

## Goodness

### Altruism and the Literary Imagination

Ingersoll Lecture 2012

TONI MORRISON

**O**n an October morning in 2006, a young man backed his truck into the driveway of a one-room schoolhouse. He walked into the school and after ordering the boy students, the teacher, and a few other adults to leave, he lined up ten girls, ages nine to thirteen, and shot them. The mindless horror of that attack drew intense and sustained press as well as, later on, books and film. Although there had been two other school shootings only a few days earlier, what made this massacre especially notable was the fact that its landscape was an Amish community — notoriously peaceful and therefore the most unlikely venue for such violence.

Before the narrative tracking the slaughter had been exhausted in the press, another rail surfaced, one that was regarded as bizarre and somehow as shocking as the killings. The Amish community forgave the killer, refused to seek justice, demand vengeance, or even to judge him. They visited and comforted the killer's widow and children (who were not Amish), just as they embraced the relatives of the slain. There appeared a number of explanations for their behavior — their historical aversion to killing anyone at all for any reason and their separatist convictions. More to the point, the Amish community had nothing or very little to say to outside inquiry except that it was God's place to judge, not theirs. And, as one cautioned, "Do not think evil of this man." They held no press conferences and submitted to no television interviews. They quietly buried the dead, attended the killer's funeral, then tore down the old schoolhouse and built a new one.

Their silence following the slaughter, along with their deep concern for the killer's family, seemed to me at the time characteristic of genuine "goodness." And I became fascinated with the term and its definition.

Thinkers, of whom none was as uninformed as I was, have long analyzed what constitutes goodness, what good is good, and what its origins

are or may be. The myriad theories I read overwhelmed me, and to reduce my confusion I thought I should just research the term "altruism." I quickly found myself on a frustrating journey into a plethora of definitions and counterdefinitions. I began by thinking of altruism as a more or less faithful rendition of its Latin root: alter/other; selfless compassion for the "other." That route was not merely narrow; it led to a swamp of interpretations, contrary analyses, and doubt. A few of these arguments posited wildly different explanations: (1) Altruism is not an instinctive act of selflessness, but a taught and learned one. (2) Altruism might actually be narcissism, ego enhancement, even a mental disorder made manifest in a desperate desire to think well of oneself to erase or diminish self-loathing. (3) Some of the most thought-provoking theories came from scholarship investigating the DNA, if you will, seeking evidence of an embedded gene automatically firing to enable the sacrifice of oneself for the benefit of others; a kind of brother or sister to Darwin's "survival of the fittest." Examples of confirmation or contradiction of the Darwinian theory came primarily from the animal and insect kingdoms: squirrels deliberately attracting predators to themselves to warn the other squirrels; birds as well and especially ants, bees, bats all in service to the colony, the collective, the swarm. Such behavior is very common among humans. But the question being put seemed to be whether such sacrifice for kin and/or community is innate, built, as it were, into our genes just as individual conquest of others is held to be a natural, instinctive drive that serves evolution. Is there a "good" gene along with a "selfish" gene? The further question for me was the competition between the gene and the mind.

I confess I was unable and ill-equipped to understand much of the scholarship on altruism, but I did learn something about its weight, its urgency, and its relevance and irrelevance in contemporary thought.

Keeping those Amish in mind, I wondered why the narrative of that event, in the press and visual media, quickly ignored the killer and the slaughtered children and began to focus almost exclusively on the shock of forgiveness. As I noted earlier, mass shootings at schools were perhaps too ordinary; there had been two such shootings elsewhere during that same time, but the Amish community's unwillingness to clamor for justice/vengeance/retribution, or even to judge the killer was the compelling story. The shock was that the parents of the dead children took pains to comfort the killer's widow, her family and her children, to raise funds for them, not themselves. Of the victimized community's response to that

almost classic example of evil, in addition to their refusal to fix blame, the most extraordinary element was their silence. It was that silence (that refusal to be lionized, televised) that caused me to think differently about goodness.

Of course thinking about goodness implies, indeed requires, a view of its opposite.

I have never been interested in or impressed by evil itself, but I have been confounded by how attractive it is to others. I am stunned by the attention given to its every whisper and shout. Which is not to deny its existence and ravage, nor to suggest evil does not demand confrontation, but simply to wonder why it is so worshiped, especially in literature. Is it its theatricality, its costume, its blood spray, the emotional satisfaction that comes with its investigation more than with its collapse? (The ultimate detective story, the paradigm murder mystery.) Perhaps it is how it dances, the music it inspires, its clothing, its nakedness, its sexual disguise, its passionate howl, and its danger. The formula in which evil reigns is bad versus good, but the deck is stacked because goodness in contemporary literature seems to be equated with weakness, as pitiful (a girl running frightened and helpless through the woods while the pursuing villain gets more of our attention than her savior).

Evil has a blockbuster audience; Goodness lurks backstage. Evil has vivid speech; Goodness bites its tongue. It is Billy Budd, who can only stutter. It is Coetzee's Michael K, with a harelip that so limits his speech that communication with him is virtually impossible. It is Melville's *Bartleby*, confining language to repetition. It is Faulkner's Benjy, an idiot.

Rather than rummage through the exquisite and persuasive language of religions — all of which implore believers to rank goodness as the highest and holiest of human achievement, and many of which identify their saints and icons of worship as examples of pure altruism — I decided to focus on the role goodness plays in literature using my own line of work — fiction — as a test.

In nineteenth-century novels, regardless of what acts of wickedness or cruel indifference controlled the plot, the ending was almost always the triumph of goodness. Dickens, Hardy, and Austen all left their readers with a sense of the restoration of order and the triumph of virtue, even Dostoevsky. Note that Svidrigailov in *Crime and Punishment*, exhausted by his own evil and the language that supports it, becomes so bored by his terminal acts of charity, he commits suicide. He cannot live without the

language of evil, nor within the silence of good deeds. There are famous exceptions to what could be called a nineteenth-century formula invested in identifying clearly who or what is good. Obviously *Don Quixote* and *Candide* both mock the search for pure goodness. Other exceptions to that formula remain puzzles in literary criticism: Melville's *Billy Budd* and *Moby Dick*, both of which support multiple interpretations regarding the rank, the power, the meaning that goodness is given in these texts. The consequence of Billy Budd's innocence is execution. Is Ishmael good? Is Ahab a template for goodness, fighting evil to the death? Or is he a wounded, vengeful force outfoxed by indifferent nature, which is neither good nor bad? Innocence represented by Pip we know is soon abandoned, swallowed by the sea without a murmur. Generally, however, in nineteenth-century literature, whatever the forces of malice the protagonist is faced with, redemption and the triumph of virtue was his or her reward.

Twentieth-century novelists were unimpressed. The movement away from happy endings or the enshrining of good over evil was rapid and stark after World War I. *That* catastrophe was too wide, too deep to ignore or to distort with a simplistic gesture of goodness. Many early modern novelists, especially Americans, concentrated on the irredeemable consequences of war — the harm it did to its warriors, to society, to human sensibility. In those texts, acts of sheer goodness, if not outright comical, are treated with irony at best or ladled with suspicion and fruitlessness at worst. One thinks of Faulkner's *A Fable* and the mixed reviews it received, most of which were disdainful of the deliberate armistice between soldiers in trench warfare against each other driven by a Christ-like character. The term "hero" seems to be limited these days to the sacrificing dead: first responders running into fiery buildings, mates throwing themselves on grenades to save the lives of others, rescuing the drowning, the wounded. Faulkner's character would never be seen or praised as a hero.

Evil grabs the intellectual platform and its energy; it demands careful examinations of its consequences, its techniques, its motives, its successes however short-lived or temporary. Grief, melancholy, missed chances for personal happiness often seem to be contemporary literature's concept of evil. It hogs the stage. Goodness sits in the audience and watches, assuming it even has a ticket to the show. A most compelling example of this obsession with evil is Umberto Eco's *The Prague Cemetery*. Brilliant as it is, never have I read a more deeply disturbing fascination with the nature

of evil; disturbing precisely because it is treated as a thrilling intelligence scornful of the monotony and stupidity of good intentions.

Contemporary literature is not interested in goodness on a large or even limited scale. When it appears, it is with a note of apology in its hand and has trouble speaking its name.

For every *To Kill a Mockingbird*, there is a Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* or "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," striking goodness down with a well-honed literary axe. Many of the late twentieth-, early twenty-first-century heavyweights — Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, and so on — are masters at exposing the frailty, the pointlessness, the comedy of goodness.

I thought it would be interesting and possibly informative to examine my thesis on the life and death of goodness in literature using my own work. I wanted to measure and clarify my understanding by employing the definitions of altruism that I gleaned from my tentative research. To this end, I selected three:

1. Goodness taught and learned (a habit of helping strangers and/or taking risks for them).
2. Goodness as a form of narcissism, ego enhancement, or even a mental disorder.
3. Goodness as instinct, as a result of genetics (protecting one's kin or one's group).

An example of the first: A learned habit of goodness can be found in *A Mercy*. There a priest, at some danger to himself, teaches female slaves to read and write. Lest this be understood as simple kindness, here is a sample of punishments levied on white people who risked promoting literacy among black people: "Any white person assembling with slaves or free Negroes for purpose of instructing them to read or write, or associating with them in any unlawful assembly, shall be confined in jail not exceeding six months and fined not exceeding \$100.00." That text appeared in Virginia's criminal law as late as 1848.

Examples of the third: Instinctive kin protection is the most common representative of goodness — and I acknowledge several areas of failure to articulate them. From the deliberate sticking of one's leg under a train for insurance money to raise their family in *Sula*, to setting a son on fire to spare him and others the sight of his self-destruction. Note this is the same mother who throws herself out of a window to save a daughter from

fire. These acts are far too theatrical and are accompanied by no compelling language. On the other hand, there is the giving away of one's child to a stranger in order to save her from certain molestation in *A Mercy*. The motive that impels Florens's mother, a *minha mae*, seems to me quite close to altruism, and most importantly is given language which I hoped would be a profound, a literal definition of freedom: "To be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is an evil thing."

Another example of the third: Unquestioning compassion in support of not just kin but of members of the group in general. In *Home*, for example, women provide unsolicited but necessary nursing care to a member of the collective who has spent a lifetime despising them; their "reason" being responsibility to God: "They did not want to meet their Maker and have nothing to say when He asked, 'What have you done?'" A further instance of innate group compassion is the healing of Cee, physically as well as mentally. It was important to me to give that compassion voice: "Look to yourself," Miss Ethel tells her. "You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. . . . You young and a woman and there is serious limitation in both but you a person, too. . . . Somewhere inside you is that free person. . . . Locate her and let her do some good in the world."

An example of the second: Goodness as a form of narcissism, perhaps mental disorder, occurs in the very first novel I wrote. Determined to erase his self-loathing, Soaphead Church, a character in *The Bluest Eye*, chooses to "give," or pretend to give, blue eyes to a little girl in psychotic need of them. In his letter to God, he imagines himself doing the good God refuses. Misunderstood as it is, it has language.

Over time, these last forty years, I have become more and more invested in making sure acts of goodness (however casual or deliberate or misapplied or, like the Amish community, blessed) produce language. But even when not articulated, like the teaching priest in *A Mercy*, such acts must have a strong impact on the novel's structure and on its meaning. Expressions of goodness are never trivial or incidental in my writing. In fact, I want them to have life-changing properties and to illuminate decisively the moral questions embedded in the narrative. It was important to me that none of these expressions be handled as comedy or irony. And they are seldom mute.

Allowing goodness its own speech does not annihilate evil, but it does

allow me to signify my own understanding of goodness: the acquisition of self-knowledge. A satisfactory or good ending for me is when the protagonist learns something vital and morally insightful that she or he did not know at the beginning.

Claudia's words, at the end of *The Bluest Eye*: "I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong of course but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late."

Such insight has nothing to do with winning, and everything to do with the acquisition of knowledge. Knowledge on display in the language of moral clarity — of goodness.