Justine Baillie, Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic

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In 1993 Toni Morrison became the first African-American writer to win the Nobel Prize. Henry Louis Gates Jr. celebrated the award saying that: “Just two centuries ago, the African-American literary tradition was born in slave narratives. Now our greatest writer won the Nobel Prize.” Given this high praise, Justine Baillie’s title, Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic, seems justified as it posits Morrison as an ‘inventor,’ whose work helped shape not only African-American but also American theory and tradition. The book focuses predominantly on how the literary, social, cultural and historical context influenced Morrison’s work and, in extension, the development of her aesthetic. Of course, Baillie acknowledges the dialectic relationship between the writer and the aforementioned context; nevertheless, the discussion seems to focus mostly on one side of this relationship, which makes the word ‘invention’ in the title appear slightly exaggerated.

Baillie starts her study from the early twentieth century and Harlem Renaissance and gradually moves on to Home, published in 2012, examining in total ten of Morrison’s novels. The novels are examined in chronological order and Baillie justifies her choice in the “Introduction: ‘The Changing Same,’” where she argues that each chapter considers the development of the writer’s aesthetic in conjunction with the major developments in African-American literature and theory (11). Admittedly, Baillie had a difficult task in opting for such a division given the complexity of Morrison’s work together with her continuous disavowal of a linear concept of history based on which themes, motifs and underlying patterns are recurring, thus bringing many of her contemporary novels in constant dialogue with the older ones. Such a division, of course, offers adequate space
for a useful and well-informed revision of some of the major developments and debates in African-American tradition, yet, at the same time, adds a certain complexity to the book that could discourage the average reader.

In the first chapter, “Historical and Literary Context: The Harlem Renaissance,” Baillie focuses on the early twentieth century and more specifically on DuBois’ and Locke’s attempt to “establish a black literary identity” (9) through redefinition. Morrison, herself, continues this project of redefinition, or, re-imagining of both American and diasporic identities. DuBois’s concept of ‘double-consciousness,’’ as well as Harlem Renaissance’s consideration of folk sensibilities, are central in her project of creating new, alternative narratives that problematize white, patriarchal history. Overall, the first chapter is successful in offering an informative overview of the historical, literary and intellectual context of the early twentieth century.

Morrison’s language occupies a central part in the next chapter, “Ideology, Identity and the Community: The Bluest Eye (1970) and Sula (1973). Aptly enough, the Bakhtinian theory of ‘double-voiced’ utterances whose meanings are ‘split between a first speaker’s intention and a second speaker’s reception and response according to his own understanding and perspective’ (50) is used to explain Morrison’s use of contestatory language in her first novel, the Bluest Eye. As Baillie explains, Morrison constantly engages in developing a dialogical relationship with her readers (51). One could add here that Morrison engages in constant dialogue not only with her readers but also with the socio-historical context and literary tradition.

Chapter three, “Intertextuality and Gender Politics: Song of Solomon (1977) and Tar Baby (1981),” reveals Morrison’s interest in the relationship between the individual and the community and explores the author’s deconstruction of white America’s concept of blackness through the “parodic use of a range of discourses” (119-120). Baillie quotes Deleuze and Guattari in order to explain that Morrison’s construction of oppositional forms of literary expressions allows her “the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (120). Especially Tar Baby reveals, as Baillie accurately observes, how Morrison manages to “express a marginal sensibility from within the canon” (10). What is missing from this discussion, however, is a reference to the fact that the tendency to “use the master’s tools in order to dismantle the master’s house,” aligns Morrison’s project with the projects of feminist and minority writers and artists.

What is noteworthy, according to Baillie in chapter four, “Repetition, Memory and the End of Race: Beloved (1987), Jazz (1992) and Paradise (1998),” is Morrison’s view of language as not oppressive which transfers the responsibility of interpretation onto the reader. This transference, which has been explained in detail in chapter two, goes back once more to the “Bakhtinian dialogical relationship between reader and text that bestows responsibility upon the reader”(142). Especially in Beloved Morrison “extends this relationship to new limits in a narrative that necessitates the reader’s participation in its construction.” Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of desire as “fluid, unrestrained and able to break through systems of territorialization” (141) is very appropriately used here by Baillie to explicate how Morrison’s literature, through its reliance on an active reader
who has agency and thus contributes immensely to the unfolding of the narrative, brings about a positive effect of “deterritorialization” (142).

7 In comparison with the previous chapters, the final chapter “Reading and Writing: Love (2003), A Mercy (2008), and Home (2012),” does not rely primarily on a discussion of major theorists as it attempts to discuss Morrison’s re-working of James Baldwin’s understanding of love in Love, or, her engagement with America’s founding writers, such as Hawthorne, in A Mercy. Of course, the effect of an invocation of such mainstream authors as the book draws to an end, cannot be ignored as Baillie triumphantly places once again Morrison at the center of both the African-American and the American literary tradition.

8 Overall, the book represents an important contribution to the scholarship on Morrison by offering a well-researched approach to the author’s extensive body of work, and by bringing together her most important novels. The definite asset are the insightful discussions of the socio-historical and cultural background and of major theorists such as Bakhtin, Deleuze and Guattari that can prove useful not only to Morrison’s scholars but also to those interested in American and cultural studies in general. One could even claim that Baillie follows Morrison’s Bakhtinian transference of responsibility to her readers who have to actually dig deeper in order to discover the often implied dialectical relationship between author and context.

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