

Stony Brook University



OFFICIAL COPY

The official electronic file of this thesis or dissertation is maintained by the University Libraries on behalf of The Graduate School at Stony Brook University.

© All Rights Reserved by Author.

On Discourse: Style, Voice, Reading

A Thesis Presented

by

Amir Rauf Alduha Jaima

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Philosophy

Stony Brook University

December 2008

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

Amir Rauf Alduha Jaima

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the
Master of Arts Degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this thesis.

Mary C. Rawlinson – Thesis Advisor

Associate Professor

Department of Philosophy

Megan Craig – Second Reader

Assistant Professor

Department of Philosophy

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin

Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

On Discourse: Style, Voice, and Reading

by

Amir Rauf Alduha Jaima

Master of Arts

in

Philosophy

Stony Brook University

2008

The distinction between the form of discourse and the content of discourse has been a philosophical consideration since at least as long ago as ancient Greece when Plato wrote the dialogues. The traditional philosophical position maintains that there is an important difference between form and content. Form is the medium of presentation, and content is the essential meaning that is presented.

The literary work of Toni Morrison challenges the distinction between form and content. The content of *The Bluest Eye*—and perhaps of all successful discourses—is communicated and constituted by the style of its discourse. In this inquiry I will argue that based upon the phenomenological evidence of *The Bluest Eye*, style *is* the content, all of it. The recognition of style is the extraction of content. The success of *The Bluest Eye* is due to the way that its specific style of voice constitutes its specific content.

Literature—loosely defined as the discourse for which there is a narrator, who is hypothetically distinct from the author—is the only “form” of discourse that explicitly requires the author to consider the constitutive role of style of voice. As a literary work,

The Bluest Eye serves as an appropriate example to examine and demonstrate the relationship between style and content.

Also the recognition of style is the acknowledgement of the phenomenon of novelty and the unprecedented. The act of reading and recognizing unprecedented style provides two kinds of inter-subjectivity. First of all, the narrative creates a community of readers for whom *The Bluest Eye*, for example, serves as a constitutive element of language and human understanding. And second, more importantly, the reader gains momentary access to the perspective of the narrator. Through the act of reading and recognizing style readers learn of the experiences of other individuals, and obtain a basis of comparison to better understand their own experiences.

In the first section I will examine the experience of reading *The Bluest Eye* and the process of recognizing and extracting the content constituted by its style of voice. In section two, I will examine the narrative voice of *The Bluest Eye*, which animates the style, and thus articulates the content. In section three, I will analyze the “formal” elements of the style of *The Bluest Eye*, which constitutes the content. In section four, I will examine the phenomenon of reading as the mechanism of inter-subjectivity.

And finally, I will conclude by discussing the methodological implications of this inquiry for philosophical reading and writing. In brief, as Proust argues, philosophy must become literature. There is a need to reread the history of philosophy with an ear to the style of voice of the authors. Also, there is a need to write philosophy with an explicit awareness one’s style of voice, and the ways that it constitutes content.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
I. Literature as Philosophy: <i>The Bluest Eye</i>	5
II. The Narrator and Voice	15
III. Style and its Content.....	18
IV. Inter-subjectivity and Reading	23
V. Conclusion: Philosophy becomes Literature.....	27
Bibliography.....	30

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank sincerely Professor Mary Rawlinson and Professor Megan Craig, who provided invaluable direction and feedback during my research and writing. I would like to thank Amma Asare and Mary Louise Patterson, who listened and responded to many intermediate versions of my arguments. And I would like to thank Heather White, who provided a sense of community during the solitary process of writing.

Introduction

The distinction between the form of discourse and the content of discourse has been a philosophical consideration since at least as long ago as ancient Greece when Plato wrote the dialogues. The traditional philosophical position maintains that there is an important difference between form and content. Form is the medium of presentation, and content is the essential meaning that is presented. Though all content is presented necessarily in one form or another, form itself is meaningless and accidental. The decision to communicate content in one form over another is a secondary consideration, weighing questions of persuasiveness, accessibility, or beauty, but not intelligibility.

The literary work of Toni Morrison challenges the distinction between form and content. The content of *The Bluest Eye*—and perhaps of all successful discourses—is communicated and constituted by the style of its discourse. The style of *The Bluest Eye* is the quality of the voice of Morrison's narrator. The narrator's voice is specific and unique. It suggests to the reader an irreducible way of seeing the world. Style is not simply another form of discourse or another way of presenting content. Style is absolutely specific and every instance of it is unprecedented.

In this inquiry I will argue that based upon the phenomenological evidence of *The Bluest Eye*, style *is* the content, all of it. The recognition of style is the extraction of content. This thesis is not making an empirical claim. I am not arguing that since content must be presented in one form or another, style constitutes content by providing a necessary medium for the communication of essential meaning. An empirical analysis of style maintains that there is a distinction between style and content, ideally. There is a

distinction, even if no empirical examples can be given of content without form. There is a distinction because presumably several different forms of discourse can serve as a medium for the communication a given content. If the same content can be presented in several different forms, then a particular form of discourse is not necessary to communicate it.

The work of Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* suggests an absolute connection between a particular style and its content. It suggests that if the style of discourse is altered, the content will also be altered. The specificity of style is not simply embroidery at the edges of content, rendering content more or less persuasive, or more or less accessible, or more or less beautiful. The style of discourse is tangible and dimensional, entirely filling the space between the edges, constituting every aspect of the content in its image.

Also, this is not a semantic argument, suggesting that the definition of content should be broadened to include some “formal” features of discourse. In other words, I am not arguing, as Martha Nussbaum does in *Love’s Knowledge*, that some forms of discourse implicitly communicate content alongside and in addition to the explicit content of the discourse. Nussbaum’s thesis maintains that there is a distinction between form and content. Nussbaum says,

that any style makes, itself, a statement: that an abstract theoretical style makes like any other style, a statement about what is important and what is not, about what faculties of the reader are important for knowing and what are not. There may then be certain plausible views about the nature of the relevant portions of human life that cannot be housed within that form without generating a peculiar implicit contradiction.¹

¹ Nussbaum, 7

Nussbaum continues, “[T]he very choice to write a tragic drama—or we can now say, a novel—expresses already certain evaluative commitments. Among these seem to be commitments to the ethical significance of uncontrolled events, to the epistemological value of emotion, to the variety and non-commensurability of the important things.”²

Nussbaum argues that before any explicit content is communicated, the choice to use one form of discourse over another as the medium of presentation implies “evaluative commitments” that are inherent to the chosen form. Considerations of form are important in order to avoid a contradiction between the explicit content and the implicit evaluative commitments. Nussbaum’s argument challenges the idea that form is meaningless, but it does not challenge the distinction between style and content.

The success of *The Bluest Eye* is not, as Nussbaum implies, due to the compatibility between the explicit content and the implicit evaluative commitments of the literary form. The success is not due to the technical harmony between the subject of *The Bluest Eye*, i.e. beauty, and the adept employment of any “formal” elements or literary devices. It is not a consequence of the appeal of the discourse to the emotions of the reader, or its presentation of uncontrolled events and non-commensurable competing values for readers’ consideration, or its accessibility by appealing to our desire to be entertained. The success of *The Bluest Eye* is due to way that its specific style of voice constitutes its specific content.

Literature—loosely defined as the discourse for which there is a narrator, who is hypothetically distinct from the author—is the only “form” of discourse that explicitly requires the author to consider the constitutive role of style of voice. As a literary work, *The Bluest Eye* serves as an appropriate example to examine and demonstrate the

² Ibid., 26

relationship between style and content. In forms of discourse other than literature, one may be inclined to ignore the constitutive role of style. For example, some forms of discourse—such as those that are common in journalism or academia—constitute content in such a manner that the meaning deliberately overshadows its “formal” elements in order to present the content as self-evident. Despite the self-evident appearance of content, it is constituted by its style.

The difference between form and style is not trivial. One can speak of the literary form of discourse, or the traditional philosophical form of discourse. The specificity of style and its relationship to content requires more precise language. Though the work of both Morrison and Proust can be described as literary, their styles, and thus their content, are extremely divergent and absolutely irreducible. Their work is considered literary because *The Bluest Eye* and *A la recherche du temps perdu* both share some technical elements, the most obvious of which is the presence of a narrator. Nonetheless, the style of Morrison or Proust is not technical or “formal.” Style suggests a way of seeing and understanding and constituting content, rather than a method of manipulating it. Each of their styles is something unprecedented and new. Though *The Bluest Eye* and the *Recherche* are both considered literature, one could never predict the style of Toni Morrison from that of Marcel Proust, just as one could never predict the style of Van Gogh from Cézanne, though reductively speaking they share a form of painting. Form is general, but style is specific.

Also the recognition of style is the acknowledgement of the phenomenon of novelty and the unprecedented. The act of reading and recognizing unprecedented style provides two kinds of inter-subjectivity. First of all, the narrative creates a community of

readers for whom *The Bluest Eye*, for example, serves as a constitutive element of language and human understanding. And second, more importantly, the reader gains momentary access to the perspective of the narrator. Through the act of reading and recognizing style readers learn of the experiences of other individuals. And readers obtain a basis of comparison to better understand their own experiences.

I will begin in the next section by examining the experience of reading *The Bluest Eye* and the process of recognizing and extracting the content constituted by its style of voice. In section two, I will examine the narrative voice of *The Bluest Eye*, which animates the style, and thus articulates the content. In section three, I will analyze the “formal” elements of the style of *The Bluest Eye*, which constitutes the content. In section four, I will examine the phenomenon of reading as the mechanism of inter-subjectivity.

And finally, I will conclude by discussing the methodological implications of this inquiry for philosophical reading and writing. In brief, as Proust argues, philosophy must become literature. There is a need to reread the history of philosophy with an ear to the style of voice of the authors. Also, there is a need to write philosophy with an explicit awareness one’s style of voice, and the ways that it constitutes content.

I. Literature as Philosophy: *The Bluest Eye*

The Bluest Eye is a tragedy about beauty. It is the narrative of an empowering and rejuvenating conception of beauty. It is also the narrative of the destructive, racial, American conception of beauty. The project of *The Bluest Eye* is twofold. First, the narrative voice implicates the reader in the construction of the destructive, racial, American conception of beauty. Second, the narrative voice communicates the alternative, rejuvenating, Morrisonian conception of beauty.

The story is told primarily through the eyes of a child, Claudia. It begins in autumn, when Pecola Breedlove, the tragic protagonist, moves in with Claudia's family. Their home is small but they make room for Pecola. During this period, Claudia, her sister Frieda, and Pecola share their childhood, their room, and their bed. Through a series of mundane encounters that paints a vivid image of the hostile historical climate, the narrator shows us the pervasive poverty in the African-American community and the axiomatic standard of beauty, of which Shirley Temple is the paradigm. As the three girls interact, we learn of Pecola's unique yet familiar relationship to beauty. She is uniquely ugly, but she is ugly in a way that is familiar to all little black girls. As we watch Pecola's painful childhood through the eyes of Claudia—Pecola's lonely persecuted days at school, the fear of her first menstruation, her distant relationship with her mother despite their proximity, her eventual rape by her drunken father, and Pecola's eventual and sad exclusion from the community—we observe how Pecola bears the burden of ugliness. By the end of the narrative, we understand her escalating yet futile preoccupation with the

acquisition of blue eyes. With blue eyes she would be beautiful and her world would not be quite so full of pain.

Stylistically, *The Bluest Eye* begins with a parable repeated three times. “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy...” The first time it is repeated there is no punctuation and the only capitalized letter is the H of the initial word “Here.” “Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live here in the green-and-white house they are very happy...” The second time it is repeated there is still no punctuation, but now neither are there even spaces between what used to be words. “Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfather dickandjanelivehereinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappy...”³

What begins as an easily legible paragraph, by the second repetition digresses into little more than a long string of letters. The three paragraphs theoretically contain the same content since all of the letters appear in the same order. In the first paragraph the reader is presented with the text, the story of a happy family. In the first repetition, the reader assumes it is the same story, but the reader must reconstruct the punctuation to organize the words into sentences, into thoughts; and since the reader may not remember the punctuation of the first paragraph perfectly, or she prefers to read the paragraph differently, she may reconstruct the punctuation differently, which ultimately yields a slightly varied story. In the second repetition, the reader struggles to reconstruct words, not to mention sentences. She stumbles over encountering words that either have no conventional meaning in her language or are spelled incorrectly. As the possibilities of

³ Morrison, 3-4

the story are compounded, the reader becomes aware of her complicity in the construction of the story. She also becomes aware of her role in animating the narrative voice. In the first paragraph, the punctuation and spacing strongly delineate what one assumes is the only, or rather “correct” narration of the story. By the third paragraph the reader is aware of her role in delineating, and in that sense limiting, the compounding possibilities of voice.

At the opening of *The Bluest Eye*, the reader is not aware of the irony of beginning the tragic story of an ugly, little, black girl with the childish parable of a happy, beautiful, white family. The narrator leads the reader to believe that the story of Pecola will be happy. The ignorance of the reader, however, is short lived. On the next page, the narrator foreshadows the entire story. The reader learns that there will be no marigolds in the fall of 1941, and that during the same fall Pecola will become pregnant with her father’s child. The reader also learns that despite Claudia and Frieda’s prayers, Pecola will have a miscarriage and her father will die.

The juxtaposition of the story of the happy white family with the tragic foreshadowing of Pecola’s story serves as a metaphor for the first project of the narrative, i.e. to implicate the reader in the construction of the American conception of beauty. The narrator juxtaposes the happy story that the reader helped to construct with its tragic consequences for a little black girl. Each subsequent chapter opens with except from the story of the happy white family. The excerpts are without punctuation or spacing. In order to read and makes sense of them, the reader must determine the “correct” spacing and punctuation and the narrative voice. In that sense the reader determines the story of the happy white family again. Opening each chapter with this exercise reminds the reader

that she constructs the American conception of beauty that is implied in the parable. After each chapter, the implication of the reader becomes more striking. It becomes apparent that the existence of the American conception of beauty, which the reader constructs, also determines Pecola's ugliness and instigates her devastation.

The initial determination of the Breedloves' ugliness occurs early in the narrative. The epigraph for this chapter ironically reads,

“HEREISTHEFAMILYMOTHERFATHERDICKANDANETHEYLIVEINTHEGREEN ANDWHITEHOUSHEYAREVERYH.”⁴ As expected, the reader imagines spaces and punctuation to form words. The reader also finishes the final word, “happy,” which is only indicated by its initial letter. As the chapter begins, the reader immediately notices the contrast between the Breedloves and the happy family. Their home is not “green and white” like the happy family's. It is a cold and unkempt storefront indicative of their poverty, and acceptable because they are ugly. Though the reader does not yet know why it is the case, she is told that though the Breedloves' poverty is typical, “their ugliness was unique.”⁵ The reader is then offered a short description of the Breedloves' familial features as validation. They have, “small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads...irregular hairlines...straight, heavy eyebrows...keen but crooked noses with insolent nostrils...high cheekbones, and their ears turned forward. Shapely lips which called attention not to themselves but to the rest of the face.”⁶ As a mental image materializes, the reader is inclined to call them non-descript at least, but not necessarily “aggressively ugly,” as the narrator does.

⁴ Ibid., 38

⁵ Ibid., 38

⁶ Ibid., 38-9

Initially, one assumes that the Breedloves' ugliness is a fact that the narrator is communicating. Confused by their ugliness, one wonders why that is the case. But the 'wondering' does not challenge whether or not they are ugly. Their ugliness is certain. The reader wonders how the combination of these common features produces such an ugly whole. Anticipating the reader's confusion, if not sharing it, the narrator follows with the rare use of the second person pronoun, "*You* looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; *you* looked closely and could not find the source. Then *you* realized that it came from conviction [the reader's conviction and], their conviction."⁷ There ugliness is unique because, as the narrator tells the reader, "it did not belong to them."⁸ The reader bestowed it upon them. And the Breedloves' acceptance of it ossified it into an objective truth. The style of this passage implicates the reader not only in the Breedloves' ugliness, but also in their plight.

The narrator implicates the reader again at the moment of Pecola's birth. Pauline remembers Pecola nursing and says, "I used to like to watch her. You know they makes them greedy sounds. Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly."⁹ One is inclined to smile as I imagine the nursing Pecola materializes, healthy and hungry, helpless but cared for, loved. One imagines holding her in the same way Pauline does to encourage Pecola to nurse. One is inclined to call her beautiful, but then Pauline tells us Pecola is ugly. The discord between Pecola's pending beauty and Pauline's conviction highlights the reader's role in determining Pecola's ugliness.

⁷ Ibid., 39, my italics

⁸ Ibid., 38

⁹ Ibid., 126

The second project of *The Bluest Eye* is to communicate the new, Morrisonian conception of beauty, which must subvert the existing narratives of white beauty and black ugliness. Simply inverting the American conception and positing black beauty would be insufficient. Katherine Stern quotes Morrison saying that the concept of Black beauty is simply “‘a white idea turned inside out’ that still reduced the worth of a people to their bodily appearance.”¹⁰ The concept of “black beauty” operates within the existing narrative of white beauty, and reinforces the assumptions of that model—that physical beauty is a virtue—which ultimately leads to alienation and self-contempt. *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison says, “tried to hit the raw nerve of racial self-contempt, expose it, then soothe it not with narcotics but with language that replicated the agency I discovered in my first experience of beauty”, where Morrison learned that “Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could *do*.”¹¹

The second project of *The Bluest Eye*'s is to articulate the new, positive, Morrisonian conception of beauty. Beauty is something done, not something beheld. Stern extracts Morrison's positive articulation through a metaphor of touching. Stern refers to the way that Paul D, in *Beloved*, touches Sethe's scarred back and turns it into a beautiful cherry tree. Stern refers to the way that Sula, in *Sula*, sees the beauty of her lover Ajax as the craft of her imagination working on his skin. Ajax's beauty requires Sual to “rub... scrape... chisel... tap.”¹² Beauty metaphorically requires touch. Literally, it requires labor, proximity, engagement, work, and the time implied in all of these.

The narrator of J. Nozio Maraire's narrative *Zenzele* communicates a similar conception of beauty. Zenzele's mother recounts on the eve of her wedding when her

¹⁰ Conner, ed., 77

¹¹ Morrison, 211, 209

¹² Conner, ed., 87

mother-in-law, old and wrinkled, makes Zenzele's mother trace the wrinkles on her mother-in-law's face and prune-like breast. As she does so, she tells Zenzele's mother the story of each crevice. "That was from the tears I shed at his birth...that line was when he began to cry...That was when he left the farm...that was when they threw him into jail...And this [her breast] is where the strength of your man comes from...I breast-fed six children...all greedy and strong."¹³ When she is done, the work of her fingers tracing each line on her mother-in-law's face and breast has made her mother-in-law strikingly beautiful. As the reader imagines tracing each wrinkle with her hand, she experiences the change in the image of the mother-in-law. The reader enacts the Morrisonian conception of beauty by reading the passage and making the mother-in-law beautiful.

Similarly, the narrator of *The Bluest Eye* presents the Morrisonian conception of beauty. When Pauline and Cholly's marriage is young and healthy, when they love each other, Pauline's description of her attraction consists entirely of remembered touch and work on Cholly's body and on herself. Pauline describes a night when they make love. Cholly has returned late and for a long time before he touches Pauline, she pretends to sleep. With her eyes closed and her back turned, she says, "I can see in my mind's eye his black arms thrown back behind his head...Without touching him I be feeling those ridges on the tips of my fingers...I know where the hair growth slacks out—just above his navel." At the end, when she orgasms it is the product of her labor of bestowing beauty on Cholly and on herself. She says it is the moment when she feels him loving her, when she imagines in the moment of his orgasm that she is all that is on his mind. Then, she

¹³ Maraire, 42-3

says, “I feel a power. I be strong, I be pretty, I be young...strong enough, pretty enough, young enough to let him make me come.”¹⁴

Also, sadly, in the final chapter of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola makes herself beautiful. In the final chapter, Pecola bestows beauty upon herself by working for Soaphead Church. Her payment is a pair of her own blue eyes. She deludes herself and believes in the integrity of her compensation. Since no one can see her beautiful blue eyes except her and her imaginary friend, she is called crazy and ostracized by the community. Though the community blames Pecola for her craziness, or perhaps they blame Cholly because he raped his own daughter, the narrator blames the reader.

The epigraph of the final chapter reads,

“LOOKLOOKHERECOMESA FRIENDTHE FRIENDWILLPLAYWITHJANETHEYWILLPLAYAGOODGAMEPLAYJANEPLAY.”¹⁵ Again, the reader imagines spaces and punctuation. In this way, the reader delineates and determines the story of the white happy family. The *happy* story of Pecola that follows is conditioned by perverted circumstances. The friend that plays with Pecola is imaginary, and the “good game” they play is a circular act of self-delusion. Throughout the narrative, the narrator makes the reader aware of the disturbing differences between the happy family and the Breedloves.

In the last chapter, the similarities are conspicuous and uncanny. The epigraph reminds the reader that the craziness to which Pecola succumbs is a consequence of the American conception of beauty, which the reader constructs. The narrator shows that in order for Pecola to be beautiful according to the American conception, her circumstances must be perverted or she must be crazy. As a little black girl, she is absolutely excluded

¹⁴ Morrison, 131

¹⁵ Ibid., 193

from the American conception of beauty. She could only be beautiful by becoming something that she could never be, i.e. blue-eyed. When Pecola bestows American beauty upon herself, she makes the impossible happen.

This analysis has not exhausted the content communicated by the style of *The Bluest Eye*. The argument demonstrates that the content of *The Bluest Eye* is communicated by the style of voice, not by the story. The style is not a technical feature of the narrative. It is an element of the narrative that is irreducible and unprecedented. Before *The Bluest Eye* was published, the Morrisonian conception of beauty lacked a communicable referent outside of the experience of (at least) Toni Morrison. As Hegel says, “it was an idea for the author alone.” Since the idea did not exist in language, it could not have been articulated in words alone. The idea needed to be demonstrated before it could be named. Style constitutes content in a demonstrative act.

In the next section I will examine the voice of *The Bluest Eye*, which animates style.

II. The Narrator and Voice

The voice of *The Bluest Eye* narrates or puts into motion the style of the narrative. Gérard Genette's critical work *Narrative Discourse* distinguishes three conventional conceptions of narrative. The first sense of narrative is the act of *narrating*, the telling, the enunciating, or the action of recounting events. The second sense of narrative is the *story*, that which is recounted or narrated. The story consists of "the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse."¹⁶ It includes characters and a sense of time and place, though time and place need not be specific. The third sense of narrative is the *narrative*, which is "the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events."¹⁷ It is the narrative instance, within which the narrating of story occurs. It is the space occupied by the narrator, and thus mediates voice.

Voice is "the way in which the narrating itself is implicated in the...narrative situation or its instance, and along with that its two protagonists: the narrator and his audience, real or implied...[It] refer[s] to a relation with the subject...of the enunciating."¹⁸ Genette says that voice prevents readers from mistakenly reducing "questions of enunciating to questions of 'point-of-view' ...[or] indentify the narrating instance with the instance of writing, the narrator with the author, and the recipient of the narrative with the reader of the work."¹⁹ Voice refers to the act of telling, the articulating of style, and the functioning of narrative.

¹⁶ Genette, 25

¹⁷ Ibid., 25

¹⁸ Ibid., 31

¹⁹ Ibid., 213

Voice implies a “who.” The “who” is the narrator. The narrator is distinct from both the author and all of the characters. Even if the narrative is what is traditionally referred to as “first-person,” meaning the narrative is told using the first person pronoun “I,” the character that the “I” refers to will not necessarily be the narrator. Though pronouns direct readers to the narrative instance, one cannot identify the narrator with the occurrence of the pronoun “I,” or even its combination of occurrences.

For example, the narrator is not Pecola, Pauline, or even Claudia. Neither of these characters could narrate *The Bluest Eye* simply because none of them know everything that occurs. Neither Pauline nor Claudia know the details of Pecola’s rape. Neither Pecola nor Claudia know of Pauline’s lost love of Cholly. Neither Pauline nor Pecola know that Claudia and Frieda desperately want Pecola’s baby to survive. Even their combination their voices does not identify the narrator. Neither Pauline, Pecola, nor Claudia know of Cholly’s humiliation by the two white men during his first sexual experience. Interestingly, Cholly’s humiliation is told in the third person. Even if a character does know everything that was narrated, the narrator is still distinct from all of the characters.

Overlooking voice and identifying the narrator with any of the characters, conflates point-of-view with the instance of enunciating. The difference is between “who sees” and “who speaks.” Who is the character that “orients the narrative perspective...[and] who is the narrator?”²⁰ Point-of-view, which is a matter of seeing rather than speaking, remains within the viewing subject. Seeing does not constitute story or content, whereas enunciating does.

Similarly, conflating the author with the narrator overlooks the instance of enunciating. The narrator only exists within the narrative instance. For example, Genette

²⁰ Ibid., 186

says, “no document external to the *Recherche*...could teach us about either those events or that act [of writing it], since both of these are fictional and both set on stage”²¹.

Though historically we know that Proust wrote the *Recherche*, the protagonist, Marcel, is the narrator and the eventual writer of the narrative. History may offer some insight to the extent that the narrative is factual; but insofar as it is literary, the narrative instance is an overriding consideration. Each reader must enter the narrative instance, and hear the narrative voice in order to recognize the style. The quality of voice that identifies the narrator is its style of the narrative.

In the next section, I will examine the style of *The Bluest Eye*, which constitutes the content and the story.

²¹ Ibid., 28

III. Style and its Content

The style of *The Bluest Eye* constitutes the content and the story. The style cannot be reduced to literary devices such as the plot, the setting, the characters, or the conflict. Though style contains literary elements, style itself is reducible to any technique or single element. Proust says, “style for the writer, no less than color for the painter, is a question not of technique but of vision: it is the revelation, which by direct and conscious methods would be impossible, of the qualitative difference, the uniqueness of the fashion in which the world appears to each one of us.”²² The style of *The Bluest Eye* consists of the way that the narrative functions when it is read. It is the quality of the voice of Morrison’s narrator. The quality of the language, the rhythm of the sentences, and the choice of words all contribute to the style of voice. Nonetheless, style cannot be reduced to jargon, inflection, or meter. These elements of language function like additional literary devices.

The style of voice resists formalization. It is the feature that is felt and remembered, betraying the specificity voice. Those things-felt include the candid insight and casual disregard of experiences that seem to be familiar to a certain kind of person. Or it is the quotidian tone of a description that undermines its novelty. The style is most apparent in *The Bluest Eye* when the narrator is not playing an active part in the story, when the narrator appears to be merely watching and describing, when there is not a character “on stage” who orients the narrative perspective. It is during those passages when the narrator, due to the absence of the pronoun “I,” does not have a complicating inherent interest in Claudia, Pauline, or Pecola. Then the rhythm of the narrator’s words belongs to no one else.

²² Proust (3), 932

Since style is specific, unprecedented, and demonstrative, it cannot be adequately described. It is more easily shown. For example, the narrator describes at one point the kind of women who come from certain towns in the south. The narrator says,

When you ask them where they are from, they tilt their heads and say 'Mobile' and you think you've been kissed. They say 'Aiken' and you see a white butterfly glance off a fence with a torn wing. They say 'Nagadoches' and want to say 'Yes, I will.' You don't know what these towns are like but you love what happens to the air when they open their lips and let the names ease out.²³

Though the narrator uses the pronoun "you" to include the reader, the images that the names evoke are unique to the narrative perspective. The reader recognizes the unique way that the narrator sees the world. As one reads this passage, one wonders, how must a person pronounce 'Mobile' to feel like you have been kissed? How must a person pronounce 'Aiken' to bring to mind the image of a white butterfly glancing off a fence with a torn wing? How must a person pronounce 'Nagadoches' to make you utter aloud 'yes I will?' The reader is pronounce the words aloud to herself, to arrive at an inflexion that evokes these responses. The inflexion that the reader arrives at, if she arrives at one, may not be the same pronunciation of the names that the narrator actually heard (hypothetically speaking since narrators are not actual individuals). Nonetheless, the predisposition to be affected by words in such a way suggests something unique about the vision of the narrator. It suggests a unique way of seeing the world that is not reducible to the things in the world. That uniqueness is the style.

There are two kinds of criticisms that follow, a literary criticism and a philosophical one. The literary criticism argues that any example can be reduced to its formal elements. The uniqueness of style is due to the uniqueness of the story. The

²³ Morrison, 81

philosophical criticism asks, how does one recognize style? What prevents each reader from recognizing the style of a given narrative differently or “incorrectly”?

In response to the literary criticism, let us consider a form of narrative discourse that does not rely primarily on words, i.e. graphic novels or comics. In *99 Ways to Tell a Story*, Matt Madden illustrates 99 different ways to present the “same” story. Comics have even greater stylistic variation than logo-centric discourses, because the artist must also consider the pictures (or lack thereof) as additional “vocabulary” to communicate the story. Madden says in his introduction, “Can a story, however simple or mundane, be separated from the manner in which it is told?” He concludes—a conclusion that precipitates his project—that “stylistic choices are in fact an essential part of the story.”²⁴ In short, style constitutes content. One may object that already we have presumed an essential story that each of the 99 narratives aim to narrate. Therefore there is a distinction between style and content. One needs only to flip through the pages of Madden’s project to understand his conclusion.

The stylistic differences of each comic frame my engagement of the story. Eventually the reader realizes that each comic tells a different story. Obviously Madden began with one illustration, but which of the 99 comics was it? Also, simply because a given comic was drawn or thought of first does not make it the most essential, if there is an essential comic. The first comic the reader engages (if she starts from the beginning of the book) is called the “template.” Madden, however, says that there is no real criterion for calling it the template. It does not contain the most information, providing the material for all the others. Nor does it contain the least amount of information, serving as a scaffold upon which the style of the others hangs. It is called the “template,” because “it

²⁴ Madden, 1

has the least overt manipulation of formal elements.” Basically, the “template” was named as such because its style is the most familiar, the most traditional.

Similarly, Proust’s depiction of Berma’s dramatic presentation of *Phèdre* in the *Recherche* provides an analogy for the relationship between style and content. After Marcel’s first experience, he is disappointed because he cannot “see” Berma at all, not to mention her style. She is within his line of sight, but all he can see in the space that her body occupies is Phaedra, the character that she is playing. Marcel says, “I listened to her as though I were reading *Phèdre*, or as though Phaedra herself had at that moment uttered the words that I was hearing, without its appearing that Berma’s talent had added anything at all to them.”²⁵ It is not until Marcel’s second experience of Berma, when his expectations were significantly diminished, that he realizes that Berma’s style, her genius was in rendering herself absolutely transparent. Or in other words, every element of her being permeates Berma’s version of Phaedra. Indeed Racine was the playwright. But, as Marcel says, “the work of the playwright was for the actress no more than the raw material, more or less irrelevant in itself.” Phaedra, as she appears on stage, though inspired by Racine, is entirely Berma’s creation. In order to see how much Berma’s style constitutes the content of Phaedra, one need only to substitute another actress. Similarly, the style of voice of *The Bluest Eye* permeates every aspect of the narrative in the same way that the style of Berma permeates every aspect of Phaedra.

The philosophical criticism will be addressed more thorough in the next section. Briefly though, the act of reading provides a strong moment of inter-subjectivity between the reader and the narrator, and a possibility of inter-subjectivity each reader of the same narrative.

²⁵ Proust (1), 484

In the next section, I will examine the activity of reading *The Bluest Eye* as a mechanism of inter-subjectivity.

IV. Inter-subjectivity and Reading

The act of reading *The Bluest Eye* animates the narrative. The reader puts the narrative in motion. The reader enters the narrative instance and recognizes the style of voice. The recognition of the style of voice is an acknowledgment of the unknown and the unprecedented. As the reader recognizes the unknown, she emerges from herself and experiences the world of another. She obtains a moment of inter-subjectivity between herself and the narrator.

The reader's imagination animates the narrative. It animates Pecola, Claudia, Pauline, and Cholly. It creates the town of Lorain, Ohio in the 1940s—Claudia's cold drafty bedroom, the streets where Pecola eats ice-cream with Maureen Peal, the kitchen of the white family where Pauline works, and the Breedloves' kitchen where Cholly rapes Pecola. But most importantly, the reader's imagination animates the narrative voice. In a sense, the reader *is* the narrator. Genette says, "the real author of the narrative is not only he who tells it, but also, and at times even more, he who hears it."²⁶ Everything that the narrator "sees" in the narrative, the reader "sees." In the context of the narrative, the reader's perspective is the narrator's perspective. This is not a question of whether the reader identifies or sympathizes with a character in the narrative. Rather, everything the reader knows about the narrative is necessarily given by the narrator. Everything that the narrator gives, intelligibly, is constructed by the reader's imagination. It is as if the reader inhabits the narrator and witnesses the story through narrator's eyes—but the narrator's eyes are necessarily the reader's eyes. It is as if the reader inhabits the narrator and narrates the narrative—but the narrator's voice is necessarily the reader's voice. In the

²⁶ Genette, 262

narrative instance, the reader becomes the narrator of a story other than her own. In this manner, the reader experiences an alternate view of the world.

Recognizing the style of voice is an acknowledgment of the unknown and the phenomenon of novelty. One reads to obtain the inter-subjectivity of the narrative instance and glimpse a world different from one's own. Proust says reading is like "go[ing] for a train journey, with the hope, that is, of resting myself by the sight of objects that I do not see every day and by breathing the atmosphere of an earlier time."²⁷ One reads *The Bluest Eye* and glimpses the world of Morrison's narrator. There are experiences that a given reader can never have. There are perspectives that are inaccessible to some readers. Yet those inaccessible perspectives and unique experiences often contain valuable insights. Through reading, one enters into the inter-subjectivity of the narrative instance and partially escapes oneself. Proust says, "Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe."²⁸ Reading does not replace life. It is not a substitute for the world out of which the narrative arose. Nonetheless, reading does provide a glimpse of another person's experience.

The inter-subjectivity of the narrative instance also creates a community of readers. Genette says, "And who [hears the narrative] is not necessarily the one it is addressed to [i.e. the narratee]: there are always people *off to the side*."²⁹ Every reader is specific, but the idea of the reader, which is necessary for the existence of the narrative, is that of an "implied reader"³⁰ or a potential one. The potential reader is a plurality

²⁷ Proust (3), 922

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 932

²⁹ Genette, 262

³⁰ Genette (2), 149

consisting of all the readers that will eventually engage the narrative, including those who are “off to the side” and span space and time. Each implied reader of *The Bluest Eye*, though a member of a plurality of readers, animates the *same* narrative.

The Bluest Eye becomes both a shared experience and every reader’s experience. It is a shared experience because the narrative creates a community of readers who have entered into the same narrative instance. The narrative is every reader’s experience because each reader, in a sense, is the narrator.

Certainly each reader animates the narrative differently. Anyone who has discussed a book with another person encounters the moment when you realize that you both imagined elements of the narrative differently. Perhaps Pecola or Claudia had a darker or lighter skin tone. Perhaps they “spoke” with a different accent. Maybe one of you read an allusion to “The Ugly Duckling” or you disagreed about the redeemability of a character, like Cholly or Miss Marie. Despite your different visions of the story’s details, a community around the narrative has been created. The narrative serves as a frame of reference around which readers can discuss their different experiences of the *same* narrative. All readers of *The Bluest Eye* know a little black girl named Pecola who wishes for blue eyes in order to be beautiful, and tragically acquires them. This community, however, is the weaker of the two kinds of inter-subjectivity. It must be mediated by the narrative, like a third party facilitating a discussion.

The stronger moment of inter-subjectivity occurs directly between the reader and the narrator. Though the reader animates the narrative voice, the reader does not, ultimately, construct the voice. The author creates the narrative instance that the reader enters into and animates. The author creates the unprecedented style that the narrator

personifies. Together, readers and writers construct and animate the narrative instance.

The narrative instance serves as a mechanism of inter subjectivity.

V. Conclusion: Philosophy becomes Literature

There are two conclusions to this inquiry. First, there is a need to reread the history of philosophy with an ear to the style of voice of the texts. The attention to style will bring to light content that has been ignored or misinterpreted. Proust says, “Quality of language...is something the critical theorists think that they can do without.”³¹ Yet even that vain effort to transcend the cohesive materiality of discourse, its style, is betrayed in the style of those discourses. Style is content and is salient and inevitable.

Second, there is a need to write philosophy with an awareness of one’s own style of voice and the evaluative commitments of that style. This involves an explicit acknowledgement that one’s style constitutes one’s content. If a writer overlooks the ways that the uniqueness of her style of voice is implicated in her discourse, the writer assumes the unrealistic and prejudicial lens of normativity.

Narrative forces considerations of style due to the necessary presence of a narrator. Philosophy may not need to become “literature proper” to adequately address the considerations of style, but for the sake of intelligibility, there are few alternatives. Those alternatives may include the pervasive use of examples, which are essentially short narratives.

Similarly Proust concludes at the end of the *Recherche* that philosophy must become literature. True to his claim, Proust’s argument takes the form of a seven volume demonstrative act, presenting his claim through the style of his discourse. Though his argument is clear, the most explicit articulation is a question buried in a pregnant passage. He says,

³¹ Proust (3), 916

To this contemplation of the essence of things...the task was to interpret the given sensations as signs of so many laws and ideas, by trying to think—that is to say, to draw forth from the shadows—what I had merely felt, by trying to convert it into its spiritual equivalent. And this method, which seemed to me the sole method, what was it but the creation of the work of art?³²

Every element of Proust's narrative resists formalization. His claim's validation is not a logical proof. It is the phenomenological evidence of Marcel's life, specifically those ephemeral "minute[s] freed from the order of time,"³³ i.e. the phenomenon of involuntary memory. They serve as the only authentic point of access into intelligibility. It is the writer qua artist who after tasting these fugitive moments wields the unique talent to "force himself to make [such] an impression pass through all the successive states which will culminate in its fixation, its expression."³⁴ The writer bears the unique philosophical responsibility to construct the mechanism of inter-subjectivity. In this manner the writer shares her own experiences, and helps allows even the reader become aware of his own experiences.

There are two interpretations of Proust's claim. The first interpretation emphasizes the passive mechanism of intelligibility. Philosophy must become literature because our lives our literary; and to the extent that philosophy is derived from and constitutive of our lives, it becomes literature. The second interpretation prescribes the approach to philosophical activity suggested above. Philosophy must become literature because the "creation of the work of art" is the only way to communicate the unprecedented nature of human experience. Just as the artist has a philosophical

³² Ibid., 909, 912

³³ Ibid., 906

³⁴ Ibid., 916

responsibility, the philosopher qua philosopher has an artistic responsibility.

Methodologically, philosophy must consider the constitutive role of style to demonstrate the novelty inherent in life.

The challenge of articulating novelty and the unprecedented is that writers must use a language that does not yet contain the idea—or the narrative—of the unprecedented experience. The writer must delineate a space between existing narratives that up until the demonstrative moment were seamlessly contiguous. It is like trying to define “purple” in a language that has only ever considered degrees of “red” and “blue.” The style of *The Bluest Eye* communicates a new conception of the beautiful. In the words of Toni Morrison, it is the “attempt to shape a silence while breaking it.”³⁵ In the words of Proust, “what is it but the creation of the work of art?”

Toni Morrison says that *The Bluest Eye* ends with the italicized opening that foreshadows the entire story. I return to this opening and reread it. It provides a satisfying sense of closure that the actual ending lacks. Like my inquiry, the last line gestures away from saying toward doing, away from story toward narrative, away from text toward style. Morrison says, “There is nothing really more to say—except why. But since *why* is so difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*.”³⁶

³⁵ Morrison, “Afterword,” 216

³⁶ Morrison, 6

Bibliography

- Connor, Marc C., ed. *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000
- Cooper, John M., ed. *The Complete Works of Plato*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997
- Diamond, Cora. *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 82, No. 10, Eighty-Second Annual Meeting American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division (Oct., 1985), pp. 530-531, accessed 10/1/08
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1980
- _____. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1988
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*. Trans. William S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987
- Maraire, J. Nozipo. *Zenzele*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1996
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Plume, 1994
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Love's Knowledge*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990
- Proust, Marcel. *Remembrance of Things Past, Vol. I*. Trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terrence Kilmartin. New York: Random House, 1981
- _____. *Remembrance of Things Past, Vol. II*. Trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terrence Kilmartin. New York: Random House, 1981
- _____. *Remembrance of Things Past, Vol. III*. Trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terrence Kilmartin. New York: Random House, 1981
- Rosen, Stanley. *The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry*. New York: Routledge, 1988