

Yvette Christiansë, *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. 307 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0823239160

Reading Yvette Christiansë's monograph is no easy task. Articulated in five chapters, the book opens with a long explanatory introduction and closes with an 'epilogue'. The choice of an epilogue rather than a conclusion – as one might expect from a scholarly work – is indicative of Christiansë's critical approach. The concluding part of a literary work – as the OED reminds us – the epilogue epitomises the very nature of *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics*. The book is a critical work about the art of writing, written in a style which is distant from the scholarly dryness and far more cognate with literary prose. Christiansë's subtle formal choices playfully engage with Morrison's oeuvre and its longstanding tradition of self-referential and self-aware writing. "This book proceeds by reading Morrison's fiction in terms of their 'internal' operations and moves to a consideration of their intertextual relations" (27). Engaging with both fiction and non-fiction, and with the early and most recent works, Christiansë offers innovative critical readings of Morrison's oeuvre. Rather than chronologically, this book engages with Morrison's fiction thematically; this results into a more organic, cohesive and coherent approach. Early on in the book, Christiansë spells out her intentions: "I am especially concerned to understand how Morrison transforms her thematics into an ethical poetics that increasingly tries to understand the relation of her writing to the production or reproduction of a canon and what being drawn into a canon also demands of her writing" (5-6).

The book's main goal is a fascinating one; since Morrison's oeuvre forcefully engages with the ethical, theorizing and ethical poetics means re-reading her work through an analysis which brings together form and content, ethics and aesthetics. Christiansë sets out her methodological approach by identifying three distinct but related levels of enquiry: the first "is that of figure and narrative. The second is that of metanarrative, which is also the level on which figures are intertextually linked to others ... [t]he third level is that of a poetic practice" (6). Morrison's blatantly self-conscious writing is for Christiansë realized through the interrelations of these levels. However, sparse elements of guidance for the reader – in the introduction, and more so in the chapters – prevent a full grasp of the book's foregrounding of an ethical poetics. Clear statements of intent, perhaps placed at the start of each chapter, as reminders to flag up the main lines of critical inquiry – without taking away from the book's elegant and subtle form – could have helped leading its readers.

The book widely engages with the question of language and eruditely draws from a vast array of critical traditions; postcolonial and postmodern theories are explored at length in the introduction with the aim to position the book and its critical stances within larger theoretical frameworks. From Marxian ideology, the Frankfurt School, to Ashcroft, Walcott and Glissant, Christiansë skilfully outlines critical debates about language and its relations of 'enclosure' within set systems. The book takes as its premise "Morrison's own labor to find a language that resists history and its clichés, while making that history visible as the history of a language"(5). The Morrisonian concern to find an adequate language to represent the African American experience – a language that is "race-specific or race-free" – is Christiansë's main point of departure to read Morrison's works. The book's aim is challenging and not unproblematic; as Christiansë reminds us, Morrison has extensively discussed the dilemma of language and writing referring to "the 'racial house' of thought, which lives only according to the 'house rules' of language. And she writes of "rebuilding" the space that she occupies in this house so that it will not be a "windowless prison" into which she has been forced". (8) The spatial metaphor of the house dominates Christiansë's readings; starting from Morrison's non-fictional essay "Home" (1998) to her most recent novel *Home* (2012), this book takes its readers on a journey in full circle through the Morrisonian oeuvre and its efforts to overcome the constraints of language in search of a home.

For Morrison, being imprisoned in the house of race entails questioning fiction and representation; hence the question: "how does one escape a system when that system is language itself and when one is a writer?" (19). *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* takes at

heart this major concern; reminding us that “Morrison produces writing that listens to itself” (5), the book looks at Morrison’s fiction as a continuous process toward “an idealized architecture, a palace where corruption no longer exists” (19). For Christiansë, in the Nobel laureate’s oeuvre “language constantly come into view only to place itself under erasure in order that story and history appear as the outside that is also an inside, yet always vanishing” (20). This point echoes Homi Bhabha’s analysis of Morrison’s aesthetics as disclosing – on the outside – an ethical time of narration. This interrelation of form and content, ethics and aesthetics is creatively examined in this book by traversing the boundaries between text and context and between fiction and history. However, amidst its numerous readings, thematic explorations and Pindaric flights, *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* often leaves the reader wondering about a more explicit definition of an ethical poetics.

The first chapter, ‘From Witnessing to Death Dealing: On Speaking of an For the Dead’, draws on Giorgio Agamben philosophy on witnessing and being a witness, in order to read Morrison’s fiction and its desire of amnesia and severance from the past. The subsequent chapters span the genre of apocalypticism and other forms of prophecy, the disjuncture between past and present, the relationship between apocalyptic discourse and the politics and poetics of discourse. The innovative approach deployed in this book derives from an intimate connection between critical discourse and metaphorical explorations; with sophisticated nonchalantness Christiansë playfully moves between diverse levels, registers and realms of inquiry.

The formal choice to close *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* with an epilogue is masterfully coupled with a further self-referential note. Indeed, the epilogue offers an excursus on the uses of another rhetorical tool, the epigraph. The short quotation or superscription placed at the start of a book, is in Christiansë’s words a “typographical performance of writing as decontextualiation and recontextualization” (218). From reclaiming the epigraph as verification, “partly to attest to her mastery of fiction” (219), Morrison returns to the epigraphic convention with *Home*. This (partial) coming *home* to tradition, explored in the epilogue, powerfully closes the circle that *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* opens at the start. The numerous and problematic interrogatives raised about language and writing find a meaningful – yet not definite – response in the last pages of the book, where beginning and end, epigraph and epilogue, meet.

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