To the contrary

by Kathleen Norris in the November 18, 1998 issue

By Marilynne Robinson, The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought. *(Houghton Mifflin, 254 pp.)*

Marilynne Robinson's essays fully live up to her own description: "They are," she writes, "contrarian in method and spirit. They assert . . . that the prevailing view of things can be assumed to be wrong, and that its opposite . . . can also be assumed to be wrong. They undertake to demonstrate that there are other ways of thinking, for which better arguments can be made." In reading this rigorous but invigorating book, I realized that it is something I have been waiting for. As the forces of polarization all but overwhelm us, a bracing book of truly contrarian essays is useful medicine.

Since reading Robinson's gem of a novel, *Housekeeping*, in the mid-'80s, and giving at least ten copies away to friends, I have been waiting for her to write another novel. Housekeeping is one of those quiet American masterpieces (James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* is another) that I suspect will emerge from our present clutter as a novel that continues to be well worth reading. It is one of the best evocations of childhood and provincialism ever written.

But as Robinson explains in her essay "Facing Reality," she finds herself feeling smothered as a novelist by the collective fictions of contemporary American life, rigid notions of "reality" which have "educated our audience, as surely as the pulpit educated Emerson's," and leave the novelist "little to build on and little of interest to explore." With a novelist's sharp eye, Robinson exposes our bland acceptance of capitalist brutalities, our addiction to anxiety, our idolization of success, and our attendant loss of the ability to comprehend the significance of events. "I think we are not taking responsibility for making ourselves reasonable, either individually or collectively. . . . Now it is as if public discourse exists only to be disrupted, as if gaffes and scandals . . . were the real substance of collective life."

While Robinson sometimes rants, as a contrarian is wont to do, her book is large in spirit. She ranges through a wide variety of subjects, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

the experience of hearing Psalm 8 in a Presbyterian church as a child, the origins of the *McGuffy Reader* in the abolitionist, pacifist and early feminist movements, and the implications of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution for our time. "The strain in Western civilization that is expressed in Malthus / Darwin / Nietzsche / Freud," she writes, "has no place in it for the cult of the soul, that old Jacob lamed and blessed in a long night of struggle."

A rigorous thinker, blessedly conscious of history, Robinson makes a frontal assault on the easy, dismissive stereotypes of religion that abound in our culture. In the Darwin essay she asserts, "Surely it is fair to say that science is to the 'science' that inspired exterminations as Christianity is to the 'Christianity' that inspired Crusades."

I could have used Robinson's ideas when, on my last book tour, I dared to speak favorably about religion on public radio. After I had defined the word "righteous" in its biblical sense, as doing justice for the poor and oppressed, a caller angrily stated that Christians have no right to the word justice, as theirs is an inherently evil and unjust religion. I am aware that Christians speak to each other about justice, and sometimes even practice it, but I agree with Robinson that many American Protestants have lost touch with their historical claim on the word. When speaking about justice as foundational to biblical religion, pastors tend to cite Amos or Isaiah, but seldom remind us that Christian thinkers like John Calvin or Jonathan Edwards also had a good deal to say about the topic.

Robinson does cite them both and in good measure. One of the most valuable things that she does is to share what she has learned through her extensive reading. "Think how much less stupefying the last fifty years might have been," she writes, "had people actually read Marx." She openly challenges the view easily picked up from history texts that "the merger of Christian pretensions and bullyboy economics" by which our culture thrives "has its origins in Calvinism and Puritanism. Well," Robinson says, both traditions "left huge literatures. Go find a place where they are guilty of this vulgarization."

Robinson's greatest contribution may be her insistence on restoring the good name of John Calvin--or, as Robinson slyly calls him, aiming to "free the discussion," Jean Cauvin. I am typical of many Presbyterians in that I have never read much Cauvin, and have blindly assented to the culture's overwhelmingly negative assessment of him. Robinson has made it impossible for me to continue to do so, and I am profoundly grateful. I am glad to have discovered, through Robinson, Cauvin's

statement on the need to "remember not men's evil intention but to look upon the image of God in them, which cancels and effaces their transgressions, and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them."

I am grateful also to have a new comprehension of Cauvin as a biblical exegete. Robinson's assessment of his notes for the Geneva Bible is that they have great interest as "background for English and American history and literature into the 18th century." Her statement that Cauvin's use of Jewish scholarly sources led him to "a distinctive understanding of the Old Testament which allowed Jews and Judaism to flourish safely in Calvinist societies as they could not anywhere else in European Christendom" gave me hope.

It has been the polity of the Presbyterian churches--certainly not the poetry of their worship--that most attracts me, and now I can more clearly see its roots in Cauvin's antihierarchical ideas of civil governance, which were rightly considered seditious by the reigning monarchs of his time. Robinson finds it ironic that American culture, "by supposing it has in fact rejected or defied [Cauvin's] heritage," has done so "precisely in carrying forward its most distinctive elements." Among these she cites a "relatively popular government, the relatively high status of women, the separation of church and state, and what remains of universal schooling." Reading Robinson's convincing arguments on this score leads me to a radical thought of my own: now that we have begun to acknowledge the influence of Seneca and Iroquois polity on our country's foundation, might we just as happily acknowledge Jean Cauvin?

Two essays on Cauvin and the brilliant "Prigs and Puritans" constitute the core of Robinson's book. In the latter she effectively skewers the stereotype of Puritans as "characterized by . . . fear or hatred of the body, anxiety about sex, denigration of women." In a typical passage, Robinon presents a more profound and sympathetic understanding of the Puritan worldview, and asks us to consider that our own world may be far more cruel and priggish than the Puritans'.

"The belief that we are all sinners gives us excellent grounds for forgiveness and self-forgiveness, and is kindlier than any expectation that we might all be saints" once the bad ideas, words and people are identified and expunged. "Gross error survives every attempt at perfection," Robinson writes, adding: "No Calvinist could be surprised. No reader of history could be surprised."

Ideologues of all stripes are likely to be enraged by this book--which seems like poetic justice to me. But if readers are willing to engage a book that may chip away at their ignorance and challenge their most dearly held assumptions and stereotypes, then Robinson's book will do its work. She forces us to look at ourselves in a new light: to see our lamentable tendency to "visit our sins upon the fathers," and to carp at each other over bits of language.

In a brilliant passage in "Prigs and Puritans" she analyses the public assault that a younger woman makes on an elderly man over a term that she perceives as "ethnocentric." Robinson concludes: "I have not yet found a Puritan whose Calvinism was so decayed that he or she would say to another soul, I am within the kingdom of the elect and you are outside it. But translated into the terms of contemporary understanding . . . that is what that woman said to that man."

Robinson's book is a valuable contribution to American life and letters. Still, I wish she would write another novel.