Mariangela Palladino

Sound and sign in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

Focusing on Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* (1992), this paper will address Morrison's controversial claim to create 'both print and oral literature' (1984, 328). After highlighting unmistakable correspondences between the novel and the music genre from which it takes its name, it will examine closely the claim of the writer and how such a claim is realized in *Jazz*. Further it will investigate how orality is inscribed in a written text by looking at *skaz*, a Russian Formalist device which informs writing with an illusion of orality. The correlation between *Jazz's* narrative form and *skaz* reveals the problematic nature of the concept of 'oral literature' claimed by Morrison, whilst acknowledging a way of writing which can only seek to attain the status of oral. Finally, this study will analyze the last section of the novel to ascertain how such an ambition is realized in the text.

Jazz and jazz.

Jazz is composed of several stories narrated by an "I" who unravels the lives of characters in a temporal dimension where past and present seem to be one: the plot is an intricate tale recounted to the reader through memories, thoughts and states of mind in which the notion of time appears to be distorted and unreal. The story revolves around Joe Trace, Violet and the picture of a light skinned young girl, Dorcas, shot to death by Joe himself, her secret lover. Joe, door-to-door salesman of beauty products, is married to Violet, a unlicensed home hairdresser,

named Violent after attempting to disfigure Dorcas's corpse lying in the coffin during the funeral ceremony. The living memory of the young girl becomes a disturbing presence in the lives of Violet and Joe, awaking past reminiscences and bringing unsolved and unbearable issues to the surface.

The novel is structurally organized in ten sections; it unravels several stories narrated in a distorted temporal dimension where past vicissitudes occur abruptly in the narration, often breaking the natural course of events. Each section works as a micro-novel: in fact one could learn the whole story by reading only a section of the novel. The key element is the notion of repetition: stories and facts, iterated several times, designate a compulsion whose nature has to be investigated. In the ancient tradition of orality, from which Morrison seems to borrow, repetition served as a means to remember the 'text', to memorize a long story in order to be able to perform it. As Okpewho observes, repetition is

> one of the most fundamental characteristic features of oral literature[1]. It has both an aesthetic and a utilitarian value: in other words, it is a device that not only gives a touch of beauty or attractiveness to a piece of oral expression (whether song or narrative or other kind of statement) but also serves certain practical purposes in the overall organization of the oral performance. (71)

Repetition has been identified as a device of particular importance to the African-American aesthetic[1], and it has always been a distinctive feature of African-American music, its vital peculiarity. Jazz, for instance, is based on the repetition of a stanza of twelve bars with a variation of three chords; its lyrics always have a refrain that recurs without following a precise pattern. Often variations are introduced to the repeated elements; these variations usually add new meanings to the lyric and cause a sensible alteration to the rhythm of the music. A jazz jam-session is a creative act where extemporaneous variations are

---

[1] Here we are referring to 'literature delivered by word of mouth' (Okpewho 1992, 3).

[1] cfr. Hebdige, Dick 1987. Cut 'N' Mix. London: Metheun.

introduced on a repetitive pattern and, despite the obsessive component, it becomes a moment of pleasure.

In *Jazz* there are whole sections in which a pattern is repeated over and over conferring to the text the rhythm of a jazz piece: it 'sounds' like a chant and its flat printed words seem to have an inner rhythm crying out to be sung. [2] The novel by Toni Morrison seems to be written like a jazz piece: repeating, creating, relating, and handling unsolved issues is what the novel is about. Love, murder, everyday life, memories of slavery and displacement are the main themes of the early city jazz played and sung in the suburbs of the northern American cities inhabited by thousands of former slaves fled from the South.

'I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name': Morrison's project to oralize her fiction.

Jazz functions as the narrative mode of Morrison's novel and as its linguistic code: it shapes both its structure and its texture. Rodriguez observes that 'the novel has a loose fluid non-Aristotelian experimental form. Not the light, climactic, Freytag-pyramid structure of conventional fiction, but the form of a jazz piece. Toni Morrison oralizes print.' (7) In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" Toni Morrison has clearly maintained that her fiction aspires to be 'both print and oral literature:

> There are things that I try to incorporate into my fiction that are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as the major characteristics of Black art, wherever it is. One of which is the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well. […] To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken – to have the reader *feel* the narrator without *identifying* that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about, and to have the reader *work* with

[2] See p. 89-90 in Jazz.

> the author in the construction of the book – is what's important. (328)

Morrison's assertion prompts several questions and we should perhaps begin by asking what such an apparently oxymoronic quality might entail. As Walter Ong has noted, the concept of 'oral literature' is a contradiction in terms:

> though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever. […] It appears quite impossible to use the term 'literature' to include oral tradition and performance without subtly but irremediably reducing these somehow to variants of writing. (12)

Whilst the written word can be rendered oral through reading aloud, orality in literature can only ever be metaphoric, illusionary. This does not exclude the existence of a form of writing inspired by speech and shaped on its expressive and instantaneous nature. And of course we do intuitively feel that writing can have an 'oral' quality, can convey something of the immediacy and vivacity of speech.

Morrison's novel embodies such form of writing, it epitomizes the duality between spoken and written word. *Jazz*'s point of departure is soon revealed in its epigraph:

> I am the name of the sound
> and the sound of the name.
> I am the sign of the letter
> and the designation of the division. ("Thunder, Perfect Mind"; The Nag Hammadi)

The passage from "The Thunder, Perfect Mind," one of the texts in the collection known as The Nag Hammadi Library, juxtaposes orality ('the sound of the name') and inscription ('the sign of the letter'). Such juxtaposition results in a non-unitary entity, it signifies a gap. *Jazz* is about voice and letters, music and literature, orality and literacy; it designates an incompatible duality, that arbitrary irreconcilable division

between *langue* and *parole,* a gap impossible to fill.[3] *Jazz* voices the sign, inscribing it in letters but, by privileging the written word, it fails to be 'the sound of the name': its aspiration to be at once 'the name of the sound and the sound of the name' can only designate a permanent division.

Jazz and *skaz.*

An appearance of orality can be achieved by writing; the paradox of representing, of containing somehow, the oral within the written, is not new to the literary tradition. Henry Louis Gates, with regard to Zora Neal Hurston's narrative strategy, observes that it 'seems to concern itself with the possibilities of representation of the speaking black voice in writing.' (xxv) Gates writes of *speakerly texts* which 'privilege the representation of the speaking black voice, of what the Russian Formalists called *skaz* and which Hurston and Reed have defined as "an oral book, a talking book."' [4] (112) It should be noted that Gates mentions *skaz* only in passing, whilst going on to focus upon the African American literary context. Yet examining *Jazz* in the light of the Russian Formalists' theorizing proves far more revealing.

Skaz is a literary device that allows the narrative 'to emulate the phonetic, grammatical and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the illusion of oral narration.' (Ehrlich, 206) *Skaz* is actually a formal category of several devices rather than being a literary device in

---

[3] 'Jazz is about signification. The epigraph […] frames the novel's playing on the division between signs and their referents. Joe and Violet's last name is Trace, taken by Joe after being told his parents "disappeared without a trace", surely signifying on Jacques Derrida's concept of the trace left by the absent sign in the process of signification.' (Pereira, 76) In terms of theme as well, the novel plays on division: a moral ambiguity in Joe's killing of the girl is at stake.

[4] Gates observes that the trope of the Talking book 'reveals, rather surprisingly, that the curious tension between the black vernacular and the literate white text, between the spoken and the written word, between the oral and the printed forms of literary discourse, has been represented and thematized in black letters at least since slaves and ex-slaves met the challenge of the Enlightenment to their humanity by literally writing themselves into being through carefully crafted representations in language of the black self.' (Gates, 132)

itself. It designates a group of elements which enable language to mock a speech act. It has

> a tendency not simply to narrate, not simply to talk, but also to reproduce words with an emphasis on mimetic and articulated sounds. Sentences are devised and put together not according to the principles of logical speech alone, but more accordingly to the principles of expressive speech, where articulated sound, mimicry, phonic gestures, etc., play a special role. (Eichenbaum, 272 -3)

As Eichenbaum explains, *skaz* not only mimics spoken words, but it simulates 'expressive speech' and its paralinguistic components. Among *skaz* elements there are also parenthetical expressions, digressions, and the use of meaningless words (Chizhevsky, 299-301). It should be noted that such features are all evident in Morrison's text.

In *Jazz* the narrators often enrich their accounts with parenthetical personal observations, as in the following examples: 'the marcelling iron they used on her (though I suspect that girl didn't need to straighten her hair)' (Morrison 1992, 5); 'I don't know how she did it – balance herself with two different hand gestures.' (59); 'Alice thought the lowdownmusic (and in Illinois it was worse than here) had something to do with […]' (56). Digressions are not infrequent: often the narrator mentions events, facts, and observations which are not relevant to her/his main discourse. The very first word of the novel is meaningless: 'Sth, I know that woman.' (3) '"Sth" is not a word but a sound, the sound of sucking one's teeth while talking', which 'implants a sense of orality' (Page, 59) that immediately throws the reader into a world of gossips, rumours, and stories. This is not the sole example of a meaningless word: many others occur throughout the text.

The orality that *skaz* confers to a text is all based on writing. Ann Banfield defines *skaz* as follows:

> *Skaz* is posited on writing. The *skaz* narrative is not orally composed; it is a written imitation of an oral narrative, and it is only conceivable if it is written. In a

> real act of oral composition, the voice and accent of the storyteller is perhaps as equally transparent as the narration of a written text; nevertheless, it is produced concurrently with the story and can be heard as well. (253)

Jazz epitomizes *skaz*: it imitates the oral, but it is 'posited on writing'. 'In the formalist conception, a tale in *skaz* is not really accurately labelled as 'oral'. Rather, it is a written (literary) imitation of a discourse.' (171-2)

Skaz is also known as an 'artistic form of confession' as it is mostly employed in first-person narration which 'both conceals and reveals what the narrator, or confessor, wishes to say.' (Maguire, 26) Moreover, it is 'a device which creates the illusion that the work as a whole is a real story, related as a fact but not known to the narrator in every small detail' (Eichenbaum, 284). Therefore *skaz* not only designates a group of elements emulating speech acts, but it also plays a key role in shaping the narrative, defining the story as an orally related account in its full, imprecise and extemporaneous nature. In *Jazz* the narrator actually 'confesses' to the reader/listener a 'real' story that s/he has probably heard or learned from someone else, or only partially experienced. In fact the text is filled with expressions like 'I suppose', 'I suspect', 'I can't say', 'I don't know', which not only mark a sense of uncertainty, but also the spontaneity typical of verbal communication. Throughout the novel the narrator plays several and different roles: far from being omniscient, it is instead a voice aside (or more than one), sometimes a spectator, often a "someone" in charge of reporting other peoples' stories for a specific purpose. As Rodriguez observes, 'Morrison makes use of a number of voices and tellers. These voices blend and change, then shift into viewpoints that switch and slide, then become voices again.' (13) It should be noted that such 'voices' are often addressing 'somebody' who happens to be the reader/listener. Since *Jazz's* narrative structure is based on an 'oral' model, the address to the reader/listener seems to be appropriate to the genre. As Callahan maintains,

> in the twentieth-century African-American fiction the pursuit of narrative form often becomes the pursuit of voice. And by voice I mean the writer's attempt to conjure the spoken word into symbolic existence on the page. […] They adapt call-and-response[5] to fiction from the participatory forms of oral culture. (14)

Morrison's text belongs to such a category: aspiring to be oral, her text demands continuous attention and response from the reader. Before turning our attention to the use of call-and-response in *Jazz*, it is interesting to note that this is also a chief characteristic of *skaz*. In fact, with regard to this, Ann Banfield observes that

> the storyteller or raconteur addresses the tale to a possible interlocutor, who may or may not respond. What counts is the *possibility* of his response being recorded along with the original speaker's voice, a possibility inherent to the dialogue form which contains sentences of communication. (171-2)

Banfield cites as cases of *skaz* narrative in English the 'Cyclops' episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* and the first version of Faulkner's short story "Spotted Horses". Faulkner's influence on Toni Morrison's

---

[5] Callahan defines call-and response as follows: 'Call-and-response is both a fundamental, perhaps even universal oral mode and a distinctively African and African-American form of discourse in speech and story, sermons and songs. It is also especially well suited to the vernacular culture of an experimental democratic society. As it evolves in black American oral tradition, the call-and-response pattern registers the changing relationship between the individual musician or storyteller and the community. […] Specifically, call-and-response awakens a number of dormant relationships: between different writers; different readers; different texts; different characters in the same text; a writer and his characters; and always between a writer and his fictionalized and actual readers and between those same readers and the writer. Symbolically present in the literary genre of fiction, these variations of call-and-response summon us to read and hear and, potentially, contribute to the still unfolding "immense story" in our lives and voices beyond the solitary, private act of reading.' (16-21)

fiction deserves a more extended study, therefore I shall refer to Joyce's *Ulysses* to compare the presence of the reader/listener in the two texts. Banfield observes that in *Ulysses*, although an audience is never explicitly identified, 'linguistic signs of an addressee/hearer's presence do occur' (173). Joyce's narrator seems often to reveal a truth, or a fact; the line 'Jesus, he took the value out of him, I promise you'. (Joyce, 345) is addressing the reader/hearer while restating his/her integrity as storyteller. Joyce's 'I promise you' finds its correspondent in Morrison's text where the narrator, stating his/her role of a truth teller says: "Take my word for it, he is bound to the track." (Morrison 1992, 120) Morrison's narration is filled with 'linguistic signs' of an addressee's presence. It is as if the 'I' were talking directly to the reader, as the examples below show:

> "You'd think that being thrown out the church would be the end of it – the shame and all – but it wasn't." (4)
> "Here comes the new. Look out." (7)
> "Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last." (7)
> "Close up on the tops of buildings, near, nearer than the cap you are wearing" (35)
> "Think how it is, if you can manage, just manage it" (63)
> "Can you see the fields beyond, crackling and drying in the wind?" (153).

In many cases the narrator seems to respond to a question from a listener, an unidentified member of the audience; as Philip Page observes it is 'as if the narrator were gossiping over the back fence with her neighbor.' (62)

> He was here. Already. See? See? What the world had done to them it was now doing to itself. Did the world mess over them? Yes, but look where the mess originated. Were they berated and cursed? Oh yes but look how the world cursed and berated itself. Were the women fondled in kitchens and the back of stores? Uh huh." (77-8)

Let us return for a moment to the epigraph of the novel. The lines used by Morrison as an overture for *Jazz* are part of a stanza which reads as follows:

> Hear me, you hearers
> And learn of my words, you who know me.
> I am the hearing that is attainable to everything;
> I am the speech that cannot be grasped.
> I am the name of the sound
> and the sound of the name.
> I am the sign of the letter
> and the designation of the division.
> And I […].
> (3 lines missing)
> […] light […]
> […] hearers […] to you
> […] the great power. ("Thunder, Perfect Mind", The Nag Hammadi)

The source of Morrison's epigraph happens to be a text which presupposes the presence of hearers: these lines[6] are clearly addressed to the listeners who are asked to 'hear' and whose presence is designated in the text by the pronoun 'you'. Morrison's text refers on more than one occasion to "The Thunder, Perfect Mind" and to the metaphor of the Thunder.[7] Thunder

> is a revelation discourse uttered by a goddess figure whose name is Thunder, which in Greek is feminine.

---

[6] The first reference to a listener occurs at the fourth line: 'Look upon me, you who reflect upon me, and you hearers, hear me.' ("The Thunder, Perfect Mind"). As the poem opens, the listeners are soon addressed with a first invitation ('Look upon me') and identified with the pronoun 'you'.

[7] The opening of Jazz's last section reads as follow: 'Bolts of lightening, little rivulets of thunder. And I the eye of the storm. Mourning the split trees, hens starving on rooftops. Figuring out what can be done to save them since they cannot save themselves without me because – well it's my storm, isn't it? I break lives to prove I can mend them back again.' (219)

> Thunder is the way in which Zeus tonans makes his presence known on earth, a heavenly voice. […] That it is the thunder goddess who narrates the story becomes clear at last in the first paragraph of the final section of *Jazz*, where the words "thunder" and "storm", the phrase "I the eye of the storm", and the statement "I break lives to prove I can mend them back again" are heard. (Rodriguez, 17)

As Rodriguez points out, Morrison's narrator is like a 'thunder goddess' who looks over the scenery of a devastated land confident in her power to 'save' and 'mend back' lives. She narrates and destroys, since it is her storm, as she rhetorically asks the listeners/readers. She shapes the stories of other people, moving the strings of their lives, but her inscrutable divinity is undermined by a sudden overturn of roles:

> And when I was feeling most invisible, being tight-lipped, silent and unobservable, they were whispering about me to each other. They knew how little I could be counted on; how poorly, how shabbily my know-it-all self covered helplessness. That when I invented stories about them – and doing it seemed to me to be so fine – I was completely in their hands, managed without mercy. (Morrison 1992, 220)

Her God-like presence sinks into a human dimension: far from being a powerful director of other peoples' lives, the "I" realizes itself to be, instead, a talked-about, helpless little thing, 'managed without mercy'. We are not told who 'they' are.

> Busy, they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable – human I guess you'd say, while I was the predictable one, confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered. (220)

Those 'busy being human' are the characters who turned out to be the living produce of a human creator, too human and too 'predictable' to be a divinity. The narrator recognizes her/his status as slave to her/his false and misleading point of view, narrow as the peep-hole of a door. Like the narrator of 'Thunder', Morrison's narrator is contradictory: s/he is powerful and helpless[8]; s/he thought her/himself to be in control, but s/he was not[9]. Like Morrison's 'I', 'Thunder' is self-deprecatory and accusatory ('I am shame and boldness').

The last page of the novel presents the major example of the narrator's humanity where the call-and-response[10] with the readers reaches a 'corporeal' dimension.

> I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it – to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: *That I have only loved you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be with you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer – that's the kick.*
> But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (229)

---

[8] 'I am strength and I am fear' ("Thunder, Perfect Mind", The Nag Hammadi)

[9] 'For I am knowledge and ignorance'. Ibid.

[10] The literary device of call-and-response 'persuades the readers to become symbolic and then perhaps actual participants in the task of image-making, of storytelling.[…] [it] opens up a potential relationship between writer and reader analogous to the human situation that exist between performers and their audience.' (Callahan, 17)

The passage above conveys both linguistic and paralinguistic features of oral literature. While the seven lines written in italics clearly and effectively mark the spoken words from the body of the written text and suggest an emphasis in pitch and loudness, the direct address to the reader seems to invoke lyrically a physical intimacy with the reader 'so longed' for by the narrator. Such an invocation might also be addressed to the narrator's secret lover, as Zoë Wicomb maintains:

> Morrison's last page offer's a lover's discourse in which the speaker stepping outside the role of the narrator speaks of her own clandestine love that longs for public expression. But, ambiguously, she also addresses the reader in the act of reading, asserting a flesh and blood story-teller who insists on her own corporeality as well as that of her reader. […] it is the final temporal deixis, 'Now', that points to text as book, a physical object in the hands of the reader. (13-15)

The addressee is asked to enter physically the narrator's world: through use of deixis, the 'I' brings its discourse to the level of a 'present' that belongs to the reader. The use of 'this' and 'now' in connection with the repeated 'you' demands a 'longed' for attention, a desire to be owned, held. The whole passage gives a feeling of intimacy and familiarity. At stake is the dialogue initiated by a narrator who is now awaiting a response: '*Talking to you and hearing you answer – that's the kick'*. The Thunder goddess is in Morrison's novel a human storyteller. Although demanding the continuous attention of the reader throughout the text, as in 'Thunder', s/he waits for a response to her story, and, what is more, in the end s/he gives full power to the listener/reader to 'make and remake' her story.

The above analysis has questioned Morrison's claim of orality in her fiction. Further, the comparison with *skaz* and *Jazz's* narrative forms validates the argument that there can be a form of writing that aspires to the status of oral. The use of *skaz*, although bestowing the quality of orality, does so as a peculiar feature of writing. Thus the novel signifies the coexistence of spoken and written word, sound and

sign, but as its epigraph reveals, it also signifies the permanent division between the two. I would argue that such contradiction, celebrated in the text and plainly epitomized by the epigraph, seems to be a conscious acknowledgement of the impossibility to have both sound and sign coexist in a text. In other words, Toni Morrison, despite what she writes in her non-fictional work, in *Jazz* is fully aware of the paradoxical nature of her claim.

As the last section of the novel shows, the address to the readers signifies Morrison's desire to speak to them. The call-and-response, defined by Callahan as the awakening of 'dormant relationships' between a writer and his characters, between a writer and his 'fictionalized and actual readers' (21) is adopted by Morrison to inscribe a form of discourse in her text, to externalize her craving to speak to her readers. *Jazz's* epigraph, although embodying a contradiction, signifies such a compelling urge. Morrison's attempt to talk to the readers, through a text which is eventually materialised, is a mere expression of a desire which cannot be fulfilled.

Works Cited

Banfield, Ann. *Unspeakable Sentences*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

Callahan, John F. *In the American Grain*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Chizhevsky, Dmitry. "About Gogol's 'Overcoat". *Gogol from the Twentieth Century*. ed. Maguire, R. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Ehrlich, Victor. *Russian Formalism. History*. The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1955.

Eichenbaum, Boris. "How the 'Overcoat' is made". *Gogol from the Twentieth Century*. ed. Maguire, R. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Gates, Henry Louis Gates Jr. *The Signifying Monkey*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Hebdige, Dick. *Cut 'N' Mix*. London: Metheun, 1987.

Holquist, Michael. *The Dialogic Imagination. Four essays by M.M. Bakhtin.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. New York: Vintage, 1961.

Maguire, R.. *Gogol from the Twentieth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Morrison, Toni. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation". *Literature in the Modern World*. ed. Walder, Dennis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

---. *Jazz*. London: Vintage, 1992.

Okpewho, Isidore. *African Oral Literature*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy*. Routledge: London, 1988.

Page, Philip 1995. "Traces of Derrida in Toni Morrison's Jazz." *African American Review*, Spring 1995, Vol. 29 Issue 1.

Pereira, Malin Walther. “Periodizing Toni Morrison’s work from ‘The bluest eye’ to ‘Jazz’: the importance of ‘Tar Baby’”. *Melus* vol. 22, issue: 3, 1997.

Rodriguez, Eusebio. “Experiencing Jazz”. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 39: 3\4 (1993: Fall\Winter).

“Thunder, Perfect Mind”, The Nag Hammadi. *The Gnostic Society Library*. Ed. James M. Robinson. 23 March 2005 <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/thunder.html>.

Wicomb, Zoë. “Setting Intertextuality and the resurrection of the Postcolonial Author.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. 2005 Vol. 41 No 2.