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The Many Homes of Marilynne Robinson

Marilynne Robinson's indebtedness to history is apparent in all her work. Her novels are -- and feel -- rooted in the past. At a literal level this is self-evidently the case. First, and most obviously, *Housekeeping* (1980) has an unspecified post-Depression era setting. The recurrence of popular songs such as "Irene", "Love Letters Straight from your Heart" and "Cottage for Sale", all loved – and sung -- by the narrator's mother Helen, help readers situate it in the decade following 1945. The action of *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014), chiefly takes place in the period around 1956, when the first of the three opens. Each novel looks back through history, using the lens of family and of genealogies produced out of the relationship between the familial and national. Robinson invokes specific events such as John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry (*Gilead*) and the consequence of the Wall Street Crash (*Lila*) to give contexts to the lives of her characters. The present day of each novel is thus derived from a profoundly consequential past, in ways that are continually foregrounded. Second, while her 'quiet' narrative aesthetic corresponds to one current novelistic trend, it is entirely at odds with another tendency that represents noise as the governing motif of contemporary US experience. (Sykes, 2014) This means that though her novels are contemporary, they do not seem to belong to the dominant zeitgeist. Finally, and most importantly to what will follow, her fiction draws upon a literary genealogy that includes key nineteenth-century forbears. Starting with a discussion of Robinson's avowed indebtedness to nineteenth-century literature, this essay examines the way that her work engages with its legacy and brings it into the present. It identifies two interconnected features of her writing: her use of metaphor and focus on home. Tracing these through her oeuvre, it locates her writing within the context of a set of contemporaries to see the ways she is profoundly linked to our own time. In this way it opens up new possibilities of reading Robinson in conjunction with writers such as James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, bell hooks and Toni Morrison.

Robinson is not only an extraordinarily successful novelist, but a Christian thinker and highly polemical essayist, whose writings have had both positive and negative attention from environmentalists and scientists. She is one of the United States' most significant public intellectuals. She has helped shape the careers of a number of younger American

writers over the two and a half decades she spent at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, teaching and mentoring. Her writing achievements were recognised in 2012 with the award of the National Humanities Medal, adding that to a tranche of awards with which she had been honoured over the preceding three decades. The acclaim in which she is held reaches across boundaries. With a writer and thinker such as Robinson there is therefore much to do in order to give her intellectual projects the proper and serious attention they demand. A number of prominent figures have taken up that challenge. Probably her most famous fan is Barack Obama, who conducted what was dubbed a 'conversation' with her in Iowa in September 2015, subsequently published in two parts in *The New York Review of Books*. He especially admired a quality of attention to the ordinary in her work and located as belonging to the domestic. He notes that 'part of my connection to your books, I think, is an appreciation for – without romanticizing Middle America or small-town America – that sense of homespun virtues.' Obama's identification of the 'homespun' as a source both of moral worth, but also to a politics of the local and everyday, reminds us that just as home is a key physical location in her fiction, values associated with the domestic are also central to her novels. This recognition shows the way the human subject is at the heart of all her writing. Both insist on the relationship between Christianity and human value.

During a wide-ranging 1993 interview with Thomas Schaub, Robinson specifically noted the ways that the work of Melville, Dickinson and Thoreau influenced her development as a novelist. All these writers were profoundly linked to the emerging democratic culture to which their work contributed to shape. At the point at which they were producing their seminal works, almost exactly one hundred years before the setting of the *Gilead* trilogy, debates with fundamental consequences for the United States were taking place with a particular urgency. Slavery, civil rights, the responsibilities of engaged citizenship, democracy and nationhood were all under scrutiny. Newspapers, journals, essays and public meetings were the sites in which current events were debated with seriousness. Emerson was an enthusiastic participant in lyceum and print culture and his lectures helped to spread his doctrines of civic responsibility and self-reliance. Robinson is an active and engaged author in the manner of Emerson. Like him, she expresses an optimism about human potentiality, and a vocabulary shaped by a deep knowledge of the Bible and of works of theology. The fact that she shares this engagement with the broader culture within which she is

situated, challenges the feeling that her novels are not fully situated in the present. In other words, though her fiction is set historically in the past, this does not mean that it is not also richly located in the politics of the present.

Her comments on their methods, and their impact are complex and revealing. She expresses a particular interest in metaphor. Early in the interview she argued that 'anything you can do with language that works justifies itself, and anything is fair, anything is open, including long metaphorical passages that at first don't appear to be going anywhere.' (235) A little later she returns to a discussion of metaphor, telling Schaub that, 'I was particularly impressed with the use of metaphor in the great ones….the way they used metaphor was a highly legitimate strategy for real epistemological questions to be dealt with in fiction and poetry.' (239) Reflecting on the impulse behind *Housekeeping*, she links it to this named group of writers in two ways. She notes 'the feeling that there was something to the idea of experience as emblematic' and then she admires their insistence that 'reality is all of a piece'. (Both 239) Her acknowledgment of the power of metaphor as a strategic writing tool is important to engaging with the ways she appropriates this in her own work, so successfully that it becomes one of her writing's defining qualities. The narrative strategy she outlined as her aim, when writing *Housekeeping*, is based on their model of extended metaphor. Like them, she uses metaphorical passages to apprehend and describe reality, through a process of analogy. These metaphors have a 'signature quality' (239) and allow knowledge to be produced by, and in consequence of, language that has both beauty and intellectual weightiness. Certainly, Robinson's prose is characterised by meditative passages, and moments of precise, often religiously inflected, observation: many of these intense moments are articulated through metaphors of home.

In Robinson's work, home is an expansive and generative category. It encompasses theology, domestic ideology, ideas of comfort and belonging. Scholars have recognized the way Robinson's novels use metaphor to describe 'emblematic' experience. Powerful and allusive metaphorical language profoundly shapes her non-fiction in ways that have not yet had sufficient acknowledgement. A richly varied idea of home is at the centre of all of Robinson's work. It is, to borrow once again from her own words, 'the genetic strand that opens a whole genealogy' (239). This description

means an analogical method of reflecting on reality. The word genealogy can be usefully extended both to encompass the intellectual lineage that shaped her development as an author, essayist and public intellectual and to suggest her body of work – or "begats" to use a word invoked by John Ames at the start of *Gilead*. The recognition proposed here allows for a new mapping of the connections between her diverse outputs, a critical lacuna [1] to date, despite the attention her fiction has been given.

One reason for the way that this connection between parts of her oeuvre has been under-explored, is that her readers belong to different, and not always overlapping, constituencies. While the bulk of her readers encounter her writing through her novels, another group is more concerned with theology, reading her essays in order to engage with her religious thought. Her theological writing has been admiringly reviewed by thinkers who include Rowan Williams, formerly the Archbishop of Canterbury, suggesting its niche readership. Most of her readers encounter her through her novels, and do not go on to her essays. Readers who come to her essays first, however, are also likely to read her novels. Critics have almost invariably divided up in similar ways, reading her fiction and non-fiction more or less apart from each other. Though she appears fully at home in each of the arenas in which she makes her public interventions, it seems that readers are not. This general (though not universal) critical oversight offers an opportunity for new readings. It would be productive to develop more scholarship that considers her essays and novels in relation to each other to explore their contiguities.

Metaphors of home create a 'signature quality' connecting her entire oeuvre. Conceptually speaking, home seems at once intuitive, universal and stable. It suggests relations and connections between the material, and the affective. These add weight to both as they are brought to bear upon each other. Home is thus much more than the sum of its parts. While a house is a material structure, it is also the stuff out of which home might be fashioned. It is not itself home, though, until imaginative and emotional work transforms it in ways that can be felt, or experienced, yet are difficult to name or

[1] To some degree this is changing now: a 2014 article by Aaron Mauro is exemplary in this regard noting that 'metaphor is bound to fundamental problems within the home and is necessary for a robust critique of…structures of debt.' (155)

pin down. It is both a location (though not necessarily a single one) and an affective, and imaginative category. As a term it is also expansive, used metaphorically to encompass what it means to be comfortable "at home" as well as what it means to feel unsettled or uncomfortable "not at home". As I have argued elsewhere, since it is 'constituted through the imagination' it can be both a 'site and object of desire, but...apparently paradoxically…a space of exclusion and management.' (Bennett, Carroll and Mackay, 4) This means that it can involve coercion and violence – often gendered and raced. Issues of exile, marginalisation and homelessness have also been the subject of work in which contestations about home and ownership -- whether in terms of property rights or larger political arguments about borders and belonging -- have been significant. Robinson does not represent houses as forms of collateral but instead they are places of refuge, and of possibility. They are also locations of restriction and restraint: after all, her first novel ends with the deliberate burning down of a house in order to flee from it.

Her ecologies and economies of home encompass the theological, the political in its broadest sense, the experiential, imaginative, and affective. Each of these is important to understanding Robinson's concerns and the powerful narrative possibilities of using metaphors of home. They all have connections to ideas of self and other which inform the construction of characters within novels. But additionally, the sense of home as a crucial site of identity formation, belonging and responsibility is central to debates about ecology, catastrophe, democracy, warfare, fear, and identity politics. These concerns are at the heart of her polemical essays, from her early book *Mother Country: Britain, The Nuclear State, and Nuclear Pollution* (1989) onwards. The emotion associated with home is important in her work. She is a vocal opponent of neoliberal assumptions of value that come from calibrations of the fiscal in which the house-as-home is part of a portfolio of assets that can be precisely measured. The home has been at the heart of global crisis, its significance is both as a material structure, and as an abstraction that can be used to indicate economic and psychic events in the life of the family. A return to intimacy, to home and the domestic has become a common focus for some cultural texts, challenging the primacy of the so-called "noisy" contemporary novels.

The imminent possibility of repossession and its impact on a set of interlinking familial and social relationships and subjectivities was also a staple of nineteenth-century fiction, the period at which the home increasingly becomes, paradoxically, both a financial asset and a liability for many more people than it had in the past. For in the economic crises or panics from the early national period to the end of the century, the home was often precisely what was at stake. This was one of the critical ways in which market crisis had its impact on the lives of Americans, especially middle class homeowners, as Andrew Lawson and Jessica Leppard have argued. At the same time, since the culture of home and domesticity was also reaching its apotheosis, metaphorical language relating to the home and to the domestic was a profoundly important literary resource for nineteenth-century writers. Thus the rise and significance of domestic ideology in the nineteenth century, made using metaphors of home an efficacious way of speaking to a wide public, in a way audiences found recognisable, and engaging. Invocations of home, variously defined, were diverse and powerful within public discourse: they offered ways of reflecting on subjects as diverse as the intimate and familial to public affairs and national crises. Probably the single outstanding example is Abraham Lincoln's celebrated 1858 "House Divided" speech. His prophetic, biblically-derived language underwrites the moral and political case he carefully lays out, challenging the extension of slavery in the United States. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) brings together practical methods of housekeeping with philosophical modes of reflecting on lived experience. He laments the paucity of modern life that keeps many families living in rented accommodation: 'though the birds of the air have their nests, and the foxes their holes, and the savages their wigwams, in modern civilized society not more than one half the families own a shelter.' (44) Emily Dickinson's poetry repeatedly uses metaphors of houses and domestic interiors to reflect upon complex psychological states. As she writes, 'One need not be a chamber – to be haunted --/ One need not be a House.' (9) Whitman instead represents a richly imagined national scene in which the ordinary and domestic has extraordinary potential to bring together individuals in intimate and caring relationships: 'The little one sleeps in its cradle,/ I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies with my hand.' (195)

Without exception, each of Robinson's novels centres on a family home. They all reflect upon complex questions of absence and presence, of leaving and returning, of

gaining and losing a home. Take, for instance, this extended example from *Housekeeping* which suggests home's rich possibilities. Ruth and her aunt Sylvie, a drifter who cares for her after her mother's suicide, visit an abandoned homestead. Sylvie then vanishes, leaving Ruth entirely alone. At this point in the novel, her sister Lucille has already moved out of their Fingerbone house to live with her home economics teacher. Most of Ruth's known relatives are dead, or absent, except for Sylvie. Her inadequacies as a home-maker are repeatedly exposed, yet, for Ruth, she represents a final possibility of achieving some kind of settled dwelling place. When Sylvie also disappears, leaving Ruth alone in the ruined building, Ruth imagines that the ruins contains children or their bodies, and that she will uncover them. But then, Sylvie fails to reappear and she starts to wish she could join the ghostly, missing children. Willing her own death, she envisages her body as a house tethering her to the material: 'I thought, let them unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart. It was no shelter now, it only kept me here alone and I would rather be with them.' (159) Robinson's insistent use of metaphors of home in this extended passage create Ruth's complex reality. Home is comfort but also loneliness, and terror, and is tied both to dwelling and being. Robinson captures the paradoxical situation of desire for and repudiation of home, brilliantly invokes by Melville in a passage in *Moby Dick* on the enigmatic figure of Bulkington. He repeatedly heads out to sea on perilous voyages, leaving home behind, 'Let me only say that it fared with him as with the storm-tossed ship, that miserably drives along the leeward land. The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities. But in that gale, the port, the land, is the ship's direst jeopardy; she must fly all hospitality; one touch of land, though it but graze the keel, would make her shudder through and through.' (116) His perpetual transcience results in his untimely death. Despite knowing the dangers of the sea he continually embarks upon whaling voyages, leaving home behind him and being literally unhoused.

A number of critics have noted the importance of metaphors of house and home within Robinson's fiction. Critical readings of *Housekeeping* have especially allied metaphors of house and home to female subjectivity and engagement with environmental concerns. Maggie Galehouse argues that 'Without demonizing domesticity or disregarding the mostly female community she depicts, Robinson creates a new landscape for twentieth-century heroines' (119); Paula Geyh focuses on the way

'feminine subjectivity both constitutes itself and is constituted either through or in opposition to the space of the "house" or the "home"' (104); George Handley argues that the novel 'commemorates loss of home even as it seeks to reenact its rediscovery' (508). In contrast to these three readings, Karen Kaivola finds the novel's 'insistence on the inclusion of opposing truths' (675) frustratingly limits the emancipatory possibilities of the novel. The attention that her first novel gives to home is extended, albeit in distinct ways, in all her fiction. With regard to her later, connected, novels *Gilead*, *Home* and *Lila*, attention to habits and rituals of being at home, to patterns of community and family and to inclusions and exclusions characterise each of their plots and contexts.

These are brought together most obviously in *Gilead* itself. John Ames recounts in his letter to his young son that people near to death would ask him to tell them what it was like: 'I used to say it was like going home. We have no home in this world, I used to say, and then I'd walk back up the road to this old place and make myself a pot of coffee and a fried egg sandwich and listen to the radio, when I got one, in the dark as often as not.' (4) The disparity between his optimistic message, and the solitude of his own domestic life, is poignantly and unsentimentally set out, showing that Ames epitomises his own theological message about this world being an unhomely place. Yet as the novel goes on, and Ames moves from lonely bereavement into a fulfilling second marriage late in life, his experience changes. His earlier, idealised description of home bears a close relation to Robinson's description of heaven in a 2010 essay "Wondrous Love" though she shows that contemporary life often falls short. The Christian heaven, she writes, is 'an ultimate home where sorrow ends and error is forgotten' (215). In her essay "Imagination and Community" (2012) she returns to a focus on a different kind of home, firmly located in this world but modelled on idea of the next. She advocates for an empathetic home environment that develops the best kinds of human values, arguing that the domestic environment, in which we are raised, contributes to our ethical and political impulses for good and for bad. Home, then, is the locus for value systems that shape societies. This claim, with its emphasis on a set of influences that emanate from the home, is as important to *Gilead* as her metaphorical linking of home with heaven. Late in *Gilead*, with the revelation of Jack Boughton's interracial relationship and mixed race child, he asks whether, as he puts it, '"I might find some way to live with my family here, I mean with my wife and son."' (261) The novel ends

inconclusively, but *Home* takes this question up once more, showing that this will be impossible in a town in which the best ethical impulses towards the other have been buried beneath racist prejudice. The town's radical past has ossified into a conservative and inward-looking present.

This kind of social commentary recurs throughout her writing. In "Imagination and Community" she argues that the 'shrinking of imaginative identification which allows such things as shared humanity to be forgotten always begins at home'. (31) Her identification of the best kinds of human relationships as a series of small redemptive or beautiful acts between a mutually respectful group aiming to live together harmoniously, is consistent with her understanding of an afterlife described by this metaphor of 'ultimate home'. But it also envisages this as an extension of a view of human experience as being premised on have been cast out of this home and always engaging in the anxious and stubborn desire to return. This results in a sense that transience is the natural condition of earthly life.

This is one of the most important themes in *Housekeeping*, articulated in the opening of Chapter Ten in an extended passage about Cain and Abel: 'God troubled the waters where He saw His face, and Cain became his children and their children and theirs, and a thousand generations, and all of them transients'. (193) Robinson insists on the importance of a liberal politics that acknowledges the necessity of fully inhabiting the world as temporary home, ethically and robustly, and by shaping it by engaging in acts of grace at local levels. Such actions create a kind of universal homeliness. Furthermore, she expresses a deep identification, evident also in the expressive prose of her novels, with the way writers such as Whitman articulated a profound respect for others and for the everyday. This ethical impulse towards the other is central to all her work and to her discussions of national politics. She argues that it was negatively and influentially undermined by the political and cultural assumptions of Modernist writers such as Eliot and Pound. Their elevation of high cultural and elitist values over the inclusive and democratic urges (the 'homespun' as Obama calls it) championed by Whitman, in particular, has had a detrimental legacy in assumptions of value and in habits of thought. (237) An appreciation of generous impulses includes her reminder that, as she argues in a 2016 essay in *Harper's Magazine*, two of the major institutions that contributed to the emergence of an importantly galvanising culture of citizenship

in the nineteenth century, were public universities and public libraries. Yet access to these was contingent on privileges of whiteness and (often) masculinity that circumscribed the very definition of what constituted citizenship and access. This can be an under-acknowledged element in her essays, in part due to a prose style that often makes important points in oblique and understated ways. When she notes that Whitman's work is evidence for the fact that the literature of the mid-century period is underpinned by the conviction that 'people are mysterious and profoundly worthy of respect, under almost all circumstances' she immediately added the significant caveat that '(O)f course there's the great anomaly of slavery itself, which ran very much in the opposite direction but was nevertheless more characteristic of the world at that time than was any custom of mutual respect.' (238) The avowal that slavery was 'more characteristic of the world' than the ethos of Whitman's work suggests is easy to miss, though. Indeed it seems on first reading to be problematically restrained. Yet such a mode of expression is absolutely consistent with the systematic yet understated moral rigour of her position. Her politics is not set out as a form of grandstanding, but threads its way insistently through her writing and grounds it ethically. It can take diligence and patience for the reader to recognize the deep earnestness of such sentences. Here it is indicated by way she makes the self-evidence of the caveat impossible to miss by the use of her corrective '[O]f course'.

Like her, the nineteenth-century 'great ones' she admires believed that culture matters, and that it is, fundamentally, political. This recognition helps frame Robinson as a contemporary writer who continues to engage with the challenging racial aftermath of the nineteenth century, including the ongoing consequences of slavery. In this context her work bears an under-recognised relationship to the writing of a constellation of twentieth and twenty-first century figures who take the politics of race as a central concern. What kinds of provocations, affinities or reflections might be produced by reading *Gilead* in relation to other epistolary texts written for much-loved male children, such as James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) or Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015)? How does bell hook's relocation to Kentucky after a lifetime away -- described with such eloquence and emotion in *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (1990) – correspond to Jack Boughton's fictional situation in *Home*? hooks describes moving to Berea, a town containing a college 'founded in 1858 by a visionary abolitionist who believed in freedom for everyone, women and men' (222) so that she

can build a progressive life, close to her remaining family. She notes that however radical a town's history might be, racial hostility lives on in the present, writing, 'I have made my porch a small everyday place of antiracist resistance, a place where I practice the etiquette of civility. I and my two sisters, who live nearby, sit on the porch. We wave at all the passersby, mostly white folks who do not acknowledge our presence.' (150) She makes an activist life into an everyday home-based form of work and, like Robinson, expresses herself in language in which fruitful dwelling is central. Her porch is simultaneously a place of activist labour and shelter. It opens both into the interior of her house and outwards, into public space and nature, and 'invites one to be still – to hear divine voices speak.' (152)

What each of these writers have in common is their engagement with deep beliefs regarding human dignity. Morrison and hooks, like Robinson, use the home as a kind of index for social attitudes: hooks writes: 'Home was the place where the me of me mattered. Home was the place I longed for, it was not where I lived.' (215) Recognising that racism, perniciously pervades the everyday lives of individuals leads to strategies of resistance and opposition that she describes in her work. These rely on the possibility of individual transformation, and include her relocation to Kentucky, in other words, to home. Morrison's post-racial location, a 'world-in-which-race-does-not-matter' (3), is what she simply calls '"Home"'. In this definition, home is not a material site but is her writing itself, something she can create and shape. These contemporary writers, like the figures Robinson expressed her admiration for in the interview with Schaub, all have an understanding of the importance of a shared culture and of the relationship between the intimate and the public. Reading her metaphors of home with an understanding of these connections opens up new relationships with past and present writers, and also continuities between, and across, her own work. Understood this way, home is, indeed, the 'genetic strand that opens a whole genealogy'.

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