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Marilynne Robinson, Wallace Stevens, and Louis Althusser in the Post/Secular Wilderness: Generosity, *Jérémiade*, and the Aesthetic Effect

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Abstract: In *Restless Secularism* (2017), Matthew Mutter points out that Wallace Stevens described three related techniques that could be used to attempt to purge secular life of its religious residue: adaptation, substitution, and elimination. Marilynne Robinson pushes back against such secularizing strategies by employing three related techniques of her own: negotiation, grafting, and invitation. She does so to attempt to bridge the gap between religious and humanistic perspectives and—in the process—mounts a spirited defense of religious faith and practice. Robinson uses a fourth technique as well: *jérémiade*. In its usual sacred form, *jérémiade* is a lamentation that denounces self-righteousness, religious hypocrisy, and social injustice. Much of what Robinson says about the Christian Right is essentially *jérémiade*. Robinson’s critique of parascientists is *jérémiade* as well, although its grounding assumptions are secular rather than sacred. While Robinson’s *jérémiades* against the Christian Right and against parascientists are effective in isolation, in aggregate they sometimes undercut her more generous and inclusive attempts at negotiation, grafting, and invitation. This may be because Robinson’s essays do not undergo the moderating influence of what Louis Althusser called the aesthetic effect of art, which in *Housekeeping* (1980), *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), and *Lila* (2014) helps counterbalance the flashes of anger and tendencies toward judgement that periodically surface elsewhere in Robinson’s work. Taking into account the presence—or absence—of the aesthetic effect in Robinson’s work helps explain the sometimes startling differences between Robinson’s fiction and nonfiction and helps provides a new perspective from which to rethink two of the most influential postsecular readings of Robinson’s work to date: Amy Hungerford’s *Postmodern Belief* (2010) and Christopher Douglas’s *If God Meant to Interfere* (2016).

Keywords: Marilynne Robinson; Wallace Stevens; secular; postsecular; *jérémiade*; parascience; Christian Right; aesthetic effect; Absence of Mind; The Givenness of Things; What Are We Doing Here?; Chicago Theological Seminary Lecture; Amy Hungerford; Christopher Douglas

“But one morning, turning to pass the doubloon, he seemed to be newly attracted by the strange figures and inscriptions stamped on it, as though now for the first time beginning to interpret . . . whatever significance might lurk in them . . . ”

—*Moby-Dick*

Marilynne Robinson is a unique figure in contemporary American letters. The author of four novels, five essay collections, and a book-length critique of the British government’s mismanagement of the Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant, Robinson has been awarded the National Humanities Medal, the Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction, and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In September of 2015 she was interviewed by former President Barack Obama, and the following year she was included in *Time* magazine’s list of 100 Most Influential People.

Robinson is also a devout Christian, and the bulk of her writing—especially her essays—articulate a specifically Christian view of the universe. In much of her work, Robinson attempts to persuade us to better appreciate the beauty and complexity of human consciousness, to rethink our present low opinion of the Puritans, to bridge the gap between persons of faith and humanists generally, and to identify and correct certain wayward tendencies within contemporary American thought and culture—tendencies, Robinson believes, that are especially prevalent among those sometimes called the Christian Right.

Although Robinson dislikes the distinction scholars make between secularism and postsecularism, her attempts to find common ground between persons of faith and humanists generally are themselves postsecular responses to a cluster of secular initiatives—especially to the three secular strategies described and endorsed by Wallace Stevens. Her critiques of the Christian Right, on the other hand, are what I have chosen to call *Jérémiaades*, a form of public address that has clear affinities to what Sacvan Bercovitch (1978) called *The American Jeremiad* but that is sufficiently unique, in Robinson's case, to justify the use of a different—if closely related—term.¹ Robinson's three-part response to the secular strategies advocated by Stevens and her *Jérémiaades* against the Christian Right are nevertheless two sides of the same coin—that coin being Robinson's commitment to a particular version of Christian thought and behavior.

But while Robinson's implicit response to Stevens and her explicit critique of the Christian Right are expressions of a single unified impulse, the two sides of that single coin sometimes cut against one another in ways that limit the effectiveness of Robinson's enterprise. Robinson's *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (Robinson 2010) in particular embodies two of the countervailing tendencies in her work: the desire to find common ground and the impulse to critique. Unlike Robinson's novels, however, neither *Absence of Mind* nor Robinson's *Jérémiaades* against fundamentalists and evangelicals are works of fiction; as a consequence, neither is required to pass through the transformative fire of what Louis Althusser (1972) called the aesthetic effect of art—a process that, at its best, serves as an important aesthetic and technical counterbalance to ideological surety. The absence of the aesthetic effect in *Absence of Mind* and in Robinson's *Jérémiaades* against the Christian Right helps explain why select aspects of her discussions there sometimes seem unexpectedly ungracious and inhospitable, exhibiting what Alex Engebretson (2017) calls the “sharp polemical edge” (p. 101) to Robinson's work, an edge that tends—at least in its worst moments—toward hyperbole and provocation. And the presence of the aesthetic effect in Robinson's novels provides a new perspective from which to rethink two of the most influential postsecular readings of Robinson's work to date: Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Hungerford 2010) and Christopher Douglas's *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Douglas 2016).

1. Generosity

In *Restless Secularism: Modernism and the Religious Inheritance* (2017), Matthew Mutter explores the ways in which such writers as Wallace Stevens, Virginia Woolf, W. H. Auden, and William Butler Yeats attempted to purge secular life of its religious residue. Mutter's analysis builds upon the earlier work of Charles Taylor (2007) and Talal Asad (2003), and in the process Mutter highlights three of the interconnected forms of resistance to religion described and advocated by Stevens in specific: adaptation, substitution, and elimination.

¹ Bercovitch defines the American jeremiad as “a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting ‘signs of the times’ to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols” (p. xi). I am persuaded by much of what Bercovitch says, and Robinson is steeped in the rhetoric of the Puritans, but Bercovitch's emphasis on the rituals of consensus in jeremiad is sufficiently different from what Robinson does in her *Jérémiaades* to justify the use of a different name for her discourse. Using *Jérémiaade* rather than American jeremiad also allows us to approach the analysis inductively; it allows us to use the characteristics of Robinson's rhetoric to create a provisional definition for the term rather than obliging us to attempt to shoehorn those characteristics into a preexisting definition.

As its name suggests, *adaptation* is a revisionist strategy that bleeds the specifically religious content out of formerly religious terms and concepts, replacing that religious content with secular content which—though it may share surface similarities with the content it replaces—is grounded in a worldview founded on secular premises. In important respects, modernist adaptation can be understood as a logical outgrowth of the processes of secularization and naturalization we commonly associate with the Romantic period (Mutter 2017, p. 9).

Unlike adaptation, *substitution* focuses not on the content of religion but rather on the cluster of psychological needs that are understood to give rise to religion in the first place. The goal of substitution is to identify those needs and to seek nonreligious agents or structures capable of satisfying them. Just as adaptation is a logical outgrowth of the secularization of the Romantic period, so substitution is a logical outgrowth of the Victorian period, perhaps best exemplified by Matthew Arnold's attempt to "invest 'culture' with the agency [needed] to govern the emotional and moral worlds once ordered by religion" (p. 9).

The last of the three forms of resistance to religion described by Stevens is *elimination*. Unlike substitution, elimination does not attempt to create secular agents or structures capable of satisfying the needs that give rise to religion. Rather, elimination seeks to eliminate such needs themselves precisely by uprooting the needs, desires, and moral assumptions that engender what might be called a craving for God. Just as adaptation has roots in the Romantic period and substitution in the Victorian, so the genealogy of elimination can be traced back to Nietzsche, who in *Human, All Too Human* observed that "the needs which religion has satisfied ... are not immutable; they can be *weakened* and *exterminated*" (Nietzsche 1996, p. 26; quoted in Mutter 2017, p. 11).

Marilynne Robinson reads Wallace Stevens with both affection and care, observing—in *What Are We Doing Here?* (Robinson [2018] 2019)—"[T]here is no poet I return to as often as I do to Stevens" (p. 102). But Robinson does more than simply read Stevens. She counterbalances the three secularizing strategies he endorses by employing three techniques of her own, techniques that do not reproduce adaptation, substitution, and elimination *per se* but that correspond to those three techniques almost as echo to voice, countermove to move. Not surprisingly, each of the three can be understood as an ideologeme that functions as a *de facto* counterpoint to its secular equivalent, part of what Fredric Jameson (1981) calls the antagonistic dialogue "in which two opposing discourses fight it out within the general unity of a shared code" (p. 84).

Robinson's first technique—which stands in functional opposition to the kind of secular adaptation Stevens celebrates—is *negotiation*, a positive hermeneutics that expands identity politics to include what Lori Branch (2016) calls "belief amidst uncertainty" (p. 98) and/or a negative hermeneutics that attempts to make space for faith precisely by calling into question the grounding assumptions of the secularization thesis proper.

Robinson's second technique is *grafting*. In other contexts, grafting serves as a generic category for various methods of political and philosophical intervention most completely described by Jacques Derrida (see Culler 1982, pp. 134–56). In this context, however, grafting does not refer to the process by which new signifieds are grafted onto old signifiers, as is typically the case in the examples of grafting discussed by Derrida. Instead, the term grafting here calls our attention to the process by which Robinson grafts into her fiction moments of religious affirmation that do not always seem to grow naturally out of the material under discussion. Such grafts simultaneously highlight and call into question various secular methods of substitution, creating strategic moments of textual aporia by presenting faith as a more excellent way of meeting the needs secularization is deemed incapable of meeting.

Robinson's third and most inclusive technique is *invitation*. Recognizing the contemporary inclination to eliminate not merely religious faith but also the cluster of psychological needs that form the impetus behind that faith, Robinson proffers her faith to those who would do her ill. She does so both by way of overt authorial apology and through the empathy-building power inherent in fiction, inviting her readers to discover transcendence in the most unlikely of places, to search for the cracks

(to paraphrase Leonard Cohen) that let the light in, in order to create a broken *Hallelujah* in the midst of an apparently secular world. As a *de facto* counterpoint to the modernist attempt to exterminate even the desire for God, Robinson offers to believers and nonbelievers alike an image of faith that is equal parts defense, persuasion, and inducement.

Each of Robinson's techniques can work independently, but more often than not they are tightly interwoven into the same textual cloth. I have chosen to highlight their collective presence in her work as part of my ongoing attempt at what Jameson (1981) calls metacommentary, one aspect of which involves "the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which" a dominant hegemony is presently opposed, "a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence, marginalized, its own utterances scattered to the winds" (p. 85). Jameson's goal in metacommentary was to reconstruct peasant culture. My goal is to highlight, critique, and celebrate select aspects of Robinson's work.

For an example of *negotiation* in action, consider Robinson's 2010 collection of essays, *Absence of Mind*.² In the essays, Robinson critiques a cluster of writers and thinkers she calls *parascientists*, a group that includes such notable figures as Sam Harris, Steven Pinker, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins. To Robinson, although individual parascientists may differ from one another in terms of their areas of study, methods, and conclusions, they are all cut from the same cloth in that virtually all of them believe that there is no God, that the universe is purposeless and void of ultimate meaning, and that modern consciousness is best understood in evolutionary terms, as the present embodiment of primitive impulses and needs.

Robinson believes that given its grounding assumptions, parascience is as profound a threat to humanists as it is to persons of faith, and in *Absence of Mind* she attempts to bridge the gap between religious and humanistic perspectives. To make that attempt at negotiation as attractive as possible to nonbelievers, Robinson builds the bridge not from the religious but from the humanist side of the divide: "[F]or purposes of argument"—she says in the introduction to the book—"let us say ... that the origins of the universe can be taken to be devoid of theological implication" (p. x).

As part of her critique of parascience, Robinson highlights an important area of agreement between persons of faith and humanists generally: the authenticity, the significance, and the inherent worth of human subjectivity. In Robinson's view, that shared emphasis on the value of human subjectivity is—or can become—the basis for understanding and at least partial agreement between those humanists who stand within and those who stand without a religious tradition, a unity underwritten by their joint desire to "open the archives of all that humankind has thought and done, to see how the mind describes itself, to weigh the kind of evidence supposed science tacitly disallows" (p. 16). In highlighting this shared assumption about the inherent worth of human subjectivity, *Absence of Mind* attempts to minimize the differences between religion and humanism, faith in God and faith in humanity. Little wonder that in his review of *Absence of Mind*, Rowan Williams (2010), the Archbishop of Canterbury, celebrates Robinson's attempt at negotiation this way:

She is not alone in implying that without the transcendent we shall find ourselves unable, sooner or later, to make any sense of the full range of human self-awareness.

But she makes the case with exceptional elegance and authority—the authority not only of one of the unmistakably great novelists of the age but of a clear and logical mind that is wholly intolerant of intellectual cliché ... [*Absence of Mind*] is one of the most significant contributions yet to the current quarrels about faith, science and rationality.

While *Absence of Mind* serves as a convenient example of Robinson's attempt to negotiate the differences between religion and humanism, *Housekeeping* (Robinson [1980] 1982) provides a helpful instance of *grafting*—the second of Robinson's methods under discussion. *Housekeeping* is not an overtly religious novel. Indeed, in important respects *Housekeeping* is best understood as Robinson's

² For an expanded discussion of the collection as a whole, see (Muhlestein 2014).

exploration of the power and limitations of tone and voice in a post-religious world. Grounded in trauma and absence rather than faith and presence, *Housekeeping* is a beautifully written postmodern version of the biblical story of Ruth, a story that ends as much in aporia as in affirmation.

At strategic moments in the novel, however, Robinson grafts her own perspective onto Ruth's narrative by way of a cluster of sustained—and somewhat unexpected—meditations on various biblical passages. In the passage around which *Housekeeping* pivots, for example, the promise of mended families is linked explicitly to faith in Christ:

Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it. God Himself was pulled after us into the vortex we made when we fell, or so the story goes. And while He was on earth He mended families. He gave Lazarus back to his mother, and to the centurion he gave his daughter again. He even restored the severed ear of the soldier who came to arrest Him—a fact that allows us to hope the resurrection will reflect a considerable attention to detail. (p. 194)

Robinson is the speaker here, rather than Ruth. But while Robinson is preempting—as it were—the perspective of her own narrator, she is careful to do so in ways that strive toward inclusion and generosity rather than exclusion or dogmatism, describing the death and resurrection of Christ in terms that are equally amenable to a literal or a figural reading:

Being man He felt the pull of death, and being God He must have wondered more than we do what it would be like. He is known to have walked on water, but he was not born to drown. And when He did die it was sad—such a young man, so full of promise, and His mother wept and His friends could not believe the loss, and the story spread everywhere and the mourning would not be comforted, until He was so sharply lacked and so powerfully remembered that his friends felt Him beside them as they walked along the road, and saw someone cooking fish on the shore and knew it to be Him, and sat down to supper with Him, all wounded as he was. (p. 194)

This lovely graft of Robinson's religious perspective onto the lynchpin of Ruth's post-religious narrative is generous and inclusive by virtue of what might be called its conditional mode. It affirms faith through a type of figuration that has historically been grounded in literal belief, but it attempts to make that affirmation equally available to those for whom belief in the literal veracity of the Bible is no longer possible, or even desirable. It is not that the biblical account is presumed to be false. It is, rather, that it need not be true. In that respect, Robinson's religious graft serves as a supplement to Ruth's post-religious narrative, rather than as a replacement. It amplifies rather than contradicts.³

Robinson's third method of intervention, *invitation*, is expressed in a variety of ways in different contexts. In *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Robinson [1998] 2005), for example, Robinson addresses her readers directly, by way of authorial apology. And while part of the book carries on the same kind of negotiation that reappears in *Absence of Mind*, a number of Robinson's essays in *The Death of Adam* invite us to rethink our present understanding—Robinson would say our present misunderstanding—of religious figures ranging from John Calvin to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and to view in a new and more generous light the moral and social lives of the Puritans, our present low opinion of whom seems to her to be one part projection, another part, herd mentality: “[T]he way we speak and think of the Puritans seems to me a serviceable model for important aspects of the phenomenon we call Puritanism. Very simply, it is a great example of our collective eagerness to disparage without knowledge or information about the thing disparaged, when the reward is the pleasure of sharing an attitude one knows is socially approved” (p. 153).

While in *The Death of Adam* Robinson the essayist invites us see religious persons and movements in a new and more positive light, in the three gospels of Gilead—*Gilead* (Robinson [2004] 2006), *Home*

³ For a consideration of the relationship between grafting in *Housekeeping* and associated techniques in *Gilead* and *Home*, see (Muhlestein 2008).

(Robinson 2008), and *Lila* (Robinson 2014)—Robinson offers us much the same invitation, not as an essayist but as a novelist.

In *Gilead* in particular, Robinson invites us to see the world through the thoughtful mind and gracious prose of the Congregationalist minister John Ames. Because *Gilead* is an epistolary novel, the entirety of the book is written from Ames's perspective, and in fact, much of the beauty of *Gilead* comes by way of the care with which tone, voice, and subject matter are managed in accordance with Ames's desire to create for his son a quite specific—and in important respects, quite limited—sense of history. Ames invites his son to view the world as Ames himself views it, and although it would be a mistake to conflate Ames's perspective with Robinson's, Robinson infuses Ames's letters with the kind of language and imagery that make a compelling artistic case for Ames's view of the world (to quote just one passage among a multitude of lovely options):

It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light ... But the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who can have the courage to see it? (p. 245)

Ames's letters in *Gilead* are a literary *tour de force*, “so serenely beautiful”—Michael Dirda (2004) rightly observes—“and written in a prose so gravely measured and thoughtful, that one feels touched with grace just to read it.” By clothing Ames's perspective in some of the most graceful language and beautiful imagery written in the last half century, Robinson invites us to see the world as Ames sees it, to feel as he feels, to know as he knows. In the process, she invites us to rethink—and perhaps even to reevaluate—the broader religious tradition of which this gracious old minister is a part.⁴

As is the case with her use of negotiation and grafting, Robinson's goal with invitation is not conversion. Rather, she simply invites us to judge persons of faith more kindly, to understand their perspectives more fully, and to empathize with them in a way we are not always wont to do. And here, as elsewhere in her writing, Robinson's use of negotiation, grafting, and invitation stand as both an indirect rebuke to and possible alternative to the view of the world articulated by Stevens: negotiation as a counterpoint to adaptation; grafting as a counterpoint to substitution; invitation as a counterpoint to elimination.

2. *Jérémiade* and Regret

Although Robinson uses negotiation, grafting, and invitation to attempt to bridge the gap between those who believe in God and those who do not, when she speaks to and about her fellow Christians, she employs a fourth rhetorical technique as well—an ancient form of discourse, properly speaking, that facilitates the expression of emotions ranging from warmth and understanding to something approximating the deep red glow of long-banked anger.

This fourth technique is what the French first called *jérémiade*: a prophetic lamentation that denounces self-righteousness, religious hypocrisy, and social injustice. Finding its fullest expression in Jeremiah's lament in the Old Testament, *jérémiade*—at least in its usual sacred form—is different from the anger directed against those with no faith, or those of other faiths. Rather, *jérémiade* is typically directed against one's own religion or tribe, where the stakes are highest and one's sense of identity, most at risk. While Robinson's *jérémiades* have clear affinities to the kind of New England jeremiad described by Bercovitch, Robinson's *jérémiades* seem typically European—rather than American—in the sense that her *jérémiades* so seldom celebrate what Bercovitch calls, speaking of the New World

⁴ For more on this aspect of Robinson's writing, including her use of “vision,” see (Muhlestein 2017).

iteration of the genre, “unshakeable optimism ... [in] the inviolability of the colonial cause” (1978, p. 7).⁵

Robinson periodically chastises members of the Christian Left⁶ with whom she feels the deepest sense of connection, those whom in her November, 2018, lecture to the Chicago Theological Seminary she calls generally “liberal and religiously diverse” (Robinson 2018, p. 1). In both her Chicago lecture and her earlier *The Givenness of Things* (Robinson [2015] 2016), Robinson enumerates the failings of the believing Left. Positivism, she says, has “distracted and demoralized the faithful, as it would not have done if they were a little inclined to reflect (2016, p. 88). They are part of “a long retreat from Scripture and tradition” (ibid., p. 164). They tend to be artificially progressive rather than authentically liberal, *progressive* being for Robinson an empty signifier: “Liberal means generous, progressive means tending in an established direction. It means nearly nothing, in other words” (2018, p. 4). They share with the Christian Right mistaken assumptions about Americans generally, including the view that America is inherently—and uniquely—violent and inherently—and uniquely—racist: “When violence manifests itself in our collective life, a progressive type will say, America is a violent country. Then, apparently, everyone can relax. Our history of slavery. Violence is in our DNA. We have to expect this kind of thing” (ibid., p. 4). Worst of all, members of the Christian Left are too often cowards whose silence and passivity have made it possible for the Christian Right to redefine the meaning of Christianity in contemporary America: “Could my subject be cowardice? ... As it happens, the capitulation I mentioned earlier, which has allowed Christianity to become a brand name for assorted trends and phenomena that have no more to do with its texts and traditions than mythical women warriors have to do with online retail, is the default of liberal Christianity” (2016, p. 161). Silence and cowardice in such matters, Robinson concludes, “is so grave that there is no word for it but sin” (2018, p. 8). But even in her most strident moments, there remains in Robinson’s tone and voice an undercurrent of warmth for the Christian Left. “I apologize,” she says in *The Givenness of Things*. “There are countless good souls in the mainline churches” (p. 101).

Although Robinson leavens her critique of the Christian Left with periodic expressions of generosity and care, when she turns to a consideration of the Christian Right, her tone sharpens appreciably, and her companionable critique gives way to anger. Robinson’s catalogue of what she takes to be the sins of the Christian Right is extensive; her denunciation, clear. To her, they are foolish for taking the biblical narrative literally—“would-be loyalists who will forever insist that the Bible is in fact a collection of utterly veracious just-so stories” (2019, p. 257). They are typically poorly educated, ill-mannered “ranters” (2016, p. 106) who have “made religious language toxic by putting it to uses that offend generosity and dignity” (2019, p. xiii). “Then as now,” Robinson declares, “this minority is loudly Christian. Now as then, they believe they own morality because they are so very Christian” (2018, p. 6). Because they are so “clearly convinced that their wrath and God’s righteousness are one and the same” (2019, p. 119), they judge others constantly, and poorly: they are “[t]he moralists/moralizers among us, those who ... have been minding everyone else’s business, as usual” (2018, p. 4). But in the things they teach and the way they live, they are actually the precise antithesis of Christianity, having replaced Christ’s injunction to love with a fraudulent moral system based on the rejection of that royal law: “[T]here is a large, loud faction who represent themselves as Christians while speaking and acting with such contempt for this ‘royal law,’ this most difficult commandment, that they have erected a sham moral system based on the principled rejection of it” (2019, p. 250).

⁵ Bercovitch highlights this important difference between the two traditions as follows: “Miller rightly called the New England jeremiad America’s first distinctive literary genre; its distinctiveness, however, lies not in the vehemence of its complaint but in precisely the reverse. The essence of the [American] sermon form ... is its unshakeable optimism. In explicit opposition to the traditional mode, it inverts the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success, affirming to the world, and despite the world, the inviolability of the colonial cause” (Bercovitch 1978, pp. 6–7).

⁶ I am not entirely comfortable with such generic categories as Christian Left and Christian Right, but I can think of no better, and they are categories Robinson typically invokes.

In Robinson's view, such self-proclaimed "Christians" are blasphemers in the most fundamental sense of the word—they slander Christ Himself:

People who claim to care for the future of Christianity should listen to their critics rather than falling back on resentment and indulging the notion that they are embattled and abused by rampart secularism. They would learn that the faith they urge on the rest of us is precisely deficit in Christianity. If slander is a factor in all this, the first object of slander . . . is Jesus of Nazareth. (ibid., p. 312)

In the process, they do irreparable damage to the very cause to which they—and Robinson with them—are said to have pledged allegiance, a point Robinson highlighted in a 2016 interview with George Handley and Stanley Benfell:

MR [Marilynne Robinson]: ... Christianity's great enemy is Christianity now. It has done itself harm like nothing else could do, partly by running absolutely counter to its own prohibitions. ... They're like cartoon images of everything that is intolerant and hypocritical associated with the worst moments in religion. ... I do have a desire to have people know how one can think in religious terms without being mean or crazy.

SB [Stanley Benfell]: Or mean *and* crazy at the same time.

MR [Marilynne Robinson]: Yes. (Handley and Benfell 2018, pp. 101–2)

"Mean *and* crazy": this is *Jérémiaade* indeed, the kind of generalized condemnation that seems incompatible with Robinson's own deeply held religious prohibitions concerning judging others. Not surprisingly, she is well aware of the paradox—and perhaps even the contradiction—inherent in her position. "Judgmentalism is narrow and inhumane," she observes in this same interview. "Every once in a while, people call me a moralist, which slides over into moralizing and moralistic and all of that stuff. And it's a little bit of a narrow path to show the beauty of goodness without being somebody who's judging the world at large" (Handley and Benfell 2018, p. 100). "I mean, God forbid"—she continues—"it's against my religion" (ibid.). Two years later, she reminds her audience at the Chicago Theological Seminary, "I am of the 'invisible church' school of belief. God knows his own, who might be anyone anywhere. So I am reluctant to speak critically of any religious group" (2018, p. 2). Then, speaking of the Christian Right, she muses,

Here I assume for the sake of argument that they have carefully considered whether any real transgression has occurred, sufficient to justify their transgressing against a famous prohibition, "Judge not," or whether they have simply hung a cross on an ordinary quarrel to justify the disproportionate passions brought to bear these days on simple differences.

Yes, I run the risk of committing the same sin. (ibid., p. 3)

The irony, of course, is that acknowledging the precariousness of her position in no way extracts Robinson from it nor absolves her of possible culpability. And so rather than identifying herself as the generative source of religious judgement, Robinson strategically adopts what is for her a surprisingly modest intellectual stance, remarking that in critiquing those against whom her *Jérémiaades* are directed she is not expressing independent moral judgement so much as she is simply accepting—and acting upon—a prevailing cultural conclusion: "... I am reluctant to speak critically of any religious group. However, I think the view is widely shared that Christianity is in crisis, and that it is at the center of crises that have impact far beyond its institutions, far beyond the reach of its acknowledged influence, and that its influence at present is by no means reliably good" (ibid., p. 2). When all else fails, Robinson—now in her seventies—plays the trump card of the prerogatives of age: "So it is with our contemporary Left and Right," she says, speaking as much of religion as of politics. "Between them we circle in a maelstrom of utter fatuousness. I say this because I am too old to mince words" (2019, pp. xiii–xiv).

Robinson's *Jérémiades* against the Christian Right are typically grounded in a cluster of related issues that spiral outward in concentric waves, encompassing, successively, politics, morality, and theology, before circling back to that most personal of bonds: family.

In terms of politics proper, Robinson's position is clear: the Christian Right has adopted and falsely asserted as Christian a cluster of political positions to which she is unalterably opposed:

I am moving, reluctantly, toward the conclusion that these Christians, if they read their Bibles, are not much impressed by what they find there. ... To my utter chagrin, at this moment in America, [being Christian] can be taken to mean that I look favorably on the death penalty, that I object to food stamps or Medicaid, that I expect marriage equality to unknit the social fabric and bring down wrath, even that I believe Christianity itself to be imperiled by a sinister media cabal. (2016, pp. 158–59)

Robinson denounces Christians who advocate gun rights, who oppose unfettered immigration, or who are—in her view—insufficiently liberal in their advocacy of social justice, calling them “gun-toting resenters of the poor and of the stranger” (p. 159). Christians who hold such views, she says, are divisive, cowardly, contemptible, immoral:

These “moralists” pass radical negative judgment on the population at large ... And they are disproportionately liable to own guns. They have imagined themselves into a hostile, anti-religious country and world, created a malign fantasy on which they depend for their identity, their sense of righteousness. They are invested in fear and contempt, to hold their imaginary world together, and to explain to themselves their need for battlefield weapons ... This is cowardly and dishonorable, contemptible beyond words. (2018, p. 4)

But while Robinson's *Jérémiades* against the Christian Right are typically expressed in terms of politics and morality, at least part of her response is also a function of her increasing unease over a theological claim that is usually taken to be one of the foundational elements of Christian faith: the belief that Christ died as a vicarious sacrifice for sin.

Robinson is understandably annoyed by how some Born Again Christians use Christ's death as a convenient way to excuse their bad behavior. “The very great emphasis on the crucifixion we see and hear everywhere,” she observes tartly, “releases believers from the consequences of their bad behavior, more particularly of their sins as Moses and Jesus named and described them. So, presumably, Jesus died in order to nullify the effects of his life, his teaching, his example” (2018, p. 2). But Robinson has also begun to question the notion of vicarious sacrifice *per se*. In *The Givenness of Things*, she acknowledges that the death of Christ has been traditionally understood as expiation for human sin, but then continues: “[A]s for myself, I confess that I struggle to understand the phenomenon of ritual sacrifice, and the Crucifixion when explicated in its terms ... I suppose it is my high Christology, my Trinitarianism, that makes me falter at the idea that God could be in any sense repaid or satisfied by the death of his incarnate self” (2016, p. 194). Robinson's *Jérémiades* against the hypocrisy of those who would turn a theology of grace into an invitation to sin are thus part of her broader movement away from the view that Christ died to pay the price for sin and toward the view—which she attributes to Calvin—that Christ's death is better understood not as an actual sacrifice but rather as a potent gesture and symbol:

I understand Calvin to mean that the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth made manifest what was always true, that there was a love that could only be made known to us through a gesture of such unthinkable grandeur and generosity. ... This is an interpretation I find more beautiful and more consistent with my understanding of the nature of God than the thought of Jesus' death as sacrifice. (ibid., pp. 197–98)

There is more to the story than politics, morality, and theology, however. Robinson's *Jérémiades* are also intimately connected to family tragedy—to what happened between her and her mother.

The last essay in Robinson's most recent collection is entitled "Slander"—a topic with immediate relevance to the question of *Jérémiasse*, and of judgement generally. There, Robinson talks in detail about her sometimes strained relationship with her mother. "My mother lived to be ninety-two," Robinson writes, "She was a sharp-minded woman, aware and proud of her intelligence to the end of her life. She was complicated, and my relationship with her was never easy, but it was interesting, which was probably better for me, all in all. With a little difficulty we finally reached an accommodation, an adult friendship" (2019, p. 297).

This accommodation became sufficiently central to Robinson's life and connections that she "spent an hour every evening on the phone with her mother until she passed away" (Dowling 2019, p. 287). But then, tragedy struck: Robinson's aged mother "started watching Fox News" (Robinson [2018] 2019, p. 297). And not merely her mother, but all of her mother's friends:

She had a circle of friends who watched Fox News, then gathered to share that particular salacious dread over coffee cake. My mother would call me to ask me if I thought the world was coming to an end ... I would tell her that, according to Jesus, we would not know the day or the hour, but she would always have been updated by one of those commentators she and her circle called by their first names, as if they were trusted friends. The authority of Jesus was not quite robust in the light of breaking news. Sharia law! A war against Christmas! Who, she would say, would attack Christmas?! Just about nobody, of course, but the point of her question was not to doubt that the plot was afoot but to isolate those imagined malefactors from the human and American norm. (ibid., pp. 297–98)

Fox News provided Robinson's mother and her friends with "excitement, a big dose of adrenaline" (p. 299). But in the process, it sounded the near death knell of the relationship between Robinson and her mother:

Toward the end of her life, my mother began to be tormented with anxieties and regrets. I, her daughter, a self-professed liberal, was one of those who had ruined America. I would go to hell for it, too, a fact she considered both regrettable and just. ... A mother less Fox-saturated might have taken satisfaction from degrees and prizes, but to her they were proof that I was in league with the sinister Other. (p. 298)

"I wish it could have ended better for both of us," Robinson laments. "What a weird intrusion, those loud voices shouting down memory and reflection and assurance, nullifying the most intimate kinship" (p. 299).

Let me be clear: Robinson's *Jérémiasse*s neither began nor end with Fox News, even taking into account its scandalous treatment of her friend Barack Obama. Her concerns grow out of the broader moral, religious, and theological issues that have defined her adult life. Nevertheless, Robinson's contempt for "Sean and Megan and Bill" and all the "Fox blondie[s]" down through the years (p. 298) inflects her *Jérémiasse*s in at least three significant ways.

First, Robinson's anger makes her less prone to search for compromise and to value common ground, sharpening her tone in ways that sometimes cut against her own earnest admonition: "Always ... it behooves Christians to think and act as Christians. This would mean practicing self-restraint, curbing our speech, remembering that our adversaries are owed the respect due to the divine image, which no one can be redeemed enough to be excused from honoring" (p. 314).

Second, Robinson's anger sometimes turns her into a surprisingly inattentive writer and reader—or non-reader, as the case may be. When she discusses Fox News, for example, she is generally content to populate her *Jérémiasse*s with trivial remarks about hair color and with second-hand summaries of something some reporter may have said—responses that suggest contempt rather than attentiveness. And although Robinson is typically an extremely exacting reader who will parse a line of Scripture or explicate a sentence by Calvin with almost preternatural care, when she speaks of the Christian Right's attempts to defend the literal veracity of the Scriptures, she is, she says, content to base her

conclusion that such truth claims “are totally improvable and ... flourish in contempt of evidence” on what slender evidence can be gathered during what she calls “a slow walk past the religion shelves in any bookstore ...” (2016, p. 261).

Finally, Robinson seems increasingly disinclined to honor that particular portion of the Body of Christ with one of the most basic of all human courtesies: direct address. In her most recent interviews and published essays, at least, Robinson speaks about the Christian Right more often than she speaks to them. Rather than attempting to persuade someone like, say, Pat Robertson of the error of his ways, Robinson seems increasingly content simply to express annoyance and distaste, at his expense, especially when provoked by evidence of unkindness and intolerance:

MR [Marilynne Robinson]: ... [S]tudents are embarrassed to be seen carrying Bibles. And who did that? Pat Robertson did that, you know?

SB [Stanley Benfell]: It’s true that, in people’s minds, the Bible stands for intolerance and bigotry.

MR [Marilynne Robinson]: Ah! It’s such a shame, such a shame. (Handley and Benfell 2018, p. 107)

For better and worse, as the shadows lengthen on Robinson’s long life and luminous career, she faces the same dangers we all ultimately face, including the possibility that “we become loyal to our hostilities” (Robinson [2018] 2019, p. 314). In Robinson’s case, however, that possibility poses a threat not merely to her family and faith but also to the trio of techniques discussed earlier, by means of which Robinson has worked so diligently to narrow the gap between those who believe in God and those who do not. Midway through “Slander,” Robinson laments, “We in this Christian country are consuming one another now, bringing disgrace to the faith with our internecine ferocities, then alarmed that the church’s numbers dwindle” (p. 308). It is hard not to wonder whether, at least in the moments of their greatest intensity, Robinson’s *Jérémia des* against those who under other circumstances might consider her a fellow traveler in Christ do not risk contributing to that result as well.

3. The Aesthetic Effect

Of course in certain respects the distinction I have just drawn between Robinson’s *Jérémia des* against the Christian Right and her use of negotiation, grafting, and invitation to help bridge the gap between believers and nonbelievers is problematic on its face, in part—at least—because various of Robinson’s essays also include what are essentially secular versions of *Jérémia de*. It is important to note, however, that the secular versions of *Jérémia de* in Robinson’s work frequently cut against her attempts at negotiation and the like in precisely the same way as do her sacred versions.

Robinson’s 2010 collection, *Absence of Mind*, is a case in point.⁷ There, although—as we have seen earlier—Robinson works hard to bridge the gap between humanists generally and those who ground their commitment to humanity in religion specifically, as soon she turns her undivided attention to the cluster of materialist writers she calls parascientists, her characteristic generosity and care begin to give way to the same outbursts of anger that characterize her *Jérémia des* against the Christian Right. In both instances, the result is a partial loss of persuasiveness and perhaps even a partial loss of credibility—a regrettable diminution noted even by those who otherwise admire *Absence of Mind*.

In her *Los Angeles Times* review of the book, for example, Susan Salter Reynolds remarks that “Robinson’s arguments ... do at times become shrill and sarcastic, the voice of a powerful mind that was, for much of its existence, prevented from criticizing prevailing ideologies” (Reynolds 2010, June 13). “Robinson has a way with words,” notes M. A. Orthofer, “and there’s a certain eloquence ... to

⁷ Robinson’s (1989) *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* is another important case in point (Robinson considers it her most consequential book), but both her *Jérémia des* against the British government and Greenpeace and the resulting lawsuit for libel are beyond the scope of an essay on the connections among secular and postsecular thought.

these essays; there's also a surprising amount of humor — though of the rather crueler sly kind ... It's easy to enjoy that kind of argument, but examined slightly more closely proves not to be much argument at all" (Orthofer 2010, June 6). Julian Baggini agrees, concluding that in *Absence of Mind* Robinson risks becoming a mirror image of her materialist secular adversaries:

Robinson's tendency to see in the materialist excesses of modern secular thought symptoms of its fundamental weakness is, ironically, the mirror image of the weakness of which the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens so often stand accused: of taking religion's worst excesses to condemn it tout court. She laments much anti-religious writing as "a hermeneutics of condescension", claiming that "the tone of too many of these books is patronizing". But her pity for what these shallow materialists are missing ... is equally condescending. I was reminded of Nietzsche's remarks on how pity drains strength, making the pitier as feeble as the pitiable. (Baggini 2010, June 14)

Absence of Mind sometimes foreshadows a second characteristic of Robinson's *jérémiades* against the Christian Right as well. For while Robinson discusses texts written by such major figures as E. O. Wilson, Steven Pinker, and (in a somewhat backward-looking glance) Sigmund Freud, she sometimes focuses as much on questions of tone and voice and popular adaptation as on the texts' discrete content. "What I wish to question," she declares "are ... the methods of a kind of argument ... that assumes a protective coloration that allows it to pass for science yet does not practice the self-discipline or self-criticism for which science is distinguished" (2010, p. 2). She also argues that the authors under discussion exhibit an unjustified nostalgia for lost certainties, that they hold up science as a kind of magic, and that they are arrogant to a fault, collectively embodying what Robinson calls the "hermeneutics of condescension" (ibid., p. 14). "Triumphalism," Robinson observes in annoyance, "was never the friend of reason. And the tone of too many of these books is patronizing" (pp. 20–21).

Robinson's approach to Dawkins et al. in *Absence of Mind* thus anticipates at least part of what she does in her *jérémiades* against the Christian Right. In both cases, she sometimes skips across the surfaces of texts rather than plumbing their depths. And in both cases, she is able to do so comfortably in part—at least—because of her strategic choice of listeners. The essays that later appear in *Absence of Mind* were initially delivered as lectures to an audience already predisposed to agree with Robinson's denouncement of the so-called Horsemen of New Atheism, her audience being made up of those who attended Yale's The Dwight Harrington Terry Foundation Lectures on Religion in the Light of Science and Philosophy to hear her speak. And just as Robinson essentially preached to a choir of likeminded humanists in the lectures that later evolved into *Absence of Mind*, so in her most extended *jérémiade* against the Christian Right she preached to an equally enthusiastic choir of the Christian Left—members of the Chicago Theological Seminary, an affiliated seminary of the United Church of Christ which, in its 2019 website, characterizes itself as "perhaps the most progressive-minded and forward-thinking graduate school of theology. Learn about our historic advocacy of civil rights, interreligious engagement, gender and LGBTQ justice, and other commitments" (Chicago Theological Seminary 2019). In neither case was Robinson hazarding the lion's den.

Perhaps equally importantly, neither Robinson's secular *jérémiades* against parascientists nor her sacred *jérémiades* against the Christian Right have been obliged to pass through the fire of what Louis Althusser called the aesthetic effect of art. In *Lenin and Philosophy, and other essays* (1972), Althusser makes a compelling case that art separates itself from ideology to the precise extent to which the ideology inherent in aesthetic technique presses up against the ideology embodied in art's content. "Art," he observes, "(I mean authentic art, not works of an average or mediocre level) does not give us ... knowledge in the strict sense, ... but what it gives us does nevertheless maintain a certain specific relationship with knowledge. This relationship is not one of identity but one of difference" (Althusser 1972, p. 204). That difference manifests itself by way of what Althusser calls the "internal distance" between a work of art's ideological content and the various aesthetic techniques that govern its production as art: "What art makes us see ... is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes" (ibid). Thus—to proffer an example

Althusser himself does not provide—in a play like *The Merchant of Venice*, the aesthetic demand for full characterization may press the play’s preexisting ideology of antisemitism into temporary disorder, resulting in dialogue that is today understood to stand in opposition to bigotry in all forms—“Hath not a Jew eyes?” etc. In such cases, aesthetic technique creates an internal distance by means of which ideology itself is made visible, understood, tempered, modified. In that respect, the requirements of artistic form can—and sometimes do—have “a critical, and even a potentially transformative, relation to ideology” (Albrecht 2004, p. 3).⁸

Robinson is a brilliant wordsmith—one of the great essayists and novelists of the last half-century. But although her artistic excellence is as evident in her essays as in her fiction, there is an important difference between the two genres. Unlike in her essays, in her novels Robinson creates characters—fictional characters. She also dearly loves her fictional characters. “I mean, you do kind of fall in love with your characters,” she tells Handley and Benfell. “I don’t have any characters I don’t like just because I don’t want to spend time with characters I don’t like” (2018, p. 87). In Robinson’s fiction, that love manifests itself through the instrumentality of the same cluster of techniques and inclinations that almost always grow out of love unfeigned: patience, empathy, care, a commitment to withhold judgement, and—above all—the desire to understand and reverence what Matthew Arnold (1897) called (in the poem that bears its name) “The Buried Life” of human consciousness. In *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*, the resulting amalgamation of deeply felt emotion and patient aesthetic technique creates an internal distance between Robinson’s own occasionally strident perspective and the perspectives of the various characters that inhabit her fiction—an internal distance Robinson seems both aware of and grateful for: “There is a great difference,” she notes in an important aside in *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, “in fiction and in life between knowing someone and knowing *about* someone. When a writer knows *about* his character he is writing for plot. When he *knows* his character, he is writing to explore, to feel reality on a set of nerves somehow not quite his own” (Robinson [2012] 2013, p. 6).

Robinson herself can think of no single term sufficient to describe precisely what happens when she creates a fictional character: “Words like ‘sympathy,’ ‘empathy,’ and ‘compassion’ are overworked and overcharged,” she says. “There is no word for the experience ...” (ibid.). And although one intriguing possibility might be Keats’s term, “negative capability,” regardless of whether we focus on Robinson’s strategic employment of negative capability or on the resulting internal distance such negative capability opens up in her novels, the aesthetic requirement to see and feel and experience reality on a set of nerves not quite Robinson’s own does important work in her fiction, including counterbalancing the flashes of anger and tendencies toward judgement that periodically surge to the surface elsewhere in her nonfiction. Perhaps another way to say this would be to say that Robinson’s love for her fictional characters and her desire to constellate her understanding of a given character “into something a little like a spirit, a little like a human presence in its mystery and distinctiveness” (ibid., p. 7) places upon her a burden of care—aesthetic care—commensurate with the requirements we typically associate with Christian discipleship. When Robinson’s writing is informed by such burdens, her work is generous and inclusive. When it is not, her writing sometimes tends in other directions.

4. Implications for Postsecular Interpretations of Robinson’s Fiction

Althusser’s theory of the aesthetic effect, then, helps us mark at least part of the distance between Robinson’s hospitable use of negotiation, grafting, and invitation and her less generous employment of *Jérémiaade*—a four-fold division of labor that in Robinson’s oeuvre is genre-inflected but not genre-unique

⁸ Not surprisingly, Althusser’s notion of the aesthetic effect was initially critiqued as privileging art over other modes of representation: “Althusser’s reference to the *specificity* of an *authentic* art was routinely criticized by the Marxist literary critics who followed Althusser, in particular by British Marxists writing in the last 1970s and early 1980s, as unreflected formalism” (Albrecht 2004, p. 3). In the twenty-first century, however, claims for the potentially transformative power of genre and form are perhaps less fraught than they were in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

(grafting occurs only in Robinson's novels and *jérémiade* predominantly in her essays, but negotiation and invitation appear in her fiction and nonfiction alike). Althusser's theory of the aesthetic effect also provides a new perspective from which to rethink two of the most influential postsecular readings of Robinson's work to date: the discussion of Robinson in Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Hungerford 2010) and the chapter on Robinson in Christopher Douglas's *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Douglas 2016).

In the chapter in *Postmodern Belief* entitled "The Literary Practice of Belief," Hungerford interprets *Gilead* and *Home* with insight and care, and she highlights important connections among those two novels and Robinson's earlier *Housekeeping* (*Lila* had not yet been published). Hungerford is surely right to point out that Robinson's narrative strategies are designed to dramatize the fact that "ordinary people have rich and complicated interior lives" (2010, p. 115), and Hungerford's discussion of the ways in which *Gilead* and *Home* enact shared beliefs more often than they insure individual religious certainty is compelling as well. "[D]ifference," Hungerford concludes, "is not for Robinson a problem to be solved but rather the occasion for living a religious life. ... Religious life is above all the practice of reconciliation. ... [Robinson's] novels imagine belief made capacious, and aim to show us behavior within the life of belief that can heal both the family and Republic" (ibid., p. 121). In her analysis of the particulars of Robinson's novels, Hungerford is generous, persuasive, and clear.

What is less clear, however, is whether Hungerford's specific analysis of Robinson's novels fits entirely comfortably within the broader thesis of *Postmodern Belief*. The thesis of the book as a whole is that the writers under discussion "believe in meaninglessness" and that "belief without meaning becomes ... a way to maintain religious belief rather than critique its institutions. ... Belief without content becomes ... a hedge against the inescapable fact of pluralism" (p. xiii). Belief in meaninglessness; belief without content; an unwillingness to critique Christian institutions—these phrases seem a quite peculiar way to characterize Robinson's work. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Hungerford later flexes the meaning of the phrase "belief in meaninglessness" to include the important qualification that in certain cases, both language and belief become "a form of ritual for contemporary writers who profess strong, and doctrinally specific, Protestant belief" (ibid.), ultimately implying that Robinson may in fact be an exception to the general rule—an exception who still cares deeply about the specific content of religious belief: "Despite Ames's exemplary tolerance for those who differ with him, a tolerance vigorously argued for in Robinson's essays, strongly held belief still matters, for Robinson and for the characters she creates in these novels" (p. 115).

Part of the gap between Hungerford's book-length thesis generally and her discussion of Robinson specifically may profitably be understood in terms of the aesthetic effect at work in Robinson's novels. It is not that Robinson herself believes in "meaninglessness" or in "belief without content" or in religious ritual detached from religious belief (her life and her occasional ministry and her essays provide abundant proof to the contrary). It is, rather, that in *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*, Robinson really does embrace and attempt to enact what Jennifer L. Holberg (2010) calls "narrative sympathy," an act of authorial courtesy designed to encourage the "charitable reading" of alternative perspectives and values:

Like [George] Eliot, Robinson is involved in the fulsome cultivation of narrative sympathy, in helping the reader develop the ability to see the world through others' eyes—what Augustine might have called "charitable reading," a reinscription of "loving your neighbor as yourself." Eliot and Robinson both seem to agree that a profounder sense of neighbor comes concomitant with a novelistic allegiance to representing the full spectrum of human existence. (Holberg 2010, pp. 286–87)

In her novels, Robinson lets the Other speak, even when—as is evident in the contradictions between *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*⁹—the resulting perspectives are neither in complete agreement with one another nor in complete harmony with Robinson’s own faith and commitments. Robinson is not Ruth. She is not Ames. She is not Glory. She is not Lila. Robinson is, however, a novelist who embraces the process of defamiliarization inherent in the creation of what Althusser called “authentic art” (p. 204). Rather than imposing her own perspective upon her characters, Robinson allows Ruth to become Ruth; Ames, Ames; Glory, Glory; Lila, Lila. And she allows her characters to become who they become even though in doing so she runs the risk of writing novels that can subsequently be interpreted as evidence of authorial belief in meaninglessness, “belief without meaning,” “belief without content,” and the like. Such is the cost—and the glory—of the aesthetic effect at work.

Reminding ourselves that Robinson’s novels are shaped by the imperatives of art and so embody the aesthetic effect allows us to rethink some of the conclusions in Douglas’s *If God Meant to Interfere* as well. In the chapter on Robinson entitled “Christian Multiculturalism and Unlearned History in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” Douglas contextualizes the novel within what he calls “three temporal registers”: the antebellum and Civil War period, 1956, and the decades between the publication of *Housekeeping* in 1980 and *Gilead* in 2004 (2016, p. 90). Douglas’s argument is too extensive to rehearse in full here, but the heart of his claim is that Robinson uses *Gilead* to willfully conceal the fact that for the bulk of American history, many Christians used Christian doctrine and practice to justify racism and slavery. “There is not a glimpse of this historical Christian support for slavery in Robinson’s *Gilead*,” Douglas asserts. “[W]hy does Robinson not recognize it as a historical perspective? ... What does it mean that, on this point at least, the novel will not try to say what is true?” (ibid., p. 89).

In Douglas’s view, the answer to such questions is simple, and alarming: “The liberal Christian Robinson opposes some of the cultural politics of the conservative resurgence on the level of ideas and values, so she understandably prefers religious experience, dishonestly cleansing ‘true’ Christianity of its history by ‘forgetting’ unsavory aspects” such as Christianity’s historical theological justification for slavery (p. 105). Robinson is like many other religious studies scholars and historians of religion, Douglas concludes, who “sometimes silently edit out of the range of Christian practice, belief, and history those things they do not find in agreement with their version of religion—as Robinson has also done” (p. 111).

Douglas’s assertion that Robinson writes *Gilead* precisely in order to conceal the fact that historically many American Christians were racist would likely come as a surprise to such critics as Lisa M. Siefker Bailey, who argues that the novel itself demonstrates that “[e]ven though he did not burn down the Negro church, Ames is guilty for it” (Siefker Bailey 2010, p. 270)—not because of anything he did but because of the many things he failed to do. *Gilead* is careful to remind us of the earlier arson of the African American church and of the subsequent dissipation of its congregation. Further, the sequence of events that structure the novel’s plot turn on the sad truth that a mixed-race family would still not be welcome in this most Christian of towns. And near the end of the novel, Ames himself becomes so convinced of Gilead’s myriad imperfections that he bursts out in anguish: “this town might as well be standing on the absolute floor of hell for all the truth there is in it, and the fault is mine as much as anyone’s” (p. 233). To conclude that *Gilead* is designed to conceal such hard truths seems to cut against at least part of the available evidence.

My point, though, is less to critique Douglas’s choice of evidence than to suggest that *Gilead* is better understood in terms of the aesthetic effect of art than as the embodiment of authorial malfeasance. In my view, Robinson’s purpose in writing *Gilead* has nothing to do with some ill-conceived attempt to paper over the most problematic aspects of Christian history and everything to do with Robinson’s decades-long attempt to explore the profound importance of individual perspective—and to do so with as much narrative sympathy as possible. In that respect, *Gilead* is as much a companion piece to

⁹ For a discussion of various of the contradictions between the three novels, see (Acocella 2014).

Housekeeping as it to *Home* and *Lila*. Both novels are sustained attempts at empathy and understanding, attempts that do not necessarily preclude ultimate judgement but that invite us as readers to suspend judgement long enough to see and feel and understand the world as others might conceivably see and feel and understand it, and—in the process—to experience a more thoughtful and measured and empathetic response to the characters' actions and perspectives. For Michael Vander Weele (2010), the result—at least in *Gilead*—is equal parts judgement and grace:

[In *Gilead*,] the meaning of moments in time extends beyond and before those moments, in our narrator's generous perspectivism. Blessing doesn't forestall judgment; but neither does judgment preclude grace. Never, perhaps, is this so clear as in the final scene with Ames and Jack walking through Gilead seeing it from the distance of impending death, on the one hand, and the impossibility of settlement on the other. As readers, we hardly know whether to bless the town or exercise our judgment upon it. ... The characters and author seem to do both. (Weele 2010, p. 232)

In that respect, Robinson's novels are the aesthetic equivalent of what might be called Christian charity, the kind of charity Robinson gestures toward so earnestly in *The Death of Adam* when she asks what it would mean "if we understood our vulnerabilities to mean we are human, and so are our friends and our enemies, ... our inspirations and errors. We [all] weep human tears, like Hamlet, like Hecuba" (p. 86).

By this I do not mean to suggest that Robinson condones racism in any of its manifestations, including Christian racism (racism is wholly incompatible with Robinson's faith in—and defense of—the wonder and complexity and divine worth of human consciousness). What I do mean to suggest is that in such books as *Gilead*, Robinson chooses to defer judgement in ways that allow her to feel a greater degree of empathy for—and understanding of—those with whom she may disagree than she is able to muster in her essays. The resulting difference in tone and voice is striking—so striking, in fact, that in *Understanding Marilynne Robinson* (2017), Alex Engebretson argues that we should view Robinson's fiction and nonfiction as inhabiting separate if complementary categories of thought and expression: "Robinson's essays are remarkable for their independence from her novels, in content and in style. It appears that Robinson's intention is not for the nonfiction to supplement the fiction but rather for the nonfiction to be an equal and complementary intellectual discipline" (p. 100).

I am not wholly persuaded that Robinson's fiction and nonfiction are entirely independent categories of thought and expression. The two categories are more fungible than that: negotiation and invitation cross genre boundaries with ease, and although grafting is specific to the novels and *jerémiade* to the essays, there is in Robinson's oeuvre an author function that—in retrospect, at least—remains surprisingly consistent. Still, while Robinson's novels and essays share a number of rhetorical techniques and are ultimately underwritten by a common sensibility, Althusser's notion of the aesthetic effect (which is typically linked to fiction but which is not exclusive to it and which in no way defines it as a genre, since countless examples of fiction do not embody it) remains an intriguing way to rethink various of the postsecular interpretations of books like *Gilead*. The mediating influence of the aesthetic effect also helps explain why Robinson's novels are so often loved even by those who do not share her religious perspectives and commitments, and why her essays are loved primarily by those who already agree with her. In the former, she defers judgment in ways designed to facilitate generous perspectivism, narrative sympathy, and charitable reading. In the latter, she is significantly less inclined to do so. The fact that Robinson the novelist may embody generosity and care more fully than does Robinson the essayist is a testament to the power of art itself. A testament to the power of the aesthetic effect at work.

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