

Critique

In "Stranger in the Village" (1953), James Baldwin asserted that "the root function of language is to control the universe by describing it." In her article on naming in Toni Morrison's novels, Linda Buck Myers asks us to consider Morrison's insights regarding who does the controlling and how. In the end Myers offers us a number of useful and provocative observations regarding language and our uses of it as they inform ethnic experience.

Among the more interesting observations of the article are the following: (1) Naming is a much more complex phenomenon than it is usually taken to be, with many more motives and implications than are typically acknowledged. Names can be given, taken, borrowed, modified, corrupted, abandoned, lost. A name can be a curse, blessing, defense, legacy, accident, promise, threat, joke, disguise, weapon, or tool. Especially in the lives of ethnic peoples, imposed upon by the "unnamed Things" of dominant culture, a conscious awareness and control of the naming process is one of the keys to identity and survival. Although naming can be a casual or sardonic exercise, an ironic or self-deprecating gesture, it can also be the gesture that enables us to identify and know ourselves.

(2) Language is inextricably a tool of the social order. That is, it identifies and designates everything from aesthetic values to social attitudes and theological assumptions. While naming in particular can reflect the need and responsibility to control one's immediate experience, the use of language in general is crucial in the relationships of individuals to social concepts such as conformity, acquiescence, and power. The conscious, insistent alteration that results in the place name "Not Doctor Street" is indeed combative, subversive, and liberating; it is a statement about the nature of one particular group's relationship to another.

(3) Naming, one of the earliest forms of language to which a person (and a people) is exposed, is only the beginning of a complex relationship with how words work. One can, of course, take charge of language in social or economic or political terms. These are all clearly important, immediately functional applications. But in the end, on what is a more indirect but finally no less functional level, one can take charge of language by shaping it into intricate figures of speech and typography, the consciously shaped form of the created object—the poem, the story, the novel. This is, of course what Morrison has done: focus the artist's passion for arranging words on pieces of paper

(as Joan Didion once put it) so as to generate complex metaphors of tragedy, self-knowledge, and liberation. There is, in other words, a clear line of development from naming to *flying*. It is a progress of which all are capable if they only grasp, as Morrison points out and Myers explains, how it all begins with names.

In Part IV of her article, Myers sets aside the explicit emphasis on naming and language that informs her prior analysis, focusing instead on the thematic question of opposing assumptions, forces, and beliefs, and the disabling dialectical mindset that creates them. This is, perhaps, as it should be, since the basic thrust of Morrison's own work is toward the perception and power that grow out of an attentiveness to individual words.

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There is always something final, of having said much of what appears to need saying, when we deal with opposites, when we discuss anything in terms of antipodes. Linda Buck Myers's article, "Perception and Power through Naming: Characters in Search of a Self in the Fiction of Toni Morrison," gives me this feeling; and, having considered the matter, she has not "said everything," but she has pointed the way and perceptively located what should become a main vein in the study of Toni Morrison. Language has always been the very stuff of literature, and Myers is correct in highlighting Morrison's clear desire to name anew, to baptize, as it were, the words we prosaically use in order to turn the language into a tool to provide readers with new ways of looking at black Americans. Semiotics has taught us that language does and does not designate, that it names in naming and not naming; and, having thus named, that our very words decree the interpretation of everything we see. This last, to be sure, is a currently fashionable reworking of the basic ideas that Edward Sapir first broached in *Language* (1921), and Myers brings much of this heritage to explain Morrison's work. Morrison says something like: "Look, this is how many Americans tend to look at blacks in America, and this is why we see them as we do." She says further: "But this, my readers, is not what the black world is. In many ways, this world is shaped, like everything else, by the perspectives imposed on it; if you, however,