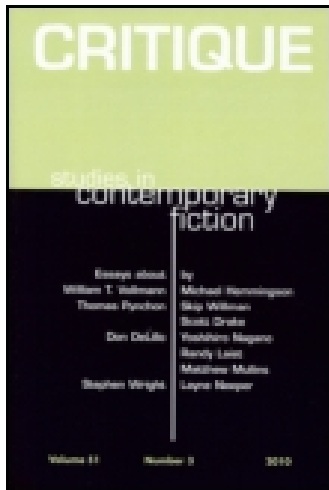


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### Ontologies of Interdependence, the Sacred, and Health Care: Marilynne Robinson's Gilead and Home

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## Ontologies of Interdependence, the Sacred, and Health Care: Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*

*Marilynne Robinson's two most recent novels offer a compelling ethical framework for contemporary readers. After reviewing the shift in how her seminal novel Housekeeping has been received, this article demonstrates how Robinson's more recent fiction focuses on responsibility, generosity, and interdependence, all founded in a system of belief her protagonists have accepted. Robinson's work invites readers to reconsider humanistic concerns in ways that speak back to neoliberal hegemony and postmodern relativism.*

**Keywords:** Marilynne Robinson, contemporary fiction, neoliberal ontology

Marilynne Robinson's most recent novels, *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008), support, complicate, and intensify certain operations that literary critics have diagnosed in her best-known work, *Housekeeping* (1980). The ethereal spirituality of *Housekeeping* becomes the firm-but-flexible Protestantism of *Gilead* and *Home*, a shift that retains the earlier novel's meditative flavor while expressing a more developed system of ethics. I will argue that this move interacts suggestively with the ethical turn in literary theory as well as the left-leaning intellectual sphere's craving for a more potent response to the ideological dominance of neoliberalism and its apparatuses. In an interesting paradox, Robinson's rooting in a liberal progressivism heavily influenced by her Christian beliefs is what makes her distasteful to many leftists, but her faith in orthodoxies and universals can also act as an antidote to the relativism that so frustrates this same audience.

Robinson's affection for older forms of American liberalism has brought her scrutiny from William Deresiewicz and Christopher Douglas.<sup>1</sup> Her longing for an earlier America, diagnosed in 1996 by Thomas Schaub, can be seen in her decision to set all three of her books in rural portions of the 1950s Midwest. Given the postmodern dismissal of nostalgia—Fredric Jameson called it a “haunting”—Robinson's positive depiction of the American past might seem dangerously ahistorical or shortsightedly romantic. For Robinson, however, revisiting old orthodoxies represents a useful means of recovering interred notions of community and responsibility that effectively speak back to the neoliberal logics dismantling the welfare state.

Neoliberal ideology's pervasiveness has been discussed *ad nauseam* since the financial collapse of 2008, whose effects were an obvious consequence of what has come to be known as “the

Washington Consensus.”<sup>2</sup> Even in the aftermath of the collapse, the responses to debt crises in Europe have remained in line with neoliberal thinking—shrink government, deregulate industry, keep inflation low. When Democratic politicians follow the wagging tail, which has been the case over the last two decades (think of Bill Clinton declaring the end of the era of big government and his overseeing of welfare’s disemboweling), left-leaning circles have reason to despair.

We can see this frustration in the recent writing of Walter Benn Michaels and Sean McCann and Mark Szalay. For each, the relativism that followed as a philosophic consequence of poststructuralist, postmodernist, and deconstructive critiques of humanism severely undermined the ability of the progressive left to organize resistance to the growing power of the neoliberal and neoconservative movements. Daniel Rodgers’s outstanding intellectual history of post-Cold War America, *The Age of Fracture*, capably demonstrates the affinities between academic postmodernism and political libertarianism in the mainstream: though each does so for entirely different reasons, they both eradicate faith in the solidity and importance of collective identities. The success of both movements has made what would once look like extreme individualism the status quo.<sup>3</sup>

One of Tony Judt’s final contributions to the *New York Review of Books* gives voice to this point. His students, he found, were incapable of conceiving of the commitment it would take to join a collective: “a self-abnegating commitment to a secular faith was beyond their imaginative reach.” For Judt, relativistic, liberal-secular individualism had swung too far in the opposite direction of the collective-minded midcentury. Neoliberal thinking, of course, has linked this intense individualism to an argument for the necessity of unfettered free enterprise: markets must be unregulated because individuals, who make up the market, must be allowed to achieve their fullest potential. Because of Western philosophical liberalism’s long marriage to the power of the individual, those trained in that tradition have little to say back to any system that makes individual liberation sacrosanct. In addition, neoclassical economics, which relies on a version of the rational Enlightenment human, insists that an utterly free market is the only way of sustaining economic growth. This position dominates thinking about economic policy to such a degree that even Judt cannot think his way out of these confines: “[t]he thrall in which an ideology holds a people is best measured by their collective inability to imagine alternatives. We know perfectly well that untrammelled faith in unregulated markets kills. [. . .] But in Margaret Thatcher’s deathless phase, ‘There is no alternative’” (9–10). Within the same issue of the *New York Review of Books*, Charles Baxter echoes Judt’s defeatism in a review of Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*, ruefully pronouncing that the book “attempts to come to terms with the Bush years and is finally defeated by them. [. . .] It cannot solve the problems it regards as crucial, which is our loss and probably our fate” (16). Such a position is symptomatic of the intellectual logjam neoliberalism causes, when even a high-powered liberal journal asserts that an “inability to imagine [plausible] alternatives” is “probably our fate.”

Robinson responds to these conditions by proposing a set of ethics not rooted in the individual’s importance. I argue that the intensification of neoliberalism’s dominance helps us make sense of why Robinson’s novels of the 2000s stray from the deconstructive mysticism of her first book; in *Gilead* and *Home*, Robinson’s depiction of domestic spaces and relationships within small communities dramatizes the necessity of interdependence and the precariousness of human life. While neoliberalism depends on a definition of the human exclusively driven by economic incentives, Robinson offers an ontology based in mystery and insecurity, as she does in *Housekeeping*. But the later novels emphasize a set of responsibilities that follow from defining the human in this way, which I read as having political resonance aimed at undoing the binds I’ve described. For readers unfamiliar with *Housekeeping*, let me offer a brief summary of the text

and its reception history, which I hope will demonstrate its emphasis on undecidability, before discussing how *Gilead* and *Home* aim for firmer conclusions.

*Housekeeping's* narrator Ruth and her sister Lucille experience a series of childhood traumas that leave them desperate for models with which to identify. While Lucille chooses to live with their home economics teacher and move toward small-town normalcy (the novel is set in 1950s Idaho), Ruth is drawn to her wayward, transient aunt Sylvie, the fourth guardian to parent Lucille and Ruth before they become teenagers. When the conventional forces of the town threaten to separate Ruth from the reckless Sylvie, the pair abandons and then burns their family home, heading off to a life of homeless wandering.

Our instincts as early twenty-first century readers might incline us to see "the account of the young girl's grief [as] fables of liberation," as Thomas Schaub has put it ("Lingering Hopes, Faltering Dreams" 310). The standard counterhegemonic reading of the novel, which dominated its reception for fifteen years, saw it this way, assuming that Ruth's turn away from normativity and domesticity affirmed poststructuralist and feminist views of patriarchal society. Karen Kaviola, one of the first readers to counter this trend, argued that to affirm Ruth is to espouse her interaction with grief, and Kaviola feels profoundly uncomfortable doing so—or taking the opposite position. To argue for Ruth's "well-being," as in wishing for her to choose a settled life over transience,

may be equivalent to adopting the conventional stance the townspeople represent, while not to speak of it is to ignore the pain that permeates Ruth's discourse despite her attempts to repress it. In other words, to use terms like "well-being" is to position oneself outside Ruth's own perspective, to assume that one is in a privileged position to Ruth, to believe that one is able to determine what, exactly, is in her best interest. (682)

If anything, *Housekeeping* seems intended to frustrate our attempts to convert its pages into some political or even ethical end, and if Kaviola is correct—and she, along with Schaub and Paula Geyh, seems to have established the normative position for responding to the novel since the mid-1990s—that we are unable to take a "privileged position" in relation to Ruth, then Robinson achieves her aim.

Robinson's more recent novels follow protagonists also incapable of assuming a privileged position in relation to a suffering person, but these characters must react to this individual anyway, without the troubling but ultimately safe distance aesthetics allow. *Gilead* and *Home* move the suffering figure from the position of the narrator to the narrator's concern (in *Gilead*) or that of the focalizing consciousness (in *Home*). Jack Boughton, whose return to the dusty Iowa town of Gilead is the central event of both novels, bears remarkable resemblance to Ruth. Each chooses transience over stability. Each has trouble believing in Heaven or that they have much chance for it. Each engages in the practice of looking into settled people's homes through windows at night, gauging their distance from conventional lives. Just as *Housekeeping* put us in the position of being unable to judge Ruth, *Gilead* and *Home* resist judging Jack, but the clear ethical imperative operating in each is that characters must respond to Jack's abjection, an obligation that requires them to offer comfort and hope, two qualities the forlorn Jack sorely lacks. In Jack, Robinson produces a test case for her characters—how can they become equal to what it takes to encounter Jack ethically?

In this concern, Robinson's characters hold themselves to a quasi-Levinasian commitment to the Other. This commitment couples elements of the ethical sensitivity Judith Butler, among

others, has recently espoused, with the orthodoxy of organized religion. In allowing a mild but still dogmatic form of religion into her ethical program, Robinson breaks with the rigidly antidogmatic relativism that has followed from postmodernism. It is in this insistence on systematizing an ethics, one built on axioms of interdependence and self-sacrifice, that makes Robinson's fiction profoundly compelling for readers experiencing Judt and Baxter's frustration. In what follows, I will explore how this system emerges in *Gilead* and *Home* while making periodic references to Robinson's nonfiction, which will help clarify how the fiction has political referents. I will then discuss how Robinson's work dovetails with Butler's, articulating how their mutual efforts at redefining ontology speak back to neoliberal hegemony, before continuing to discuss the novels' system of ethics. In my conclusion, I will then try to differentiate Robinson from other contemporary writers in an effort to show her intervention's force and value.

Having rejected his family for a life of dissolution, Jack Boughton arrives in Gilead a broken man. His troubled childhood graduated from reckless pranks largely aimed at his godfather, John Ames, to drinking and petty theft as a teenager. Before leaving for college, Jack impregnates a young girl from a proud but impoverished family. His unacknowledged daughter dies while still a toddler, and Jack leaves school well short of a degree. In his adulthood, he spends time in prison, runs up debts, and maintains a distance from his family, failing to return even for his mother's funeral—though he is not above writing them with occasional requests for money.

Jack's life achieves a measure of stability when he enters into a relationship with a kindhearted and patient woman named Della, but the difference between their races (Jack is white, Della black) mitigates their ability to be together. Her family also strenuously objects to Jack, for reasons related to his shiftlessness and, it is implied, his race. Jack and Della manage to spend brief periods in domestic happiness, hidden from her family, but Jack's inability to provide consistently for his wife and the child they conceive together sends him back to Gilead, where he hopes that his respectable family might help him with the struggles he's faced elsewhere (his drinking problem, his trouble keeping a job, antimiscegenation laws, and racial prejudice). Alas, his memories of his childhood transgressions, his strained relationships, and his inability to feel comfortable with himself make him remote and brittle. The novels each orient around attempts by other characters, who have ample reason to dismiss Jack, to encounter him in a way they feel is ethical and welcoming.

*Gilead* consists of a series of letters the aforementioned John Ames, seventy-seven and dying of a heart condition, writes to his seven-year-old son Robby, to be read when Robby reaches adulthood. Ames's narration meanders, mixing stories from family history, bits of autobiography, and meditations on theology (Ames is a Congregationalist minister) until rumors of Jack's return disturb the narrative's placid ruminating. The letters, in addition to providing Robby with information about his family's past, also aim to provide Robby with a model of ethical living that Jack's arrival challenges. Ames consistently counsels against judgment and holding grudges, yet of Jack, Ames announces, "I don't forgive him. I wouldn't know where to begin" (164). The tension in *Gilead* emerges from Ames's struggle to locate a method of encountering Jack ethically that squares with the example he wants to be to his son.

*Home* concerns the Boughton family, documenting events contemporaneous to *Gilead*. Jack's father Robert, Ames's closest friend and a Presbyterian preacher, is also in declining health, his condition much more advanced than Ames's. Glory, the youngest of Boughton's eight children, returns to take care of her father after the humiliating end of her relationship with a married man. The novel's narration is primarily focalized through Glory and spends significant time on her attempts to make herself equal to comforting her difficult brother, even when Jack does not know how to accept comfort.

In making the novels center around responding to Jack—not whether Jack redeems himself—Robinson requires that her characters accept asymmetrical relationships.<sup>4</sup> Neither Glory nor Ames (after he gets past his old anger at Jack) expects Jack to show gratitude or respond in kind. They are driven less by hope for Jack's redemption than by their sense that they recognize this suffering human's plight and attempt to offer the balm (hence Gilead) for that suffering.

As *Housekeeping* demonstrates through Ruth, an experience of time that simply hurts is not foreign to Robinson's characters, and to Jack especially. Jack has trouble believing in Heaven, but "perdition is the one thing that made sense to me [. . . o]n the basis of my experience" (*Home* 119); he admits to being "tired of [him]self" (172); quoting the Biblical verse about the offensive eye or hand, he states, "I offend me—eyes, hands, history, prospects" (174). Glory discerns that Jack had "no notion at all of possible refuge" (76); knowing how hard he was on himself, "there was seldom much reason to believe that rescue would have any particular attraction for him" (248). After Glory interrupts Jack's suicide attempt, he asks her to clean out a space he made for himself in the family's barn. As she looks at the books and alcohol bottles and crudely created accommodations, she is "amazed at what was before her, as if it were the humblest sign of great mystery, come from a terrain where loneliness and grief are time and weather" (286).

Jack is not the only figure present in both novels who experiences extended unhappiness. In *Gilead*, Ames spends time detailing the difficult and lonely years he had between the death of his first wife and child and the arrival of Lila, Robby's mother, late in his life. *Home* has Glory castigate herself for foolishly investing so much of herself into her long, failed relationship. Ames admits that, for most of his life, "I didn't feel very much at home in the world" (*Gilead* 4), and Glory is kept awake at night when "the sense that everything could have been otherwise [felt instead like] a palpable darkness" (*Home* 20). Unlike Jack, Ames and Glory can negotiate their passages of despair more successfully, in part because they find enduring uses for themselves in fulfilling what they believe to be ethical responsibilities. For Ames's grandfather, who receives significant textual attention in *Gilead*, finding a use for himself that assures his value is an impossible task.<sup>5</sup>

The eldest Ames was a fiery abolitionist, who moved his family to Iowa to help make it a free state. He also rides with and provides cover for John Brown. He has visions of Christ descending upon him, loses an eye in the Civil War, and preaches sermons during the war wearing a bloody shirt with a gun in his belt. Ames describes him: "My grandfather seemed to me stricken and afflicted, and indeed he was, like a man everlastingly struck by lightning. [. . .] He was the most unrepentful human being I ever knew" (*Gilead* 49). The end of radicalism in Iowa profoundly disappoints the eldest Ames, especially when life did not improve much for the formerly enslaved: "The waters never parted for him, not once in his life, so far as I know. There was just no end to difficulty, and no mitigation of it. Then again, he always sought it out" (90). Ames explains that his grandfather's difficulty stemmed largely from an excess of virtue: he "had nowhere to spend his courage, no way to feel it in himself. That was a great pity" (47). His "strenuousness in ethical matters" (90) that is a part of this courage is annulled by compromises Ames feels are necessary to live in the world. The old man's suffering results not from sin but from the lack of an outlet sufficient to his energies, something that would allow him to feel enduringly useful.

The extended attention Robinson spends on Ames's grandfather and Jack allows each novel to meditate on sorrow, grief, and loneliness. In Robinson's fictional universe, sorrow's source often goes unexplored. We never know why Ruth and Lucille's mother kills herself. Jack cannot explain his childhood mischief or his more serious adult misdeeds. Ames's wife Lila decides never to speak about her difficult past. The eldest Ames simply smolders himself into a husk. The narration

of all three novels speculates on these figures and their sorrows. Robinson's project insists on the undeniable omnipresence of human suffering, loneliness, and grief. We will not understand it, nor do we know how to address it.

We must, however, register sorrow's indelible presence, and its existence means we must value it. Ames tells his son, "Sorrow seems to me to be a great part of the substance of human life," and that Christians "do believe there is a sacred mystery in it [...] there is a dignity in sorrow simply because it is God's good pleasure that there should be" (*Gilead* 104, 137). Recognizing sorrow's inviolability and its dignity generates two very different implications.

First, the necessary existence of suffering means we should ignore utopian thinking that would imagine it either eliminable or unnecessary. Like Ames's grandfather, we encounter a world that will never meet our demands on it and was never intended to. Robinson's nonfiction articulates this position: "There is a [mistaken] tendency among committed democrats like us to believe all significant problems must be somehow suited to our solutions" (*Mother Country* 228). For her, the notion that humans "should be suited to living happily [...]" is a stroke of thinking so remarkable in a supposedly nontheological context that it takes my breath away" (*Death of Adam* 164). She asks whether we might "not all have been kinder and saner if we had said that discontent is our natural condition [...]" that while we belong in the world, we have no place in the world [...]" not because something went wrong, but because of the peculiar terms of our rescue from extinction" (165). Above, we see Ames articulate this position, asserting sorrow's significance because its existence implies its value in the ordering system of life. *Gilead* and *Home* refuse to turn Jack's story into one of happy redemption largely because these works do not believe happy redemption is the point.

Late in *Home*, Robinson's narrator departs from reporting through Glory's perspective to offer a definition of the human that makes discontent an essential quality. In the previous lines, the narration articulates the difficulty Glory finds in having family troubles in a town like Gilead. Glory realizes that she will not be able to avoid her neighbors' concern, for her suffering, like Jack's, will be palpable. Being the object of this solicitous attention—"Dear God, she saw concern in their eyes, regret"—leads the narrator to remark:

That odd capacity for destitution, as if by nature we ought to have so much more than nature gives us. As if we are shockingly unclothed when we lack the complacencies of ordinary life. In destitution, even of feeling or purpose, a human being is more hauntingly human and vulnerable to kindness because there is the sense that things should be otherwise, and then the thought of what is wanting and what alleviation would be, and how the soul could be put at ease, restored. At home. (282)

The passage demonstrates that Robinson does not expect us to dismiss our desires for happiness. We are asked to consider the human *more* human when "vulnerable to kindness" or when "in destitution [...] of feeling or purpose." What makes the human *more* human is the desire for "things" to "be otherwise." The desire for things to be better makes the human more human because we can name no grounds for the expectation that this desire will be met, yet the desire remains. Ultimately, we belong here but have no place here, and we have homes that do not feel homely. Here we see the second implication: the consequent responsibility that we must assume toward each other should grasp that acknowledging the world's inability to meet our desires for it does not diminish our sense that things should be otherwise. Recall Glory's own troubling inability to locate this sense ("a palpable darkness") would keep her up at night. She

needs this sense in order to get by, even if she does not live her life invested heavily in the hopes it creates.

I have endeavored to show that Robinson makes suffering a central part of her fictional project because she sees it as an essential characteristic of the human condition. What follows from recognition of this sorrow is that the human is not autonomously capable of achieving fullness or happiness. If discontent is part of the conditions of existence, then discontent is a shared burden—something not to be dissolved but to be borne.

In Judith Butler's work of the last decade, she has argued for a separation of autonomy from ontology. For her, the human is always in a precarious state, always reliant on communities to sustain existence. As she asserts in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, even self-awareness relies on some sense of an Other, some norm where definition can begin. The human, in other words, begins with the social: human life cannot be defined without a social body to define it against, nor can it be sustained without that same social body.

Butler situates this argument against what might be called the neoliberal humanist position, which sees some humans as more fully human (which is to say, human) than others. Wars such as those fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, which make up the backdrop of Butler's *Frames of War* and *Precarious Life*, are premised on ideological justification of protecting some lives by the destruction of others—a war on bodies to protect other bodies from feeling terror—which requires a purchase of certain understandings of what humans merit.

The project of redefining the human, then, has political and social consequences. In declaring the purpose of her project, Butler states,

I want to argue that if we are to make broader social and political claims about rights of protection and entitlements to persistence and flourishing, we will first have to be supported by a new bodily ontology, one that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence, desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging. [...] The “being” of the body to which ontology refers is one that is always give over to others, to norms. (*Frames of War* 2)

To make claims that counteract those of neoliberal ideology, Butler claims, we have to rethink the definitions of the human that neoliberalism begins from.

For Michel Foucault, the neoliberal human is economic man, the rational, freethinking individual capable of making responsible decisions in the marketplace. As he argues in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the economic market has become the privileged site in the postmodern “regime of verdidiction” (36). In recent decades, the market has become understood as part of nature, something that when left alone produces truths in the forms of agreed-upon prices. This naturalizing of the market displaces earlier privileged naturalizations so that we receive the market as the only producer of truths. The dream of the pure market transaction, so central to the belief in the invisible hand, necessitates that participants be capable of facilitating a logical transaction. Norms emerge *from* this transaction: people determine what they are willing to pay for their needs as well as what they are willing to receive in exchange for their labor. Though sociology and psychology have long argued that the self-determining market participant is a fiction, public sphere discourse about market importance continues to drive public policy.<sup>6</sup>

Following Foucault's argument, the autonomous, rational individual so key to belief in the market is also the figure who must be protected from the meddling influence of the state. The



Western nation-state has increasingly seen its role as managing economic affairs in the form of releasing controls on individual bodies (including corporations) rather than protecting those bodies. The rise of what Robinson has called “the ideology of austerity” speaks to this. Robinson sees this shift as a change in capitalist dogmatic allegiance, which she discusses in her essay “Austerity as Ideology” (*When I Was a Child* 35–58). Here, she suggests that the welfare state imagined its role as protecting citizens from predictably negative outcomes, but the austerity policies currently in vogue require governments whose attitudes toward their subjects are not just un- but anti-generous. Austerity places the nation’s fiscal demands over what might be thought of as its traditional responsibilities; solvency, rather than providing a social safety net and common cultural welfare, becomes paramount. One can see how such a governmental philosophy imagines a human substantially different from Butler’s and, for that matter, Robinson’s. For though Robinson’s human can never expect to be free from discontent, the responsibility demonstrated by characters who Robinson admires—Ames and Glory, specifically—on the local level has obvious implications for how states should treat their citizens.

A different component of suffering’s mysteriousness—what both novels call its “sacredness”—affirms the importance of recognizing and responding to human precariousness. We learn that the young Glory “confused, in fact fused, the words ‘secret’ and ‘sacred,’” but the narrator amends this statement, suggesting that Glory (con)fused these two terms for “the whole of her life” (*Home* 15–16). For Glory, this conflation means that she “loved tact and discretion better than she should” (16), but *Home* and *Gilead* imply that the two are inextricably connected.

Both Ames and Glory aver that the unknowable totality of an entity, human or otherwise, is what assures its singularity. Robinson’s narrators make much of the unknowable nature of another human being, but she spends equal time tracing the futility of any attempt to achieve any other version of intellectual certainty.<sup>7</sup> By asserting this unknowability as axiomatic, Robinson makes two points: First, the subject needs to recognize the limitations of her ability to perceive and understand, and second, she must recognize the sacredness of the other.

Very early in *Gilead*, Ames ponders the gap between perceiving with the senses and knowing: “Well, see and see but do not perceive, hear and hear but do not understand, as the Lord says. I can’t claim to understand that saying, as many times as I’ve heard it, and even preached on it. It simply states a deeply mysterious fact” (7). Interestingly, Ames cites a scriptural command that he declares is descriptive.<sup>8</sup> The imperative (“see and see”) not only directs but accurately describes a permanent condition (“states a deeply mysterious fact”). You are both not meant to be and are incapable of perception and understanding; while your perceptive tools will seem to promote perceiving and understanding, certainties are not what your sense perceptions generate. Interestingly, although Ames has an outstanding grasp of the Bible, he decides to paraphrase these lines, emphasizing the relentlessness of seeing and hearing. The subject is forever fed information that she wants to compile into certainties, but she must not and cannot confuse that desire for actual certainty.

In spite of his own limited understanding of the saying, Ames quotes it, even preaching on it. In the worldview these novels promote, the impossibility of achieving certainty should not close off the subject’s desire to ponder or consider. When Ames writes of intellectual dilemmas he encounters, he shows Robby something besides frustration; instead, Ames feels something like wonder. For instance, Ames asserts that often

when we think we are protecting ourselves, we are struggling against our rescuer. I know this, I have seen the truth of it with my own eyes, though I have not myself

always managed to live by it, the Good Lord knows. I truly doubt I would know how to live by it for even a day, or an hour. That is a remarkable thing to consider. (*Gilead* 154)

Here, as Ames works through his antagonism toward Jack, he tries to recall the truisms that act as ethical guidelines even when he does not feel capable of living up to them. In writing, he converts what must be frustration into cause for stunned contemplation, making his inadequacy something to study. Our inept perceptions are the only ones we have: Ames explains that “you never do know the actual nature even of your own experience. Or perhaps it has no fixed or certain nature” (95). Ames models a way of interacting with his uncertainty makes it a marvel rather than a knot to be undone, an occasion for doubt, or a reason to rage at his limitations.<sup>9</sup>

In an essay on Darwinism, Robinson complains that Darwin makes competition the natural state for all living species. The understanding of nature that follows, Robinson says, is troublingly hierarchical: specifically, she claims that if “survival is always a matter of *relative* fitness,” then “there is no such thing as intrinsic worth” (*Death of Adam* 32).<sup>10</sup> This erasure of inherent value naturalizes a denial of human interdependency, enabling the rejection of our basic responsibility to one another.<sup>11</sup> The wonder we ought to experience at strangeness can work to restore this value; rather than waiting for the strange figure to prove her worth, we ought to assume that her worth is secured by her strangeness.

Ames articulates this position when explaining to Robby that the content of his parishioner’s “confessions” or “unburdening[s]” concern him less than the marvel of their manifest selves:

When people come to speak to me, whatever they say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them, the “I” whose predicate can be “love” or “fear” or “want,” and whose object can be “something” or “nothing” and it won’t really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around “I” like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else. But quick, and avid, and resourceful. (*Gilead* 44–45)

The language his parishioners deploy does not “really matter.” The speaker’s attempt to explain or account for itself through language (I loved him; I feared it; I wanted that) animates the subject’s presence. Ames is careful to add on “quick,” “avid,” and “resourceful,” terms that point to the self-preserving impulse that motivates any attempt at “emanating itself.” He does not want to suggest that the “I” is without self-interest or cunning. But the things that the parishioner would come to say, the language that presumably would make the exchange meaningful, matter less than the subject’s animating itself through an impossible desire to signify. The vitality fills him with wonder because he knows that this vitality is evidence of the figure’s inherent worth.

In other moments, Ames, of course, does pay attention to the content of what people say and the actions they perform. I highlight this description because it encapsulates how Ames reframes the encounter with the absolutely inassimilable Other (to borrow another concept from Levinas). Ames makes his case by underscoring our fundamental isolation: “In every important way we are secrets from each other, and I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us, also a separate aesthetics and a separate jurisprudence” (*Gilead* 197). Something will not translate when each of us has a separate language. He worries relentlessly that Robby will not understand him or that he will not communicate what he hopes to: “It all means more than I can tell you. So you must not judge what I know by what I find words for” (114). Nevertheless Ames’s own

attempts to communicate emanate a self that Robby cannot help learning from, hearing, imagining, and inadequately and incompletely knowing. We see Ames again and again try to “satisfy” and “struggle to live” up to his “notions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable” (197). Though we are not equal (for better or worse) to Ames, we are struck by the intensity of his desire to communicate himself through these pages. That we might be estranged from his actual intentions does not make us distance ourselves from him; our inability to completely know him assures us of his value by reminding us of his singularity.

An individual’s remoteness from us and his failure to do what he intends, then, reminds us of his sacredness and thus secures it. The imperative that follows from recognition of this innate worth demands that we greet and welcome the other precisely because he is so different from us. In the case of an individual such as Jack, the task of greeting becomes especially complicated. Glory, for instance, realizes that while she can offer food, encouragement, and patience to Jack, things that “must have been some comfort to him,” though “she [also] knew no comfort was ever sufficient” (*Home* 101). Jack’s wariness leads to a stiff formality that occasionally seems satirical. His elusiveness about the twenty-five years of his absence further isolates him. Those around him must find a way to continue to make themselves available to him even when what they offer may be unwelcome or insufficient. They see a person whose destitution of purpose and whose paucity of comfort have damaged his ability even to believe things ought to be otherwise. At his lowest point, Jack tells Glory, “I think hope is the worst thing in the world. I really do. It makes a fool of you while it lasts. And then when it’s gone, it’s like there’s nothing left of you at all. [. . . E]xcept what you can’t be rid of” (275). For such a remarkably estranged figure, the imperative of responsibility requires others to locate and provide whatever comfort he can feel.

As a result, the plot of each book is not so much about forgiving Jack, though his transgressions are multiple and grievous, nor is either about his redemption; instead, their focus is on how to encounter him ethically. Forgiveness is a necessary part of creating this encounter, but Robinson’s novels attempt to alter how forgiveness is understood. Traditionally, forgiveness implies hierarchies, where those with the moral high ground benevolently bestow their good will. But Glory, summarizing Boughton’s oft-stated sentiment, explains that forgiveness means something different for them: “There is a saying that to understand is to forgive, but that is an error, as Papa used to say. You must forgive in order to understand. Until you forgive, you defend yourself against the possibility of understanding.” The *giving* in “forgiving” refers less to a granting than the opening up that the gesture allows: “If you forgive, we would say, you may still not understand, but you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace” (*Home* 45). Both preachers agree on the primacy of readiness-to-understand over and above *attempts* to understand. You forgive not because you understand but because you *do not*; you offer the other your incomprehension as a part of your willingness to receive or welcome them. In turn, you receive not so much the benefit of peace or tranquility, but of relocation: “grace is the great gift. So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that *we* also can forgive, restore, and liberate, and therefore we can feel the will of God enacted through us, which is the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves” (*Gilead* 161). To forgive is also to restore is also to liberate—while these certainly carry hierarchical implications, we should realize that the “restoration” referenced in the last clause does not involve the figure that has been forgiven. The posture of grace allows the restoration of *both* parties to themselves.

Ames articulates this incommensurability often when talking about love. He divorces loving or appreciating someone from the content of their personality or the sum of her behaviors. The

very nature of love, Ames argues, exceeds both the model of balance we imagine in symmetry or the logic of causality:

Love is holy because it is like grace—the worthiness of its object is never really what matters. [. . .] There is no justice in love, no proportion in it, and there need not be, because in any specific instance it is only a glimpse or parable of an embracing, incomprehensible reality. It makes no sense because it is the eternal breaking in on the temporal. So how could it subordinate itself to cause or consequence? (*Gilead* 209, 238)

Ames imports this asymmetrical model of love—God is of a different order than humans, yet he can and does love them—and divorces that love from content and hierarchy. Godly love here has nothing to do with acts or worthiness; we must assume, then, that human love should be no different. The novels push readers to think outside a mathematical logic of deserving and the causal model of love. In so doing, they work against the logic of neoliberalism and its market-oriented human.

This critique questions the fetishizing of the incentive in a meritocracy. Much public and academic discourse about the ways to mobilize individuals assumes the importance of incentives, a practice no doubt supported by experience within a capitalist society.<sup>12</sup> To presume that we *must* have incentives in order to progress, however, overlooks that progress can be its own reward—or that rewards might take a different form than the public-sphere or economic trimmings we normally associate with the idea. To suggest otherwise is to imply that the human can be explained through simple recourse to biology or psychology.

We see, then, why Robinson spends so much textual space establishing the human as mysterious and sacred. We see why generosity and charity become axiomatic. In so doing, she offers a potent example of a way of living that effectively counters the social Darwinism of the neoliberal austerity state that so frustrates Judt, Baxter, and the bulk of U.S. intellectual culture.

In many respects, what we see in Robinson's novels is also dramatized in the literature John McClure has usefully called "postsecular." McClure explains that postsecular literature, including the post-1990 works of such resolutely intellectual writers as Thomas Pynchon and Toni Morrison, expresses disgust with secularism and invites a spiritualism that troubles the certainty that comes with rationality's triumphs.

McClure states that the postsecular fictions he discusses lack a clearly defined political program, choosing like *Housekeeping* to retain such a firm emphasis on undecidability that McClure wound up having to defend postsecular literature against claims about its political irrelevance or regressiveness (see McCann and Szalay). For, as Jodi Dean has argued, Butler and other academic leftists' recent emphasis on "ethical sensitivity," which we can see reflected in postsecular literature, eliminates "the division necessary for politics." Too great a "generosity to difference and awareness of mutual vulnerability" sacrifices the power to condemn (123, 136–43).

Robinson might seem to fall into this same category. For instance, Ames explains that his grandfather's "errors were mainly the consequence of a sort of strenuousness in ethical matters that was to be admired finally" (*Gilead* 90). Such ethical strenuousness, though it should be admired, is not to be emulated in the moral universe of these novels. Ames's father and Ames each seem wary of the eldest Ames's involvement with John Brown, and the profound pacifism of Ames and his father would seem to argue against something like the Civil War. In *Home*, Boughton repeatedly dismisses Jack's concern over the civil rights struggle in the U.S. South, and Ames

does not take a firm stand on civil rights either. Jack's repeated insistence on the hypocrisy of Southern Christians is met with invocations not to judge (218).

Many readers have expressed disappointment in Robinson for Ames's reluctance to speak up about these last issues, a conflation that understandably occurs because Ames appears to be a mouthpiece for Robinson's own views. Yet as I have discussed above, Ames's drama is one of self-overcoming: he has to find a way to get past his aversion to Jack, and *Gilead's* emotional climax occurs when he and Jack have two moments of communion. At one point, Ames seems to evince the ethical strenuousness of his grandfather: he writes a sermon loudly denouncing the First World War, explaining that the Spanish influenza is God's way of punishing the warlike. His will fails when he realizes he will deliver this sermon to a crowd of grieving parents, and he backs off. Still, he takes three pages to tell Robby about what he wrote and why, announcing at the end: "I believe that plague was a great sign to us, and we refused to see it and take its meaning and since then we have had war continuously" (*Gilead* 43).

This incident shows us a fairly extreme viewpoint, one that we cannot tell if Robinson also holds. What it does tell us is that Ames is an individual who filters his beliefs through a certain set of social responsibilities. This ethical strenuousness might seem to be the extreme position, but it is, in fact, the consequence of the humility Ames takes toward his ability to understand the world that dominates this anecdote. He is not willing to shame or hurt his congregants even though his position as congregation leader would allow him to. This humility might explain his silence about civil rights; it seems sensible that Ames would feel uncomfortable writing to his son about what may be still unsettled feelings on racial progress, though we do know he planned to vote for Eisenhower (96).<sup>13</sup>

While Ames is not as radical as his grandfather or perhaps as radical as Dean would like, we see him make an imperative decision here based on this ethical system. These gestures indicate that Robinson is after something more muscular than McClure's postsecular fictions. Instead of the spirituality that suggests only the limitations of our ability to know, Robinson builds an ethics out of those limitations.<sup>14</sup> In this last example, we see Ames choose to be generous to his audience rather than announce his own reading, for both Robinson and Ames believe in the community's need to support those in need, such as heartbroken military parents.

Robinson's nonfiction enables us see how this respect for one's fellow citizens is an essential element to a functioning democracy. As she writes in "Onward, Christian Liberals," democratic guarantees of political equality "have to be enabled and respected in society if they are to exist in fact. For example, they more or less require that one come through childhood in a reasonable state of health" (214). In other words, this basis for a relativistic-seeming ethics easily translates into a liberal politics, one with the power to condemn and advocate. Our respect for this unknowable Other means we should provide for her health care, plain and simple. We see this exhibited in the novels, of course, through the responsibility to greet Jack in whatever way he needs. It is a short jump to believe that Jack requires a social safety net.

As Todd Shy has written, Robinson is the rare liberal with an outsized appreciation for the traditions of the past. Setting her books in a small town with an ethics drawn from old-time religion (if a fairly flexible version of that religion) demonstrates her desire to use the past to tell us something about the present. Religion gives characters a set of guidelines to follow to behave ethically. Though perhaps drawn from unfashionable sources, the baseline considerations presented here—responsibility to others, assurances of inherent human value—provide a set of axioms that rewrite the atomizing ontology of neoliberalism, a philosophical act with necessarily political resonances.

To reach this conclusion, it helps, of course, to know that Robinson is an old-fashioned liberal. She insists on the significance of, among other things, health care, for certain basic material needs require meeting for “well-being,” a term Robinson returns to again and again in her nonfiction, to be assured. Her belief in social forces, however, is different from the usual liberal. She does not seem to believe that hegemony or ideology is as contagious as the intellectual left might fear. Her insistence that fiction not need be political underscores her distinction from current intellectual currents.<sup>15</sup> Key among these distinctions is her belief that what is actually hegemonic—what functions to determine the most important parameters of our existence—has nothing to do with human behaviors or ideological oppression.<sup>16</sup> While intellectual culture in the U.S., whether in the academy or in the *New York Review of Books*, sees politics as the most important sphere of human concern (though also out of the hands of the standard citizen), Robinson sees the situation differently: “I think that politics in Aristotle’s sense of anybody’s sense subsequently is a fairly reduced form of thinking. At its very best I think that politics is management of the cruder aspects of existence” (Schaub, “Interview with Marilynne Robinson” 244).

Robinson’s cosmology buffers these claims. Recall the earlier discussion of the eternal breaking in on the temporal. Robinson imagines a universe that includes at least two different realms—that of God and that of the human. Ames criticizes Feuerbach for his inability to

imagine the possibility of an existence beyond this one, by which I mean a reality embracing this one but exceeding it [...]. If you think how a thing we call a stone differs from a thing we call a dream—the degrees of unlikeness within the reality we know are very extreme, and what I wish to suggest is a much more absolute unlikeness, with which we exist, though our human circumstance creates in us a radically limited and peculiar notion of what existence is. (*Gilead* 143)

Politics can enable something like universal health care, which would bring us closer to completing the ethics Robinson favors. In the greater scheme, as she views it, health care might be the stone, while at real issue is the dream. Robinson wants to remind us of these limitations. As we have seen in both novels, however, that limitation is not a reason for skepticism, nihilism, or relativism. It is, in fact, the basis of her ethical system.

The novels thus reserve a space for agency vital for Robinson’s ethical message by realizing that we must work within our limitations. Our plight is not to bemoan our absence of consent but to consent where we can. I want to turn to one more example to discuss how vital and how contextualized these ethics are. *Home* concludes on what might seem to be a troubling note. While Sylvie and Ruth were valorized for their escape from domesticity, Glory decides that she will stay in her family’s home in spite of her disdain for Gilead and her desperate desire to escape the house. After her father’s death, she decides, she will tend to the home primarily because of what it means to Jack. Just before his departure, Glory sees him examining the house meaningfully, realizing she “will probably have to keep all that sour, fierce, dreary black walnut [furniture]. That purple rug. [...] I will still have to keep it, because I have seen him look at it that way” (*Home* 299). Later, a visit by Jack’s estranged wife Della and his young son further solidifies her resolve to stay behind. This one visit, she thinks hopefully, might make it easier to return for another. If the boy returns as an adult, she envisions that he will “not possibly know that [her] whole life has come down to this moment” (325). Can the author of *Housekeeping* deliver a woman to this fate willingly? Glory reduces her life to one hardly-likely potentiality, sacrificing her own happiness for a ne’er-do-well man.

On the face of it, the ending feels terribly regressive. Yet we need not read this moment through a leftist value system that applauds agency only when it fits a certain teleological model.<sup>17</sup> Glory believes her submission empowers her: the sacrifice she makes graces her by making her useful.

If our instincts as twenty-first-century readers, to borrow Schaub's phrase, incline us to see such self-sacrifice as regressive, if we see such behavior as piety overwriting agency, then we have defaulted to the same logic that drives Judt's students to find self-abnegation impossible. Robinson asks us to step outside of the sensitivity to complicity with hegemony that has paralyzed the academic left and to consider what are essentially old-fashioned values: dedication to another person and to a set of principles—and gratitude that there are principles to be followed. In this unironic insistence that dogmatic ethics lead to desirable ends, Robinson offers a profoundly compelling option for readers frustrated with relativism to consider, and in redefining the human, she challenges the basis of neoliberal hegemony, even if she borrows from old hegemonic beliefs to do so.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In a much earlier and less polemical treatment of Robinson's cultural position, Thomas Schaub called her "nostalgic," but he uses the term more neutrally than Deresiewicz or Douglas. Douglas argues that *Gilead* presents a too-sanitized version of Christianity, one scrubbed of its complicity with the ills it denounces; I agree with Douglas that Robinson's Christianity is idealized, but her hopes for it are part of what give her novels their imaginative (rather than truth-telling) force. Deresiewicz questions Robinson's nonfiction for its focus on primarily white, Protestant figures who contributed to American progress, but I wonder why Deresiewicz believes Robinson must account for all participants in historical change, rather than the tradition she believes has been unfairly maligned.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Stiglitz provides a concise definition of the Washington Consensus in *Globalization and Its Discontents*: the term refers to "the consensus between the IMF [International Monetary Fund], the World Bank, and the U.S. Treasury about the 'right' policies for developing countries," a unified belief rooted in "the free market mantra of the 1980s" (16). Because of the major influence of the U.S. and these two economic engines on economic policy worldwide, the Consensus affected nations weak and strong, making deregulation and other pro-growth policies the global norm.

<sup>3</sup>On this point, see also Cyrus R. K. Patell, *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology*, which traces how Emersonian individualism was adapted to New Right libertarianism.

<sup>4</sup>In insisting on this asymmetricality, I, of course, echo Emmanuel Levinas. Rebecca Painter has also indicated that Robinson's ethics have Levinasian overtones. While she has insisted that Robinson advocates a "respect" for the Other, however, I believe "respect" implies a more level playing field between self and other than I think Levinas allows. As her references are as brief as mine, I do not want to make much of the discrepancy.

<sup>5</sup>Christopher Leise discusses Ames's grandfather as an example of the New England tradition of Calvinism, one more militant than its Midwestern cousins. He makes a compelling argument for Robinson's relationship to the religious history from which she borrows.

<sup>6</sup>See John Cassidy, *How Markets Fail*, or Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. The latter won the Nobel Prize for demonstrating neoclassical economics has had a profoundly misguided faith in a human's ability to make rational self-interested decisions.

<sup>7</sup>Stefan Mattesich locates a similar interrogating impulse in *Housekeeping*, though he sees it as more deconstructive than I do here. As the argument will show, the uncertainty is *constructive* for Ames and, to a lesser extent, Glory.

<sup>8</sup>I want to thank my colleague and dear friend Adam Haley for first introducing me to this distinction.

<sup>9</sup>He reuses the phrase "that is a remarkable thing to consider" or close variations of it five times in *Gilead* (45, 49, 136, 154, 193), an expression that seems his default response to intellectual gridlock. Its multiple appearances attest to how important Robinson believes this characteristic to be.

<sup>10</sup>Many of the essays in Robinson's *Death of Adam* (1998) and *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (2012) reiterate this claim.

<sup>11</sup>Throughout *Absence of Mind* (2011), Robinson targets Darwinism as one of the many deterministic discourses that reduce the human to biological or psychological impulses. I lack the space to trace all her points here: for the current argument, however, it is essential to realize that Robinson mistrusts any science claiming to explain the human, because for her, its resistance to reduction is its defining feature.

<sup>12</sup>The popularity of *Freakonomics*-style analyses of human behavior, which explain why certain practices occur (or do not occur) because of hidden incentives, speaks to how embedded this belief is in American society. Again, Robinson sees these as a byproduct of the contemporary willingness to reduce the human to a limited number of determining influences. See *Absence of Mind* for an extended version of this argument.

<sup>13</sup>My former colleague Jeffrey Pence pointed out that this vote might seem benign to us now, but Eisenhower's actions during the Little Rock Nine incident are perhaps a motivating factor in Ames's decision (and a clue about his sense of how civil rights should be handled, though he does not speak up about them).

<sup>14</sup>McCann and Szalay's response to McClure argues that pointing exclusively to epistemological limits is no longer an act with any political potency in and of itself. They see the failure of postsecularism in its refusal to allow any form of organization that it views as dogmatic, whereas Robinson shows no fear of dogma.

<sup>15</sup>See the interview with Schaub for extended conversation on this point.

<sup>16</sup>Schaub's 1995 essay critiques Robinson's claims for the existence of *any* apolitical space. To claim to be outside politics is, of course, a political claim. The argument this article makes, ultimately, considers whether such a gesture might still be progressive in spite of its investment in tradition.

<sup>17</sup>In making this point, I follow Mahmood Saba, who forcefully argues that Western feminists must not view assertions of "agency" as only those actions that fit a Western counterhegemonic pattern. For Saba, agency, if it exists at all, must be understood contextually.

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