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The Road to Gilead

The Theology of Marilynne Robinson

In 2005, after a public interview, a man in the audience asked Marilynne Robinson a loaded question: “What do you think of Flannery O’Connor?” She demurred before admitting to disliking the way O’Connor “creates terribly defective characters and then destroys them”. She realises O’Connor intends to express the presence of Grace, in some way, but she believes this is fudging, and her definition of Grace is different.

Grace is an attribute Scripture assigns to God. From the Hebrew *Khen* and Greek *Charis*, Grace is God’s transformation of life, as distinct from his gift of life. It is also a gift—free and undeserved—without denomination. It is like oxygen. Yet thinking about oxygen, why we must breathe it, is easier than thinking about Grace.

Literature’s ability to represent theological concepts depends on shared cultural reference. Like readers, authors are shaped by culture: O’Connor Catholic, Robinson Protestant. These cultures have adapted to the secular world along with the novel’s form. Distinctions are made between literary and popular. Harlequin romances are predictable and formulaic. They are not awarded literary prizes.

In *The Critics Bear It Away* (1992), Frederick Crews notices O’Connor’s debt to her time at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop in the late 1940s, during its New Critical phase, “under the tutelage of Paul Engle and Andrew Lytle, with Brooks and Warren’s ubiquitous *Understanding Fiction* providing the models”. Intriguingly, the Iowa Writer’s Workshop is where Robinson taught creative writing between 1991 and 2016, in a later phase, using different models. In other words, what O’Connor considered literary would change dramatically by Robinson’s time.

According to Crews, O’Connor wrote with “a sense of the critics looking over her shoulder”, hence she never strayed from “the regnant creative writing mode”. Her challenge, as a pre-Vatican II Catholic, was how to convey the Church’s anti-modernism in the literary aesthetic of her milieu—Southern Gothic—whose grotesqueries had evolved

into an absurdist critique of modernity. In *Flannery O’Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (1982), Frederick Asals suggests this limited her creative options. She could only press her characters either “downward toward the level of animals and things or upward toward the mania of numinous possession”. This can be an occupational hazard for authors trying to convey dogmatic theology through a regnant creative writing mode.

Robinson avoids this trap, yet her theology remains orthodox in the broadest and best sense. One of her teachers, avant-garde author John Hawkes, believes the novel’s true enemies are plot, character, setting and theme. Once these familiar ways of thinking about fiction were abandoned, “totality of vision or structure was really all that remained”. Writing fiction in this unfamiliar landscape is more challenging than writing fiction to a dogmatic formula.

Was the man who asked the loaded question—what Protestant Robinson thinks of Catholic O’Connor—hoping to stir sectarian controversy, like the mischievous little boy who pokes a stick at a caged animal to get a reaction? This is often what reader-response amounts to and—unfortunately—critical response too. Fortunately, Robinson is also a powerful public intellectual.

Robinson set her Gilead series—*Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), *Lila* (2014) and *Jack* (2020)—towards the end of the Jim Crow era. She wanted her characters to still have a cultural memory of the Civil War, because chattel slavery remains an indelible stain on the American psyche. John Ames comes from a family of multi-generational Congregational clergymen. His grandfather was an abolitionist with a militant understanding of abolition as a Gospel imperative. His father was a pacifist. The tension between them is a strong memory in the grandson’s clerical persona. The Presbyterian Boughtons are not conflicted by this cultural memory, coming from Scotland after the Civil War, which makes

them less invested in the indelible stain.

John Ames and Robert Boughton—both clergymen in Gilead, Iowa—are lifelong friends, allied to a Protestant theology they often debate. The disagreements they have—what salvation means, what damnation looks like, the argument between a Calvinist focus on God’s sovereignty and an Arminian focus on free will—never threaten their alliance. The tension running through the series revolves around Jack Boughton, a prodigal son figure, a sinner living with a sense of damnation. Ames recognises Jack’s sin, his lost soul, his sense of damnation, and struggles against judging him. Boughton loves his son unconditionally, as God loves Israel, although neither Jack nor Israel merit or deserve this love.

As the US cultural critic A.O. Scott has noticed, *Home* presents a “tableau of decency and compassion” alongside a “devastating indictment of moral cowardice and unrepentant, unacknowledged sin”. As a youth, Jack impregnated and abandoned a young girl from a poor white family living in squalor, without a hint of remorse, and left his father to accept the family’s moral responsibility. As an adult, he fell in love with a young black woman, Della Miles, and married her when miscegenation was still illegal. Jack’s moral awareness of—and sympathy with—the plight of American blacks neither absolves him of moral cowardice nor cures him of alcoholism and a tendency towards kleptomania. Della’s father, a Methodist bishop in Memphis, is a separatist who cares nothing about Jack’s sympathy and feels superior to this white loser. As Gerard Windsor notes in a review of *Jack*: “It’s one of the original touches of this novel that black–white relations are turned on their head.”

Near the end of *Home* there is an important scene. Jack wants to know Ames’s view of the doctrine of predestination, whether some souls are intentionally and irretrievably consigned to perdition from birth. His father interjects:

“Grace,” his father said. “The grace of God can find out any soul, anywhere. And you’re confusing something here. Religion is human behaviour. Grace is the love of God. Two very different things.”

“Then isn’t grace the same as predestination? The pleasanter side of it? Presumably there are those to whom grace is not extended, even when their place in life might seem suited to—making Christians of them.” He said, “One way or the other, it seems like fate.”

Jack had put his glass down and sat slumped, with his arms folded, and he spoke with the kind of deferential insistence that meant he had some intention in raising the question.

His father said, “Fate is not a word I have ever found useful.”

“It is different from predestination, then.”

“As night and day,” his father said authoritatively. Then he closed his eyes.

Glory [Jack’s sister] thought she saw trouble looming. Ames and her father had quarrelled about this any number of times, her father asserting the perfect sufficiency of grace with something like ferocity, while Ames maintained, with a mildness his friend found irksome, that the gravity of sin could not be gainsaid. Could Jack have forgotten? She stood up. She said, “Excuse me. I hate this argument. I’ve heard it a thousand times and it never goes anywhere.”

Her father said, “I hate it a good deal, too, and I’ve never seen it go anywhere. But I wouldn’t call it an argument, Glory.”

She said, “Wait five minutes.” She looked pointedly at her brother. He smiled. She went into the house.

Jack then asks Ames if he believes “a man might be punished for the suffering of his child. If a child might suffer to punish his father, for his sins. Or his unbelief.” Glory, who is still listening, thinks to herself:

Either he had forgotten that Ames also lost a child all those years ago, or he was implying that Ames was being punished when he lost her, that he was a sinner, too. Jack’s impulse to retaliate when he felt he was being injured was familiar enough, and it always recoiled against him.

Over the following pages, Jack’s question to Ames—whether some people are “simply born evil, live evil lives, and then go to hell”—is revealed as spiritual pride, through which he seeks to invest his moral cowardice with tragic significance. This is fudging, in Robinson’s terms, since Tragedy and Christianity are irreconcilable. Ultimately, the only atonement Jack achieves, before leaving home, finally, is attentiveness towards his dying father. This is good, as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough in anyone’s terms, including Jack’s.

Jack is a baptised and confirmed member of the Church. He reads Scripture and ponders it. He has a working knowledge of dogmatic theology. Nevertheless, he does not *believe*. His problem is the way he has exercised his free will throughout his life, and stubbornly refused to accept responsibility for it. Robinson creates an exquisite frustration around this refusal. O’Connor would have treated Jack differently. Perhaps, as his father says, when trying to reconcile the mystery of predestination

with the mystery of salvation, “the conclusions are never as interesting as the questions”.

As Windsor suggests:

Robinson is a one-off, a fiction writer who knows her faith so intimately and can depict it at its attractive and complex best. We would never see that in Australia, and I doubt we’ll ever see it again anywhere.

To say Robinson is orthodox, in the term’s broadest and best sense, is to say her theology is grounded in undivided Christendom, before the Great Schism, in the dialectic of canonical Scripture and the Early Church Fathers, which once defined the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. Strictly speaking, this orthodoxy is neither Catholic nor Protestant in the senses usually attached to those terms. A deacon in her Congregation, Robinson preaches a high Christology: a belief in Christ as the second person of the Trinity, the pre-existing Johannine Logos.

Robinson is a contrarian, appalled by the group-think on every side of a shallow historical consciousness compromised by ideology and what passes for intellectual life. As she laments in the preface of *What Are We Doing Here?* (2018):

It is no accident that Marxism and social Darwinism arose together, two tellers of one tale. It is not surprising that they have disgraced themselves in very similar ways. Their survival more than one hundred fifty years on is probably owed to the symmetry of their supposed opposition. Based on a single paradigm, they reinforce each other as legitimate modes of thought. So it is with our contemporary Left and Right. Between them we circle in a maelstrom of utter fatuousness.

Robinson traces this fatuous maelstrom to sociologist Max Weber, responsible for influential but nevertheless superficial links between Calvinism, Capitalism, and a misleading concept called the Protestant Work Ethic. In her much-quoted interview with the *Church Times* in 2012, Robinson said: “I think, if people actually read Calvin, rather than read Max Weber, he would be rebranded. He is a very respectable thinker.” This must seem counter-intuitive to Westerners habituated to the Weberian view, which makes them think about their history in erroneous clichés, when they think about it at all.

Robinson admits the irony of her indebtedness to Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), whom she discovered at university. His influential book, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (1758),

awakened her to “a much more plausible ontology than anything compatible with the ugly determinisms on offer then and now in courses on philosophy and psychology”:

In it Edwards describes Being as emergent and the continuities we depend on not as intrinsic but as wholly sustained by God. So reality is indeterminate within a very broad and arbitrary frame of probabilities and possibilities until it happens. In other words, Edwards dismisses the narrow causal channel of conventional deterministic thinking, which is also essential to Freudianism, Skinnerism, Marxism, or neo-Darwinism. His purpose is to defend the traditional doctrine that implicates all generations in the sin of Adam, without reference to individual transgression. He asserts another, higher-order determinism, which is the freedom of God, constrained only by his own nature ... [Edwards’s] conception of Being as emergent opened Emerson, Dickinson, Melville, and Whitman to me, and William James as well. He helped me wonder constructively about what Puritanism actually was. He certainly made me wonder what I was looking at when I read his work and theirs.

The discovery of Being as emergent is not new. In Exodus 3, God announces himself from the burning bush as a process not an event, since *I AM* also means *I WILL BE*. In Genesis 3, Adam’s sin—what sets the Fall in motion—is meaningless without free will, construed as Adam’s agency. The mystery of Jack’s inability to accept responsibility for his agency is analogous with the mystery of Adam’s inability to accept responsibility for his. Both men gesture towards excuses, Adam towards Eve, Jack towards Tragedy.

Robinson sees American intellectual life as a forceful and expanding void, “driven by a nameless energy that pushes reality out of shape and might ultimately push it out of sight altogether”. This is a matter of education, since the population has been taught to believe they already know what is essential to know, and, at the same time, “that certain things are worthy of unvarying and uninformed contempt”:

Many people are aware that Edwards wrote a sermon about hell and damnation. Many highly educated people are aware that Edwards is generally considered the finest philosophic mind this continent has produced. They all have the same fixed ideas about him and his America, learned from the same high school or college anthology with the same excerpt

from that sermon, which is offered as an epitome of New England thought and culture, though it is certainly not characteristic even of Edwards's writing, let alone his theological tradition. The void Puritanism has merged with the void Calvinism, swallowing Edwards along the way, to constitute a vast ignorance of early American history, a negative energy that obviates any awareness of contemporary British and European history, with which early New England history is so deeply intertwined.

Robinson has studied those histories extensively, to rescue Puritanism and Calvinism from the voids of negative assumptions about them, glib or simply contemptuous. "Ideas about the nature of a good society were developed and applied in New England," she reminds us. "The Puritans were intent on a reformist experiment, as much political as religious." By contrast, the South was dominated by the Church of England, "the capstone of Royalist conservatism". As Marx was well aware, in his essays about the Civil War, "slavery was part of an indus-

trial workforce whose great centre was in England. Its tactics of exploitation were in the last degree greedy and aggressive. The great vision of the South was the spread of slavery and cotton all the way to California."

Robinson's Calvinism is inspired by a positive sense of what the Puritan experiment in New England has produced, for good. For example, she is fiercely proud of America's system of tertiary education and wishes to protect it. In her essays, one senses a hostility towards Republicans, particularly under Trump, while Robinson and Obama are mutual fans. Inevitably, this leads to an impression of Democrat sympathies. There is an irony here. The Democrats supported Slavery and Jim Crow. The Republicans were the party of abolition and emancipation.

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There's a Dinosaur in the House

There's a dinosaur in the house.
 Every day it scurries about,
 under the fridge, across the floor,
 over the carpet and behind the door,
 eating moths and ants and spiders,
 leaving a tell-tale trail behind it.
 Where its nest is nobody knows.
 It just appears, then away it goes.

We've tried to catch it, grab it, squash it,
 swish it, sweep it, spray it, mop it.
 No matter what, we just can't get it.
 We've even tried to trap it, net it.

Truly, though, we're rather fond of
 this little monster on its wanders.
 Sometimes it even watches tele,
 Spread-eagled on its large fat belly.
 If visitors come, he quickly hides
 away from strangers' prying eyes.
 And so the secret is not known:
 we have a dinosaur in our home.

Kevin Hallewell