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Less Than Divine:
Toni Morrison's Paradise

HEAVEN HAS ALWAYS BEEN a tough sell. For all the specificity of religion's shalt and shalt nots, the prize that justifies the game has remained remarkably nebulous over the millennia. Literature has fared no better than theology in portraying Virtue's capital city: even in Dante's *Paradiso*, where everything is pedagogy and light, one longs for a little of the *Inferno*'s garish charm. Nothing is purer than monotony: it's no accident that the "happy ever after" sign-off of old stories is as vague as it is brief. What we know of joy is momentary and serendipitous; pleasure, like pain, seems to acquire intensity at the expense of duration—which would make Eternal Bliss the ultimate oxymoron. The question remains, "If heaven is such a great place, why am I in no hurry to get there?"

Yet authors continue their attempts to pin paradise down, to describe the undescribable (or, in Beckett's phrase, "to eff the ineffable"). Toni Morrison is the latest to take up the challenge, but in *Paradise* she has produced, unfortunately, her weakest book. Morrison's stature as America's premier black novelist—a celebrated and gifted chronicler of the African-American experience—makes this lapse all the more painful; one feels obliged to dredge up the pieces and reassemble the wreck to determine what went wrong. Some of the novel's faults can be traced to flawed strategies or miscalculated effects, but the brunt of its failure lies in the didactic purity that underlies every paradise. Though Morrison doesn't run the risk of having her prize reclaimed by Stockholm, this book can only send ripples of reappraisal back over the rest of her oeuvre.

Like sections of *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, *Paradise* deals with the founding of a locale. Nine ex-slaves and their families set out from Mississippi and Louisiana for Oklahoma and an independent life during the

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1870s. Along the way they seek refuge in an all-black community, but are rebuffed. This permanently affects the group's identity: future generations remember the rejection, with almost biblical inflation, as "The Disallowing." The wanderers move on to an even obscurer part of Oklahoma and set up a town called Haven, where they will now scorn all outside influences. Seventy years later, the twin grandsons of the founding patriarch return from World War II to find the town slipping into economic irrelevance. So they dismantle the communal oven, which has come to represent the old settlement's heart, and move the town farther west, to a spot where the only neighbor within a ninety-mile radius is an all-but-deserted convent. The oven is reassembled, and the citizens resume their lives. The only change acknowledged is one of name: the town, no longer a "Haven," is now called Ruby after the twins' only sister, who died during the move.

Ruby's first female victim won't be its last. By the 1970s, the town consists of self-righteous men and the women they break. Most of these broken women drift to the convent, which is presided over by Consolata, the former head nun's assistant. The convent becomes the area's true haven and, despite Ruby's prosperity, the community's vital center: for all the reverence shown the original oven, townspeople go to the nunnery for their bread. The alternative that this refuge offers is viewed by the powers-that-be as a challenge, and resentment builds. Nine male descendants of the nine founding families storm the convent and, in a brutal Disallowing of their own, shoot the handful of women hiding there. The novel ends with a coda that contains no fewer than five ghosts, each achieving the apotheosis of a personal heaven.

Morrison's deepest interest has always been in psychology rather than plot. She typically places the climax of her stories up front (*Paradise* starts with the massacre) and then moves on to what truly engages her—speculating about her characters. In a long novel with a large cast of principals, though, this stratagem can pose problems: the many characters (most of whom are given equal prominence) generate a lot of action that has to be differentiated. There isn't much development here; the town's past is dispatched in summary, leaving the reader to wade through male intransigence and female vulnerability for three hundred pages.

From the murders of the cat in *The Bluest Eye* and Chicken Little in *Sula* up through the shooting of Dorcas in *Jazz*, there has always seemed to be something contrived in the violence in Morrison's novels; the motivation never quite meshes with the mayhem. The convent bloodbath is a case in point. Morrison establishes the suspicion and

resentment the macho moralists of Ruby feel, but then she has them violate a cardinal rule of machismo: you can't be overly rough with a weak foe. Her vigilantes might have burned the convent; might even, in a fit of rage, have horsewhipped the women. But to shoot them down in cold blood? No. To this point the antagonists have been merely unattractive; suddenly Morrison makes them viciously criminal as well. The murders seem prompted less by the men's depravity or indignation than by the author's pragmatic need for those ghosts in the finale.

Unorthodox and symbolically loaded names have always been important in Morrison's fiction. On occasion, especially when the impulse is leavened with humor, she'll produce a delight like "Hereboy" the dog in *Beloved*. But names that carry too much significance run the risk of coarsening the characterizations, and John Bunyan might wince at some of the monikers employed in this book: Consolata, Divine, Best, Pious, Wisdom, Providence, and Pallas Truelove are just a few. Unfortunately, Morrison's manipulation of symbols in *Paradise* is as heavy-handed as her nomenclature. Ruby's communal oven could have been an effective device for portraying the subtle shift from unconscious utility to self-conscious parody, and for a time it is. But then the relic becomes the center of a generational confrontation over words supposedly carved around its mouth. The old guard feel the inscription says one thing, while the radical youngsters think it says something else. One of the twin brothers even threatens to kill a boy who questions the oven's word. The elders become defensive when the upstarts want to name the oven, but one minister defends their ambition by declaring, "It's because they do know the Oven's value that they want to give it new life."

A good symbol requires perfect balance: it is an object or act that is wholly appropriate to its situation and, at the same time, something that reverberates with larger meaning. But if the metaphorical freight overpowers the context, a symbol loses its power. Such is the case when the rainstorm that precedes the assault on the convent causes the oven to shift on its foundation. This is as unwieldy as the bag-of-bones-that-Milkman-steals-thinking-it's-gold-but-it's-really-his-heritage symbol in *Song of Solomon*. Handling oversized metaphors like these is like juggling bowling balls: one should do it gracefully or not at all.

Current fashion has deemed magic *de rigueur* for visionary novels. There are practical reasons for this. Magic gives the homeliest of settings a spiritual aura, while also affording the author a convenient means of realigning the drama when needed (a *deus ex machina* in a world without *Deus*). The plethora of ghosts and spectral figures here more than fill the paranormal quota, but Morrison feels the need to bolster Consolata's

moral authority by turning her into a shaman as well. Her healing goes beyond mixing potions and medicinal teas; the woman literally raises the dead by "going inside" people. During the climactic downpour, Consolata has her damaged flock paint things like fetuses and scars in the outlines she traces around their bodies on the floor. Then, after a rambling speech full of incantatory gibberish ("My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him. When he fell away the woman rescue me from my body again . . ."), she has them shave their heads and dance naked in the rain, which miraculously washes away their traumas. One emerges from the bathos of a scene like this with the realization that magic, in such a context, has more to do with the sentimental than the supernatural.

All this is doubly vexing because the elements that make Morrison a consistently interesting writer are scattered throughout *Paradise* as well; the book's failure represents a lapse of taste, not talent. One has always admired Morrison for the bits, and the bits are here: the felicity of casual descriptions ("The stranger's lipstick smirked sloppily from the [cup's] cardboard rim"), the personal observations ("He compliments my cooking, then suggests how to improve it next time"), the easy small talk that is expressive in a subtle and unassertive way. Occasionally an incident will fire her imagination, and she'll bring it vividly to life. Arnette's self-inflicted abortion is dealt with in a single paragraph, but the death of "the three pounds of gallant but defeated life" is more pitiful and wrenching than the case studies of all the convent's inmates. The two pages that depict the six lonely days an abandoned child spends in an apartment in the projects, grasping her predicament as she rummages for food, are far more affecting than the bloodletting that's supposed to vindicate the novel's theme.

Which brings us back to the problem of heaven. One of paradise's shortcomings as a concept is that it's too schematic, a place that's all of this and none of that. Morrison's new novel falls prey to this same exclusivity. Virtue and vice seem to have been rigorously sorted along the convenient divide of gender; all the women are good, all the men bad. Even if we employ the euphemisms of anthropology and say that Morrison is exploring the patriarchal in conflict with the matriarchal—certainly a rich subject, and one of great significance in the history of African-Americans—the theme is still too broad and emotionally unengaging to propel an affecting novel.

Individuality can redeem a monolithic theme, as Morrison well knows. In *Tarbaby* she explored the tension between light- and dark-skinned blacks within the confines of a single household and made the issue intricate and compelling. In *Beloved*, she caught the way slavery

hampers the imagination in the dilemma an escaped slave experiences when someone on the street gives him a coin: "Paul D walked around with it for hours—not sure what it could buy (a suit? a meal? a horse?)." But in *Paradise*, Morrison undermines her talent for characterization by making the protagonist a place—for a piece of real estate to have a personality, all its inhabitants must reflect that personality. This accounts for the deadening redundancies one finds here: too many bigots, too many ghosts, too many lunatics (and lest the reader miss the male-centric character of Ruby, Morrison gives the community not only a Big Papa but a Big Daddy as well).

A theme can be pursued as relentlessly as an idea, and repeating a pattern twelve times doesn't make it twelve times more convincing. Morrison implies that if heaven lies anywhere, it's in the soft rather than the hard, in the complicated rather than the simple, but in making her point she resorts to the very didacticism she condemns. *Paradise* has about it a belligerent singlemindedness—one that gives the author's plea for tolerance the uninflected purity of a religious tract. Near the end of her tale Morrison observes of the quest for perfection, "How thin human imagination became trying to achieve it." This could serve as the novel's sad epitaph.