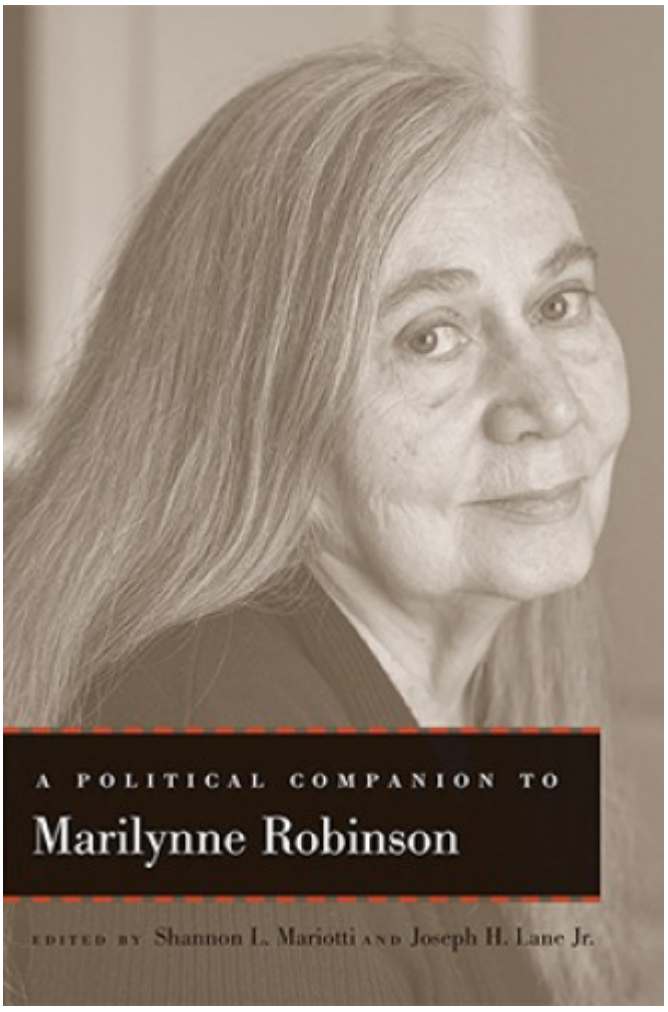
Marilynne Robinson's vision for democracy

Critics are correct that Robinson doesn't offer an alternative to the Christian Right. But she never claimed to.

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the September 13, 2017 issue

In Review



A Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson

Edited by Shannon L. Mariotti and Joseph H. Lane Jr.

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In the summer of 2016, the *New York Review of Books* published a conversation between Marilynne Robinson and President Barack Obama. The details of their conversation were less memorable than the spectacle of a president unspooling long, substantive thoughts with a prominent novelist.

Obama and Robinson are linked by affinity, mutual admiration, and coincidence. Robinson's epistolary novel *Gilead* launched her back into the heights of American letters in the same month Obama was elected to the U.S. Senate following a masterful oratorical display at the Democratic convention. Two more novels set in the fictional Gilead and three essay collections—which sometimes commented assertively on current events—followed during the years Obama served in public office. He cited her in speeches and awarded her the National Humanities Medal. She wrote about her vast admiration for him. It was not hard to see them working on congruent democratic projects—his on the large but tightly constrained stage of national politics, hers on the smaller but infinitely open theater of the page and its reader.

Yet Alan Jacobs, in a thoughtful and widely read essay on the decline of Christian intellectuals in America, took Robinson to task for her conversation with Obama, finding her chat with Obama overly genial. "It may be poor form to use a conversation with a friend in order to speak truth to power, but I for one would have appreciated a dose of Cornel West–like poor form," Jacobs wrote. He cited Obama's failure to close Guantánamo Bay as one topic she might have raised (*Harpers*, "The Watchmen," September 2016). "Robinson may well be the finest living American novelist, and at her best a brilliant essayist," Jacobs went on, "but whatever her religious *beliefs*, her *culture* seems to be fully that of the liberal secular world."

Jacobs does Robinson some injustice in characterizing her as an auxiliary to liberal secular politics and in minimizing the role her religion plays in shaping her views of public life. But the question he poses is a good one: How *does* Marilynne Robinson's writing on religion—and in particular her appreciation of the Calvinist tradition—relate to her political vision? And what does that political vision mean now that the Obama years are over?

Robinson believes that democracy has an ethos, and needs one. Her most political writing is seldom concerned with the institutional machinery of the democratic state,

its shifting demographic trends, or its partisan composition. It is instead concerned with the culture, habits, and civil society institutions—most notably schools, churches, and publications—that undergird American democracy, enabling or inhibiting its health and flourishing. When she does comment directly on politicians and elections, it tends to be through this lens of cultural interpretation.

The openness of experience and human potential are central to Robinson's fiction and nonfiction, and the political implications of her appreciation for Obama are clear: an experiment in democratic self-government will not long survive the closure of possibility, either among individuals, in the ongoing development of culture, or in ideology. This is classic American pragmatism, continuous, as Robinson regularly points out, with the literary tradition that includes Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson, and Melville among many others. It is also implicitly theological, even if its theological roots have long been forgotten. Calvinism, on her account, is "uniquely the *fons et origo* of Christian liberalism."

Robinson's characters are marked by yearning, but seem resigned to injustice.

That Calvinist influence, in turn, depends on the Old Testament and its uncannily generous laws. In *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, Robinson connects *liberal* in the American sense to the Geneva Bible's use of *liberality* rather than to the French *liberté*, giving it the sense of generosity rather than the assertion of individual freedom. God creates the world freely and without constraint, and human beings reflect, in miniature, that unconstrained freedom. The laws honoring and defending that freedom for Israel require mutual support and open-handedness.

Consequently, the political history that most interests Robinson is the antebellum abolitionist movement and the era of Republican radicalism that gave America the Homestead Act of 1862, a piece of legislation she compares to Deuteronomy. There was nothing inevitable about the emergence of an American democracy based on mass small-scale land ownership rather than vast plantations. Our development of unprecedented systems of primary and higher education likewise expressed an egalitarian ambition: that access to schooling at all levels would transform people beyond anything envisioned in the more rigorously class-bound societies from which Americans emigrated.

In this perspective, John Ames, the prairie philosopher of *Gilead* and *Lila*, is not so much a moral or intellectual hero as he is an odd tendril thrown up by a culture that

valued the office of country preacher and positioned him to learn from anything and anyone. An unlikely heir of the words of Moses, and a minor heir of the words of Calvin, Ames exemplifies the miracle of his own possibility and the world that bestowed that possibility with such a free hand.

For some of the contributors to *A Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson*, this story of liberality and possibility does not constitute an adequate conception of political life and its substantive goods. Ralph Hancock calls it a “repudiation of teleology,” a conception of human life so open and cosmopolitan that it cannot sustain the doctrine and the social order that created it. Ames, he notes, fails even the basic democratic test of using his influence to make Jack Boughton’s biracial family welcome in Gilead. Taking an opposite tack, Christine Maloyed accuses Robinson of sanitizing Christian history to make it useful to progressive politics and making strawmen out of secular discourses like evolutionary theory (which Robinson identifies with the tendency to constrain or roll back the instruments of democratic potential).

Briallen Hopper, writing on the website Religion and Politics, builds an even sharper critique on a puzzling transposition in *Home*. In that novel, Boughton, secretly married to the African American mother of his child, expresses shock at racial unrest in Montgomery while describing much different events in Birmingham that took place years later. Whether the substitution of one event for another is a troubling oversight on the part of the author or a deliberate anachronism meant to throw her white characters into starker relief, it reveals a dimension of Robinson’s fiction: she “is not interested in telling the stories of people who fight their fate, alone or together.” In hundreds of pages on a small town and its churches, citizens and worshipers barely make an appearance. At the heart of Robinson’s work is not the achievement of justice or reconciliation but rather the nobility of yearning. “The mere longing is enough,” Hopper writes. “It feels more satisfying than any real attempt at interracial community or racial justice could ever be.”

These critics converge in finding in Robinson’s work a disturbing complacency. Just as Jacobs laments that she pulls up short of a stern word to the president on Guantánamo Bay, Hancock finds her work lacking in the virtues and commitments required for the defense of the ordered hierarchy of family and society. For Hopper, Robinson’s fiction is too Stoic and resigned to deal adequately with the reality of injustice. Robinson’s intellectual generosity does not extend to modern white evangelicalism, which she treats in a summary and dismissive manner, and her

considerable curiosity does not extend to the contributions of Catholic or Jewish social thought to America's democratic institutions.

The critics are not wrong. To the extent that her readers have sought in Robinson's work a fully articulated alternative to ethnic nationalism, neoliberalism, or the Christian Right, they seek in vain. But Robinson has never claimed to offer such an alternative. Only the enthusiasm of her audience would indicate that she has one to offer, and only the parched landscape of modern thought could demand it of her.

If her relentless focus on interiority seems like a political cul-de-sac, and if her continual return to a humanism of awe and mystery seems inadequate for the hard-edged questions of our age, perhaps we should conclude that Robinson's politics are not strictly *political* after all. What is a community of inwardness, anyway? Ames unburdens his soul most fully in an empty church, or in a letter dropped into the stove. One can no more imagine him wearing out his congressman with phone calls than rousing the Israelites through the sea behind Moses.

Where Robinson's tart critiques and broad reveries do become genuinely political, fierce with unresolved grief, is in her defense of the institutions and habits that created lonely wanderers like Ames in the first place. When she talks about education or the conventions of literary and scientific thought that nurture or despoil it, we see a figure who is anything but complacent.

For all her optimism about human nature and possibility, Robinson's view of institutions is dire and forlorn. Her own University of Iowa, over 150 years old and long sustained by the "generosity and good faith" of "hundreds of little farm towns," is being turned toward gruesomely antihumanistic and profit-seeking ends. "It is as if the very idea of a people, a historical community, has died intestate," she concludes, "and all its wealth is left to plunder." Built on land grants, subsidized by public budgets, and charged with building up a democratic culture, American universities have become resources to be extracted, endowments to be raided. Something similar is happening to primary education. Instead of equipping citizens for the demands of democracy, schools are training workers for the rigors of global capitalism. You would think from our rhetoric, she writes, that Americans lost the Cold War.

Calvinism and its American progeny, too, are now mostly distant memories. *Gilead*, set in the time of Robinson's youth, is in no small part a lament for the faded ideals

of the abolitionist movement. The eldest John Ames, the narrator's grandfather, a veteran of the Kansas unrest and the Civil War, and his comrades "harbor a barely suppressed wild grief," Emily C. Nacol writes in the *Political Companion*. The black church of Gilead, a remnant of its more egalitarian history, was set on fire; its members moved to Chicago. Ames the narrator recalls this event with a discreditable lack of sorrow and fury.

But Ames's complacency—and here the term is wholly appropriate—was the complacency of a white America that had long before agreed to put the war, its motives, and its radical potential in the past. It was tired of the rigor and heat of the old evangelical abolitionists, who were never popular enough to keep their printing presses from being destroyed and their leaders from being harassed or worse. Gilead survived, but without its past intact. The novels that document it, despite their aesthetic and spiritual astonishments, have a tragic hue.

What, in Robinson's telling, has replaced the Calvinism that so shaped American institutions and its secularized descendants? In the churches, she claims, nothing much. Outside of the churches, Puritanism has been replaced by what Robinson calls priggishness, a version of sanctity that awards or deducts points as viciously as—and more trivially than—any Great Awakening revivalist.

In intellectual life and political ideology, the ideas that command the most prestige are reductive, harsh, and minimizing of human strangeness and possibility. Austerity in politics and economics turns us against the best of our public inheritance and against each other. In the social sciences, human experience is diminished to the flicker of fMRI data or the just-so stories of evolutionary psychology. When our dominant ideologies reduce us to the role of observers in our own collective actions, how could we remain committed to the clumsy genius of plebeian democracy?

In the lecture series published as *Absence of Mind*, Robinson notes the frequent use of the story of Phineas Gage in the scientific literature she finds so dehumanizing. Gage was a railroad worker who in 1848 survived a blast that lodged an iron rod in his skull. He remained remarkably intact, but his deportment was reported to have become rather poor and unreliable. This case is frequently cited as evidence that our personality traits are functions of our neural hardware. Robinson, however, asks, "Did he have hopes? Did he have dependents?" Gage's afflictions, she suggests, might have shaped his profane and irreverent behavior beyond the damage to his circuitry. When our ideas reduce human beings to things, they require a new sort of

mythology. The more we believe in this mythology, the more evidence we find to verify it.

I returned to this passage on Gage as the tide of 2016 election postmortems was at flood and a large swath of the American electorate was receiving a similar analysis. The now proverbial “white working class” Trump voters, limned in anecdote and aggregate data, were the test subject. What issue would bind them to Trump or pry them back to the progressive coalition? Which survey would chase their real motivations out into the open? What could explain their choices? Behind the questions was the assumption that people are inert; they merely respond to stimuli.

You would think from our rhetoric, writes Robinson, that we lost the Cold War.

This assumption may be true. Or at least it is being made true through repetition and by the scarcity of other claims for what a democratic society should or could be. That we have come to such a moment should not be a shock to anyone who has read Robinson’s books. She has been unfolding its possibility for a long time.

“The force behind the movement of time,” she wrote in *Housekeeping*, “is a mourning that will not be comforted.” Memory “pulls us forward” and “prophecy is only brilliant memory.” It is easy for readers to lose this mournful theme in Robinson’s work, deep and thunderous though it sometimes sounds.

John Ames, at the end of *Gilead*, prays that his son will grow up brave in a brave country and that he will be useful. Those wizened abolitionists whom he remembers—they were brave and useful. Their bravery and usefulness were a reproach and a warning to their lukewarm, forgetful progeny.

Fictional prayers for fictional children bounded by the page are poignant in their immunity to answer. The youngest Ames, had he existed, would now be eligible for Medicare. We can hazard a judgment on whether he would have grown up in a brave country. If these memories are to become brilliant enough to serve as prophecy in the wilderness of America’s retracting democracy, it will require something more and other than even our greatest living novelist can do for us.

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