved*'s mode of existence? One of Phelan's hypotheses is that the stubborn forces us to renounce a feeling of mastering the experience. "Us," in his essay, stands for "white male," and from this position he modestly says: "To presume

mastery here would be to flaunt my hubris" (721). It seems to me that the impossibility of mastering such an emotionally wrenching experience is not confined to white male readers. For similar or different reasons, African American readers probably find *Beloved* just as stubborn as white readers do, and the horrors of slavery just as ungraspable or unmasterable.

This leads me to speculate that one purpose of the ambiguity of *Beloved* is to dramatize the difficulty of gaining access to and making accessible an unbearable reality. After listening to a presentation of an earlier version of this chapter at Princeton (in 1990), Morrison suggested that the Fantastic status of the title character may be a displacement of what seems to Morrison much more central and much more unbelievable (fantastic in a nontechnical sense), namely "the slavery stuff" (her own words).²⁵ Reformulated in my terms, the ambiguity can be said to enact both the representational impetus and the obstacles it encounters.

That the obstacle in this case is at least partly psychological is hinted at by the notion of displacement. Elaborating on this, I would claim that the oscillation between the sensation of unreality (*Beloved* is not a "real" person) and the insistence of the traumatic events in the present (she has, nevertheless, returned as a flesh-and-blood creature) is a performative representation of the response to trauma on the part of the characters, the overall narrator, the author, and the reader. From this perspective, the unbelievability can be seen as a manifestation of denial, a characteristic defense mechanism against trauma. The intrusion of the horror, its lifelike return, enacts the obsession that is the obverse of the self-defensive response. The possibility of representation is thus riddled with ambivalence.

A similar ambivalence emerges in relation to narration. Its strongest manifestation, perhaps, is the "contradiction" between the recurrent assertion in the novel's last chapter, "It was not a story to pass on" (274–75), and the fact that this is precisely the