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HNRS 101

10 February 2019

A Historiography of Utopianism: Truth in a Mythic Narration of the Past

With an ordination by God, American settlers conquered the West. Behind the fervor of Westward Migration stood the dream of new beginnings; an untamed land fit for a new haven. Next to this dream, however, stands a tale of domination, marginalization, and displacement – an illegitimate process of disallowing. In effect, the American paradise was built on a biblically prescribed exclusion. Author Toni Morrison constructs a similar history in the 1997 novel *Paradise*, creating two converse approaches to utopianism: the exclusionary and patriarchal township of Ruby, and the Convent – a spiritual, mental, and physical sanctuary for dispossessed women. For the citizens of Ruby, the women of the Convent are a threat – the manifestations of the greatest evils in the flesh, and yet these notions of malevolence are born from a misogynistic and misconstrued historical narrative. In turn, the novel becomes a scrutiny of the ideals of a community evolved from falsities, rendering *Paradise* a historiography of utopia. Morrison, using unreliable narration, exposes the ways perceived historical truths are maintained and subjected in a community subscribed to a mythical historical narrative. *Paradise*'s metahistory is marked by the tensions between the personal microhistories of identity and the grand narratives of femininity and Ruby itself, illustrating the relationship between biblical myth and history in the disallowing practices of a utopian society.

Mythic history develops through a partial representation of experience, though is evermore misconstrued as the narrative is inscribed in communal memory. As a result, a sanctioned version of history emerges; a historical narrative so fundamental to collective thought that dissent is actively punished by hegemonic powers as mythic history conflates with personal narratives. For the citizens of Ruby, it began in Haven – a township created by former slaves in a wave of post-Reconstruction emigration. Haven created the foundations of moral authority in the town of Ruby, and it was Zechariah, the most prominent of the “Old Fathers” and grandfather of Deacon and Steward Morgan, who discovered “how narrow the path of righteousness could be” (Morrison 14). Zechariah’s moral discovery propagates Ruby’s violent characterization of utopia, as the journey faces a series of trials: bandits, tornedoes, starvation – and yet, the greatest injury, labeled “the Disallowing,” came in the form of exclusion when the migrant families were deemed “too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter” the all-black town of Fairly (14). To grant authority to the patriarchal hegemony in Ruby, Steward marries the biblical tropes of Haven’s disallowing with his own personal narrative. Steward’s description of Haven’s origins is analogous to the Israelites, as the migrant families wander the plains “on foot and completely lost” searching for the Promised Land (95). Along the journey, the men, according to Steward, carry the “shame of seeing one’s pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter” (95) – a sentiment which alludes to Mary’s rejection at the inn before Christ’s birth. Despite Steward’s infertility and lack of children, he has “no trouble imaging the shame for himself,” as the Morgans carry “the rejection of 1890 like a bullet in the brain” (95, 109). In this example, Steward is offering to the reader, and to the community of Ruby, a history which is not of his own. Morrison uses this concept of an invented personal narrative born of a mythic communal history to illustrate the distortions and abuses of power to which oral history is subjected.

It is this concept of an invented history, built on the foundations of a mythicized version of reality, which grants Steward and Deacon the perceived moral authority to “bile at the thought” of the Convent women, for at the root of the massacre is the Morgans’ “most powerful” memory (279, 107). In 1932, Haven was thriving amidst the woes of the Great Depression. To see how the other all-black towns were faring, Big Daddy Morgan took the twins on a tour marked by scenes of varying degrees of stagnation and flourishment. In one prosperous town, Steward and Deacon were met by nineteen women who “preened for the photographer,” wearing “summer dresses of material the lightness, the delicacy of which neither of them had ever seen” (109). So powerful a sight were these women that the Morgans “would have burst into tears” had they not won the attention of the nineteen (110). This memory, “which even now...the summer dresses, the creamy, sunlit skin excited [them],” gave the Morgans an idealized concept of femininity elided in the patriarchal structure of Ruby. As such, the mythicized celebration of womanhood found in the scene is fraught with conflicting ideologies, demonstrating the unreliability of *Paradise*’s character narrations.

The Morgan twins, in creating Ruby and its power structure, omit the very traits which made the nineteen women so entrancing. The “laughing,” “teasing,” and “preening” by the women suggests an agency marked by sexual energy; however, it is this precise sexual agency that undermines the Rubian concept of a utopia and renders the Convent a threat. Morrison, to explore this conflict through the subjectivity of memory, writes that Deacon’s “image [of the nineteen women] ...was unlike the photographer’s. His remembrance was pastel colored and eternal” (110). Deacon has, in effect, created a narrative counter to the reality captured by a photograph, and it is this myth-making process that legitimizes the violent exclusionary practices of Ruby, as described in the planning of the Convent massacre. With the Morgan brothers’

mythical narrative “doomed to extinction by this new and obscene breed of female,” the twins react with great zeal, as “neither one put up with what he couldn’t control” (279). The women of the Convent stood in opposition to the communal history which “strengthened [the Morgans] efforts to build a town where the vision [of the nineteen women’s femininity] could flourish” (279). In response, the women of the Convent were deemed unfit to live near the town of Ruby and were disallowed through the means of murder. Toni Morrison uses this conflict between the Morgans’ memory and the invented threat posed by the Convent to reveal a historical perspective contingent upon perspective. Moreover, the utopian ideals in *Paradise* emerge out of a renewal of communal history through the process of mythicizing. Morrison uses an unreliable depiction of the distant past, such as the Disallowing and the nineteen women, to explain the characters’ actions in the near past -- the creation of Ruby -- and the present -- the attack on the Convent.

With its origins in biblical revelations, the religiously authorized process of disallowing is the fundamental tenet of Ruby, both in its origins in Haven and its communal notions of power, for “everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many” (Morrison 189). The Rubian community’s interpretation of Haven’s rejection is similar to Steward’s interpretation of Convent, as both justify contemporary disallowings both internally and externally. Using Patricia’s attempt to chronicle the history and genealogy of the Rubians, in conjunction with the Christmas play’s perpetuation of the “8-rock” purity myth, Morrison proposes the limits of history – communal and personal – in its ability to offer the truth.

At the core of the Rubian identity is the concept of the 8-rock – a notion of racial purity characterized by the inter-marrying of the original families. Ruby manifests the 8-rock identity by excluding those who break from the unspoken “blood rule” that forbids the citizens from

marrying the “impure” light-skinned African Americans. The origins of the blood rule are found in the traditions of Haven, as the founding nine families, especially the Morgans, feared the “scattering...of the group or tribe or consortium of families” (192). The cultural fear of scattering soon to a more sinister approach, however, as it became “an even more dangerous level of evil, for if they broke apart and were disvalued by the impure, then, certain as death, those ten generations would disturb their children’s peace throughout eternity” (194). Morrison uses the idea of racial scattering to critique the false and ironic narratives that compose a community’s history, as the citizens of Ruby now use the Disallowing to justify internal disallowings. One disallowed family, the Bests, are active participants in defying 8-rock purity. Morrison, through Patricia Best’s genealogy, counters the grand narratives of Ruby’s mythic history. In the genealogy, the reader discovers a complex history of incestuous marriages between the 8-rocks. And yet, despite the obvious flaws in Ruby’s ironic notions of purity, the town actively perpetuates the myth by retelling and revising the same Christmas play each year.

The citizens of Ruby see the school play as a simple depiction of the Nativity; however, it soon becomes apparent to Reverend Misner, the newest resident of Ruby, that the play explicitly combines the Disallowing with the events surrounding Christ’s birth. As the play progressed, Misner watched with “growing interest. He had assumed it was in order to please as many children as possible that there were four innkeepers, seven Marys and Josephs. But perhaps there were other reasons. Seven holy families?” (211). Misner, after conferring with Patricia on the accuracy of the representation, leads Patricia to realize that “by the time she understood that the Cato line was cut, there was another erasure” – a realization which illustrates the use of the Disallowing to manipulate the narration of the present (215). Through the genealogy, and by the community’s failure to give Patricia, who “had seen the play all her life,... any part other than

the choir,” Morrison establishes the Bests – “the first to have broken the blood rule” – as the forgotten family (214, 195). Ruby’s rejection of the Best family reveals the exclusionary trait of a utopian society, as the contemporary disallowings, legitimized by the school’s retelling, are tools to uphold the communal narrative of truth.

Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* constructs a tale rooted in factual and experimental truths. The novel’s use of unreliable narration, specifically through the origins of Ruby, womanhood, and the notions of 8-rock purity, exposes the relationship between historical legend and fact. For behind the characters’ purists of social justice lies a vicious cycle of omission and exclusion, revealing an argument that probes the ways historical fact and justice connect to systems of power.

Work Cited

Morrison, Toni. *Paradise*. Vintage International, 2014.