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Toni Morrison and William Faulkner's Verbose Ghosts

Solveig Dunkel

Toni Morrison, who published her first novel eight years after Faulkner's death in 1962, recognized the problematic legacy of Faulkner in her own work. In 1985, Morrison was invited to Oxford, Mississippi, as the keynote speaker for the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, centered that year around the polemical subject of "Faulkner and Women." The first words of Morrison's speech are telling: "I'm ambivalent about what I'm about to do" (Fowler and Abadie 295). Ambivalence is certainly the most appropriate term to define Morrison's literary relationship with Faulkner. At the end of her speech at the Yoknapatawpha Conference, Morrison addressed her complicated relation to Faulkner: "There was for me not only an academic interest in Faulkner, but in a very, very personal way, in a very personal way as a reader, William Faulkner had an enormous effect on me, an enormous effect" (*Conversations* 25). However, in the course of the Q&A that followed her speech and reading, she appeared to quickly backpedal by stating that "I'm not sure that he had any effect on my work" (*Conversations* 25), completely divorcing herself from Faulkner as a writer all the while acknowledging him still as a reader and a scholar. This stance can easily be understood: for a black writer with such an active stance against the insidious workings of racism, there is something inherently dangerous in being immediately categorized as being indebted to a white writer whose treatment of race has often been considered ambiguous. From a feminist perspective, Morrison was undoubtedly aware of the weight of being seen as merely emulating a white male writer, and especially "the patriarch of Southern literature," to quote Mary Ellen Snodgrass' *Encyclopedia of Southern Literature's* entry on Faulkner: "If Southern literature were to declare a patriarch, the title would go to William Faulkner" (Snodgrass 93). More generally, it could be said that Morrison suffered from the same burden as any "post-Faulknerian" novelist, as Flannery O'Connor famously phrased it: "The presence alone

of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down" (O'Connor 45). Throughout her literary career, Morrison has simultaneously worked against and with the current created by the Dixie Limited, recognizing while resisting the Faulknerian heritage on her work. Yet, it remains clear that their works actively resonate with each other. Perhaps signaling the influence of Faulkner on her work, it is at this 1985 Yoknapatawpha Conference that Morrison read the first pages of her then unfinished novel, *Beloved*.

The intertextual relationship between Faulkner and Morrison has rapidly caught the attention of critics. The collection *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned*, edited by Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross, and Judith Bryant Wittenberg in 1997, proposes an in-depth analysis of Morrison and Faulkner's complex literary relationship. The title of Alessandra Vendrame's article raises the controversial question: "Toni Morrison: A Faulknerian Novelist?" (1997). Schreiber's *Subversive Voices: Eroticizing the Other in William Faulkner and Toni Morrison* (2001) examines identity and race through the prism of Jacques Lacan's theories. Similarly, a whole section dedicated to Faulkner is featured in Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu's *Toni Morrison Encyclopedia* (2003). Parallels between *As I Lay Dying* and *Beloved* have been drawn, especially by Karla F. C. Holloway's chapter in *Unflinching Gaze*, "Narrative Time/Spiritual Text: *Beloved* and *As I Lay Dying*," in which she argues that *As I Lay Dying* and *Beloved* are both narratives, which "privilege dissonance and violence in the telling of their stories" (*Unflinching Gaze* 92), by focusing on the shared spiritual and narrative space of the two novels. In the brilliant book *Dead Women Talking*, Brian Norman analyzes the omnipresence of dead women in American literature, and dedicates two separate chapters to Addie and *Beloved*. Although the peculiar resonance between *As I Lay Dying* and *Beloved* has been previously noticed and commented upon, I would like to contribute to the conversation on these two novels by adding that the linguistic insubordination and the poetic power of the dead voices of these two ghosts mark the climax of the literary relationship between Faulkner and Morrison, by focusing specifically on the monologues dedicated to their voices.

Indeed, these two novels appear to hold a dialogue on a variety of issues. It is undeniable that Faulkner and Morrison share several key interests, as for instance the past's hold on the present, as Faulkner famously phrased it in *Requiem for a Nun*: "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (85). The concept of a backward-looking present is similarly vital to Morrison's fiction. Perhaps indicating once again the influence of Faulkner on her own work, she has stated that "there is infinitely more past than there is future. . . . The past is infinite. I don't know if the future is, but I know the past is" (*Conversations* 27). The indefinite and infinite past is constantly intruding

into the present, *haunting* it; the present hence becomes this in-between, liminal state caught in the backwash of the waves of the past. Jacques Derrida famously coined the term “hauntology” in *Spectres of Marx* (1993), a neologism he used to describe this unstable ontology. The present, according to the logic of hauntology, is replaced by the figure of the ghost, which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive. When this concept is applied to the fiction of these two authors, two novels immediately jump to mind. Indeed, both Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) obey the spectral logic of hauntology, according to which there is no reality that is not also an experience of being haunted. More specifically, this idea is personified by two specific characters, Addie Bundren and Beloved, as the two novels center on a dead female figure who manages to find her way and her voice back from the dead into the novel.¹

As I Lay Dying and *Beloved* are comparable in numerous aspects. They both tell the story of a family tragedy, and they are two stories of mourning. They relate the death of the mother and the death of the daughter respectively, and the journey the survivors have to take in order to survive the void left by their absence. In the Foreword to *Beloved*, Morrison addresses the fact that her novel was based on the real-life story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who killed her daughter rather than let her be returned to slavery. At first, Morrison explains that she had reservations about writing this book, as using such a horrific true story would be like inviting the readers “into the repellant landscape” of slavery, something like “pitch(ing) a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocable ghosts” (*Beloved* xi). For Faulkner scholars, the expression “highly vocable ghosts” is oddly familiar with the very first pages of *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which Quentin Compson describes the “deep South” as being “dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts” (*Absalom, Absalom!* 4). If *Absalom, Absalom!* is concerned with the difficulty of telling the dead past, *As I Lay Dying* gives a direct voice to the dead. In both the latter and *Beloved*, ghosts are “vocable” and “garrulous,” incapable of remaining silent. Indeed, in *As I Lay Dying* and *Beloved* alike, ghosts cannot—or maybe will not—stop talking, and the two dead female characters cling to existence by desperately occupying textual space. In this way, the two novels orbit around an empty center, an absence, which finally turns out to be the problematic manifestation of a presence.

By no means am I suggesting that Morrison exclusively drew her inspiration from Addie Bundren when she wrote *Beloved*. The network of inspiration for Morrison’s novel is obviously extremely complex, and it would be a mistake to consider *Beloved* as exclusively influenced by Faulkner’s writing, or as a reaction to it. However, as John N. Duvall has suggested,

¹Karla F. C. Holloway writes in her chapter in *Unflinching Gaze* that Morrison and Faulkner had a “shared understanding of the reach of violence” (*Unflinching Gaze* 96). This violence, for me, is primarily translated into the voices of these dead women.

arguing for an intertextual relationship between Morrison's and Faulkner's fiction does not require granting Faulkner's the status of master text. . . . The notion of intertextuality, with its emphasis on the infinitely resonating signification of language, means that one can validly read not only Faulkner's influence on Morrison, but also Morrison's influence on Faulkner, how her fiction and literary criticism may cause one to rethink Faulkner in a fundamental way. (*Unflinching Gaze* 3–4)

In this way, I wish to contend that the character of Addie Bundren “haunts” *Beloved*, especially in her relationship to language. Therefore, I will study the thematic and aesthetic dialogue Faulkner and Morrison engage in on the subject of ghosts and their privileged relationship to textual space. The term “verbose” used in the title of this paper points in that direction. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “verbose” is an adjective referring to something “using an excessive number of words; writing or speaking at excessive length.” Undoubtedly, the way both Addie and *Beloved* appropriate language certainly is excessive. Excess is defined, according to the OED again, as “an amount of something that is more than *necessary, permitted, or desirable*” (emphasis added). This indicates the subversive quality in the appropriation of speech of these dead women, who talk when they are not supposed to, not allowed to, and not wanted to. Indeed, it seems that in their respective novels, Faulkner and Morrison attempt to give voice to those who, by definition, never talk: the dead. In this way, *As I Lay Dying* and *Beloved* are marked by a similar will to create a space to let those who have been silenced speak.² And indeed, is there something quieter than the dead?³ Strikingly, in these two novels, published almost sixty years apart, the two dead women are given monologues to express themselves. Both characters’ voices come from beyond the grave (and the fact that they are both women is significant), and their voices act as the catalysts of the voicing of what used to be unspeakable.

The Bodies of/in The Text

In *Dead Woman Talking*, Brian Norman analyzed the figure of the dead woman coming back to life as a leitmotiv in American literature: Edgar

²I used, in my first draft for this essay, the term “subaltern” to refer to Addie and *Beloved*, in reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. However, while *Beloved* is an appropriate illustration of the concept of “subaltern,” using this term to refer to Addie, a white woman, would be reducing the notion to something it is not. Indeed, as Spivak herself stated, “*subaltern* is not just a classy word for ‘oppressed,’ for (the) Other, for somebody who’s not getting a piece of the pie... In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern — a space of difference. Now, who would say that’s just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It’s not subaltern” (Spivak 46).

³The notion of the South being marked by undeadness has garnered much critical attention recently. For instance, the collection *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture* takes a look at manifold forms of southern haunting.

Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, and Tony Kushner, to name just a few, feature dead women in their works. However, Faulkner, and Morrison in his wake, seem to walk a different path from the canon. Defining Addie and Beloved as ghosts is an approximation at best.⁴ There are no traditional, or perhaps conventional, ghosts in Faulkner and Morrison's works. They *do* have a body. For Addie, it is the slowly rotting corpse enclosed in her coffin. For Beloved, the supposed incarnation of the baby-girl whose throat Sethe slit to save her from slavery, it is the strangely adult body bearing a scar across her neck. Therefore, as opposed to the traditional figure of the ghost, it is not the lack of bodies that is so horrific for them, it is not their disembodiment; Beloved's and Addie's bodies *are* the problem. The stench of Addie's decaying corpse turns into a health hazard for the other characters, while the sudden apparition of Beloved's strange adult body terrorizes the community and challenges the boundaries between the living and the dead, but also between propriety and a socially-unacceptable female sexuality. Indeed, if a ghost is traditionally defined as an incorporeal being, Addie and Beloved are not disembodied—they do have a body, and a demanding one at that.

In that respect, Addie and Beloved, who also resist the definition of corpses, challenge the very notion of body. Both novels emphasize heavily the fact that the bodies of the dead women have been mutilated, perforated. In *As I Lay Dying*, Vardaman, Addie's youngest son, starts to obsess over the fact that his mother cannot breathe through her coffin. In a desperate attempt to see her face in the coffin, the little boy bores holes in the coffin, accidentally mutilating the head of the corpse. In the same way, Beloved's adult body is said to bear scars on her forehead and on her throat, "the little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-coo place under her chin" (*Beloved* 281), the stigmata left by Sethe's assault.

These corporeal degradations, however, are not confined to the body, as they seem to infect the voices of the dead women. As soon as the ghosts start talking, the sentences and paragraphs appear perforated, and the fabric of the text becomes full of holes, as if it were decomposing too. Addie's famous ghostly monologue is split open by a single void: in a meandering

⁴The resurgence of Addie and Beloved's voices, in a way, creates a crisis of nomenclature, of categorization. Even the word "ghost" seems reductive and limited as a way to describe them. Are they poltergeists? Zombies? It is impossible to say clearly. On top of that, whether they are actually dead is up for debate. Is Beloved an incarnation of the murdered daughter, or the traumatized young woman who just escaped the house where she was repeatedly raped, as the novel also suggests? Does Addie talk from her coffin, or is this a fragment of thoughts from before her death? The very name of Beloved (which is both the name of the character and the "name" of the novel) exemplifies the idea of a crisis of nomenclature. In the Garner case, the name of the slain daughter is almost never mentioned: the case was used by abolitionists and pro-slavery activists alike, but the dead daughter was never the focus of the interpretation—she was a symbol. The fact that Morrison made Beloved the focus of her novel is significant. Sethe is the main protagonist, indeed, but the novel bears the name of the daughter, as if the novel acted as her headstone. But it is not her real name either—it is the only word that Sethe could have engraved on her daughter's tomb, and her real name has been erased: from the headstone, from the novel and from history.

sentence, Addie describes herself thinking: "I would think: The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a " (AILD 100). This hole, this silence, represents what Addie cannot put into words, her perforated hymen that took away from her the status of virgin. It encompasses the fallibility of language, the failed relationship between signifier and signified. Indeed, words in Addie's monologue are "just the *gaps* in people's *lacks*" (AILD 101, my italics); language, in that way, is similar to a black hole (or should we say white hole?) of meaning, and through the accumulation of images referring to nothingness, the word becomes a hole in a hole. Words are then nothing but smoke and mirrors, concealing the emptiness of meaning. Using John T. Matthews's analysis of Faulkner's deliberate use of ellipses in *Sanctuary*, when Addie is about to reveal a primal information, "the text simply goes blank" (Matthews 249). However, if ellipses for Horace Benbow are used to displace his incestuous urge, "the impossibility of representing natural relations that precede language" (Matthews 248), Addie's blank space encompasses her incapacity, or maybe even her refusal, to use words that would fail to "embody" her flesh.

It seems that fragmentation, which is much more systematic in Beloved's two monologues, points in the same direction. Consider how a portion of the first chapter narrated by Beloved illustrates the process of fragmentation at work, keeping in mind that this trope is carried throughout her entire section:

now we cannot his teeth are pretty white points someone
is trembling I can feel it over here he is fighting hard to leave his
body which is a small bird trembling there is no room to tremble
so he is not able to die my own dead man is pulled away from
my face I miss his pretty white points (Beloved 249)

The novel as well as the character of Beloved struggles with the need to "rememory" the trauma of slavery, and the very impossibility of finding a language that will be able to contain the overwhelming and overbearing past. In this way, Beloved is the proverbial skeleton in the closet—she embodies the past that the community desperately tries to keep in the darkness, either out of shame (she is, after all, a victim of infanticide) or out of necessity (from a psychoanalytic perspective, in order to survive, the painful memories are automatically kept at bay and repressed). The holes in the text of Beloved's monologues suggest the motif of bodily fragmentation and its imposition onto voice. Despite a common reflection upon the unavoidable limitedness of language to say the truth, both *As I Lay Dying* and *Beloved* highlight the same paradox: despite being limited, language is the only medium enabling expression. The voids leave the readers in the unstable position of trying to mend the holes in the fabric of the text. The body is both narrated and narrating, and the corpse becomes the para-

doxical impetus for the production of voice and text. These voids could be interpreted as the symptom of a failure—a failure to put one's experience into words, a failure to establish the voice of two figures of oppression into a textual presence as strong as the other characters (a point that I will develop later). However, while they denounce the ineffectiveness of language, these impossible voices can still be heard. Perhaps that is exactly why Faulkner and Morrison favored these dead speaking subjects: it seems that it is the acceptance of the limitations of language that enables, through these paradoxical speaking subjects, the unspeakable to be voiced. Brian Norman, in the subtitle of his book *Dead Women Talking*, describes the numerous characters of dead women talking as “figures of injustice in American literature.” Norman explains:

Inside literary worlds, . . . dead women need not wait for a discerning listener attentive to the indirect and unexpected, nor must they accept the passivity their deceased status entails. They can speak for themselves. In doing so, they raise questions about gender and voice, sexual violence and nonnormative sexuality, class privilege and cross-class contact, reparations for past racial injustices, . . . among other pressing concerns. (Norman 2)

Ghosts then become the spokespersons (or should we say spokeswomen?) for issues that refuse to stay silent.

Voicing The “Unspeakable Things, Unspoken”

The parallels I propose to draw between these two novels hinge in large part because *As I Lay Dying* and *Beloved* share a crucial similarity in terms of form. In the two novels, published almost sixty years apart, the two dead women are given monologues, which endows them with a voice and a self, as those two characters who are simultaneously peripheral and central seize the control of focalization. Faulkner gave Addie one section in the very heart of *As I Lay Dying*, while Morrison gave two chapters to *Beloved* at the beginning of the final part of the novel. In both cases, these moments suggest a desire to give voice to those who never talk: the dead. The dead then become a metaphor for the silenced subjects in general, may they be the enslaved, women, members of the rural working class, or mothers.⁵ It is not my intention here to deny the significant differences among these groups. However, a shared feature between them is undoubtedly their rejection from the dominant discourses, and a forced silence.

Addie's posthumous soliloquy, for instance, appears as a safe space for a mother to express what still remains a taboo of the highest order:

⁵“The mother” is undoubtedly a silenced subject, who has been long ignored by critical discourse, and whom feminist critic Tania Modleski refers to as “the traditionally mute body” (48).

the resentment, or even hatred, of motherhood.⁶ Her section reveals a torrent of bitterness and resentment, a profoundly transgressive statement in Faulkner's early twentieth-century South, which was still imbued with the Victorian cult of domesticity and the figure of the mother as the "Angel in the House."⁷ Motherhood is for her the unbearable intrusion that "violated" her "aloneness," an intrusion of the worst kind: "Then I found that I had Darl. At first I would not believe it. Then I believed that I would kill Anse" (172). This depiction of a mother is remarkable on numerous levels; even in fiction, it remains rare to see a female character, a mother especially, express so unapologetically such a wide array of emotions without being turned into a monster, a Medea-type of character. Addie is undoubtedly a complex character, expressing even her basest sadomasochistic desires, for instance in her treatment of her students who could be considered as replacement for her children: "I would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh" (170). Addie's monologue hence enables her to voice the unspeakable, the truths that she could never have spoken during her life. Addie's rejection of language is closely connected to her rejection of her children, as motherhood seems to strip her of her role as a speaking subject: "When he was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not" (171–72). The monologue enables Addie to carve her own space for self-expression, amid the cacophony of voices in the novel. After the last words of her section, "salvation is just words too," she can finally "(lay) calm in the slow silence" and, as her father put it, "get ready to die" (176). Perhaps this is what the title hints at: the gerund form suggests that death is an ongoing process, and the subtle play on the forms "lay" and "dying" seems to signify that even death can be

⁶The question of women refusing or regretting having children has only been recently analyzed by sociologists and authors. After all, isn't mother love the most unconditional form of love? Israeli sociologist Orna Donath's *Regretting Motherhood: A Study* (2015) is based on interviews with twenty-three Israeli mothers who, while loving their children, regret having had them, hence questioning the sacralized status of motherhood. Donath argues that while motherhood may be a source of fulfillment and joy, it may simultaneously be a realm of helplessness, frustration and subordination. "There is only one answer society tolerates from mothers to the question of motherhood," Donath writes. "I love it" (Donath 40). The following excerpt, interestingly, is significant when applied to Addie:

"The use of the idea of maternal love has become a form of oppression, because it dictates specific requirements that engineer women's emotional worlds and mothers' relationship with their children: they must feel unconditional love toward their children, and they must exhibit this love in a "proper" manner. A failure to meet these requirements may serve as testimony to a mother's immorality and may suggest that she is unfit to be a mother." (Donath 113)

The situation of Israeli mothers is, of course, different from the one of American mothers. However, Donath's study raised a world-wide debate about the meaning of motherhood, especially in Germany and the United States, as the hashtag #regrettingmotherhood became viral on Twitter.

⁷Daniel Singal, in *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*, explains that "Victorian moralism was reinforced wherever (Faulkner) turned in his remote southern community until it had become a basic, ineradicable component of his being" (2).

countered linguistically. Just like “salvation” (which can be read as a synonym for death) “is just words,” Addie’s death happens textually only when her voice disappears. Only then does she stop being a talking corpse; only then Addie does not “lay dying” anymore but “lies dead.” This illustrates perfectly the impossible nature of the spectral voice, the voicelessness of it that still can be “heard,” as the ghost is able to voice her own death, to say “I am dead,” a fact Derrida commented upon in his analysis of Maurice Blanchot’s *L’instant de ma mort* (*The Instant of My Death*): “I cannot say, according to common sense, should not be able to say: I die or I am dead. If there is a place or an instance in which there is no witness for the witness or where no one is witness for the witness, it would be death” (Blanchot and Derrida 46). Undoubtedly, both Morrison and Faulkner establish a sense of agency in death. Addie and Beloved are active in death, while they were profoundly passive in life. Addie was stuck in a loveless marriage that stripped her of her independence and role as a speaking subject, while Beloved was killed before being able to pronounce her first words. When Addie and Beloved take over the narrative voice, they do not merely make their voices heard, they also profoundly transform the novels as soon as they are done talking. Therefore, the events which precede and follow their sections are shaped and reshaped by the intrusion of the voice of the ghost, which radically changes the understanding of the reader over the whole text.

In a very similar way to Addie, Beloved’s presence is a medium, the catalyst which permits her to express “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (*Beloved* 235). Morrison displayed an interest in the act of voicing the unspeakable throughout her career. In 1988, she delivered a speech at the University of Michigan entitled “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” which would later be published in *The Michigan Quarterly Review*. Beloved’s appearance into the narrative enables the possibility of speaking again for those surrounding her, as Beloved and “her thirst for hearing” (*Beloved* 58) is desperate to listen to stories from Sethe’s past: “Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable” (*Beloved* 69). Before the intrusion of Beloved into Sethe’s household, the past was buried under layers and layers of silence, and even communication was based on silence, as “they had agreed without saying.” But with Beloved’s appearance and her appetite for words, what used to be unspeakable, or even “lost,” can finally be expressed, despite all the suffering brought to the surface. The pain that comes with the resurgence of the horrors of the past is inevitable. After all, as Amy explains it as she is about to massage Sethe’s damaged feet during her escape from the plantation: “It’s gonna hurt, now. . . . Anything dead coming back to life hurts”

(*Beloved* 42). Just like the forgotten traumatic past is brought back to life by being told, *Beloved* is conjured into existence; she embodies (quite literally) the need to put into words the horror of the experience of slavery. *Beloved*'s fractured monologue displays a traumatized language and a traumatized existence. The repetitiveness, the dislocation of linguistic logic, the disturbing poetic visions of men without skin and dead bodies floating, convey a primal experience of fragmentation. *Beloved* displays the impossibility of telling the horrors of slavery in a simple, straightforward manner: as she simply asks at the beginning of her first monologue, "how can I say things that are pictures" (*Beloved* 248). Indeed, how can one put into words the traumatic flashes of the past? Trauma theory reveals the crisis of representation at the core of any attempt at describing trauma, encompassed in Cathy Caruth's image of the "wounded voice" (Caruth 1). *Beloved*'s sections are indeed haunted by the inescapable ghost of slavery and bring an appropriate illustration of the motif of the ghost in this disjointed, "holed" prose relying on what is present (the text) and what is absent (the numerous blank spaces), the visible and the invisible. The spectrality of her voice linguistically relies on the "absent presence" of the numerous ellipses.⁸

What is the role of ghosts in literature? When there is no one to talk *per se*, language is liberated from its corporeal confines and can reveal what could not be put into words. Literature is spectral by essence, as a disembodied voice of the author reaches the readers through the pages. Books' pages are full of ghosts and their cacophony of voices. Characters exist without flesh and only through voice. The narrative presence shapes the telling of the story. Any literary text ventriloquizes, and it seems that its primary consequence is to make voices heard. To read, in this way, is to be exposed to the spectrality of the text. The ghost, therefore, appears as the perfect literary figure to express the ineffable.

Containing the Voices

Despite the numerous resonances between *As I Lay Dying* and *Beloved*, the two narratives have very different ways of handling the space the dead voices occupy. One of the main concerns of both novels is how much space these dead women take. Indeed, as the stories unfold, they take more and more space, as both of their bodies swell. Addie, with the putrid process of human decomposition, turns into a health hazard for the other characters, who are horrified by the stench of her decaying corpse. The citizens of Mottson are all but run out of town because of the stench: "The wagon was stopped in front of Grummet's hardware store, with the ladies all scattering

⁸See Lurie for an insightful analysis of the difficulty of representing/telling trauma. In *American Obscurantism*, Lurie questions the idea that "history is simply unrepresentable due to its basis in trauma" (Lurie 6), and challenges the idea that literature and cinema are limited in their proficiency in conveying historical trauma.

up and down the street with handkerchiefs to their noses. . . Folks couldn't stand it. It had been dead eight days. . . . It must have been like a piece of rotten cheese coming into an ant-hill" (203). Beloved, for her part, starts to eat everything she can find and gets fatter and fatter throughout the novel, until her "basket-fat stomach" (*Beloved* 285) makes her look both pregnant and malnourished, grotesque and monstrous.

However, their voices are contained differently by the narrative. At first glance, Addie is isolated in *As I Lay Dying*, narratively and physically. Narratively, she is being surrounded and maybe even buried under the voices of the members of her family. Indeed, as opposed to the other members of the Bundren family, Addie only has one section. Addie's monologue, just like the others, is isolated, "hermetically sealed from the others," to use Calvin Bedient's expression (Bedient 65). Just like Addie's coffin appears physically in one of Tull's section, her voice is contained in the metaphorical box of her only section.⁹ However, this box could also be interpreted as the perfect shelter for someone whose "aloneness" has been "violated over and over each day" (AILD 99). Addie's box is a mark of alienation and estrangement, but it is also a sanctuary to protect her selfhood, which was threatened by her family during her life.

Of course, this does not mean that Addie is absent from the rest of *As I Lay Dying*. In the opening section of the novel, even though she is mostly silent, her presence is extremely palpable as she supervises Cash as he builds her coffin. She may even be the most tangible presence in the whole novel: the characters cannot get rid of the stench of her corpse, despite Darl's failed attempt to set the coffin on fire, and the specter of the dead mother comes back again and again in the other characters' monologues. But her presence in the rest of the novel is the creation of the other characters more than her own. In her posthumous soliloquy, finally isolated from her overbearing family, from "the terrible blood, the red bitter flood" (AILD 101), Addie can have the last word.

Where Addie is physically contained in the coffin and formally in her single monologue, Beloved's presence is fundamentally intrusive. As we learn from Ella in Morrison's novel: "As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place—shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such—Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, *but this was an invasion*" (*Beloved* 302, emphasis added). Beloved cannot be contained in a box, may it be a literal box (her coffin) or metaphorical one (a chapter), as she is present and talks in most of the novel. From the moment she enters the novel and Sethe's life, she tries to occupy as much space as possible. There is, on her part, a plain refusal to die: "I am not dead I am not" (*Beloved* 252). The baby ghost who comes back in an adult body is indeed a "greedy ghost" (*Beloved* 247). This greed is firstly

⁹A drawing of Addie's coffin appears on page 88, in the middle of Tull's description of it.

directed towards maternal love; Beloved's monologues are fraught with a variation of the same phrase, which climaxes in the very last lines of her second chapter:

I waited for you
You are mine
You are mine
You are mine (*Beloved* 256)

But this greed is also, and I would like to contend primarily, of a linguistic nature. Her two monologues, although sequential, are remarkable by way of their stylistic differences. The opening of Beloved's first monologue is marked by its child-like enunciation and shaky grammar: "I am Beloved and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket the leaves are not for her she fills the basket she opens the grass" (248). The first sentences of the second monologue seem to convey the same images, but Beloved's grasp on language strengthens: "I am Beloved and she is mine. Sethe is the one that picked flowers, yellow flowers in the place before the crouching. Took them away from their green leaves. They are on the quilt now where we sleep" (253). As opposed to the confusion and fragmentation of the first monologue, the sentences considerably lengthen in the second one. The holes in the text disappear, and the sentences grow longer, more assertive and tangible. It seems that Beloved's hold on the narrative grows stronger, until the prose wrenches itself into poetic form in free verse, a very expansive form visually. Similarly, Beloved starts to slowly eat everything in Sethe's house, akin to a parasite, or perhaps to an untreated abscess, which swells before it explodes. As her body gets bigger, she eats away at the textual space, sucking up the substance out of it.

Beloved's linguistic hunger is connected to her growing sexual appetites. She does not seduce Paul D as much as she simply demands sex: "I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name" (137). The hunger to be touched, the yearning for physical contact is intertwined with the desire for a linguistic recognition: "call me my name." This transgressive nature of Beloved's erotic desires echoes Addie's extramarital sexual relationship with Reverend Whitfield. By cheating on the husband she despises, Addie takes control of her own sexuality and is enabled to assert her own subjectivity through the simple-looking yet complex assertion "I would be I" (100) after having fulfilled her maternal "duty" (174). Addie equates her physical violation with a linguistic one: "(Anse) had a word, too. Love, he called it. . . . It was as though he had tricked me, hidden within a work like within a paper screen and struck me in the back through it" (172).

Ultimately, despite the numerous parallels I have tried to highlight, Addie and Beloved's voices have a fundamentally different function. Morrison, as opposed to Faulkner's purely fictional tale, takes roots in the historic reality of slavery, as *Beloved* was inspired by the Garner case. The epigraph of *Beloved*, "*Sixty Million and more*," a reference to the estimated number of victims of the Atlantic slave trade, suggests that the voice of Beloved is a collective voice. Indeed, her chapters are filled with oblique references to the Middle Passage: "small rats do not wait for us to sleep—someone is thrashing but there is no room" (248), "the bread is sea-colored," "she does not like the circle around her neck" (249). Hence, the ghost is the medium that gives voice to thousands of silent victims of slavery. In her sections, it almost seems that her voice is filled with static radio signals, where her "I" is actually a "we" in disguise. This is how Stamp Paid describes the voices from Sethe's house, which is inhabited by Sethe, Denver and Beloved, he can hear from the street:

What he heard, as he moved toward the porch, he didn't understand. Out on Bluestone Road he thought he heard a conflagration of hasty voices—loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom. The speech wasn't nonsensical, exactly, nor was it tongues. But something was wrong with the order of the words and he couldn't describe or cipher it to save his life. All he could make out was the word *mine*. The rest of it stayed outside his mind's reach. (202)

The "conflagration of hasty voices" comes from the three women inside the house, Sethe, Denver and Beloved. However, this passage implies that the nature of the voices in question is collective, a voice probably belonging to Beloved, with its odd syntax and the relentless repetition of the possessive pronoun "*mine*," representative of her childish possessiveness. This collective voice, chorus-like, sounds "loud, urgent, all speaking at once."

This participates in making the intertextual link between *As I Lay Dying* and *Beloved* so complex, as Morrison revisits and rewrites the figure of the talking ghost to open the discourse on the trauma of slavery. Ultimately, both novels express the need to create a counter-discourse for those who, generally, never talk: not just the dead, but also mothers, the rural working class, and the enslaved. Smothered voices are replaced by long-winded monologues, superbly elegiac. They do not simply enable the resurgence of voices, but gave their ghosts undeniable eloquence and poetic quality. Addie and Beloved are indeed two sides of the same coin. This is in fact the way Faulkner and Morrison's relationship actually often functions. The stories of these dead women are, on the one hand, a story of forced integration for Addie, who was made to be a mother while she wanted to remain alone; on the other hand, a story of forced exclusion for

Beloved, who was shunned from the community first by being murdered, then by being “exorcised” away from it again.

The voices of the dead women dwindle before vanishing. Their respective monologues end on a similar image, striking in its ambiguity, with a scene of nursing, where blood and milk mix, maternal love intermingled with pain. Addie, before quieting, describes herself nursing Jewel, the only child she loved unconditionally, before “getting ready to clean (her) house,” before getting ready to die: “With Jewel—I lay by the lamp, holding up my own head, watching him cap and suture it before he breathed—the wild blood boiled away and the sound of it ceased. Then there was only the milk, warm and calm, and I lying calm in the slow silence, getting ready to clean my house” (176). The symbiotic relationship between child and mother is embodied by the em dash which graphically links their two names (“Jewel—I”), reminiscent of a still uncut umbilical cord. However, the resurgence of the verb “lay,” famously featured in the title of the novel, in this specific passage is undoubtedly significant as it imbues this scene of motherly love towards a newborn baby with a death aura. The violence of “wild blood,” probably the same parental-filial blood which Addie described earlier in her monologue as “the terrible blood, the red bitter flood” (AILD 101), is finally stopped, boiled away like milk in a pot, leaving in its wake Addie’s long-desired “slow silence.” Quite tellingly, Beloved’s monologue similarly wrestles with the ambivalent feelings of hatred and love that haunt the mother-child relationship in both novels, by conjuring the two fluids embodying motherhood (milk) but also death (blood):

I drank your blood
I brought your milk
You forgot to smile
I loved you
You hurt me
You came back to me
You left me (*Beloved* 256)

In another representation of a symbiotic relationship between mother and child, the voice of the daughter seems to blend with her mother’s, as Beloved is the one who “came back to (Sethe).” The anaphoric alternation between “I” and “You” in this free verse poem, like a grim nursery rhyme in which the two speakers send accusations to each other, further blurs the distinctions between Sethe and Beloved. Blood and milk evoke a love that is tainted by violence, and the metaphoric umbilical cord is symbolically cut when the speaker states he was abandoned—however, it remains to be seen who, between mother and child, was abandoned by whom. On a similar image of bloody milk, Addie and Beloved’s monologues each come to a stop.

Morrison's complicated literary relationship with Faulkner sheds a new light on the statement with which she began her Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in 1993: "I entered this hall pleasantly haunted by those who have entered it before me" (Nobel). There is, after all, a pleasant way to be haunted. Perhaps Morrison was aware that by delivering her Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, she was already becoming herself a spectral presence in the literary canon, like Faulkner before her. For Faulkner and Morrison alike, literature is a privileged language that can give voice to silenced specters. After all, in his own Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in 1949, Faulkner had argued in favor of man's "inexhaustible voice":

It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last dingdong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. (William Faulkner's Banquet Speech)

Morrison understood and shared Faulkner's understanding of the inter-relatedness of violence, language and alienation, which is probably what she brought into her own work. In that way, *Beloved's* linguistic rebellion echoes Addie's, in a similar outburst of poetic energy.

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