

“Aphrodite’s faces: Toni Morrison’s *Love* and ethics”
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Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content.
(Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*)

Delineating a problematic portrait of human experiences in African American history, Toni Morrison’s work advocates an urgency to reconsider ethics. Indeed, the ethical forcefully re-inserts itself in current cultural, social and literary debates. Her fiction begs for consideration of the mechanisms of interaction between the ethical and narrative, between ethics and aesthetics. Driven by the necessity to forge a suitable aesthetics to narrativize the African American experience, Morrison inscribes the ethical in narrative forms. Whilst Phelan (1998), Nissen (1999) and Wu Yung-Hsing (2003), among others, identify a connection between delayed signification and the ethical in her earlier fiction, this study seeks to examine the ethical import of Morrison’s eighth novel, *Love* (2003), through analysis of its narrative forms. In particular, it will investigate how the types and modes of narration affect the reception of the text. Through a complex weaving of narrative voices which offer different and often opposing points of views on the story, *Love* demands that readers re-assess and re-consider what is told. This conception of narrative is defined as narrative ethics (Newton 1995), i.e., the ethical impact of literary aesthetics. By foregrounding narrative ethics as the figurative, as showing rather than telling and signifying, this paper closely examines *Love*’s narrative voices and focuses on a previously unacknowledged perspective. Included, is an innovative reading of *Love*’s first person narrator, L, in the light of classical mythology,¹ and of the character Junior.

I. The ethics of narrative

Form, as spelled out in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), functions for Morrison as a means to inscribe the ethical within narrative. Thus, it is important to examine the relationship between ethics and aesthetics; Gilroy asserts that “there are other bases for ethics and aesthetics than those which appear immanent within the versions of modernity that these myopically Eurocentric theories construct” (45). Toni Morrison’s work breaches the rigidity of the Western binomial notion of ethics-aesthetics and inscribes the ethical in the “outside”; thus, as Bhabha has it, “the aesthetic image discloses an ethical time of narration” (15).

If narrative is defined as a means of accessing the ethical in Morrison’ work, it is imperative to refer to narratology. By positing the categories of form and content as independent of each other, traditional narratology denies formal consideration to the ethical category status. Hayden White’s question: “Could we ever narrativize *without* moralizing?” (“The Value” 27) marks the postmodern restoration of the ethics in the house of criticism and brings about a deconstruction of the form-content, ethics-aesthetics dichotomies. Indeed, White theorises “the content of the form”, wherein “the content of the discourse consists as much of its form” (“The Content” 42).

In his work *Narrative Ethics* (1995) Newton’s approach dismantles an already deconstructed system; he argues that narratology, with its established schism of form and content, though effective in categorizing elements of narrative, fails to contemplate an

ethics within it. Developing White's groundbreaking view, Newton argues that the rigid division of content and form "begs for and deserves to be deconstructed: into the content of form and the form of content" (53). To deconstruct the binary structure form-content imposed by narratology, Newton borrows Levinasian terminology and formally interpolates the category of ethics. To form and content Newton opposes *Saying* and *Said*; whilst the first dichotomy allows no space for the ethics, the second is thought to consider the ethics of form and the morality of content. The *Saying* is, in fact, conceived as the "narrative act": it is a performance which initiates intersubjective relations, hence an ethical performance.² The *Saying* is the self-exposure, an act, a verb, while the *Said* is a noun, a moral propositionality, as Newton puts it. This stance adds perspective to traditional narratology's two-dimensional view: here the content acquires ethical weight, and the form, *Saying*, is a performance, implying a number of relations that any performance provokes. The relations generated both by the *Said* and the *Saying* are regulated by human and subjective values rather than by a linguistic category:

An armature of intersubjective relations accomplished through story [...] is what I call *ethics*: narrative as relationship and human connectivity, as *Saying* over and above *Said*, or as *Said* called to account in *Saying*; narrative as claim, as risk, as responsibility, as gift, as price. (Newton 7)

This idea of narrative ethics conceives narrative as a site of and for intersubjective relations, in which interaction among subjects, whether fictional or real, matters. Newton regards narrative as a risk, a responsibility, hence narrative ethics is "the ethical consequences of narrating a story and fictionalizing persons and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process" (11). Narrative implies crucial ethical issues: transmitting the story, receiving it, transforming it; "narrative situations create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text" (13).

In telling a story the teller only offers fragments of his/her own self, and it is down to the receiver to re-figure those pieces, to take on the authorial role. Since representation is mimesis of reality, as Newton has it, it cannot simply duplicate the real, it disorders it; narrative fiction requires the reader to "refigure what it configures" (55). Morrison's use of polyphonic narration, implying a number of intersubjective relations and eschewing signification and mimesis, involves the reader in the making of the story. This is an idiosyncrasy of her fiction, as a plethora of scholarship on *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992) reminds us. *Love*, however, takes this further by proposing a double narrative voice which complicates the construction of an ethics of narration. The ethical turn of this mode of narration is considerable: not only is the reader exposed to events and left to interpret them, but s/he is also asked to re-assess previous information. In full Morrisonian style, *Love* narrativizes trauma and violence, however, the words 'violence', 'abuse', and 'paedophilia' (in *Love*'s specific case) are never used. Morrison's writing denies the reader any ethical guidance; hence the reader is left to interpret the event, to name what is only shown, to actively judge the facts and the characters by him/herself. Her narration is deprived of any condemnatory and critical stances, it leaves everything up to the reader. Morrison demands heuristic readings of the story. This invitation to reconsider a tale, whilst questioning the univocal view of the grandnarratives of the Western tradition, also questions referentiality. We are able to recognize the extent and the implications of the paedophilic abuse only by re-reading and re-reassessing. As

Morrison engages with the postmodern challenge to the referentiality of history, the reader is asked to ponder on a certain event, to question the teller and to re-consider what is told. Such a mode of narration has an ethical impact: it denounces unequivocal assumptions and celebrates revision as a way to involve the reader in the making of a story.³

II. L the narrator: Phantom and Aphrodite

Love comprises nine chapters, each titled with a common noun which appears to be an attribute of Mr. Cosey, around whom the novel seems to revolve. *Love* also includes five untitled italicized sections, mainly narrated in first person by L: one precedes the first chapter, one follows the last chapter, while the others are spaced throughout the text. These italicized parts, their peculiar structure and the way they are woven into the rest of the text, constitute interesting material for examining narrative forms and narrative voices.

Love's italicized opening section is narrated in first person. On reading the first chapter we realize that this introductory section differs from the central narrative. Its functions seem to be at once thematic and explicative as it temporally frames the story whilst providing an indirect presentation of the narrator and of most of the characters of the main narrative. It is in this very first italicized section that Morrison reveals the narrator's essence: "*I'm background [...] My hum is mostly below range, private; suitable for an old woman embarrassed by the world; her way of objecting to how the century is turning out. Where all is known and nothing understood*" (4). While asserting her function as a disembodied voice, as something that tells, this extract also places L above events. It almost excludes her from the picture as a human character since her presence amounts to only a hum, a background. Mystery revolves around her name too: hidden behind the initial L, the narrator's identity comes across as more and more incorporeal. "*Anybody who remembers what my real name is is dead or gone and nobody inquires now. [...] Some thought it was Louise or Lucille because they used to see me take the usher's pencil and sign my tithes envelopes with L*" (65).

As L recounts that she "*was reduced to singsong*" (63), her superiority to the narrated world becomes even more apparent. As a song, a mere sound in the background, she is an ethereal entity whose bird's eye perception allows a panchronic narration. She tells about her birth: "*I was born in rough weather. [...] You could say going from womb water straight into rain marked me*" (64). The strong bond with water, as an umbilical cord, links our narrator to the liquid element, accentuating her intangible nature. Further, as in chapter four we learn that "*L haunt[s] Up beach*" (73), we are made even more aware of L's supernatural nature.

L is thus rendered as a ghost, a singsong, a hum haunting the places of her past. Little by little, the subsequent sections in italics disclose more about her. Chapter four, "Benefactor" reiterates L's connection with water: "*The ocean is my man now. [...] I can watch my man from the porch. In the evening mostly, but sunrise too, when I need to see his shoulders collared with seafoam*" (100-6). L dwells in a supernatural realm, in a world of sound and water. The temporal deictic 'now' clearly alludes to a change of circumstances: the ocean now replaces the sexual relation she might have had – a story which is repressed in this first person narrative, but which comes to the fore in the main narrative, as I shall discuss later. The section in italics in "Husband" further asserts L's superhuman identity: "*I sat at the foot of May's bed or on top of her dresser sometimes*

and watched Heed soap her bottom" (139). A phantom, an intangible being, superincumbent above the story, above time, L will only reveal what lies behind her initial at the end of the novel. In fact the closing section in italics, through a biblical reference, casts light on L's name: Love is indeed her name, the subject of I Corinthians, the title of the novel and the epicentre of its structure. Arguably, Wyatt suggests that both the structure and the content signify Bill Cosey as the main focus:

the chapter titles point to the importance of the patriarchal figure, Bill Cosey, and [...] thus affirm[ing] literary tradition by focusing on the man: in the genres of the courtship novel and its popular-culture cousin, the romance, a female protagonist may be the focalizing subject, but the center of interest is the enigmatic desire of the man. (201)

However, I argue that, although at first seemingly centred on the figure of Bill Cosey, *Love* is actually built around L, or Love. From supernatural being to a human one, Love parades before the reader's eyes. As this paper aims to foreground, the novel is about love in its abstract meaning, voiced by a modern representation of the Greek divinity of love, Aphrodite, and L is indeed remarkably indebted to the mythological image of the goddess. Known to the Romans as Venus, Aphrodite sprang from sea foam as Hesiod writes; similarly Love, in Morrison's novel, is a water creature: born in "rough weather" from "*womb water straight into rain*" (64). The ocean is "*her man*"; she is indeed a personification of love, a new Aphrodite. Indeed, the presence of untitled sections scattered among the chapters substantiates this interpretation: due to love's self-obsession, L constantly interferes in the central narrative to tell about herself; she interrupts the story with her *own old folks' tale*.

The Greek goddess is not only associated with love, but is also known as "the deceitful" as many mythological accounts relate. Aphrodite has an ambivalent nature: an Uranian side, celestial and divine, and a Pandemian one, popular, human (Plato 11). The goddess' ambivalent nature characterizes L too. She is both a voice and a character, a liminal figure on the threshold between life and death, past and present. Moreover, at the level of narration, the duality of her character is crucial to the novel. The novel's opening offers insights into L's more human self; nostalgic for the past and judgmental of modern society:

The women's legs are spread wide open, so I hum. Men grow irritable, but they know it's all for them. They relax. Standing by, unable to do anything but watch, is a trial, but I don't say a word. My nature is a quiet one, anyway. [...] Nowadays silence is looked on as odd and most of my race has forgotten the beauty of meaning much by saying little. Now tongues work all by themselves with no help from the mind. Still, I used to be able to have normal conversations, and when the need arose, I could make a point strong enough to stop a womb – or a knife. Not anymore. (Morrison 3)

L's opinionated nature emerges right from the beginning when she criticizes the present and praises the past. She is an old woman looking back to the past because she finds the present objectionable. Hers is a critique of postmodernity, here we deal with an old narrator who demonizes the nineties condemning the radical changes in society and culture brought about during the sixties and the seventies: "[B]ecause back in the seventies, when women began to straddle chairs and dance crotch out on television, when all the magazines started featuring behinds and inner thighs as though that's all there is

to a woman, well I shut up altogether” (3). L denounces and criticizes female emancipation with silence and yet, she is the voice framing the narrative. She commences her story by questioning the sexualization of culture, undoubtedly a significant choice that manifests her own anxieties and priorities.

Women, despite their recklessness and their dirty language, are ultimately infantilized by the narrator, who, with a patronizing tone represents them as helpless beings: “*Each story has a monster in it who made them tough instead of brave, so they open their legs rather than their hearts where that folded child is tucked*” (4-5). Once again, the narrator expresses her concern with modernity signalling women rather than men or society in general, a chauvinistic point of view which targets the women’s liberation movement of the seventies. A demonization of emancipated women becomes apparent, dictated perhaps, as we later discover, by a fervent devotion to patriarchy. Love’s first person narrator plainly despises postmodernity and its political and social achievements; her obsolete perspective is a challenge to the twenty-first century reader.

This traditional view of society and customs is reinforced by an element of the supernatural: popular superstition is employed to justify a hierarchical *status quo* and to suppress rebellious behaviour. L tells about the Police-heads, mysterious sea creatures, “*dirty things [...] who shoot up and down of the ocean to harm loose women and eat disobedient children*” (5). Her mother used to tell her stories about insubordinate women and children who were victims of the Police-heads.⁴ The narrator herself recalls seeing these evil beings in their “*wide brimmed hats*” in 1942 when some “*hardheaded children swam past the safety rope and drowned*” (5). At this point in the narration we are introduced to the Cosey hotel, backdrop to most of the central narrative. Interestingly, the hotel is first mentioned as site of temptations and enticement, where the combination of alcohol, music and the sea at night induced guests to lust. With a slightly nostalgic tone the narrator relates the times when the “*Cosey’s Hotel and Resort was the best and best-known vacation spot for colored folk*” (6), when children happily played on the beach watched over by their grandmothers while men and women played croquet.⁵ In those days many people drowned, castigated by Police-heads, a constant warning for “*women up to no good and muleheaded children*” (6). The Police-heads’ disciplining role ended when Cosey’s resort failed. The connection between the two seems unmistakable: the existence of these demons are a necessary construct to alert those lured into the looseness and libertinism of Cosey’s hotel.

The narrator’s focus shifts from the past to the present, to the nineties when her narration takes place. A description of the landscape and of the surroundings, whilst reinforcing the idea of the resort’s past splendour, evokes its present derelict state:

Except for me and a few fish shacks, Up Beach is twenty feet underwater; but the hotel part of Cosey’s Resort is still standing. Sort of standing. [...] The wood siding of the hotel looks silver-plated, its peeling paint like the streaks on an unpolished tea service. The big double doors are padlocked. [...] No matter the outside loneliness, if you look inside, the hotel seems to promise you ecstasy and the company of all your best friends. And music. (7)

The tone of this passage reveals L’s emotional involvement while she explores the state of decay of a once magnificent building.

This introduction to Up-Beach and Cosey’s resort proceeds with references to the large family house on Monarch Street and to the fate of his hotel. During the sixties the

fish odour from a cannery significantly affected the fortune of Cosey's resort; the narrator describes it simply as fish odour "*like marsh stench and privies*" which "*just added another variety to the senses*" (8). Once again, she blames the "*new generation of females*" and the sixties, "*the time the world decided perfume was the only smell the nose was meant for*" (8), and re-asserts her disparagement of postmodernity. It is in the second italicized section when L, manifesting once more her distaste for modern women, discloses her main role in the actual story and tells us more about her identity:

The sign outside reads "Maceo's Cafe—ria" but the diner really belonged to me. Indeed if not in deed. I had been cooking for Bill Cosey close to fifty years when he died. [...] What I do with okra, with sweet potatoes, hopping John, and almost anything you could name would put this generation of takeout brides to shame if they had any – which they don't. (64-5)

She had been a cook for Bill Cosey for a long time, then a chef for his Hotel/Resort and, after his death, at the Maceo's cafeteria.⁶ Her strong association with food reinforces her numerous correspondences with Aphrodite, for love nourishes the world.

III. *Love's first narrative voice*

The first italicized section ends with an excursus on characters of the central narrative; the most interesting for the present study are those passages concerning Bill Cosey's widow, Heed, and his granddaughter Christine. Here the reader perceives the unreliability of L the narrator. In speculating about the end of the protracted feud between Christine and Heed (whose close friendship and early love was torn apart by Cosey's choice to marry a young Heed), L questions her own omniscience. As it surfaces from the final lines of this section, L, whilst re-asserting her role of storyteller, draws her boundaries:

I have been worried about them [Heed and Christine] leaving me here with nothing but an old folks' tale to draw on. I know it's trash: just another story made up to scare wicked females and correct unruly children. But it's all I have. I know I need something else. Something better. Like a story that shows how brazen women can take a good man down. I can hum to that. (10)

In truth, it cannot be said that the introductory section reveals the narrator as omniscient or that it offers a preamble to the main narrative as a prologue should do. Indeed, as Wyatt points out,

rather than easing our entry into the narrative proper by providing background information, as we might hope from a prologue, L provides extraneous information about supernatural figures (the "Police-heads") that she subsequently dismisses as "trash, just another story", admits to making things up, and announces that her narration is driven by a personal need for a story—any story—rather than by a desire to inscribe the truth of the events she has witnessed. From the start, L disqualifies herself as reliable narrator. (205-6)

This narrator is far from being omniscient, and admits her limits: she acknowledges that all she has to say is an “*old folks’ tale*” to scare loose women and naughty children. However, one is somewhat inclined to count on a narrator on first reading: we are affected by the power of its authority; after all, she has a story to tell. Hence the reader expects a moral tale with sea demons and unruly kids, a parable to instruct women and condemn postmodernity.

The novel’s story is about L, an embodiment of Aphrodite, as well as about love and its ambivalence, its different facets. L’s Uranian side stands for pure love, whilst her Pandemian one is epitome of corrupted love. She appears as a *deus ex machina* who orchestrates the fate of events: her impalpable nature confers on her a sense of divinity. Nonetheless, she is human and fallible, too: misleading, devious and unfair, she can be called a true Aphrodite. The last italicized section, closing the novel adds a level of complexity to the narration and complicates our understanding of L’s narrative role. Directly addressing her readers, L talks about Bill Cosey’s death:

You could call him a good bad man, or a bad good man. Depends on what you hold dear – the what or the why. I tend to mix them. [...] I don’t care what you think. He didn’t have an S stitched on his shirt and he didn’t own a pitchfork. He was an ordinary man rippled, like the rest of us, by wrath and love.

I had to stop him. Had to. (200)

Through delayed signification, *Love* offers another perspective of L. This narrator, now more human and less disembodied voice, also reveals her faults. A previous reference to Bill Cosey’s mysterious death is recalled when L openly confesses that she “*had to stop him*”: “*There wasn’t but one solution. Foxglove can be quick*” (201).⁷ In order to stop Cosey from giving all his possessions to his secret lover, Celestial, thus leaving the Cosey women (Heed, Christine and her mother May,) destitute, L poisoned the old man and forged a new will.⁸ An overdose of foxglove causes heart failure, and Cosey’s heart, aged eighty-one, could not possibly survive such strain.

Interestingly, L’s view of events is as prejudiced and conservative as in the opening section: whilst tacitly acknowledging Cosey’s vices, L does not demonize him and ultimately, aware of the readers’ opinion and of their probable bewilderment, justifies the old reprobate in panegyric tones. L’s view of Cosey, coherently with her narrative throughout the text, seems to endorse the patriarchal discourse.

The impact of this revelation on the reader is strong: the enigma of Cosey’s death is only solved at the very end of the book. It is not its sensationalism that I regard as significant, rather the delayed signification realized through L’s narrative ambivalence – her criminal act does not find any correlation with her feelings toward Cosey. Like other criminal acts in Toni Morrison’s fiction, this is ultimately an act of love. L’s duality, as narrator and character, ultimately mirrors the ambivalence of love. Hence the impact of the murder on the reader throws a stone on the still surface of a stereotypical love. *Love* narrativizes the moral law by failing to signify; it introduces the ethical in narrative forms by demanding the reader to “refigure what it configures”. L’s ambivalence allows for the text to escape signification; thus the reader is forced to reassess L as a character/teller, as well as to reconsider a given view of love. L’s gesture of killing Cosey is dictated by an extreme though corrupted love.

IV. *Love's junior*

L' perspective only partially informs the text: the old woman's view is in fact not the only one offered to the reader. *Love* has multiple narrative voices concurrently telling this story, but they relate it from significantly different and opposing points of views. The novel is narrated not only through L' subjectivity, in the italicized sections, but also through a more detached, third-person narration (often internally focalized through the characters) featuring the central narrative. The novel is split between past and present, now and then. There is one story told in the untitled sections and another independent story which surfaces without the old narrator's knowledge; she only speculates about it, but seems to have no control over it. There is after all, as she says, another story of Heed and Christine that she knows nothing about. L is stuck in the past and what she considers present is somehow already past: she has no access to the story's present, which is instead told and experienced by the other characters. There are two stories, and two texts.

Although L's narration is suspended between 'now' and 'then', the two deictics governing her story, the reader discovers that there is another story. The first chapter, as all others, is told in third person and the 'now' of this narration is not L's now; *Love's* present is completely unknown to her. There are, therefore, two narrations, as well as two stories, one told by L in the italicized sections, the other unfolding in the chapters of the novel.

The double level of narration in *Love*, shifting from first to third person is part of a larger scenario of correspondences in which duality and ambivalences play a major part. The dual nature of L's narration finds a correlation in L as a character, but more significantly in the story itself. *Love* seems to be governed by doubleness; indeed, the past-present, now-then dichotomies, as well as a central and peripheral narrative, are signifiers of the novel's binary dynamics. Interestingly, Aphrodite's supreme symbol is the mirror; she is portrayed in Western iconography as holding a mirror or gazing at her reflection. *Love's* mirror imagery is most evident in characterization, relations between characters and between the two narratives. While the main male character, Cosey, has distinguished traits, all female characters, revolving around him, mirror each other.⁹ In fact, women in the novel have a kind of double, another self, a resembling phantom or an alter ego.¹⁰ The most significant connection among characters is undoubtedly between L and Junior. Junior is her alter ego, her physically personified double. While physical similarities associate the two characters on a superficial level, their nature and function in the novel indicate that one is only a new manifestation of the other, a 'junior' version of the old one.

The first chapter opens describing Junior as having a "faint limp" (13); L too is distinguished by a problem with her feet: she would walk to work until her "*feet swole up*" (65), then she would rely on a wheelchair. Junior, due to an accident, has a "misshapen foot" (179); her "merged toes" (55) bring her closer to a sea creature. Her fin-toed foot, while recalling Heed's arthritic hands often pictured as "fins" (28), undoubtedly associates her with L: both are aquatic creatures. Junior, like L, harmed a man with the intention of "stopping him" (116). We are told that when she was at the Correctional she upended the abusive Administrator over the railing and made him fall. These remarkable similarities culminate with Junior's first encounter with Cosey. The central narrative relates Junior's arrival at One Monarch Street and of her life with the Cosey women, a narrative moment when both L and Bill are already dead. However, Junior seems to be an old acquaintance of Bill as "they recognized each other the very

first night when he gazed at her from his portrait” (118). Junior, asleep in the Cosey house, dreams of a sense of protection:

a faint trace of relief. [...] The face hanging over her new boss’s bed must have started it. A handsome man with a G.I. Joe chin and a reassuring smile that pledged endless days of hot, tasty food; kind eyes that promised to hold a girl steady on his shoulder while she robbed apples from the highest branch. (29-30)

This oneiric representation of Bill Cosey with fetching features, resembling G. I. Joe, the comic hero, arouses in Junior feelings of comfort and reassurance. The image of him holding a girl “steady on his shoulders” to reach the highest branch of an apple tree is charged with symbolism.¹¹ The reference to the apple echoes the biblical prohibited fruit; however, it also carries unmistakable mythological references to the apple of discordance, the fruit Paris offered to Aphrodite for being the most beautiful.

Junior is an embodiment of L, the novel’s Aphrodite: “as soon as she saw the stranger’s portrait she knew she was *home*”¹² (60): while Gallego offers a reading of “home” as Junior’s longing for a father figure (99), I suggest this bespeaks of L and Cosey’s longstanding acquaintance. Furthermore, when Junior finds Bill’s clothes and ties stored in a dresser, she starts to stroke and smell them, then steps in his shorts and “[h]is happiness was unmistakable. So was his relief at having her there” (119). Junior couldn’t possibly have known Bill, but L had: they are two characters, but they are one. This also suggests that L’s relationship with Bill Cosey, overtly celebrated in the main narrative, is suppressed in L’s account, heavily informed by the patriarchal perspective. Similarly, Bill Cosey’s paedophilia, his abuse of a very young Heed, is obliterated in L’s account and only comes to the fore through the main narrative.

Junior appears in the novel when L is away from the scene; the young girl steps into the story at a time when L can no longer control the narration, but only speculate. They do not co-exist in the narration, the presence of one means the absence of the other. Whilst L seems to have no access to the central narrative, she does so through her alter ego, a “modern breed of junior woman” (200). Critics unanimously agree in differentiating the two narratives, delimiting L’s role to the italicized sections (Gallego 2007; Wen-ching Ho 2006); as Wyatt maintains:

The reader is offered two different perspectives on events—one from a third-person narrator who dips into the minds of several focalizing characters and one from the first-person narrator L [...] Throughout the novel, L’s monologues interrupt the dominant third-person narrative. The two narrative modes are clearly differentiated by the use of italics for L’s voice and the use of roman type for the heterodiegetic narrator and the internal focalizers within his narrative. (202)

Yet, the connection between Junior and L’s physical similarities and their role in the narrative challenges this view. Junior is, in fact, a re-embodiment of L, her name signifies a younger version of something which already exists: she is L’s reincarnation, her return in disguise. In the light of this reading, it is interesting to note within the main narrative the inclusion of very brief passages in italics which can undoubtedly be attributed to Junior rather than to L. When Junior asks Heed about the young boy Romen who works for the Cosey women, a series of brief remarks in italics is woven into the narrative. The text indicates that these italicized passages are unspoken thoughts, recollections, rather

than part of an exchange between Junior and Heed. At this stage L and Junior merge uncannily appropriating each other's voice: Junior's thoughts borrow L's idiosyncratic italics, whilst L's seizes Junior's voice (and time) in the story and, more importantly, her lustful thoughts triggered by seeing Romen: "*Sixteen, maybe older. Nice neck. [...] He won't like this old-lady suit I got on. [...] Like the boys at Campus A shooting baskets, and us looking at them through the wire fence, daring them. [...] Sixteen at least, maybe more. Shoots baskets, too. I can tell*" (61). It is interesting to relate Junior's "*I can tell*" to L's powerful "*I'll tell*" (98) pronounced at Cosey's funeral as an admonition to take control over the Cosey women's feud.¹³ The metonymic transposition of these characters' voices is particularly relevant to my argument: in a story of feud and hatred, there is no longer place for Love who has to step back. However, Junior steps in to follow, manipulate and concoct on her behalf; she is L's instrument to return and dominate the scene: Love deceives and disguises to pursue her (its) purposes; its presence in the world has to carry on.

Ultimately Junior will bring about the reconciliation of Heed and Christine, but only through Heed's death. She will bring back the strong, sisterly and devoted love that the two girls had before being separated by Cosey's wicked decision to marry Heed, when "she belonged to Christine and Christine belonged to her" (105). Junior steps into a story of hate where there is no room for love, and she orchestrates an end where love will succeed and prevail. Junior herself is two-sided: she is wicked and divisive, her actions nevertheless restore love. The young girl is therefore a new L, the deceitful side of love, a new character or, more accurately, the return of an old one.

When at the end of the novel Heed and Christine are finally reunited, love rejoices and, as they push Junior into L's old room, "an obstinate skeleton stirs, clacks, refreshes itself" (177). L, rejuvenated by Junior when love is restored in the story, comes back on stage: the "obstinate" skeleton of L has finally achieved its goal; Junior steps out of the picture and an "obstinate" L brings the novel to an end with the last untitled italicized section.

Junior becomes a projection of L's most hidden and repressed desires, her Pandemic side. Where L celebrates patriarchy and condemns female emancipation, Junior epitomizes the sexualization of culture. Her very short skirt and flaunting sexuality are in striking contrast with L's respectfulness and discretion. Junior's unquenchable demand for sex contradicts L's principles. Junior is a manifestation of L's most subconscious desires, she is the return of the repressed. L's veneration and devotion to the hierarchy of patriarchy represses the desire to breach those rules, to act against it.

It is important to examine the relationship between *Love's* third-person narration, Junior's and L's roles and their ethical import. For Wyatt, "the third-person narrative apparatus, including the narrator and the focalizing characters whose minds he opens to us, is biased toward the interests of the man [Cosey] and permeated by patriarchal assumptions about human relations" (200). Although admitting that "the third-person narration is not monolithic" as it allows sporadic openings for a "critique of patriarchal systems" (207), Wyatt argues that it "play[s] upon [...] and expose[s] the readers' participation in male preferential conventions and codes" (201). It is indeed convincing, as Wyatt argues, that the literary convention of the heterodiegetic narration and its alleged objectivity conventionally draws attention to the figure of Cosey and to the numerous accounts of heterosexual models of love; however, it is the dominant, third-person narrative that ultimately provides a previously inaccessible horizon of perceptual experience which sheds new light on the significance of (L) love and on the story.

Indeed in chapter six, “Husband”, occurs the delayed disclosure of Cosey’s paedophilic act and of Heed’s sexual abuse: Christine, questioned by Junior, recalls that her “grandfather married her [Heed] when she was eleven. We were best friends. [...] One day we played jacks; the next she was fucking my grandfather. [...] There’s virgins and then there’s children” (Morrison 131-2). This deferral in signification, which culminates with the telling of Heed’s age, is preceded, a few pages earlier, by Heed’s account of her honeymoon, when Cosey took her shopping “every day for three days”. The “low-cut bosom” of her creamy beige dress “gathered for breasts somewhere in her future” (128), tellingly alludes to the child-bride prepubescent body. The “conflation of honeymoon with paper dolls and coloring books”, as Wyatt puts it, is a “paradigmatic scene of temporal incongruity” (196). The understated disclosure of Heed’s age subtly revolutionizes the reader’s understanding of the story and of its characters and demands complete re-consideration of the facts.

Indeed, this revelation immediately recalls Heed’s description of the wedding night, two chapters before, “her body’s recollection of pleasure” (77): “No penetration. No blood. No eeks of pain or discomfort. Just this man stroking, nursing, bathing her. She arched. He stood behind her, placed his hands behind her knees, and opened her legs to the surf” (77-78). Heed’s subjectivity perceives the act as a moment of pleasure. The absence of blood or pain suggests to the innocent mind of an eleven-year-old, that it is a blissful moment, with this man ‘just’ nursing her. Chapter six’s revelation proves Heed’s version untruthful, subjective: locked in the perception of the event with the mind of a little girl, Heed is unaware of having being abused. Through delayed signification, the reader is struck by learning that she was only a child at the time; thus the “nursing” can now be read as an instance of paedophilia. The delayed signification (Nachträglichkeit) which “Phantom” provides, is crucial to Morrison’s work, as Plasa maintains in his analysis of *Beloved* (1998), and is a significant marker of ethical narrative (Phelan 1998, Nissen 1999, Wu Yung-Hsing 2003, Wyatt 2008).

L, celebrating patriarchy accepts the abuse and remains silent about it, whilst the central narrative, set in the nineties, denounces the abuse by demanding the reader to re-consider the event and reflect on it. All such correspondences only come to mind once information is reassessed: *Love*, like most of Morrison’s texts, requests of its readers a constant process of re-examination of the *Said*. This challenges received views of the novel’s narrative voices and their roles and brings to the fore this study’s main argumentations: while the peripheral narrative, informed by the patriarchal discourse, is told by L, a re-figuration of the mythical Aphrodite, her junior self inhabits the central narrative, a third-person narration which bespeaks of hatred, family feuds, sexuality and abuse. In identifying the unmistakable connection between L and Junior, and their roles in the novel, this study proposes a reading of the novel’s narrative ethics, of the innovative ways in which *Love* ultimately eschews signification.

Love’s narrative forms articulate a dialectic between signifying and showing, *langue* and *parole*, the literal and the figurative. The “content of the form” in Hayden White’s words, plays on a double level of narration and signification. Paradoxically, this is made apparent almost literally with the biblical passage which L subtly brings up to reveal her full name. Indeed, its last paragraph uncannily tells of a mirror in relation to fragmented knowledge: “For now we see through a glass, darkly: but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known (*King James Corinthians I, 13:12*). The fragmented knowledge offered by the mirror epitomizes

Morrison's *Love*: its narration, providing the reader with simultaneous presentations and re-presentations of the story, does problematize accounts of knowledge.

The self-promotional L and the struggling "throw-away" Junior are like a "darkly glass": such a misfit in *Love*'s narrative complicates resolutive receptions of the story. Indeed, Junior's subversion of L's criticism and infantilization of women, and her unquestioning acceptance of the patriarchal view are not simply celebratory of a younger generation exposing and challenging the fallacies of L's chauvinism. Junior is not merely L's alter ego. She is also an ambivalent and dual character: although reuniting Heed and Christine with love, Junior brings also death.

Morrison's re-invention of specific repertoires, symptomatic of an urgency to re-create the canon, offers yet again an innovative aesthetic: as Gilroy argues (40), the poesis and poetics coexist in her novel forms to realize what Bhabha calls an "aesthetic image [which] discloses an ethical time of narration" (15). The tension between narrativizing the African American experience and forging a suitable aesthetics problematizes representation; Morrison's fiction engages with such dilemma by inscribing the ethical in form.

¹For another reading of Morrison's *Love* and classical mythology, refer to Tessa Roynton's essay: 'A new "Romen" Empire: Toni Morrison's love and the classics', in which she explores the "transformative engagement with America's Graeco-Roman inheritance that characterizes all of [Morrison's] previous fiction" (31).

²"Above all, as an ethics, narrative is performance or act" (Genette 7).

³As Giorgio Agamben observes, "a narrative is ethics in the sense of the mediating and authorial role each takes up toward another's story" (48).

⁴The Police-heads evoke Zeus' messenger Hermes in Greek mythology: featured by a broad-brimmed hat, Hermes, also known as Mercury, is pictured in mythology as the Olympian god of boundaries, often like a shepherd or protector of thieves. It should be noted that from Hermes, for "his character of tutelary deity of speech, writing, and traffic", derives the term 'hermeneut', an interpreter, somebody concerned with the science of hermeneutics (*OED*). Morrison recalls and deconstructs Hermes' myth. The Police-heads, patrolling Up-beach, reincarnate the Olympian god of boundaries speeding away on winged clouds. These demons, an effective deterrent for many, punished lust and disobedience; they were especially alert at night "when the hotel was full of visitors drunk with dance music, or salt air, or tempted by starlit water" (Morrison 6).

⁵The presence of black people on holiday destinations not only represents a form of escapism, but it also signifies a symbol of black gentrification and of subsequent de-politicization.

⁶Interestingly, all women in the novel but Heed are skilful cooks and often associated with food in the narration. Vida's first appearance in the novel occurs at dinner while her husband Sandler tells her and their grandson Romen about Junior. Their dialogue is entwined with passing of dishes and occasional mentioning of ingredients and sauces. Although Sandler is retired, Vida is "expected to come home and cook a perfect meal every day" (Morrison 17). That evening, her scalloped potatoes "warmed" her husband's

mood (15), together with ham slices served with raisin sauce, all accompanied by jalapenos in a jar and completed with “canned pineapple in sherbet glasses” as dessert. (17) Vida’s indirect characterization of a stereotypical woman’s role in the house is not dissimilar from May’s; L recounts that at the Hotel/Resort the two of them “managed the kitchen”. (103) May’s daughter, Christine, is also first mentioned in the novel in association with food preparation. The image of a seated Christine is framed by a “colander” and a “mixing bowl” and surrounded by a “marine odor” (19). She is “deveining shrimp[s]” (20) when Junior, after introducing herself, in the attempt to break the woman’s hostility, boasts to be “a pretty fair cook” (21). On the contrary, the reader’s first encounter with Heed occurs in a room filled with furniture. The woman is first portrayed surrounded by “a chaise, two dressers, two writing tables, side tables, chairs high-backed and low-seated” (25). This presentation of Heed sharply contrasts with the characterization of the other female characters. From the realm of the kitchen with its essential utensils and the aroma of food, we move to a setting where writing, grooming, dressing take place. The high-backed and low-seated chairs signify a certain power, define the *milieu* of an authoritative figure. Only the “little-girl scent: butter-rum candy, grass juice, and fur” (24) confer a female dimension to this room so clearly designed around an influential male figure. As women in the novel are mostly depicted as food providers, this somehow undermines Heed’s womanliness. Indeed, having married at tender age, it seems as if the process of becoming a woman, as the “little-girl scent” reminds us, has been arrested.

⁷ L’s description of Up Beach in the first untitled section fleetingly mentions foxglove along with red roses: “*Foxglove grows waist high around the gazebo, and roses, which all the time hate our soil, rage here, with more thorns than blackberries and weeks of beet red blossom*” (7). The abundance of foxglove, and the uncharacteristic profusion of the red rose, popular symbol of love, function as signifiers that subtly and prematurely invite the reader to invest in a set of meanings. The ‘raging’ of roses connotes the powerful effect – negative and destructive – of their imposing presence, despite the natural incompatibility with the soil. The novel is in fact about love and its pervasive, obsessive presence in the characters’ life.

⁸ The beneficiary of the will forged by L was purposely named “My sweet Cosey child” (Morrison 88): this formula could potentially refer to both Heed and Christine, this was her cunning plan to keep both women forever together as they were before Heed’s marriage to Bill.

⁹ The mirror figures in the novel also literally. In chapter six, ‘Husband’, Junior fixes Heed’s hair, while Heed, looking in the mirror, tells Junior about her wedding and the early days of her marriage with Bill. Through the vehicle of doubleness, Heed and Junior tell each other about their past and their families. A number of unmistakable correspondences between these two characters is revealed and magnified through the actual mirror. When Junior questions Heed about her family, Heed “made a sound in her throat” (Morrison 127) and, sympathetically Junior replies:

“I know what you mean. I’d swallow lye before I’d live with my folks. They made me sleep on the floor.”

“That’s funny”, said Heed. “First few weeks after my wedding, I couldn’t sleep anywhere but. That’s how used to it I was” (127).

The double here dominates the scene: both Junior and Heed look at their own reflections and at the other’s and so reach a sort of understanding. This powerful, yet unexpected bonding similarity between Heed and Junior is emphasized by the similarities in the ‘rites of passage’ marking the end of their childhood. Junior, at the age of eleven, ran away from home leaving her family behind and “wandered for weeks without attention being paid” to her (59). Heed married at the tender age of eleven. Both women were ill-treated and neglected as children, their premature leaving, at the age of eleven, was unnoticed in Junior’s case, whilst in Heed’s case it was arranged upon payment.

¹⁰ Heed, also shares much with the mysterious character of Celestial, Bill’s favourite secret lover. Celestial is described as “a young woman in a red sunback dress” (Morrison 188), but Heed too is portrayed in a dress which “looks like a red slip” (168). Both are scarred; Heed and Celestial represent respectively the accessible and the unattainable lover for Bill. In the final italicized section, narrated by L, Heed and Celestial almost conflate into one ghost. By Cosey’s tombstone L ambiguously tells of both as being one: “*Her scar has disappeared. I sit near her once in a while out at the cemetery. We are the only two who visit him. She is offended by the words on his tombstone and, legs crossed, perches on its top so the folds of her red dress hide the insult: ‘Ideal Husband. Perfect Father’*” (201). Unquestionably mirroring each other, at this stage they are one, undistinguished.

¹¹ The image of the apple echoes Morrison’s 1992 novel *Jazz* where Joe Trace (whose name interestingly recalls G.I. Joe in *Love*) says to Dorcas that she is “the reason why Adam ate the apple and its core” (Morrison 1992 133). Further, in *Jazz* the affair between Joe, a fifty year old man, and Dorcas, a girl in her teens, bears remarkable connections to Bill’s union with Heed. In the Morrisonian oeuvre, the apple does not bring shame or sin, rather fulfilment: the trope of the apple is returned to its Pagan roots, to Aphrodite.

¹² My emphasis.

¹³ Since “Nothing L said was ever idle” (Morrison 98), the power of her telling gave L agency over the lives of Heed and Christine.

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