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Author(s): Axel Nissen and Toni Morrison
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AXEL NISSEN

Form Matters: Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Ethics of Narrative

The last decade has seen a renewal of interest in the "ethics of fiction," in the ways in which narrative poses and attempts to answer questions about how best to live in the world. This interest has been shared by philosophers as well as literary critics. In her collection of essays *Love's Knowledge*, the neo-Aristotelian philosopher and classicist Martha C. Nussbaum stresses the significance of literary texts in arguing for "a conception of ethical understanding that involves emotional as well as intellectual activity" (ix). Nussbaum is currently one of the most prominent promulgators of "philosophy through literature," in which "a theme that is also the object of philosophical deliberation is given literary interpretation in terms of an imaginary world artistically constructed" (Lamarque and Olsen 391). In his 1995 study *Narrative Ethics*, Adam Zachary Newton is equally concerned with the philosophical status of fiction, though his context is mainly Levinas, not Aristotle. Among literary critics, on the other hand, we find the old-timer and formalist Wayne C. Booth, who suggests in *The Company We Keep* that "there are many legitimate paths open to anyone who decides to abandon, at least for a time, the notion that an interest in form precludes an interest in the ethical powers of form" (6–7).

The emphasis on the significance of form has been a recurring aspect of the renewed interest in the ethical aspects of fiction. Booth emphasizes that a writer's "choice of devices and compositional strategies is from the beginning a choice of ethos, an invitation to one kind of ethical criticism" (108). In Nussbaum's words: "Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not

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separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth" (3). Yet Nussbaum and other philosophers-turned-literary critics such as Hilary Putnam have been criticized for being too little concerned with "literature as a separate and independent practice defined by its own logic and its own constraints and conventions" (Lamarque and Olsen 397). Nussbaum herself admits, "We need to pursue in much greater depth and detail the stylistic portion of my argument, saying a great deal more, in connection with many more authors and many different genres and styles, about the practical and human expressive content of structural choices at all levels of specificity" (186).

It is the aim of this essay to pursue just such an inquiry in relation to one specific novel by Toni Morrison. *Sula* is centrally concerned with questions of right and wrong in interpersonal relationships forged by bonds of kinship, marriage, and, not least of all, friendship. What does it mean to be good? What is evil? What does it mean to be a friend? What is love? How might we learn from each other? Because *Sula* is a novel and not a treatise, potential answers to these questions await the reader in the form of character and situation rather than explicit philosophical argument. Not only that, because *Sula* is the kind of experimental, complex, writerly narrative we often call modernist, the demands on the reader as interpreter and judge are more extensive than those made by, say, one of the Grimm fairy tales or a Dickens novel.

Deborah E. McDowell has given us a telling description of the work involved in reading *Sula*:

> The novel's fragmentary, episodic, elliptical quality helps to thwart textual unity, to prevent a totalized interpretation. An early reviewer described the text as a series of scenes and glimpses, each "written . . . from scratch." Since none of them has anything much to do with the ones that preceded them, "we can never piece the glimpses into a coherent picture." Whatever coherence and meaning resides in the narrative, the reader must struggle to create.
>
> (68–69)

A number of the fragmented episodes McDowell is referring to are of a shocking and violent nature: two young girls watch a little boy drown, a mother kills her son, a daughter watches her mother burn, a woman sleeps with the husband of her best friend. As readers of

the novel, a major part of our interpretive struggle is trying to determine how we feel about these happenings. The work we must do is ethical work.

Even by my choice of words in briefly describing scenes from the story, I have implied some sort of attitude toward them. I might have written: Sula and Nel *drown* Chicken Little, Eva *murders* Plum, Sula *does nothing* to save Hannah's life, Sula *seduces* Jude. In her narration, Morrison too has been forced by her very use of language to give pointers to the evaluation of characters and events in the story. These pointers are not in the form we might have expected in earlier times. Morrison's narrator does not tell us the "moral" of the story as a whole, or of any single episode. Yet this does not mean that she abdicates the power to guide our judgment. Morrison has found other and more indirect paths. Or rather, these indirect paths have found her. For an ethical stance is implicit in the very discourse of the novel, in the structure of narrative transmission the author has chosen to relate this particular story.

Thus my purpose in this essay is twofold, to consider *Sula*'s specific response to the broad, Aristotelian question "How should one live?" as well as the ways this response is embodied in and developed through various aspects of the novel's narrative structure and technique. I will claim that Morrison's chosen form contains implicit answers to broad ethical questions concerning how human beings might best live together in a community and confront the danger and emptiness in life, and that discovering these answers will involve the reader in an interpretive process that reflects the difficulties and uncertainties of making ethical judgments in our everyday lives. Ultimately, *Sula* may be seen to conduct a debate as to whether individual experience or general ethical principles are the sounder basis for personal ethics. My combination of an ethical approach to fiction with a detailed narratological analysis will hopefully serve not only to deepen our understanding and appreciation of Morrison's novel *Sula*, but to suggest a way to read other of her narratives and the narratives of others.

The ethics *of* narrative is different from the ethics *in* narrative. In other words, every narrative has an ethics, but not every narrative is about ethics. I intend that the term "ethics of narrative" be under-

stood to mean the study of the ethical aspect of narrative form. I choose to call this aspect "ethical" because any formal choice within a communicative situation is value-laden. What is said comes into focus through what is not said. How a character or event is narrated may be highlighted through comparison with the means that have not been chosen. Whether or not the author is making systematic and ethical claims in or through her story, she cannot avoid making claims through the story's form. Who is given voice? Who is silenced? Who is characterized directly, who indirectly? Who is the focalizer? Who is focalized? What events are elided? What events are described scenically? Whose minds may we enter and whose not? How are these depictions of consciousness structured? As far as these choices guide us in determining our attitude to the novel's characters and events, they are ethical choices.

There are of course ethical dimensions to the narrative text that are not of a structural nature—first and foremost, the actions of the characters themselves. It is the discussion of the epistemological status of fictional events and their evaluation as a basis for ethical arguments—the ethics *in* narrative—that is at the center of much current work within the "ethics of fiction." I will consider the ethics in *Sula* in due course, but always keeping in mind that in a text there are no actions in themselves; all is language. Thus any evaluation of a narrative's ethical stance must begin with the analysis of the ethics of narrative representation in the work.

It is difficult to imagine an approach to an ethics of narrative that is divorced from the study of specific literary examples. Gérard Genette, who has given us one important starting point for such a study with his *Narrative Discourse*, finds it hard to imagine an ethics of narrative at all. He writes in response to a criticism from Wayne Booth:

> I do not believe that the techniques of narrative discourse are especially instrumental in producing . . . affective impulses. Sympathy or antipathy for a character depends essentially on the psychological or moral (or physical!) characteristics the author gives him, the behavior and speeches he attributes to him, and very little on the technique of the narrative in which he appears.
>
> (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 153)

Genette goes on to say, "No doubt I exaggerate, and unquestionably I paid too little attention to these psychological effects [in *Narrative Discourse*], but in returning to them today at Booth's instigation, I see hardly anything but the workings of focalization that can effectually contribute to them" (153).

Genette's standpoint is one I cannot share. If the choice of specific literary techniques did not have effects, it would be tantamount to saying that the choice of direct speech over free indirect speech or scene over summary would be entirely neutral and devoid of meaning. Narrative techniques with no effect would also have no function. In her book *Transparent Minds*, Dorrit Cohn argues convincingly that the choice of one style of representation over another does have effects. She is particularly eloquent on the subject of the multifarious effects of free indirect style. Cohn's point is that stylistic choices do have effects, but what these effects are cannot be divorced from the text in which a specific literary device occurs. Thus we cannot say whether the use of free indirect style will create an effect of sympathy or irony independent of the "narrative situation" in which it occurs (Cohn 138). I hope to show that the ethical choices open to an author in writing her story do not relate only to focalization, as Genette concedes they might, but extend to all aspects of the narrative. As long as there is choice, there is no innocent choice.

Important aspects of the ethics of narrative in the modernist novel may be illustrated by the scene "late one night in 1921," in which Morrison faces one of her biggest narrative challenges: how to represent a mother taking the life of her son. This is a scene in the sense that it purports to be a minute-by-minute account from the time Eva leaves her room until she returns to that room after having poured kerosene on Plum and set him alight. The three formal determinants of its meaning are its voice (Who speaks?), its perspective (Where is the focus of perception?)—taken together we would traditionally call these two elements "point of view"—and its speed (the relationship of the time of the telling to the time of the told). As relates to narrative speed, this brief episode, taking up two and a half pages of the narrative, is signaled as significant merely through the fact of its scenic representation. In contrast, Eva's twenty-eight years in various nursing homes are not narratively significant, as nothing is

told about them at all. The same period of Nel's life is summarized in two paragraphs.

The voice in the passage is basically the narrator's, including the extended metaphor of Eva as a heron. The choice of comparing her to this bird rather than, say, a vulture or a crow is, of course, meaningful in the context of what is to follow. We also note that later, when the perspective is that of Plum, he perceives his mother's arm as "the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him" (47). In the remainder of the passage, the voice is alternately that of the narrator giving a neutral report of events and that of Plum in a drugged stupor. Eva is voiceless, with the exception of her one remark, "I'm going, Plum" (47). Plum's direct speech shows us how far gone he is; Eva's silence shows that she is beyond words.

The perspective of the scene shifts several times. Eva is at first focalized by the narrator; then she becomes the focalizer. There is no extended depiction of her consciousness; we are only told that she "let her memory spin, loop and fall" (46) and are given one example. Morrison makes no attempt to analyze or represent in detail Eva's thoughts at this terrible moment. Instead she writes, "Eva lifted her tongue to the edge of her lip to stop the tears from running into her mouth" (47). The reader must read between the lines, picture the scene, and imagine what Eva is feeling. Her shock of discovery when bringing the strawberry crush to her lips also becomes the reader's shock of discovery. It propels her into action, as it potentially propels us into an understanding of the gravity of the situation. Plum's focalization, which follows directly, is significant for the way it defamiliarizes a gruesome process and may be seen as an example of what Barbara Johnson refers to as Morrison's aestheticization of violence, "transforming horror into pleasure, violence into beauty" (171). The effect for the reader is again one of delay, a delay in realizing what is actually happening. The realization does not come until we read that "the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight" (47). The order of the events within the scene is important (as the "setup" and "payoff" with the strawberry crush showed), but so is the position of the scene within the novel as a whole. Plum's death comes right at the end of the fourth section, labeled "1921." There are 125 more pages in which the implied author can continue to influence the reader's understanding of this violent event.

Previous to the scene of Plum's death, there are two lengthy sections giving access to Eva's mind. They are both psychonarrations. Psychonarration—"the analysis of a character's thoughts taken on directly by the narrator" (Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 58)—can be used dissonantly or consonantly. Access to the character's mind can cause either sympathy or judgment, depending on the narrator's tone. The white bargeman's thoughts on finding Chicken Little are an example of dissonant psychonarration: "Later, sitting down to smoke on an empty lard tin, still bemused by God's curse and the terrible burden his own kind had of elevating Ham's sons, he suddenly became alarmed by the thought that the corpse in this heat would have a terrible odor, which might get into the fabric of his woolen cloth" (63–64). The language of the first phrase is clearly influenced by the bargeman's clichéd biblical rhetoric, though the voice is that of the narrator reporting the man's thoughts. A unique way in which Morrison creates dissonance is seen in Helene's psychonarration on her and Nel's trip south. In this passage, Morrison uses metaphorical comparisons the character can hardly have been expected to make herself, and this creates an estranging effect when used when one of these characters is clearly the focalizer. Thus the overly fastidious Helene notices the soldiers' "shit-colored uniforms" (21), and, even more anomalously, a group of men at a railroad station that Helene passes by are described as standing like "wrecked Dorics" (24). The effect of this breach in verisimilitude is to signal a distance between narrator and character.

Consonant psychonarration is much more prevalent in *Sula* than the dissonant type. According to Cohn, consonant psychonarration is characterized by the absence of gnomic present statements, speculative or explanatory commentary, distancing appellations, and prominent analytic or conceptual terms (31). There is a cohesion of the narrator and the character: "The narrator is still there, he is still reporting, with phrases denoting inner happenings. . . . Yet these phrases show the discretion of the narrating voice, how it yields to the figural thoughts and feelings even as it reports them" (31). The psychonarration on pages 33–34 of *Sula*, telling us what was going through Eva's head after her husband left her with only "$1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel" (32), is consonant. There is no distance between the narrator and Eva, and the ac-

count shades into the free indirect style of narrated monologue. The focus is on the clarity of Eva's reasoning as she tries to find a way out of her predicament and her resolve in doing what has to be done to save baby Plum's life.

The scene of Boy Boy's brief visit to the Bottom in 1898 is also structured to create sympathy for Eva. The scene is focalized through Eva, who on hearing of his return "had no idea what she would do or feel" (35). Psychonarration is ideally suited to describing those situations when a character does not know what to think or when his or her thoughts cannot easily be verbalized. The scene in Eva's kitchen contains descriptions such as "It was like talking to somebody's cousin who just stopped by to say howdy before getting on back to wherever he came from"; "It hit her like a sledge hammer"; "A liquid trail of hate flooded her chest" (36). These comparisons, similes, and metaphors are what Cohn calls "psycho-analogies"—images that try to capture something subverbal, a gut feeling or a sensation that cannot be put into words by the character, but that has to be by the narrator. These figures are the surest sign of the intimacy between Eva and the narrator, and they create a concomitant sympathy between her and the reader. It is not necessarily true that "[t]he very exposure . . . to a character's point of view—his thoughts, emotions, experience—tends to establish an identification with that character, and an alignment with his value picture" (Leech and Short 275), but this is the effect of the psychonarration used in the characterization of Eva.

Through the manipulation of speed, voice, perspective, and order, Morrison has given a lead-up to Eva's killing of her son that will not make it easy to dismiss her and that will guarantee, if not the reader's sympathy, at least his or her attempt at understanding. The representation of Plum's death is mimetic of the watching and waiting Hannah and Eva have been doing, and the reader is made to undergo a similar process, from bemused anticipation to horrified certainty.

Sula contains an unusual combination of omniscient and figural narration. Unusual, at least, if we have come to think of "point-of-view" narrative as one that conducts the narration through the consciousness of one or more of the characters, almost as if the story were telling itself. But as Suzanne Ferguson has pointed out, in the works

of the writers considered central to the development of literary impressionism—Flaubert and Henry James—the authorial presence is "quite palpable," however "selective" and "sporadic" the omniscience of their narrators appears to be. Ferguson writes, "two major aspects of authorial presence in third-person impressionist narrative [are] over-intervention and indirect reporting of speech and thought in free indirect style" (234). These descriptions also fit *Sula*'s "omniscient, somewhat evasive narrator" (Grant 92). Classical signs of the narrator's omniscience in *Sula* are her prophetic powers ("It was the last as well as the first time [Nel] was ever to leave Medallion" [29]); her ability to foreshadow ("after 1910 [Eva] didn't willingly set foot on the stairs but once and that was to light a fire" [37]); and her ability to pass in and out of various minds at will. The fact that she has this omniscience does not necessarily mean that she makes use of it. When events are focalized through a character, there is, per definition, "a restriction of 'field,' . . . a selection of narrative information with respect to what was traditionally called *omniscience*" (Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 74).

With regard to point of view, *Sula* is a perspectival relay race. The novel contains no fewer than six major focalizers or "reflectors" of the action—Shadrack, Helene, Nel, Eva, Sula, and Hannah—among whom Nel and Sula are quantitatively and qualitatively the most important. Their friendship is at the heart of the novel, as Karen F. Stein has suggested (147), and the larger ethical claims the novel is making are closely bound up with the representation of these two girls and their growing up. As long as Sula and Nel are one, so to speak, no important distinction is made in the ways in which they are represented. Nel is introduced via her mother, and the first episode in which we encounter her in action is the episode on the train. There she takes over the power of focalization, the perspective becomes hers, as she realizes her separateness from her mother. Similarly, we first encounter Sula's thoughts and feelings in reaction to her mother Hannah. The only difference is one of quantity. Nel is given a psychonarration over several pages to depict her reaction to her mother's shame; of Sula's reaction to overhearing her mother's statement that she loves Sula but does not like her, we are only told that "the pronouncement sent her flying up the stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window fingering the curtain edge, aware of a sting in her eye" (57).

The traumatic incident of Chicken Little's drowning foreshadows Nel's and Sula's incipient difference(s) and their parting of the ways. The scene of the accident begins distinctly from the perspective of "they," to emphasize the concurrence of the two girls' sensory impressions and impulses: "They ran," "they flung themselves," "they lay," "in concert," "Together they worked," "Each then looked," "They stood up, stretched," "At the same instant" (57–59). The separation of their perspective when Sula and Chicken Little climb the tree—"From their height [Nel] looked small and foreshortened" (60)—is a foreshadowing of the girls' widely differing reactions to the accident that is just about to take place. As the water darkens and closes over the place where Chicken Little sank, the perspective of the scene becomes that of Sula alone: "The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers was still in Sula's palms" (61). Next Sula encounters Shadrack in his cabin in a psychonarration that really says very little about what she is feeling, only that it is terror and fear. Like Eva before killing Plum, Sula is speechless at this time of emotional crisis. Not so Nel. Nel is self-controlled, she is able to speak soothing words, she is able to concern herself with something as trivial as what has happened to Sula's belt, which Sula has not even noticed is missing.

Linden Peach has noted how Sula's and Nel's differing responses at Chicken Little's funeral further emphasize the disjunction I have outlined above (49). The point of no return for these two friends is, of course, when Nel finds Sula and Jude "down on all fours naked" (105) on the floor of her bedroom. Nel's emotional response to discovering Jude and Sula together, Jude's departure, and the loss of Sula's friendship is divided into four parts. Taken together the four fragments are a vivid illustration of the valences of the various discursive modes for presenting consciousness. The first section is narrated monologue in free indirect style with direct speech embedded in it. The second section begins as narrated monologue but quickly turns into quoted monologue. The third section is an intermixture of psychonarration with snatches of narrated and quoted monologue. The final section is again quoted monologue, or what we commonly call "stream of consciousness."

The second and the fourth fragments—Nel's plaintive apostrophes to Jude and to Jesus—are the only examples in the novel of autonomous quoted monologue (traditionally called interior mono-

logue). This in itself marks the passages as significant. In stylistics, the quoted monologue is regarded as the linguistic equivalent of direct speech, and like the direct quotation of a character's spoken words, it is ostensibly the most unmediated form for representing consciousness, "a literal citation of . . . thoughts as they are verbalized in inner speech" (Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 56). Thus it has been felt that in such passages one comes closest to the very soul of the character. The connotations of the form are sincerity, intimacy, and reliability. The hitch with this traditional response, as Cohn has pointed out, is that it is far from certain that all thoughts are verbalized in "inner speech." It cannot be certain that a quoted monologue provides the most immediate and reliable access to the character's innermost feelings—rather the opposite, in fact. Cohn shows how Robert Musil, Proust, and Nathalie Sarraute, who all "perceive a deep cleavage between mental language and other mental realities," "use quoted monologue to expose the mendacity of a character's thinking language, rather than to depict searchingly introspective minds" (80). In her reticent use of quoted monologue, Morrison would appear to share Proust's view that interior discourse hides more than it reveals.

In my view, Nel's quoted monologues are a prime example of the deceptiveness of this apparently objective and reliable narrative technique. The fact that Nel is able to tell herself a story about her shocking experience may be seen as a signal that she is not delving deeply enough in her self-examination. Her thoughts are well-ordered, even rhetorical, with none of the "syntactical abbreviation" or "lexical opaqueness" Cohn describes as the standard stylistic devices of the Joycean interior monologue (94). As the ending of the novel confirms, this is a case of major repression, one that lasts for twenty-eight years. Retrospectively we see that these passages contain rationalizations rather than realizations.

So why are many readers taken in? Why do we not trust our own feelings? What is there in the depiction of Jude and Nel's relationship to make us think his departure would make her feel a violent sense of loss? Strictly speaking, nothing. The reader is even told that her love for him "had spun a steady gray web around her heart" (95). Yet we have taken her response at face value. We do so largely, I think, because of the alleged directness of its representation.

S. Diane Bogus writes, "By making this switch in point of view, Morrison steps out of the way so we can begin to be sympathetic . . . to Nel"; and Bogus, in her own words, does "become sympathetic to her" (75). Elliott Butler-Evans observes similarly that sympathy is gained for Nel through a "shift in narrative focus" (87), where the events are viewed from Nel's point of view. The first monologue, a rumination on Jude's left-behind tie, reinforces the impression. That the monologue that comes closest to Joycean stream of consciousness is placed last makes it the final word on the matter until the very end of the novel. To a certain extent, it wipes out the impression of the long preceding section. On closer inspection, though, this third section may be seen to indicate a subverbal and subconscious level of Nel's mind, which she is not willing to explore and which only becomes plain when the epiphanic ending throws a new light over all that precedes it.

The third passage is psychonarration, the mode which allows the writer to approach the subconscious, if only metaphorically. The most important clue to depths unsounded and feelings unexamined is, of course, the ball of muddy strings. C. Lynn Munro has suggested that the gray ball "functions as an objective correlative for the gestalt of emotions which Nel has chosen to dismiss categorically rather than attempt to untangle" (152). In Cohn's terms, the ball of fluff is another example of a psycho-analogy, an attempt at capturing an ineffable feeling of dread and loss and a symbol of the questions Nel cannot or will not deal with. The hair ball functions so powerfully here because it is not only a metaphor for the state of Nel's mind but is also a metonymy, a symptom of a mental disturbance, an actual part of her consciousness.

Despite this eloquent sign that Nel is not able to come to terms with the true cause of her grief, readers have been convinced that her depression is due to the loss of Jude. The extent to which the reader may forget any signals that point in a different direction is vividly illustrated by Butler-Evans's statement: "While the conclusion of the novel indicates a moment in which Nel suddenly realizes that it was her separation from Sula that caused her pain, there is no sense in which that insight even remotely enters her mind earlier" (85). What of the following passage from the third section? "Here she was in the midst of it, hating it, scared of it, and again she

thought of Sula as though they were still friends and talked things over. That was too much. To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about it because it was Sula that he had left her for" (110).

Despite the long psychonarration, in which Jude is barely mentioned, it is all too easy to persist in the belief that Nel's sense of loss is occasioned by her husband's departure. In doing so, though, one is being as conventional as Nel herself. Nel's reaction is what one would expect, and thus one does not question it. In a novel where one seldom gets what one expects, the reader should be more suspicious.

There is no better example in the novel of how Morrison uses formal devices to guide our ethical appraisal of the characters, even if, in this case, the result may be a faulty judgment. There is no necessary connection between Nel deceiving herself and her deceiving us, but if Morrison is to achieve her powerful final effect she is dependent on having the reader undergo a process of perception that is not unlike that of her character Nel. Only the most conscious of writers manage to achieve this mimetic fit between fictional form and what we may old-fashionedly call the moral of the story.

Taken as a whole, *Sula*'s form mirrors the complexities of ethical judgment and displays the difficulty and uncertainty of ethical choices. McDowell raises the pertinent question: "Can we ever determine the right judgment?" According to her, *Sula* "implies that that answer can only come from within, from exploring all parts of the self" (68). This would appear to me to be a mistaken interpretation. One lesson the novel teaches very clearly is that the self is not enough, no matter how many parts of it one is drawing on. Had the self been enough, Sula with her egocentric individualism would have been much closer to the ethical center of the work. She has certainly explored more parts of the self than her contemporaries in the Bottom, yet despite her bravado, she never attains the ethical standing of, say, her grandmother.

McDowell has written one of the most insightful essays on *Sula* to date, but to my mind she is too positive in her appraisal of the title character. Though she is careful to note that the novel "does not reduce a complex set of dynamics to a simple opposition or choice between two 'pure' alternatives" (68), her own reading threatens to do

just that by the extent to which it favors Sula's perspective over and against that of Nel. While it is true that the reader "must undergo the process of development that Nel undergoes," this development does not involve "embracing what Sula represents: the self as process and fluid possibility" (66), but rather means taking full responsibility for one's life and actions, and gaining a deeper understanding of one's situation and lived experience.

One way to answer McDowell's question concerning "right judgment" and to gain some sort of objective hold on the relative ethical position and worth of the various characters in *Sula* is to be found in Lynne Tirrell's essay "Storytelling and Moral Agency." There Tirrell seeks to "explore the notion that telling stories to ourselves is necessary for being moral agents" (116), and she uses Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, as her example. According to Tirrell, moral agency is characterized by at least three features: (1) the capacity to represent (particularly one's own actions and those of others); (2) a sense of self (which involves an ability to distinguish oneself from others); and (3) being capable of making judgments marked by "authority" (that is, making ethical decisions, acting on them, and being able to justify them to others).

Against this background, we see even more clearly why Sula is not fully a moral agent and cannot be a model for emulation. She does not have Eva's power to represent her own ethical position and to justify her actions to others. While Sula's sense of self is strong, maybe too strong, it borders on solipsism because she has little sense of how she appears to the world around her. Munro has observed that Sula "never really comes to terms with the limitations of her approach to life" (153). What is essential to an ethical position, and that which Sula lacks, is an understanding of and empathy with the other. Robert Sargent comments: "[A] major theme of [Morrison's] novels is the need for balance or wholeness. These qualities may be acquired by the characters in the novels only through an act that is analogous to one involved in the creation of art—an act of the imagination which comes from a willingness to see the world as others see it" (229). As Tirrell concludes, "Without at least a minimally articulated notion of one's place in the community, one cannot be a moral agent" (124).

In her emphasis on the importance of perception—"the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient features of one's par-

ticular situation" (Nussbaum 37)—Morrison comes very close to an Aristotelian situationalist ethics, as illustrated by the later novels of Henry James and explicated by Nussbaum in her essay on *The Golden Bowl*. "The Aristotelian view," writes Nussbaum, "stresses that bonds of close friendship or love (such as those that connect members of a family, or close personal friends) are extremely important in the whole business of becoming a good perceiver" (44). She writes that, to James, "Moral knowledge . . . is not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling" (152).

If it is true, as McDowell asserts, that Morrison "denies the whole notion of character as static *essence*, replacing it with the idea of character as *process*" (61), it is equally true that she represents the ethical perception of an event as process. Johnson has pointed out that "[t]he dissociation of affect and event is one of Morrison's most striking literary techniques in [*Sula*], both in her narrative voice . . . and in the emotional lives of her characters" (168). As Nel's response to Jude's and Sula's infidelity shows, the "truth" about any situation may only become apparent after many years have passed. This in turn makes the evaluation of right and wrong an ongoing and potentially indefinite activity. The principle of deferred significance is essential to the novel's epistemology, and it indicates that if there ever is a final, correct judgment, it may be a long time in the making.

There would appear to be in *Sula* an implicit claim that the only way one may attain perception—however imperfect—is through conversation. The only way "to see the world as others see it" is through dialogue. Though the representation of dialogue is not dominant in the novel, the fictional conversations are often important sites both for the contestation of prior ethical claims and the (at least partial) resolution of ethical dilemmas. Some of the sections of dialogue come closer than anything to resolving the major ethical conflicts in the novel.

Two important examples are Hannah's confrontation with her mother and Nel's confrontation with Sula. In these conversations, explanations are sought, implications are dredged up, and motivations are given by the characters themselves, making them, in addition to

the novel's representations of consciousness, the most important loci for ethical interpretation. The form of these scenes is again significant. Dialogue can be presented in four basic ways, through report (He announced his departure); direct speech ("I'm going," he said); indirect speech (He said he was going); and free indirect speech (He was going). As the scene in the kitchen between Sula, Nel, and Jude makes clear, the choice of one of these forms and the combination of them is significant. While Nel's and Sula's speech acts are given in direct speech, Jude's words are only reported, with highly ironic effect. The summary of Jude's "whiney tale that peaked somewhere between anger and a lapping desire for comfort" (103) is in contrast to the almost page-long quotation of Sula's response to his complaint that "a Negro man had a hard row to hoe in this world" (103). This differential treatment would seem to imply that Jude is not worth listening to, while Sula deserves our undivided attention.

In the conversations I wish to focus on, the dialogue of the characters is always given in direct speech, which is the closest fiction can come in approximating an external reality. As Genette has pointed out, "the only thing that language can imitate perfectly is language" ("Frontiers" 132). The fact that Morrison quotes the characters' words verbatim lends an air of objectivity to the scene ("this is what was actually said") but also leaves it entirely up to the reader to discern the implications of the dialogue.

Hannah and Nel set off their respective confrontations with Eva and Sula by asking some of the same probing questions we have been asking. Why did Eva kill Plum? How could Sula sleep with Jude? Despite being conventionally in the wrong, on the defensive, Eva and Sula come away as the victors in these confrontations. One can put this down to their superior intelligence or their advanced verbal rhetoric, but it is the narrator who in the final instance lets them speak. Eva and Sula are given all the good lines. The narrator gives Eva the only metanarrative in the novel—the lengthy and powerful monologue in which she explains her fear that Plum would one day force himself upon her—and Sula the prophetic rhapsody beginning, "Oh, they'll love me all right. It will take time, but they'll love me" (145). Maybe to counter the enormous rhetorical power of these women, Morrison gives the perspective in these scenes to Hannah and Nel. In the phrases that sometimes intersperse the dialogue, brief reactions

from the daughter and friend are recorded that show that the scene is being focalized through them. Rather than adjust the balance, though, this privilege only works to reveal the total absence of an adequate response in Hannah to what Eva is telling her and the inability of Nel to comprehend what Sula is saying. While Eva struggles to explain how difficult it was even to keep herself and her children alive in response to Hannah's question "Mamma, did you ever love us?" Hannah is only preoccupied with planning supper. When on her deathbed Sula tries to engage her friend in a deeply ethical conversation on the question of how to live a good life, Nel's mental response is that Sula is "showing off" and that "Talking to her about right and wrong was like talking to the deweys" (143, 145). Out of self-absorption and narrow-mindedness, Hannah and Nel are not interested in pursuing the ethical discussion they themselves have instigated. Hannah does not feel any interest or sympathy in response to her mother's tale; there is never any doubt in Nel's mind that she is in the right. An interesting contrast to these scenes is the confrontation between Sula and her grandmother, which covers some of the same ground as that between Hannah and Eva. Again, the characters' words are quoted directly, but this time the scene is not focalized at all, neither character's thoughts being made available to us. This makes it much more difficult to decide who comes out the victor.

These conversations are on the whole unsuccessful. They do not bring the participants closer to each other in a mutual understanding. Yet there can be no doubt that the author still holds out a hope for the life-enhancing powers of dialogue. One of the few unconditionally beautiful relationships in the novel—that between Ajax and Sula—is depicted as working so well (at least to Sula's mind) because they have "genuine conversations" (127). Significantly, Morrison chooses not to reproduce one of these conversations but only reports what they are like from Sula's perspective: "He did not speak down to her or at her, nor content himself with puerile questions about her life or monologues of his own activities" (127–28). The emphasis is on equality, empathy, and meeting each other half way. This is the type of conversation the dying Sula tries to have with her friend Nel, but it is too late. Sula can no longer make her friend "see old things with new eyes" (95).

In the implicit debate in the novel between those favoring a per-

sonal ethics based on perception through dialogue and those holding firm to principle and universal ethical laws, the Peace women—Eva and Sula and to a certain extent Hannah—would seem to stand on the side of ethical improvisation and the Wright women—Helene and Nel—on the side of convention. To some extent, the conflict is whether the mind or the emotions should have preeminence in our ethical deliberations. The shortcomings of going to either extreme are nowhere better summed up than in Nel's and Sula's thoughts about each other:

> The situation was clear to [Nel] now. Sula . . . was incapable of making any but the most trivial decisions. When it came to matters of grave importance, she behaved emotionally and irresponsibly and left it to others to straighten out. And when fear struck her, she did unbelievable things. Like that time with her finger. Whatever those hunkies did, it wouldn't have been as bad as what she did to herself. But Sula was so scared she had mutilated herself, to protect herself.
>
> (101)

> Nel, [Sula] remembered, always thrived on a crisis. The closed place in the water; Hannah's funeral. Nel was the best. When Sula imitated her, or tried to, those long years ago, it always ended up in some action noteworthy not for its coolness but mostly for its being bizarre. The one time she tried to protect Nel, she had cut off her own finger tip and earned not Nel's gratitude but her disgust. From then on she had let her emotions dictate her behavior.
>
> (141)

For Nel there are no ethical dilemmas because there are always rules to follow. If you only watch a crime, you are not guilty of committing it. If your best friend makes love to your husband and he leaves you, then your friend becomes your enemy and you grieve for the loss of your husband. When an old friend is sick, you visit her, even if you hate her. In a crisis you remain calm and try to minimize the damage.

As the novel shows, "coolness" is different from goodness. One can do the right things for the wrong reasons. And reason can blind one to the truth of the emotions. Conventional morality blocks Nel's realization of her own complicity in Chicken Little's death and her loss of Sula's friendship. Nel enters so fully into the role of the inno-

cent bystander and the abandoned wife, succumbs so totally to the ostensible primacy of the marriage bond and the heterosexual relationship, that for a quarter of a century she is blind to the truth about her own life.

Morrison's last chance to display the potentially regenerative powers of dialogue is the scene between Eva and Nel in the nursing home. At this point Eva is ninety-five years old and we have not encountered her for more than seventy pages. While the conversation between Eva and her daughter Hannah brought perception only to the former, and that between Eva and Sula ended in a stalemate, the conversation between Eva and Nel in the nursing home illustrates the potential for shared understanding that lies in dialogue. There is again a parallel with James's ethical vision as interpreted by Nussbaum. "Progress," Nussbaum writes, "comes not from the teaching of an abstract law but by leading the friend, or child, or loved one—by a word, by a story, by an image—to see some new aspect of the concrete case at hand, to see it as this or that. Giving a 'tip' is to give a gentle hint about how one might see" (160). What is it Eva does in this scene but exactly that, give Nel a tip?

> "Tell me how you killed that little boy."
>
> "What? What little boy?"
>
> "The one you threw in the water. I got oranges. How did you get him in the water?"
>
> "I didn't throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula."
>
> "You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched."
>
> (168)

This is much the same tip that her friend Sula gave her when she asked, "How you know? . . . About who was good. How you know it was you?" (146). Only after twenty-five years and a new reminder can Nel begin to answer this question, both with regard to Chicken Little's death and the way she parted from her husband.

Given the fundamentally polyphonic nature of Morrison's novel and human fallibility, no single character may squarely inhabit or embody the ethical center of the text, that is, coincide entirely with the ethical stance of the implied author. Yet Roseann P. Bell and Deb-

orah Guth rightly emphasize the significance of the character Eva Peace. Eva has subtle powers over both her world and the narrative representation of that world that are not paralleled by any other character. I have already noted many examples of the cohesion between the narrator and this character. In addition to consonant psychonarration and metanarrative, Eva's ethos is enhanced by the way in which her "mind style" affects the narrator's style and the way in which the use of repetitive discourse shows Eva's impressions of the other characters to be correct and her memory to be reliable. The chapter entitled "1923," which deals with Hannah's death by fire, begins, "The second strange thing was Hannah's coming" (67). Later, we find: "But before the second strange thing, there had been the wind, which was the first" (73). There is no indication that these thoughts are attributed to anyone but the narrator. Finally, seven pages into the chapter, we read in reference to Hannah's dream of a wedding in a red dress, "Later [Eva] would remember it as the third strange thing" (74). Only then does it become apparent that the ordering of the "strange things" during two days in August is Eva's; her perspective has influenced the narration of the entire chapter, even those parts that are not focalized through her. Similarly, Eva's tendency to erase the individuality of the three boys she takes into her home, by calling them collectively "the deweys," is taken up by the narrator and also becomes her way of referring to them. When Eva recalls the freezing cold night she spent with Plum in the outhouse, the details of the scene are exactly the same as in the narrator's rendition twenty-six pages before. In addition to this proof of reliability, Eva's ethical standing in the narrative is increased by her being the only one to understand some of Sula's most disturbing behavior. For example, Eva is convinced that "Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested" (78). She accuses Sula of this during their argument, and in Sula's dying monologue her suspicion is confirmed.

In Munro's words, *Sula* provides the following answer to the perennial philosophical and ethical question, How should one live?:

> [Morrison] . . . suggests that only by forging meaningful relationships can the individual transcend the agony of alienated existence and attain a wholeness. . . . [I]f one is willing to take the risks of honest involvement,

> one can effect a middle ground between the self-denying retreat chosen by Nel . . . and the self-righteous disregard for others chosen by Sula.
>
> (154)

Eva is the character who goes furthest in this "honest involvement," in what James in his preface to *The Princess Casamassima* calls being "finely aware and richly responsible" (qtd. in Nussbaum 135). Regardless of how we may ultimately judge her killing of her son—as euthanasia or murder—Eva goes further in her thinking about the other and her understanding of the other, in her human empathy, than Sula or Nel or Hannah or Helene. Terry Otten says of her, "Eva, who could commit the 'crime' of burning to death her only son in a profound act of love and yet risk her own life trying to save her daughter from fire, experiences good and evil in human rather than moralistic terms" (43). This is another way of saying that in a conflict between universal ethical laws and the exigencies of the concrete, lived situation in all its uniqueness, Eva will not be pacified by fear or convention. The statement "Me, I never would've watched" seems to sum up her personal ethics. As the novel shows, she practices what she preaches.

Toni Morrison contributes to our understanding of the importance of perception in ethics her idea of perception as process, her stress on learning from others through conversation, and the extension of the ethical inquiry into "parts unknown" of the American social and racial landscape. One reviewer's reaction to *Sula* and novels by Ed Bullins and Alice Walker was: "It is not that their viewpoint is amoral—we are asked for judgment. It's that the characters we judge lie so far outside the guidelines by which we have always made our judgments" (Bryant 10). Yet as Wayne Booth has pointed out, "It is not the degree of otherness that distinguishes fiction of the highest ethical kind but the depth of education it yields in *dealing with* the 'other'" (195). Ultimately, *Sula*'s form contributes as much to ethics as does its abstractable content.

University of Oslo

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