

## Projecting Wor(l)ds : The Descriptive in Theory and Fiction

The play on *word* and *world* in my title makes no great claim to originality, it simply underscores a tension inherent to literary description, one noted, mostly with unease, by generations of writers and critics : its referential anchoring, on the one hand, its tendency, on the other, to float free of the world by foregrounding and revelling in its own linguistic substance. Alexandre Gefen resumes this paradox elegantly :

A bien y regarder, la description constitue [...] à la fois l'irruption « naturelle » du réel dans le texte, mais aussi le moment où le texte s'affiche dans sa matérialité (la prégnance du lexique par rapport aux actions, des noms par rapport aux verbes), son artificialité (les jeux de symétrie et de construction dont procède la mise en espace du réel), et donc dans sa « littéarité » (moment de stase du texte littéraire, la description est souvent poétique dans un récit). D'où ce paradoxe que le descriptif [...] pousse la représentation, au risque de l'intrigue, vers le miroir aux alouettes de l'exhaustivité et la dangereuse passion des détails.<sup>1</sup>

In modernist (and postmodernist) modes of writing, the descriptive both sharpens and enjoys this founding ambivalence, complicating the relationship between signifier and referent in a process of self-conscious play that has been qualified as “narcissistic”<sup>2</sup>, a term suggesting increased self-awareness bordering uneasily on self-obsession. Contemporary novelistic practice unsettles the boundaries between projected, textualised worlds and what Thomas Pavel calls “the really real world”<sup>3</sup> and yet the idea of “projecting/ed worlds” is strongly identified with a current of literary criticism which considers these same

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandre Gefen, *La mimésis*, Paris : Flammarion (coll. « corpus »), 2002, p. 216.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative : the Metafictional Paradox*, New York and London : Methuen, (1980) 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, Harvard : Harvard UP, 1986, pp. 56-57.

boundaries as a theoretical given – and here I allude to Possible Worlds Theory, as elaborated in the 80s and 90s in the work of Thomas Pavel and Marie-Laure Ryan in the States, Brian McHale and Ruth Ronen of the Tel-Aviv School. For all the sensitivity they show to the many ways in which the fiction/reality divide is interrogated in contemporary writing, these critics maintain an allegiance to the ontological priority of the afore-mentioned “really real world”, a stance they share with classical narratologists for whom the relationship of fiction to reality is essentially mimetic. Although I borrow their ruling metaphor, my title is not intended as an expression of solidarity with such theories, nor would I want it to imply that the writers under consideration conceive of their activity, descriptive or otherwise, as serving straightforwardly mimetic ends. On the contrary, the relationship of word to world is to be imagined here as one of equality without privilege ; the descriptive as deployed in the texts under scrutiny does not set out primarily to imitate, reflect or otherwise transcode a preexisting empirical “reality” nor does it play the subservient role prescribed by generations of critics (including Genette, who distils a long history of opprobrium when he styles it as the handmaid of narration, “a slave [...] always necessary, but always submissive, never emancipated”<sup>4</sup>) The turn to description as analysed in the passages that follow will be seen to have a very different reach and agenda : it brings the reader up against the aporetic limits of a rhetoric rich in detail yet failing, conspicuously, as a site of knowledge ; far from functioning as an “operator of readability”<sup>5</sup> it scrambles information, dislodging the various narrative instances from their accustomed positions of agency or reception ; it amounts, in short, to a close, inventive questioning of the exorbitant powers of representation associated with the descriptive utterance, especially in its high realist mode.

Before turning my attention to specific uses of the descriptive in contemporary writing, I feel it necessary to contextualize this notion in an attempt to gain firmer purchase on my object of study. As Philippe Hamon has noted in his pioneering essay<sup>6</sup>, the descriptive tends to be defined negatively, by opposition to

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<sup>4</sup> Gérard Genette, *Figures II*, Paris : Ed. du Seuil, 1969, p. 57. (Translation mine). One cannot help but be struck by the persistent gendering of description, most commonly (and predictably) organized around the « static/dynamic » binary.

<sup>5</sup> Philippe Hamon, *Du Descriptif*, Paris : Hachette (1981) 1993 (4<sup>ème</sup> édition), p. 163. All translations are mine.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-94.

terms such as *theoretical, analytical, interpretative*, couplings which are clearly not to its advantage. The one exception might be the linguist's distinction between *prescriptive* and *descriptive* approaches: here it is the latter that are positively inflected, suggesting an empiricism of method that allows rules and patterns to emerge directly from the mutable body of linguistic utterance rather than imposing them by external *fiat*. The descriptive in this sense is likely to appeal in a theoretical climate which favours immanence over transcendence and regards all master-signifiers as suspiciously complicit with the Grand Narratives of yesteryear. Yet even here the descriptive does not get an altogether easy ride. In 1974, Juliet Mitchell, a prominent British feminist, undertook to defend Freud against the reductive critique of an angry second wave who dismissed psychoanalysis as "the culture-bound product of a small-minded 'Victorian' patriarch confronted by incredible numbers of sex-starved, hysterical women"<sup>7</sup>. Mitchell's defence turned precisely on the prescriptive/descriptive distinction: she argued that Freud was *describing* the internalisation of existing power structures and their unconscious representation, not aiming to enshrine the patriarchal system through a totalising, *prescriptive* account of mental functioning and gender acquisition. Despite the brilliance with which her thesis is developed it does of course beg the question of the "ideological innocence"<sup>8</sup> of Freud's descriptive position as he puzzled over the ills of the sex-starved, hysterical female hordes of fin-de-siècle Vienna. Feminists have legitimately questioned Freud's failure to advocate social and political change, given the scale of damage he witnessed and recorded in clinical practice. In the field of the human sciences, descriptive methodologies are notoriously liable to charges of political naïveté or worse, tacit support of institutionalised oppression. This leads us to the familiar question of whether powerful descriptive systems such as Freud's are not always complicit with (or even shored up by) forms of extreme conservatism, masquerading as a bracketing of the political in the broader interests of science.

There is a recent article that gravitates around related questions in the field of literary studies – it is entitled "Whatever

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<sup>7</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. London: Penguin (1974) 1986, p. xx.

<sup>8</sup> Hamon, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

happened to descriptive poetics ?”<sup>9</sup> and its author is Brian McHale. McHale describes (and laments) the demise of what he calls “theories of the middle-range”, sacrificed, he claims, at the altar of “high” theory which intends, no less, to supplant interpretation in its “voracious” and “imperialistic” bids to exhaust textual meaning (the imagery is McHale’s but his position is not an unfamiliar one). Theories of the middle-range would include a descriptive poetics, which, “aspires to give exhaustive accounts of objects of various kinds” among them “the practices of a ‘school’ or ‘tradition’ of writing [...] or specific literary techniques, devices, *topoi*, repertoires etc”<sup>10</sup>. As a semiotics-based account of the descriptive, Philippe Hamon’s book provides an excellent example of middle-range theory. And I think McHale is right to conclude that the middle-range is under threat, not because of “high” theory’s rampant megalomania, but more simply because of a recent dialectical shift in the critical paradigm. If descriptive approaches modelled on structural linguistics held sway from the mid 60s into the late 70s, the decades that followed saw the rise (in the Anglo-American academy) of issue-based, politicized approaches focusing on the problematics of race, class, gender and body, nation and diaspora – these unsettle the universalizing claims and methodological assumptions of a formalist descriptive project such as narratology, which suddenly finds itself on the defensive. Building on the work of J. L. Austin, Grice and Searle, pragmatic theories of literature and reading centre attention on the negotiations and cognitive adjustments occurring in the space between text, reader, and context, implicitly questioning the “scientific” posture of narratology with regard to its object. Furthermore, a battery of psychoanalytic and philosophical concepts attaining prominence over the past thirty years or so has created a climate of thought that either marginalizes the descriptive or more seriously eats away at the foundations that guarantee it uncomplicated powers of representation.

It is this conceptual climate I turn to next, as one hostile element in a broad picture from which the descriptive/description finds itself increasingly erased or excluded, and this is where my attempt at contextualization must end. But before proceeding further, it may be useful to distinguish three

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<sup>9</sup> Brian McHale, « Whatever Happened to Descriptive Poetics ? » in Mieke Bal and Inge E. Boer (eds), *The Point of Theory*, Amsterdam : Amsterdam UP, 1994, pp. 56-65.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

uses of the term “descriptive”, which have so far tended to criss-cross or merge :

1. The metalinguistic sense, as in the expression “a descriptive poetics”.
2. The denotative sense : the designation of an object of study, as in the title of Philippe Hamon’s book, where the “descriptif” in question is the rhetorical figure set up as the dominant of the 19<sup>th</sup> century realist text. In Hamon’s terminology, *le descriptif* subsumes both description as a narrative moment *and* the global impulse or orientation – “le mouvement fondamental” – of the “readerly” text<sup>11</sup>. With the – *if* suffix we accede to a higher level of abstraction, which translates an effort on Hamon’s part to rethink an ancient and coarse dichotomy that has long dogged the analyst : description as static (the descriptive pause) / narration as dynamic (the forward-moving, teleologically-impelled plot). To resume : so far we have seen the term *descriptive* used in a metalinguistic and a “straight” sense. An anxiety immediately arises : if Hamon’s is a descriptive poetics – a description of the descriptive ? – the barrier between critical metalanguage and object begins to look alarmingly fragile and we face the possibility – a semiotician’s nightmare – that there might indeed, as Lacan suggests, *be no metalanguage*. Such knowledge as we gain of the descriptive appears to rely for its expression on the rhetorical figure set up as the object of enquiry, a predicament that neatly sums up a major paradox of cognition. This chiasmic intertwining of critical discourse and object may have something to do with the slipperiness, elusiveness and internal contradictions of description as noted by a number of critics<sup>12</sup>.
3. Finally, we turn to a sense of the descriptive as narrative mode or figure in widespread use, surviving theory wars and shifts in the episteme, though perhaps serving purposes and generating effects rather different to those ascribed to Hamon’s *descriptif*, and which remain to be analysed.

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<sup>11</sup> Hamon, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

<sup>12</sup> See Michel Beaujour’s article, « Some paradoxes of description » in *Yale French Studies*, N° 61, 1981, pp 27-59.

Now, if purely descriptive approaches to the text are merely less fashionable today than they were some thirty years ago, there is reason to fear that the descriptive *as an object of study* – the figure or dominant explored by Hamon – may actually be in crisis. This is because, as currently defined, it cannot be accommodated by an aesthetic which it seeks to distance itself from the logic of mimesis and its metaphysical underpinnings. The attack on mimesis is of course nothing new and the work of Lyotard, Derrida and Deleuze is frequently read as a radical working through of the Modernist critique of representation. But if, as Hamon suggests “the descriptive enjoys *privileged* links with the global aesthetic of Mimesis, especially as it attained dominance in the Western world from the Renaissance onwards”<sup>13</sup>, then this same descriptive is surely fated to remain in sufferance as non-mimetic or *anti-mimetic* concepts increasingly take hold of the critical imagination: the simulacrum, as theorised by Deleuze and Baudrillard, and its literary avatar, the fraudulent narrator whose descriptions no longer offer what Hamon calls “semantic gain”, “enhanced readability”, “additional information”<sup>14</sup>, but point instead to permanent semantic deficit and a knowledge in infinite regress; the event in its singularity, a lightning bolt or “caesura in space-time”<sup>15</sup> that defies and disables the descriptive impulse (Lyotard, Badiou); the sublime, as it emerges from Lyotard’s reading of Edmund Burke and Kant. Lyotard locates the sublime both in the ekstatic instant, the “now” or unrepeatable occurrence that is the work of art, and in the unrepresentable fact of its occurrence to which the work must stand witness<sup>16</sup>. If the descriptive act requires temporal extension, however minimal, and the presentability, or more traditionally, *re-presentability* of its objects, then Lyotard’s sublime denies it both. Derrida and Vattimo elaborate a post-Heideggerian concept of the art work as “inauguration” or disclosure of a world whose referential and imitative ties with the “the really real world” are irreversibly sundered<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Hamon, *op. cit.*, p. 88. Translation mine.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. xxxi.

<sup>16</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *L'inhumain: causeries sur le temps*, Paris: Galilée, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> See the chapter entitled « Deconstructing Representation: Narrative as Inauguration » in Andrew Gibson, *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1996, pp. 69-104; in particular, pp. 87-93.

The mimetic relationship of work to world which favoured the rise of Hamon's descriptive and ratified its position as textual dominant has been succeeded (though as we shall see not *superseded*) by a powerful conception of art as world unto itself, not a reflection, translation, abstraction but a material *addition*, existing side-by-side with reality as its enigmatic other, much as the unconscious is the other of conscious life. And this analogy reminds us that there is a psychoanalytical contribution to the ongoing critique of "the mimetic fix"<sup>18</sup>: Lacan's concept of the Real, now enjoying unprecedented popularity in film theory and art criticism in the anglophone world, largely thanks to the single-handed efforts of its champion Slavoj Žižek. The Real, it will be remembered, is that order of experience that resists the sign, and resists it absolutely ; it is at once the brute stuff of life and the "black remnant" of symbolisation that arrests the descriptive gesture in mid-flight.

In contemporary theoretical debate the descriptive does then appear to have been sidelined or crowded out, both as a methodology of the middle range and as an object of study in its own right. The history of Hamon's book is instructive : re-issued in 1993 (the fourth printing) with no changes to the original text (published in 1981), except for a few footnotes, clarifications, and an updated bibliography. This sends an ambivalent signal : was Hamon's opening statement so exhaustive that it rendered further comment spurious ? Has this study of the descriptive simply not provoked the uptake that might have re-energized the topic and taken it in new directions ? And if so, why ? We need only glance at contemporary critical writing to note that the descriptive as rhetorical figure, category, system (Hamon's terms) is massively overshadowed by tropes such as metalepsis, allegory, metaphor.

Whatever the reasons for this eclipse of the descriptive, we would do well to remember that theoretical debate is only a tiny part of the bigger picture, though academics are notoriously apt to confuse this part with the whole. Turning, then to the third and final sense of "descriptive" listed above : mimesis is in fact alive and well, and rumours of its imminent demise, as Andrew Gibson reminds us, have been greatly exaggerated : "Representation, mimesis, the *lisible* are not simply to be overcome. Rather, they have now been reworked, as Vattimo would have it, again, in weakened form."<sup>19</sup> A huge body of literature cutting

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

across the serious/popular divide testifies to the resilience of realist modes of writing, where description's referential drive and efficacy seem unimpaired. In this connection, Fredric Jameson has spoken of the postmodern fascination with what he calls "schlock and kitsch"<sup>20</sup>, a category that includes the billion-dollar industry of paraliterature (celebrity bios, crime novels, thrillers, etc.) whose attachment to the mimetic mode is steadfast and uninhibited. If anything, a casual glance at the ambient culture uncovers a paroxysmic abundance of description aided and abetted by the explosion of information technology and telecommunications. Disdained by theory, the descriptive continues to flourish unabated in current cultural practice.

I turn now to individual examples of literary description in contemporary writing and would like, here, to comment on my choice of texts. If we accept the hypothesis that it is in realist or neo-realist modes that the descriptive is most strongly in evidence, then one option is to analyse its function in texts that openly derive from or exploit the conventions of realism. There is one prominent novelistic genre that could arguably be identified as a natural successor of realism: it has a vested interest in conveying reality effects and possesses unusual gravity of tone and intent (Philippe Hamon reminds us that "realist discourse presents itself as essentially *serious*"<sup>21</sup> – it is that of testimony or testimonial fiction, which sets itself the impossible task of commemorating a past known to be irretrievable. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) are testimonial narratives dealing with past realities that have been *de-scribed*, or written out of the official historical archive and consequently, to use Morrison's verb, "disremembered". The ambition of such texts is not to restore truth or supply knowledge of such realities but precisely to bear witness to that which has always already been forgotten, repressed or concealed: the truth about Grace Marks in Atwood's novel, the truth about Margaret Garner (the historical inspiration for Morrison's Sethe), a woman who murders her child rather than have her experience slavery; the loss of "Sixty Million and more" thought to have perished as a consequence of slavery and to whose memory Morrison's novel is dedicated.

In *Alias Grace*, as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century realist novel, description has pride of place: critics have noted Atwood's

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<sup>20</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London and New York: Verso, (1991) 1995, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Hamon, *op. cit.*, p. 151.



commitment to detail, her painstaking efforts to reconstruct 19<sup>th</sup> century Toronto, its streets, interiors, smells, climate, the external trappings of its inhabitants. Such detail masks and compensates for missing knowledge, but its very proliferation underscores the epistemological fault-line at the heart of the novel: who was Grace? Did she murder her employers? Why? Atwood's is a fictionalized account of a notorious 19<sup>th</sup> century figure, Grace Marks. Together with her fellow-servant, James McDermott, Grace was charged with the double murder of her employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery. McDermott was sent to the gallows but Grace's sentence was commuted to life and she divided it between a Penitentiary in Kingston, Ontario, and a lunatic asylum. Records suggest she may occasionally have worked for spells at the Prison Governor's on day-release. She obtained a pardon in 1872 and went to a so-called "home provided" in New York State.

Confronted with the task of fictionalizing the irretrievable (Grace's psychology and motivation, forever foreclosed from knowledge), Atwood chooses to project a world which convinces in its outward aspect but foils the reader's narrative desire at every turn, resolving into a lush but impenetrable verbal décor. In the novel's climactic scene – Grace is hypnotised before a public agog for the final revelation (a typically tongue-in-cheek *mise en abyme* of readerly curiosity) – attention is once again deflected from the fictional world and its consistency onto the spoken word, invested, here, with equal weight and moment; because the truth is held to ransom, or, to put it less dramatically, held in abeyance by the undecidable nature of Grace's speech act – we cannot know, in this scene, whether she is performing madness or genuinely possessed by her dead friend Mary Whitney. In *Alias Grace*, the descriptive both overdetermines and underdetermines attempts at interpretation, carrying a surfeit of factual information while withholding the one item of knowledge that might assuage and gratify: a plausible account of what happened on the 23 July 1843.

Philippe Hamon has identified description as a textual repository of "knowledge" and "competence"<sup>22</sup>, an insight the literary text has been quick to integrate and exploit. But description is not simply a figure, it also possesses a syntax, and that syntax is one of assertion. As Barbara Johnson has pointed out, a declarative syntax generates its own referential effects, and

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<sup>22</sup> Hamon, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-113.

these are effects of knowledge<sup>23</sup>. So description, “un faire-savoir appuyé sur un savoir-faire”<sup>24</sup>) as Hamon neatly puts it, benefits from a syntactic form that increases its force as utterance of knowledge. By quoting descriptions of Grace Marks’ physiognomy and behaviour which were, for a long time, considered authoritative, Atwood provides an implicit metatextual commentary which could be summarized thus : when made available to a wide reading public, eye-witness descriptions are briskly naturalised into knowledge and truth. Susanna Moodie – the describer in question – was a contemporary of Grace’s, a Canadian immigrant writer who chronicled her experiences in journals familiar to the anglophone Canadian. She visited Grace in the Penitentiary and recounted what she saw there in *Life in the Clearings* (1853), extracts from which are positioned as epigraphs to chapters of Atwood’s novel. I quote one glorious instance of verbal portraiture here in full :

She is a middle-sized woman, with a slight, graceful figure. There is an air of hopeless melancholy in her face which is very painful to contemplate. Her complexion is fair and must, before the touch of hopeless sorrow paled it, have been very brilliant. Her eyes are a bright blue, her hair auburn, and her face would be rather handsome were it not for the long curved chin which gives, as it always does to most persons who have this facial defect, a cunning, cruel expression.

Grace Marks glances at you with a sidelong, stealthy look ; her eye never meets yours, and after a furtive regard, it invariably bends its gaze upon the ground. She looks like a person rather above her humble station...<sup>25</sup>

This collection of Victorian clichés mobilises all the resources of what Barthes called the “cultural code” in the service of credible, definitive portraiture, mingling an exacerbated pathos with clear attribution of guilt. Here is a writing bent on effacing the signs of its production in order to guarantee maximum readability and impact – straightforward syntax, conventional semantic coupling (*hopeless melancholy, hopeless sorrow, bright blue, cunning and cruel, sidelong and stealthy*), mobilisation of the reader’s “encyclopaedic” knowl-

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference : Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*, Baltimore and London : John Hopkins UP, (1980) 1985, pp. 72-73.

<sup>24</sup> Hamon, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>25</sup> Susanna Moodie, *Life in the Clearings* (1853), quoted in Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, London : Bloomsbury, 1996, p. 19.

edge (long curved chins mean witches, facial defects for Moodie's contemporaries denote inner vices, shifty eyes are proof of guilt, etc.). In her juxtaposition of extracts from various published sources, Atwood assembles and quotes rival fragments of knowledge whose confident rhetoric is undercut by the main narrative, organized as it is around a mystery – Grace's amnesia and her dream, the only vestige of the events occurring on July 23 1843. This erasure at the heart of the story is the textual inscription of an abiding and irreversible ignorance : in Atwood's words, the "true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma"<sup>26</sup>. This enigma underscores the vanity of received knowledge (vanity in the twofold sense of self-importance and vacuity), a knowledge revealed, by means of citation, as a binding of rhetoric (description), cultural cliché (readability) and syntax (assertion), ratified by the printing-press ; but the erasure also suggests that the servant's world is wholly annexed and subsumed by the word of the Other ; her script is confiscated, she is *de*-scribed and cannot speak for herself as there is no longer a self to speak of, as suggested here :

*Murderess* [Grace reflects] is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word – musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase. Sometimes at night I whisper it to myself : *Murderess, Murderess*. It rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor.

*Murderer* is merely brutal. It's like a hammer, or a lump of metal. I would rather be a murderess than a murderer, if those are the only choices.<sup>27</sup>

The fading of the self as consequence of a radical dispossession, the loss of sanity and ebbing of life-force following a confiscation of experience which is first and foremost a confiscation of language, its instrumentality, its performative reach ; with these deleterious effects of silencing in mind, I turn now to Morrison's *Beloved*. One of *Beloved*'s more positive functions in the narrative which bears her name is to unleash language, prompting Sethe, Denver and Paul D to reclaim a lost power of self-description. That slaves are denied this among other freedoms is dramatized by Morrison through a narrative technique in which the descriptive plays a vital role. It is no accident that Morrison chooses to report – describe – the crucial episode of

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, « Author's Afterword », p. 539.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

child-killing in *Beloved* from the standpoint of the four horse-men – “schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sherriff”<sup>28</sup> who come to reclaim Sethe and her children into slavery. Focalisation (it is the men who see and tell) and narrative order (theirs is the first detailed account the reader gets) allow Morrison to make a strong point : Sethe’s story is not in her hands, it has “always already” been expropriated by her owners, and it is their reading of that story that will decide her immediate fate :

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them ; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere – in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at – the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arch of its mother’s swing.

Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim.<sup>29</sup>

The deliberate stylistic flattening translates an absence or withdrawal of affect, apparent only in the dismissive “nigger” which betrays the slant of what might otherwise pass for a neutral account. The bare, descriptive style conveys the impression that facts are speaking for themselves, directly and unambiguously : “Right off it was clear...” Here, the gap between description and comprehension is effectively sealed : to see is to understand, and that understanding is of the instant. The men stare “at what there was to stare at”, not because it challenges their frame of reference, but because they are momentarily hypnotised by violence as spectacle and require “ticking time” only to process its consequences *for them* – Sethe driven mad, her children dead or dying, no immediate or future prospect of gain for the masters of Sweet Home.

The passages cited above dramatise, in one way or another, the relation of description to knowledge, since I wish to suggest that much contemporary writing – and in particular the *genre* of testimonial fiction – plays with the conventional effects of the descriptive, whether by insisting on description’s shortcomings with regard to a past posited as irretrievable, by exposing the

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

“situatedness” of the describer, or by laying bare the fabricated nature of a received wisdom congealed into common knowledge. To complete the picture, it would have been interesting to explore the modalities or strategies of the descriptive in its (always failed) attempt to grapple with or capture the reality posited by the genre: that reality which is elided through trauma, forgetfulness, amnesia, disremembering, appearing only as a confused and reiterated dream-time, requiring an endless *redescription* which announces its spectral, unassuageable, vindictive return.