irks him about historians is not their obliviousness to frameworks, but their failure to provide social activists with grounds for hope. Not the historian, but history itself, is "narcoleptic." Despite his eagerness to extrapolate moral lessons from a reconstruction of the past, he complains mournfully of "the tedious, degrading rhythm of history." By reporting the past, more or less accurately, conventional historians intimate that mankind will probably never achieve a complete mastery over events. They focus on unintended consequences, always an embarrassment to reformers; and they draw attention to the chronological narcissism of revolutionaries who wildly overestimate the degree to which they have broken with the past.

As every reader of Sade knows, many "human potentials" can be vile and worthy of repression. A social order that prevents people from expressing everything they feel (for example, racism) may not be wholly inhumane. Unger undervalues such considerations. But even more puzzling is the consolation he draws from the thought that everything is possible. The assertion that society "always stands at the edge of a cliff" is offered as a promise, not as a threat. No one foresaw the Nazis, it is true, neither liberals nor Marxists. Having delivered predictive social science some near-fatal blows, history no doubt has further surprises in store. But to view cliff-hanging as an occasion for glee is unquestionably premature.

AUNT MEDEA

Beloved
by Toni Morrison

(Knopf, 275 pp., $18.95)

Much of the Afro-American fiction written over the last 25 years derives from a vision set down by James Baldwin, who described the downtrodden as saintly. According to Baldwin, those who had suffered most knew life best; they had more to tell the world. Though Negroes had been taught to hate themselves, though they were emasculated, driven mad, or driven to drink or to drugs, Baldwin insisted that somewhere in the souls of those black folk were truths that might set everyone free:

> I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—enough is certainly as good as a feast—but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words. If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring; whatever it brings must be borne. And at this level of experience one's bitterness begins to be palatable, and hatred becomes too heavy a sack to carry.

Baldwin's success as the voice of the racially oppressed proved that something had changed in American entertainment. The United States had no sense of tragedy because Americans hate losers, William Carlos Williams observed in his emotionally brambled *In the American Grain*; but with Baldwin the claim to martyrdom, real or merely asserted, began to take on value. One no longer had to fear the charge of self-pity when detailing the suffering of one's group. Catastrophic experience was elevated. Race became an industry. It spawned careers, studies, experts, college departments, films, laws, hairdos, name changes, federal programs, and so many *books*. Blessed are the victims, the new catechism taught, for their suffering has illuminated them, and they shall lead us to the light, even as they provide magnets for our guilt.

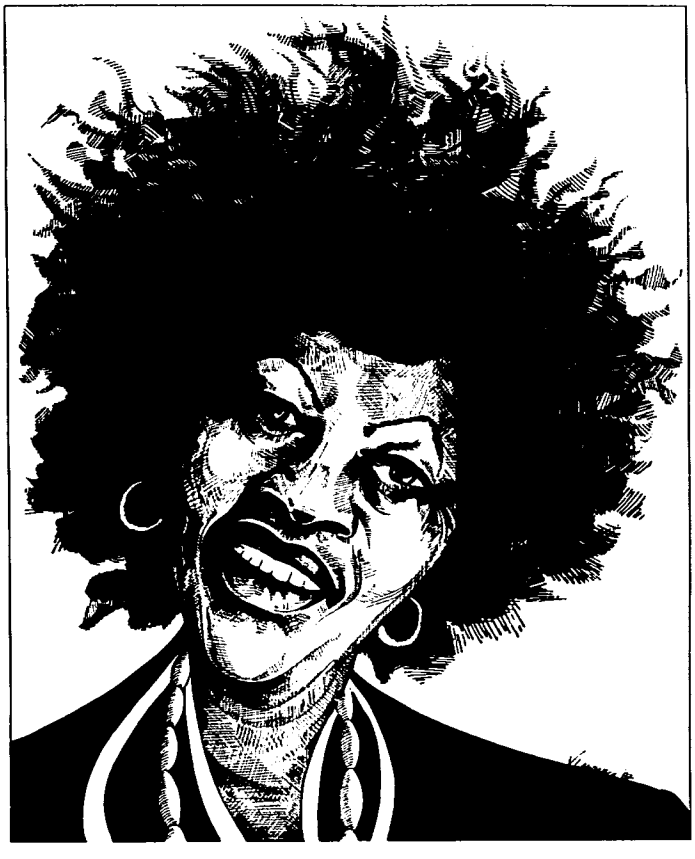
Toni Morrison's new novel is another patch in that quilt, the most recent proof of the course of racial letters since Baldwin. It was not long before feminist ideology brought its own list of atrocities to the discussion:

the horrors wrought by the priapic demon of sexism. Men and their obsession with manhood, with conquest, with violence, with the subjugation of the opposite sex and even the environment itself, were the problem. They had made things so bad that some feminists felt comfortable saying that "woman is the nigger of the universe," usurping a term of insult, and opening the way for those black women who would rise to contend for the martyr's belt that had been worn so long by the black man.

The influence of feminism on writing by black women led to work that was charged with corroborating the stereotypes of bestial black men. Zip Coon, the dangerous darkie whose pedigree stretched back to the minstrel show, became a stock character in black feminist writing. Old Zip replaced Uncle Tom as the lowest form of black life. In various manifestations he threw his children out the window, abused his wife until she murdered him, raped his daughter and drove her mad, or made intimate life so harsh and insensitive that lesbianism was the only human alternative. A pipsqueak in the world, he was hell on wheels at home. As Diane Johnson, writing on Toni Morrison and Gayle Jones, noted:

> In a demoralized subculture, everyone is a victim, but women, especially girls, are actually the most defenseless. . . . Morrison and Jones present them also as cleverer, more interesting, and eventually more homicidal than men; men are childlike, barely sentient, and predatory. Nearly all the women characters in these works have been sexually abused and exploited, usually as children.

Baldwin, Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and others had sung the same song, but now the circle of culprits was expanded. White America was still racist, violent, spiritually deficient, and exploiting, but the venom formerly reserved for Caucasians was spewed far enough to drench black men as well. Though black men clearly experienced racism, the worst of them were not above taking advantage of patriarchal conventions and brutally lording over their families—in the same way Southern white trash had used racism as an instrument of release whenever they were frustrated and Negroes were available to absorb the shocks of their passions. What might have begun as rightful indignation quickly decayed to a self-righteous, bullying whine and, went the claim, was turned inward, on one's own.



DRAWING BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Black feminist writing was especially resented by those black men who had enjoyed the social, political, and sexual benefits resulting from the smug cartoonish version of "black manhood" promoted by radical organizations. That stylized image supposedly restored the patriarchal privilege denied by bondage and racism. Black feminists challenged the predictability of protest writing by black men, and the idiot cards of "positive black images," criticizing the plots and portraits as incomplete, as failing to tell the entire story and avoiding the problems of personal responsibility. The majority of black male writers had been content to see the difficulties experienced by black women at the hands of black men as no more than the byproducts of racism, but Negro feminists protested something different. As Johnson observed, "Undoubtedly, white society is the ultimate oppressor, and not just of blacks, but, as Morrison and Jones show, the black person must first deal with the oppressor in the next room, or in the same bed, or no farther away than across the street."

So the martyr's belt hadn't been worn very well by the self-declared champ. But exposing the shortcomings in protest writing by black men didn't automatically make writing by black women any better. Writers like Alice Walker revealed little more than their own inclination to melodrama, militant self-pity, guilt-mongering, and pretensions to mystic wisdom. What the Walkers really achieved was a position parallel to the one held by Uncle Remus in *Song of the South*: the ex-slave supplies the white children and the white adults with insights into human nature and the complexity of the world through his tales of Brer Rabbit. Better, these black women writers took over the role played by the black maids in so many old films: when poor little white missy is at a loss, she is given guidance by an Aunt Jemima look-alike.

Toni Morrison gained more from these changes in black literary fashion than anybody else. As an editor at Random House, she was one of the most powerful people in the New York literary world. With *Song of Solomon*, which appeared in 1979, she became a best-selling novelist too, proving that the combination of poorly digested folk materials, feminist rhetoric, and a labored use of

magic realism could pay off. Shrewdly Morrison separated herself from the speeches and writing produced in the middle to late '60s by Stokely Carmichael, LeRoi Jones, Eldridge Cleaver, and H. Rap Brown, but avoided any serious criticism of their views. She told an interviewer that "those books and political slogans about power were addressed to white men, trying to explain or prove something to them. The fight was between men, for the king of the hill." Yet none of the black women whom Morrison proceeded to celebrate—Toni Cade Bambara, Gayle Jones, Alice Walker—took any significant positions of their own against the wrongheadedness of a black politics that mixed a romanticized African past with separatist ideas, virulent anti-white racism, and threats to overthrow the government of the United States "by any means necessary." Morrison didn't either.

What Morrison did do was consolidate her position as a literary conjure woman. Consider, for example, Mary Gordon's fantasy about her. It provides a generous taste of the spiritual and intellectual status that Morrison assumed in the dream world of white women:

> I once dreamed that she bought a huge old Victorian mansion. It would one day be beautiful, but now it was a wreck, with cobwebs, broken windows, mice, rats, and vermin everywhere. I asked her how she was going to deal with all that mess. She simply said, "No problem," and waved her arms in the air. Immediately the rats and roaches disappeared and the house was beautiful.

Hoo doo to you too.

BELOVED, Morrison's fourth novel, explains black behavior in terms of social conditioning, as if listing atrocities solves the mystery of human motive and behavior. It is designed to placate sentimental feminist ideology, and to make sure that the vision of black woman as the most scorned and rebuked of the victims doesn't weaken. Yet perhaps it is best understood by its italicized inscription: *"Sixty Million and more."* Morrison recently told *Newsweek* that the reference was to all the captured Africans who died coming across the Atlantic. But sixty is ten times six, of course. That is very important to remember. For *Beloved*, above all else, is a blackface holocaust novel. It seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest, a contest usually won by references to, and works about, the experience of Jews at the hands of Nazis. As a holocaust novel, it includes disfranchisement, brutal transport, sadistic guards, failed and successful escapes, murder, liberals among the oppressors, a big war, underground cells, separation of family members, losses of loved ones to the violence of the mad order, and characters who, like the Jew in *The Pawnbroker*, have been made emotionally catatonic by the past.

That Morrison chose to set the Afro-American experience in the framework of collective tragedy is fine, of course. But she lacks a true sense of the tragic. Such a sense is stark, but it is never simpleminded. For all the memory within this book, including recollections of the trip across the Atlantic and the slave trading in the Caribbean, no one ever recalls how the Africans were captured. That would have complicated matters. It would have demanded that the Africans who raided the villages of their enemies to sell them for guns, drink, and trinkets be included in the equation of injustice, something far too many Afro-Americans are loath to do—including Toni Morrison. In *Beloved* Morrison only asks that her readers tally up the sins committed against the darker people and feel sorry for them, not experience the horrors of slavery as they do.

MORRISON, unlike Alice Walker, has real talent, an ability to organize her novel in a musical structure, deftly using images as motifs; but she perpetually interrupts her narrative with maudlin ideological commercials. Though there are a number of isolated passages of first-class writing, and though secondary characters such as Stamp Paid and Lady Jones are superbly drawn, Morrison rarely gives the impression that her people exist for any purpose other than to deliver a message. *Beloved* fails to rise to tragedy because it shows no sense of the timeless and unpredictable manifestations of evil that preceded and followed American slavery, of the gruesome ditches in the human spirit that prefigure all injustice. Instead, the novel is done in the pulp style that has dominated so many renditions of Afro-American life since *Native Son*.

As in all protest pulp fiction, everything is locked into its own time, and is ever the result of external social forces. We learn little about the souls of human beings, we are only told

what will happen if they are treated very badly. The world exists in a purple haze of overstatement, of false voices, of strained homilies; nothing very subtle is ever really tried. *Beloved* reads largely like a melodrama lashed to the structural conceits of the miniseries. Were *Beloved* adapted for television (which would suit the crass obviousness that wins out over Morrison's literary gift at every significant turn) the trailer might go like this:

"Meet Sethe, an ex-slave woman who harbors a deep and terrible secret that has brought terror into her home. [Adolescent sons are shown fleeing.] Meet Paul D, who had a passion for Sethe when they were both slaves, but lost her to another. [Sethe shown walking with first husband Halle, smiling as Paul D looks on longingly.] During slavery they had been treated as human beings at Sweet Home in Kentucky by the Garners. [Garners waving to their slaves, who read books, carry guns into the woods, seem very happy.] That was before the master died, the mistress took sick, and schoolteacher, the cruel overseer, took over. [Master Garner on deathbed, Mrs. Garner enfeebled, schoolteacher being cruel.] No longer treated like human beings, reduced to the condition of work animals, the slaves of Sweet Home plot to escape. [Slaves planning escape around a fire.] Sethe, swollen with child, bravely makes her way to Ohio, determined to see that the child is born free! [Sethe trudging along with great determination.] And there, in Ohio, the terrible deed takes place. [Slave catchers dismounting and Sethe running into a barn with her children.] Sethe's home is ruled by the angry spirit of an innocent child, until Paul D returns to her life. [House shaking, Paul D holding onto table as he shouts.]

"Now they are together, but the weight of the past will not let them live in the freedom they always dreamed of. Then the mysterious Beloved appears and becomes part of the family, charming Denver, Sethe's only remaining child, and the horrible past begins to come clear. [Scenes of Africans in the holds of ships.] Relive some of America's most painful moments—slavery, the Civil War, the efforts made by ex-slaves to experience freedom in a world that was stacked against them from the moment they were sold as work animals. But, most of all, thrill to a love story about the kinds of Americans who

struggled to make this country great. [Sethe, Paul D, and Denver walking hand-in-hand.]"

Beloved means to prove that Afro-Americans are the result of a cruel determinism:

> . . . [that's] what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. . . . Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up.

This determinism is also responsible for the character of Sethe, the earth mother heroine who might be called Aunt Medea. Mistakenly thinking that they will be sent back to slavery, Sethe gathers her four children for slaughter, and kills one daughter before she is stopped. When the novel opens, it is 1873. The ghost of the dead daughter has been haunting Sethe's home for years, frightening off neighbors, shaking, rattling, and rolling the house.

THE BOOK'S beginning clanks out its themes. Aunt Medea's two sons have been scared off: there is the theme of black women facing the harsh world alone. Later on in the novel, Morrison stages the obligatory moment of transcendent female solidarity, featuring a runaway indentured white girl, Amy Denver, who aids pregnant Sethe in her time of need:

> A pateroller passing would have sniggered to see two throwaway people, two lawless outlaws—a slave and a barefoot whitewoman with unpinned hair—wrapping a ten-minute-old baby in the rags they wore. But no pateroller came and no preacher. The water sucked and swallowed itself beneath them. There was nothing to disturb them at their work. So they did it appropriately and well.

Woman to woman, out in nature, freed of patriarchal domination and economic exploitation, they deliver baby Denver. (Amy is also good for homilies. While massaging Sethe's feet, she says, "Anything dead coming back to life hurts." When Sethe quotes the girl as she tells Amy's namesake the story of her birth, Morrison writes, "A truth for all times, thought Denver." As if that weren't gooey enough, there's the fade-out: "Sethe felt herself falling into a sleep she knew would be deep. On the lip of it, just before going under, she thought, 'That's pretty. Denver. Real pretty.' ")

Then there is the sexual exploitation theme, introduced in a flashback in the opening pages: for ten minutes of sex, the impoverished Sethe gets the name "Beloved" put on the gravestone. This theme in particular is given many variations. One of the most clumsy comes in an amateurishly conceived flashback designed to reveal that even Sethe's mother had a touch of Medea:

> Nighttime. Nan holding her with her good arm, waving the stump of the other in the air. "Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe," and she did that. She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe."

It doesn't get much worse, or the diction any more counterfeit.

Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, is philosophical about the house ghost, and introduces the stoicism theme when it is suggested that they move away. "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby," she tells Sethe. "My husband's spirit was to come back in here? or yours? Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil." Through Baby Suggs we will eventually learn how right Paul D is to conclude that "for a used-to-be slave woman to love . . . that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one."

MORRISON IS best at clear, simple description, and occasionally she can give an account of the casualties of war and slavery that is free of false lyricism or stylized stoicism:

> Sethe took a little spit from the tip of her tongue with her forefinger. Quickly, lightly she touched the stove. Then she trailed her fingers through the flour, parting, separating small hills and ridges of it, looking for mites. Finding none, she poured soda and salt into the crease of her folded hand and tossed both into the flour. Then she reached into a can and scooped half a handful of lard. Deftly she squeezed the flour through it, then with her left hand sprinkling water, she formed the dough."

Or Paul D remembering the people he saw on the road after making his escape from slavery, people

> who, like him, had hidden in caves and fought owls for food; who, like him, stole from pigs; who, like him, slept in trees in the day and walked by night; who, like him, had buried themselves in slop and jumped in wells to avoid regulators, raiders, paterollers, veterans, hill men, posses, and merrymakers. Once he met a Negro fourteen years old who lived by himself in the woods and said he couldn't remember living anywhere else. He saw a witless coloredwoman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies.

BUT MORRISON almost always loses control. She can't resist the temptation of the trite or the sentimental. There is the usual scene in which the black woman is assaulted by white men while her man looks on; Halle, Sethe's husband, goes mad at the sight. Sixo, a slave who is captured trying to escape, is burned alive but doesn't scream: he sings "Seven-o" over and over, because his woman has escaped and is pregnant. But nothing is more contrived than the figure of Beloved herself, who is the reincarnated force of the malevolent ghost that was chased from the house. Beloved's revenge—she takes over the house, turns her mother into a servant manipulated by guilt, and becomes more and more vicious—unfolds as portentous melodrama. When Beloved finally threatens to kill Sethe, 30 black women come to the rescue. At the fence of the haunted property, one of them shouts, and we are given this: "Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like."

Too many such attempts at biblical grandeur, run through by Negro folk rhythms, stymie a book that might have been important. Had Morrison higher intentions when she appropriated the conventions of a holocaust tale, *Beloved*

might stand next to, or outdistance, Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*, neither of which submits to the contrived, post-Baldwin vision of Afro-American experience. Clearly the subject is far from exhausted, the epic intricacies apparently unlimited. Yet to render slavery with aesthetic authority demands not only talent, but the courage to face the ambiguities of the human soul, which transcend race. Had Toni Morrison that kind of courage, had she the passion necessary to liberate her work from the failure of feeling that is sentimentality, there is much that she could achieve. But why should she try to achieve anything? The position of literary conjure woman has paid off quite well. At last year's PEN Congress she announced that she had never considered herself American, but with *Beloved* she proves that she is as American as P. T. Barnum.

STANLEY CROUCH

Stanley Crouch, a staff writer for the *Village Voice*, is at work on a biography of Charlie Parker.

THE NAZI IN THE RYE

Michael: a Novel by Joseph Goebbels translated by Joachim Neugroschel

(Amok Press, 131 pp., $6.95 paper)

This is the first novel by a German student in his 20s. It shows little promise. Originally, in fact, it had to wait some six years to find a publisher in Germany: probably written in 1923, it did not appear in print till 1929, by which time its author had already shown himself to be a master of words in a different sphere. By 1929 Joseph Goebbels was in charge of the Nazi Party organization in Berlin. In that year he was appointed Reich Propaganda Leader of the Nazi Party, and was loosing the flood of words on which Hitler was to be carried to success, and which would swamp the reasoning faculties of the German people for the next 15 years.

One wonders why the American publishers thought *Michael* worth translating and reissuing, and the misgivings are not removed by the publisher's blurb. With quotations taken out of context from works by Alan Bullock and George L. Mosse, it attempts to justify a new interest in Goebbels; it also carries an enthusiastic endorsement from David Irving describing Goebbels as "a tender, introspective patriot." But if the intention was to contribute to a neo-Nazi revival, or even to a reassessment of Goebbels, it has not succeeded. The book reveals only the shallowness of Goebbels's intellectual pretensions, and the lack of originality in his ideas.

Michael is a poor example of a popular German genre, the bildungsroman, which expresses the hopes and frustrations of a young man in a time of uncertainty, who seeks a path in life and ends in tragedy. Michael, the hero and narrator (the book is cast in the form of a diary), returns from the front after the end of the First World War; studies at the University of Heidelberg; writes poems; vacations at the seaside; has endless nebulous discussions with friends, including a Dostoyevskian Russian anarchist; falls in love with a girl called Hertha Holk, whose eyes, we are told on at least two occasions, are "grayish-green enigmas," but who is "very middle class." (Perhaps this accounts for her moments of good sense, as when Michael reports that "Hertha Holk thinks I ought to start preparing for my degree examinations.") After parting from Hertha Holk, Michael has some kind of breakdown, finds salvation by becoming a coal miner, and dies in a pit accident. (This was the actual fate of Goebbels's friend Richard Flisges, to whom the book is dedicated.) He leaves behind a postcard about being a pioneer of the new Reich and a drawer containing copies of *Faust*, the Bible, and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

Still, even bad novels can be worth reading. This one not only throws light on Goebbels's own character, but also contains many of the themes he was to emphasize in his propaganda campaigns,