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## Two Vashtis: Morrison's BELOVED and the Book of Esther

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In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison employs the story of Vashti, wife of King Xerxes of Persia, as told in the Old Testament Book of Esther. Morrison gives the name Vashti to a minor character in *Beloved*, the wife of Stamp Paid, who is taken by the master's son as a sexual partner. She is mentioned only twice in the novel, once by the narrator and once by Stamp. The connection of this character with the Vashti of the Old Testament, which demonstrates the biblical intertextuality so prevalent in Morrison's fiction, enriches the meaning of ownership and identity in the novel.

Morrison explains, "The Bible wasn't part of my reading, it was part of my life" (Ruas 97). It serves as a referent, argues Sharon Jessee, as Morrison incorporates "scriptural elements: parables, epigraphs, names, and so forth" in each of her novels (130). Patricia Hunt asserts that Morrison's works "[constitute] a theological discourse" in which "scripture has primary, not secondary, consequence" (3). Her novels "are inscribed theological, and therefore political, meditations which insist on liberation, community, and love as central principles for hope and life in this world" (Hunt 30).

At times her biblical allusions are overt, as in *Song of Solomon*, but others come with great subtlety, as does Vashti in *Beloved*. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie has offered an intriguing analysis of *Beloved*'s Vashti but identifies Gomer, the adulterous wife of Hosea, as her biblical antecedent. Names are highly significant in Morrison's works, and while a number of literary critics acknowledge the reference to Vashti of the Old Testament, a critical exploration of the significance of this naming has been lacking.

The Book of Esther opens with a weeklong royal banquet at which “the royal wine was abundant” and “each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished” (Esth. 1.7–8, *NIV*). On the final day of the banquet, King Xerxes called Queen Vashti to come to him wearing her royal crown “in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at” (1.11). The queen refused, infuriating Xerxes, who divorced Vashti and banished her from his kingdom.

Xerxes's command that his wife present herself to his guests adorned in her crown and fine robes was a great dishonor to Vashti. Bible commentator Matthew Henry explains, “He dishonoured himself as a husband, who ought to protect, but by no means expose, the modesty of his wife,” for “it was against the custom of the Persians for the women to appear in public, and he put a great hardship upon her when he did . . . command her to do so uncouth a thing, and make her a show” (643). Xerxes's concern is for the preservation of his own sense of honor and not for the welfare of his wife. Therefore, he punishes her with abandonment, a penalty of no small consequence in her day.

Just as Esther's Vashti is called to display herself in her crown, Morrison's Vashti must present herself ornamented in the mark of her master's authority, a cameo on a thin black ribbon. Queen Vashti's resistance was overt, refusing to bring shame upon herself before the audience of drunken guests, but Morrison's Vashti demonstrates her resistance more subtly. Though she presents herself when called, she does not wholly surrender to his authority; her allegiance remains with Stamp. Vashti “demanded [Stamp] stay alive. Otherwise where and to whom could she return when the boy was through” (Morrison 185). The notion of return is the essence of Vashti's exercise of power. If she has a husband and a home that belong to her, she retains the right of self-definition. Vashti preserves home as a site of contestation; by choosing her allegiance, she maintains ownership of herself and offers Stamp the means to do so as well. In affirming her own identity, Vashti also affirms Stamp's manhood. He is husband and home, safe haven and protector. While he cannot shield her from the young master's rape, he remains her link to dignity and humanity.

Vashti's resistance in Esther became the impetus for a royal decree that gave men dominion over their own families. But Stamp clearly lacks the authority that Xerxes mandated for all men, which inferentially affirms that within the system of slavery he is not a man. The young master, the beneficiary of a *de facto* decree that applies only to white men, exercises

a corrupted dominion over his household. All those under his authority are subject to his whim. But Stamp responds with his own decree: the declaration of his freedom.

Vashti interrogates the notion of ownership, differentiating between the ownership sanctioned by love and the ownership sanctioned by law and bill of sale. It is this lesson Stamp takes with him when he flees slavery. "Born Joshua," the narrator explains, "he renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master's son. Handed over in the sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself. . . . With that gift, he decided he didn't owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off" (184–85). With his debt paid, he escapes and begins "extending his debtlessness to other people" by ferrying them across the river and giving them "their own bill of sale" (185). Like the Joshua of the Old Testament, he is a liberator and a guide who conducts his people into freedom. Stamp tells Paul D, "Let me tell you how I got my name. . . . They called me Joshua," he said, 'I renamed myself,' he said, 'and I'm going to tell you why I did it,' and he told him about Vashti" (232). Stamp's renaming, and thereby his freedom, is intrinsically linked to his wife and her practice of self-definition and ownership.

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behavior even as he takes steps to preserve his moral autonomy. For it is Sam with whom Teddy is most identified throughout the play and whose physical breakdown can therefore be viewed as signifying his nephew's moral breakdown, as opposed to moral self-preservation. Teddy, Sam's "favourite" (62), lives and works in America, while Sam's very title, "Uncle Sam," as well as his job, driving Yankee businessmen around London (12), connects him with his nephew's country of refuge. Teddy married but apparently feared bringing his wife home to meet the family, although he finally does so for the first time after six years; whereas Sam never married, partly for fear of having to bring his bride home to meet the family, as the following exchange suggests:

*Max.* When you find the right girl, Sam, let your family know, don't forget, we'll give you a number one send-off, I promise you. You can bring her to live here, she can keep us all happy. We'd take it in turns to give her a walk round the park.

*Sam.* I wouldn't bring her here. (15)

After Teddy brings Ruth "home" from America, it is Sam, and only Sam, who insists that "[Teddy is Ruth's] lawful husband. She's his lawful wife" (69), when Max, Lenny, and Joey get the idea of keeping Ruth as their mother-cum-whore. And it is Ruth's coming to a business agreement with her father-in-law and brothers-in-law, together with Teddy's acceptance of that agreement, that in the end drives Sam to collapse: thus is he identified with the very man—his own nephew—who repudiates him.

—BERT CARDULLO, *University of Michigan*

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#### Morrison's BELOVED

Although critics have discussed the use of water imagery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), no critic has attempted to explain Morrison's unusual use of birds.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, birds represent the "free," the light, and the beautiful. They evoke the fanciful pastoral world of springtime. Powerfully, Morrison controverts this benevolent tradition by using birds to symbolize entrapment, terror, hatred, and insanity. Morrison catapults them from the tradition of the pastoral to the grotesque, to dramatize the horrors of slavery.

When Paul D. describes for Sethe what bothered him about his imprison-

ment, he does not describe the physical agony of the iron bit he was forced to wear in his mouth. Instead, he tells her about the mental torture of feeling trapped and having the rooster, Mister, whom he had helped to hatch, stare at him. Paul D. explains that "Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D. again, living or dead" (72). Contrasting Paul D.'s entrapment with the ordinary life of a rooster, Morrison strikingly emphasizes the brutality of slavery, in which men become less than barnyard beasts. The reference to Mister's being cooked ironically recalls the very real "baking" to death of Paul D.'s friend Sixo. The grotesquerie of the comparison of cooked chicken and boiled man disturbingly juxtaposes the ordinary with the unimaginable to poignantly reveal a world turned upside down.

The terror of this unnatural world is further revealed through the sound of doves, which Paul D. hears in the prison camp. At first, Paul D. hears the sound of real doves cooing in the morning light. However, as he kneels in line with the other prisoners, this pastoral morning scene of dew and doves is transformed into a surrealistic moment of terror, as the guards demand that the prisoners take their "breakfast" of semen (107). Watching his fellow prisoners' mouths on the guards' genitals, Paul D. compares the guards' "soft grunts" with the lithesome sound of the morning doves before retching, "vomiting up nothing at all" (108). Counterpoising the morning, the doves, the breakfast, the grunts and the vomiting, Morrison violently demonstrates the terror of the prisoners and vividly recreates the horror of this world for the reader.

Whereas Morrison transforms the dove, a traditional symbol of peace, into an emblem of terror, she converts the cardinal, a bird associated with love because of the fidelity of mated pairs, into an emblem of perverted love and hatred. The cardinal first appears in the novel when Beloved, the ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter, sees one in the woods, hopping from branch to branch. Beloved follows the "blood spot shifting in the leaves" until she can't see it anymore, but even then she turns around periodically "still hungry for another glimpse" (101). The transformation of the cardinal into a "blood spot" makes the bird into one of a number of images in the book that remind the reader of the red blood that spattered when Beloved's throat was hacked open by her mother Sethe. Beloved's sadistic love of her mother is betrayed by her hungering after this "blood spot." Representing a juxtaposition of desire and murder, this scene also reminds the reader of a similar hatred and desire enacted in the previous scene, when Beloved choked and then soothed her mother's throat.

Morrison adroitly uses a second reference to a cardinal to expose whites' hatred for blacks, even after slavery has ended. Tying up his boat, Stamp Paid

thinks he sees a cardinal feather, and he tugs at it: "what came loose in his hand was a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp" (180). In this case, the innocuous and benevolent bird feather is hideously transformed into a ribbon tied around a lynched black person's scalp. Stamp Paid's mistaking the bloody ribbon for a cardinal feather wrenchingly illustrates his incredulity at whites' hatred for blacks. As the cardinal feather "disappears," leaving only a symbol of hatred, the reader is shocked into asking, along with Stamp Paid, "What *are* these people? You tell me, Jesus. What *are* they?" (180). Taking the ribbon off the hair, Stamp Paid puts it in his pocket. Through the rest of the novel, he periodically strokes it to remind himself and the reader of the hatred menacing even "free" African Americans.

The effects of this hatred culminate in Sethe's murder of her infant daughter. Considered part animal by her master, Schoolteacher, Sethe ironically turns into an animal when he arrives at her house intending to invoke the Fugitive Slave Law to take her and her children back into slavery. Scooping up her children as she sees Schoolteacher coming, Sethe grabs a handsaw and rips off her infant daughter's head, spattering blood all over herself and the other children. Morrison again uses bird imagery to picture a scene of madness. Stamp Paid envisions Sethe becoming an avaricious bird of prey: "she flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws" (157). Transforming Sethe into a maddened, beastlike fiend, Morrison uses Stamp Paid's description of Sethe as hawk to show how the Schoolteacher causes Sethe to become the beast he always thought her.

Sethe, however, does not see herself as the beast. Instead, she describes her own growing insanity as the invasion of her mind by "Little hummingbirds [who] stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Simple. She just flew" (163). Unlike the other birds that appear in the novel, the images of Sethe as hawk and as someone beset by attacking hummingbirds are entirely illusory. Like the madness they dramatize, these bird images are used to depict a nightmare Stamp Paid and Sethe have no normal words to describe. The contrast of Stamp Paid's image of Sethe as a ruthless murdering hawk and Sethe's own description of her torment by needle pricks of delicately winged hummingbirds dramatically reveals the impossibility, the insanity, of the choice Sethe must make: to become the mad murderer of her child or else madly to allow herself and her children to be returned to slavery. Using the smallest of all birds to torment Sethe, Morrison ludicrously exacerbates the enormity of her horrible position.

The novel helps to unnerve its readers through the grotesque distortion of using birds in horrible, strange, and nightmarish scenarios. It is one measure of the novel's power that Morrison is able to turn images of nature into repre-

sentations of the psychic trauma of slavery. Birds in the novel may fly free, but it is not until the characters can free themselves from these images of terror that they can be free of the ghosts of slavery. Morrison, then, utilizes a grotesquerie of traditional images to imprint on her readers that tradition misrepresents the African American experience. To erase the insipid stereotypes of all slaves being as happy as Mammy or Uncle Remus, African American authors must subvert the complacent and the euphemistic, turning instead to using powerful shocks to portray the insanity of a reality that can force a mother to kill her child to set her free.

—VIRGINIA HEUMANN KEARNEY, *Woodway, Texas*

#### NOTE

1. See Anne Janine Morey's discussion of water imagery as freedom and Angel Carabi's suggestion that Morrison uses water as a metaphor for the joy and danger of rebirth.

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#### Coover's THE BABYSITTER

Robert Coover's short story "The Babysitter" is not fiction, but fiction(s). Coover presents to the reader all the expository information required of fiction: characters and action. However, it is an impossibility for the reader to organize the action(s) into a cohesive, linear plot; it is also undesirable. "The Babysitter" exploits the art of fiction, the notion of a story, to its full potential, exploding a given situation beyond the limits of linear plot and past the ordinary story-telling conventions of time and space. Coover's tale gives new meaning to reader response, as each permutation and possibility that exists in it is limited only by the imagination of the reader. Narrative development is at the reader's discretion; it is the reader who (re)writes Coover's fiction(s) "The Babysitter" as it is read.

The elements that are part of the basic expository information of "The Babysitter" are, in and of themselves, storytelling conventions. The situation of the story is simple and suburban: a schoolgirl comes to babysit for a couple, who go to a party. The main characters include the babysitter; the Tuck-



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### Morrison's **BELOVED**

In her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison describes various instances of physical displacement through motifs that connect the concept of having a self with the concept of having a home or "place." As critic Albena Busia notes in her discussion of black women's writings about the diaspora, a central motif is "an exploration of a sense of self through both personal and group history to the final end of articulating a narrative of the self with a clear sense of one's place among one's people, in an accepted or chosen location."<sup>1</sup> A narrative driven largely by geographical uprootedness, *Beloved* explores two kinds of journeys that exemplify Busia's claim: voluntary journeys, by which the characters seek to place and define themselves, and involuntary journeys, by which characters are *displaced* and thus stripped of their identities.

Given the fundamental loss of self that results from the inability to place oneself, Morrison's characters attempt to move from absence to presence. Baby Suggs, for example, moves from Kentucky, where she has only "a desolated center," a "self that was no self," to Ohio, where her heart beats for the first time.<sup>2</sup> Yet after Sethe joins her mother-in-law, Schoolteacher threatens to return Sethe and her children to slavery. Rather than allow the whites to displace them, Sethe attempts to send her whole family to "the other side" (241) by killing her children and herself. Though Sethe's intentions are good—she envisions "the other side" as an afterlife realm where her family will all be together in freedom—the effect for Beloved is a loss of self that resembles the loss of self slaves experienced when transported from Africa to "the other side" of the Atlantic, or when transported from Ohio to "the other side" of the river.<sup>3</sup> In each case, selflessness and loss of identity result, captured in part through Morrison's dismemberment motif. Sethe attempts to cut off Beloved's head with a handsaw; throughout her descriptions of the Middle Passage, Beloved laments "I am going to be in pieces" (212). The portions of the novel written from Beloved's point of view (210-17) describe acts of displacement through fragmented language, representative of Beloved's fractured self and the difficulty she faces in claiming an identity.<sup>4</sup>

Beloved, whose movement from absence to presence, from ghost to human, serves as a metaphor for the living character's journeys to freedom, attempts to define herself by making a voluntary journey into a state of being. Since her "becoming" hinges on finding a sense of home, Beloved strives to fill her place at the house on Bluestone road as Sethe's third child, the child who is as glaringly absent as the missing "3" in the house's numerical sequence, 1-2-4. Thus when Paul D. asks Beloved

why she came to 124, she replies, "This place. I was looking for this place I could be in" (66). Later, Denver questions Beloved about the place from which she came, a kind of netherworld that is in truth no place at all, since, in Edward Said's terms, it entails no sense of home, no sense of "belonging to or in a place."<sup>5</sup> Beloved answers Denver's questions about that other place by replying "I'm small in that place. I'm like this here" (75); when Denver begs her not to leave, Beloved says "No. Never. This is where I am" (76). In a similar moment, when Denver fears Beloved has indeed gone back to that other place, Beloved insists "I don't want that place. This the place I am" (123). Morrison's use of the verb "to be" in all these instances suggests not merely being in one location as opposed to another, but also that one needs a sense of place to have a sense of self. So when Beloved seems to be looking at another version of herself in the other place through the cracks in the wall, her eyes appear to Denver "to go to no place"; when Denver looks, "there is nothing but darkness there" (124). That other place is "no place" because there Beloved has no self: she is not.

When Beloved fears losing her newfound place at 124 and being forced back into the "no place" from which she came, Morrison again juxtaposes references to displacement and dismemberment to stress the profound link between place and self. In the novel's frequent references to a threesome (the three shadows holding hands on the day of the carnival, the three women skating on the pond), there is some tension as to who makes up the third member of the threesome—Paul D. or Beloved (49, 132, and 182). As a result, a rivalry over place springs up between the two, and the way Morrison describes the interaction between them recalls the involuntary displacement of blacks by white slave holders.

For example, when Beloved first comes to 124 in human form,

Paul D. decided to *place* her. Consult with the Negroes in town and find her her own place.

No sooner did he have the thought than Beloved strangled on one of the raisins she had picked out of the bread pudding. She fell backward and off the chair and thrashed around holding her throat.

(67, emphasis added)

Morrison links Paul's thought with Beloved's strangulation, as though there were a cause-effect logic at work. Beloved's choking will bring to the reader's mind images of the collars slaves were forced to wear during their displacement from Africa to America: in the description of the conditions in the ship's hold, Beloved refers repeatedly to the "circle around [another woman's] neck" (211). Beloved's clutching her throat also explicitly echoes Sethe's cutting her daughter's throat. Likewise, in a moment similar to the choking scene, after Paul D. has tried to "take

[Beloved's] *place* for himself" (104, emphasis added), Beloved loses a tooth and thinks "next it would be an arm, a hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop, maybe one at a time, maybe all at once . . . it is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips. . . . She could wake up any day and find herself in pieces" (133). Her sense of being, her wholeness as a person, depends on the ability to place herself; otherwise she threatens to "fly apart" (133).

Yet by linking both Paul D.'s and Sethe's treatment of Beloved with the white slave holders in the novel, Morrison suggests that the quest for self, for being at home in a place, must not mirror the way white characters use the concept of a centered self to construct and alienate the Other. By displacing Beloved, Sethe and Paul D. participate in a culture of domination. Likewise Beloved, in struggling to preserve her place at the house on Bluestone Road, begins to behave in "ugly ways" (242), first driving Paul D. away and later terrorizing Sethe. Morrison again links place and self when Beloved "places" Paul D.: he is "moved, placed where she wanted him. . . . [He] could not go or stay put where he wanted to in 124" (126); "long after he believed he had willed himself into being, at the very time and place he wanted to take root—she moved him" (226).

Unlike Paul D. and Sethe who grow as characters,<sup>6</sup> Beloved's quest for selfhood is circular. At the end she again "erupts into her separate parts" (274). The last anyone sees of her, she is "thunderblack and glistening" (262); a little boy spots her by the stream, "a naked woman with fish for hair" (267). These images recall Paul D.'s first impression of her: he "had the feeling a large, silver fish had slipped from his hands the minute he grabbed hold of its tail, that it was streaming back off into dark water now, gone but for the glistening marking of its route" (67). Morrison's imagery thus implies that Beloved has returned to her prior state. Likewise, the footprints that come and go down by the stream at the novel's end (275) echo the hand prints in the cake at its opening (3). Beloved, by this point, has served her purpose in forcing Sethe to come to terms with her past, and in forcing Paul D. to accept Sethe's past actions and move beyond them. She cannot now remain whole. Yet she still seems to persist in that ambiguous and disembodied state, even after "all trace is gone" (275): her name constitutes the last word of the novel, itself a kind of "glistening marking of her route" that serves as a reminder of those "sixty million and more" Beloveds to whom Morrison dedicates the novel.

—KATHERINE LEAKE, *Hampden-Sydney College*

## NOTES

1. Albenia P. B. Busia, "Words Whispered Over Voids: A Context for Black Women's Rebellious Voices in the Novel of the African Diaspora," *Studies in Black American Literature III: Black Feminist Criticism and Critical Theory*, eds. Joe Weixlmann and Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Greenwood, Florida: The Penkevill Publishing Co., 1988) 3.
2. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987) 147. All subsequent citations noted parenthetically.
3. Indeed, as Deborah Horvitz notes, "death and the Middle Passage evoke the same language. They are the same existence; both were experienced by the multiple-identified Beloved." See "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*," *Studies in American Fiction* 17.2 (Autumn 1989): 162. In addition to linking the Middle Passage and the world of the dead, Morrison's language also links these realms with slave life in Kentucky.
4. See also David Lawrence's article "Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*," *Studies in American Fiction* 19.2 (Autumn 1991), where he notes that "in the explorations of political power in the novel, ownership of body and authorship of language are shown to be insidiously linked . . . bodily and linguistic disempowerment frequently intersect" (190).
5. Describing a concept of space that allows for one's fully human identity to emerge, Said writes that when one considers "the notion of place," it is through the idea of culture itself that one can grasp "the range of meanings and ideas conveyed by the phrases *belonging to or in a place, being at home in a place*." He points out that to be "culturally disenfranchised" is to be "homeless," much like the disenfranchised Sethe has a "homeless mind" (202). See *The World, The Text and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1983) 8.
6. Most readers note that when Sethe sees Edward Bodwin driving down the road toward the house, she is reminded of the time Schoolteacher came to take her and her children back to Kentucky. Rather than attack her children, though, she attacks the white man, directing her anger in the appropriate fashion and thereby ridding the house of Beloved's spell. Paul D. recognizes his ill-treatment of Sethe and comes back to 124 to "take root," accepting the responsibility of home and place after his life of wandering.

## Kostelanetz's TRIBUTE TO HENRY FORD

Richard Kostelanetz's "Tribute to Henry Ford" (1968) is an enticing example of pictorial poetry whose evocations surpass the visual. The architectonics of "Tribute" stimulate reactions and generate meaning far beyond the merely eye-catching or sensory as soon as one recognizes the poem's symbiotic relationship of general to particular.

On one important level, for example, the composition depicts the letters T and A, badges of the early model cars created by Ford, travelling various four-lane highways. In frame 1, the model Ts, introduced in 1908, carelessly ride the yet unmarked roads of turn-of-the century America, roaring through the twenties. In frame 2, a far fewer number of model As, originated in 1928, come to a halt, forced to obey, one can infer, the newly instituted system of traffic lights. The funereal

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All seems to be resolved by the final triplet—but here too there are difficulties. The certainty of the English sonnet is undercut by the additional line. Just as each stanza has an “extra” line, so does this final “couplet.” Just when the reader’s ear tells him or her that the poem should end, it carries on. Arrival becomes departure again. However, in the same way that “arrival” and “departure” seemingly merge in the poem and lead to stasis, so this additional line simply repeats the rhyme of the two preceding lines. For all its talk of the possibilities offered by arrivals and departures, the final sense of the poem is of a life where change is forever attractive and yet forever elusive.

—PHILIP COX, *Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, England*

### Morrison’s **BELOVED**

Although Toni Morrison’s characters speak of being assigned names at random, as a novelist, Morrison is more precise in her choice of names than her characters suggest. In effect, she uses the technique of such nineteenth-century novelists as Dickens, James, and Melville in assigning characters names that contain clues to their identity and the novel’s thematic import.

This technique of characterization appears in Morrison’s choice of the name Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*. The name is derived from Egyptian and Hebraic mythologies. In Egyptian myth, the god Set, who murders his brother Osiris out of jealousy, is banished to the desert, where he commits other acts of atrocity. He is identified with destruction, alienation, and death (Campbell 424–26; Bernal 1.192). In the Old Testament, Seth is born to Adam and Eve after Cain murders Abel, reviving hope of God’s favor (Genesis 4:35).

The name of Morrison’s character, feminized by the addition of the final *e*, embodies ideas associated with both the god Set and the biblical Seth. Together they create a dialectic that Sethe must resolve before laying claim to the privileged position found in the novel’s epigraph: “I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved” (Romans 9:25).

More than a re-creation of selected events of the black experience during the American Reconstruction, *Beloved* depicts the human penchants for violence, despair, and guilt that must be eradicated before a new order is possible. Sethe’s murder of her infant daughter, although motivated by the conviction that slavery is worse than death, is nonetheless reprehensible. Unrepentant, she chooses alienation from the Black community rather than admitting the heinousness of

the murder and seeking forgiveness. That Sethe suffers from guilt and hopes to assuage it, however, is evident in her submission first to the antics of the mischievous baby ghost and later to Beloved's destructive revenge.

The consequence of Sethe's refusal to repent is denigration of herself and her daughter Denver. Embittered by the memory of her past, Sethe locks herself in a prison of illusions, represented in her yearning for reunion with Halle and her sons when such a reunion is impossible. Denver, because of the reclusive life into which Sethe has drawn her, becomes "secretive and self-manipulated . . . a timid but hard-hearted daughter" (99). Nor is escape from her self-imposed exile desired. Sethe, who has lived at 124 Bluestone since her escape from Sweet Home, rejects Paul D's suggestion that she move, even though upon entering the house for the first time he rightly identifies the infant's spirit with evil.

Sethe's resemblance to her Egyptian namesake rests in the will to self-destruction. Their combativeness confines them to a life of alienation—Set in the desert and Sethe at 124 Bluestone—a life from which no escape is possible without personal change. In the tales surrounding him, Set continues to commit acts associated with death and destruction. Sethe's identification with him negates the possibility of change. It is through her identification with the Hebraic Seth that Morrison finds the vehicle that permits Sethe to change.

The birth of Seth, whose name means "consolation," is perceived by Adam and Eve as a sign of God's love, a blessing. A son of repentant parents, he revives their hope of God's forgiveness. Throughout Hebraic mythology, Seth is virtuous, his descendants peaceful. In the history of salvation Seth is among God's chosen people (Graves and Patai 98–99; 102). Morrison associates Sethe in *Beloved* with love and blessedness from the time of her birth. In the narrator's account, Sethe's mother threw away all the infants fathered by white men. In contrast, she claims that Sethe was born of a black man whom she loved: "She put her arms around him" (62). We are told in the same passage that Sethe's mother left the white men's infants nameless—"Without names, she threw them"—but gave the black infant Sethe her father's name (62).

An offspring of loving parents, Sethe demonstrates her capacity for love throughout the novel. As a young woman at Sweet Home she loves Halle and their children. Her grief over Baby Suggs's death demonstrates Sethe's realization of the importance of love in the Black community, for love had been the foundation of Baby Suggs's preaching. Sethe's desire for Paul D reinforces her identification with love. Finally, her flight from the demonic Beloved, in favor of Ella's offer of reconciliation, represents Sethe's rejection of self-destruction in favor of communal love.

Unlike the god Set, Morrison's character chooses love over hate and freedom over enslavement to the past. The dialectic warring for dominance in Sethe is resolved when she accepts Paul D's invitation to shape a new future: "Me and

you, we got more yesterday than any body. We need some kind of tomorrow" (273). Her acceptance positions Sethe to become the new Beloved, who together with her people will usher in the new order promised in the novel's epigraph.

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#### Pynchon's ENTROPY

When Pynchon uses science for metaphor, it remains science, but with the full knowledge that science is, after all, a hypothetical construction of reality involving metaphor. (Siegel 82)

There is no use of the term *entropy*<sup>1</sup> in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and yet many critics (notably, Tony Tanner and Charles Harris<sup>2</sup>) believe that it is the single most important concept in Pynchon's literary universe; and they insist on applying it to almost every level—cultural, literary, historical, psychological, scientific, linguistic—of his writings. My contention is that this global fixation on entropy removes it from its contextual and metaphoric use in Pynchon's earlier work and distracts us from the playful complexity, not only of the books, but also of the story itself. In what follows, I will show that it is a mistake to interpret Pynchon's early use of the term as a straightforward declaration of an enduring doctrine, or even as his temporary belief.<sup>3</sup>

In the famous, early short story "Entropy," I will argue, Pynchon explores, on one hand, different uses of the term *entropy* in thermodynamics and in information theory and, on the other, the problems that follow from applying the concept to social, biological, and psychological systems. In my view, the story subverts the accepted understandings of both informational and thermodynamic entropy, revealing in the process the nihilistic narrowness of both those disciplinary spheres. Information theory presumes that the mind is like an IBM machine; and the thermodynamic application of the term *entropy* to "the uni-





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6. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1969) 6-7. Cf. Thomas Jemielitz, "Divine Derision and Scorn: The Hebrew Prophets as Satirists," *Cithara* 25 (1985): 47-65.

7. Wilbur (note 3 above) 233-34.

8. The grammatical ambiguity of the title of the poem that Wilbur seems deliberately to have retained as the final one in both his 1963 and 1988 collections of poems, "The Beautiful Changes," allows "beautiful" to be both an adjective modifying the noun "changes," as well as the subject of the verb "changes." The second reading is clearly the one demanded by lines 7-8 of that poem, but the ambiguity is one that controls "Advice to a Prophet," as well. Men must learn to accept change in itself as beautiful; but more significantly, change is the defining quality of beauty itself. As John P. Farrell demonstrates, "In general, Wilbur's poems envision two kinds of change, disintegrative and metamorphic. Wilbur suggests that a genuine reverence for life can be attained if one has the capacity to see beyond disintegrative change, into the metamorphic and regenerative life of the universe" (quoted in Salinger, note 1 above, 189).

9. On Wilbur's sacramental language, see Donald Hill, *Richard Wilbur, Twayne U.S. Authors* 117 (New York: Twayne, 1967) 131. In "Lying," one of Wilbur's *New Poems* (note 3 above), the speaker's admission that

In the strict sense, of course,  
We invent nothing, merely bearing witness  
To what each morning brings to light . . .

likewise precedes a catalog of simple realities that are "there before us; there before we look / Or fail to look; there to be seen or not" (lines 16-18, 27-28). Wilbur's poetry, Bruce Michelson rightly concludes, is not "visionary in the cruder sense," but is "a poetry of compassion . . . or of sympathy"; see his *Wilbur's Poetry: Music in a Scattering Time* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1991) 118-19.

### Morrison's BELOVED

That the title character of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a composite symbol is clear. Ample evidence supports Terry Otten's assertion that Beloved is "not just Sethe's dead child come to exact judgment, but also the representative of the 'Sixty million and More' [who died even before reaching America] to whom Morrison alludes in her headnote" (83). The text also suggests a third meaning: the possibility, voiced first by Sethe and later by Stamp Paid, that Beloved is a young woman who has only recently escaped captivity. The idea of Beloved as "wild child," or imprisoned closet child, does not diminish the other interpretations; it only adds to this story of memory, pain, and longing.

Basing her conclusion on the few details that Beloved can recall, Sethe initially believes that she was "locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes and never let out the door" (119). Stamp Paid's conversation with Paul D on the steps of The Church of the Holy Redeemer supports this version and provides specific details: "Was a girl locked up in the

house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer [the season of Beloved's arrival at 124 Bluestone] and the girl gone. Maybe that's her. Folks say he had her in there since she was a pup" (235).

Certain lines in Beloved's monologue and the chorus of the three women's voices toward the end of section 2 reinforce this view. For example, Beloved refers to "my dead man" (211-12). When Sethe reassures her that "[the men without skin] won't ever come back," Beloved says, "One of them was in the house I was in. He hurt me" (215). Moreover, her accusation against Sethe, here and in section 3, is not "You murdered me," but rather, "You left me."

It is significant that the very characteristics of Beloved that suggest that she is the incarnation of Sethe's infant daughter are also those of the classic wild child. Beloved accepts only liquids at first, then craves sugar, and has difficulty eating solid food (she chokes on a raisin [67]). She is incontinent. She is physically impaired: "She rest[s] her head in the palm of her hand as though it was too heavy for a neck alone," and "She can hardly walk without holding on to something" (56). Her voice is "low and rough." She spells her name "slowly as though the letters were being formed as she spoke them" (52). (Her use of the name "Beloved" here may simply be ironic. In section 3, she tells Sethe, "Ghosts without skin . . . said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light" [241].) It is only when she loses a tooth—"last in the row. . . . 'Must be a wisdom,' said Denver" (133)—that she finally cries, and then only at Denver's urging.

In "A Silent Childhood," Russ Rymer describes the wild child "Genie" who walked into a Los Angeles County welfare office in 1970. Imprisoned in a small bedroom from the age of twenty months, the thirteen-year-old girl

was incontinent, could not chew solid food and could hardly swallow, . . . and, according to some accounts, could not cry. . . . She had two nearly complete sets of teeth. . . . She could not hop, skip, climb, or do anything requiring the full extension of her limbs. . . . Her vocabulary comprised only a few words. . . . Her productive vocabulary—those words she could utter—was even more limited. . . . [T]ests had shown her to have, in general, the motor skills of a two-year-old. (42-43, 54)

Rymer also notes Genie's "possessiveness" toward certain people (65); Beloved tells Sethe, "You are mine" (217). "A Silent Childhood" answers even the question of Beloved's knowledge about Sethe's earrings. In an interview granted for Rymer's article, Susan Curtiss, author of *Genie: A Psycholinguistic Study of a Modern Day "Wild Child"* (1977), described several instances of "preternatural communication—an explicit, unvoiced understanding" between Genie and strangers (80-81).

Both Beloved's identification with and her argument with Sethe are understandable in this context. Isolated, damaged, as "doomed" as Sethe's infant, the twenty-year-old Beloved is "greedy" for love—a willing surrogate daughter for the obsessed and haunted Sethe.

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#### Allen's THE KUGELMASS EPISODE

In his short story "The Kugelmass Episode," Woody Allen extends the relationship between reader and text posited by reader-response critics. "The Kugelmass Episode" portrays a distinct relationship between reader and text, a connection that represents a reversal of reader-response criticism: the protagonist literally enters the text *Madame Bovary* and metaphorically interprets it. When humanities professor Sidney Kugelmass tells the magician The Great Persky, "Make sure and always get me into the book before page 120" (68), he means it literally. Kugelmass adds to the meaning of *Madame Bovary*, just as we add to the meaning of "The Kugelmass Episode." We read Allen's story, metaphorically "entering the text"; likewise, readers of *Madame Bovary* in Allen's "The Kugelmass Episode" metaphorically enter Flaubert's novel.

Kugelmass tells his analyst that he wants to have an affair. When Dr. Mandel, the analyst, cautions him, "You're so unrealistic" (62), Kugelmass decides that he needs a magician rather than an analyst. Persky calls him, and Kugelmass says, "I want romance. I want music. I want love and beauty" (63). Persky explains: "If I throw any novel into this cabinet with you, shut the doors, and tap it three times, you will find yourself projected into that book. . . . You can meet any of the women created by the world's best writers" (64).

