

First Edition

**ON READING
ROBINSON**

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G.H.B.

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Introduction

I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said To be with the good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I'm old, and you said, I don't think you are old.

—Rev. John Ames

And so begins Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*. But I should begin elsewhere; explaining firstly my intentions here. During the last weeks of 2018 and into the new year 2019, I was immersed in my reading of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* trilogy, and enthused as I was, wrote several related blog entries. At the

same time I was doing some other "stuff"; in an experimental vein, and with L^AT_EX on my mind, this then is a fusion of some of my initial literary thoughts (and other musings that have since come to mind) embedded in my novice attempts at digital design; presented in a continuous pamphlet form for ease of reading - borrowed, so to speak, from elsewhere ¹.

The blog entries are dated in accordance with their posting, but are not always verbatim, and I note divergences from the original sometimes within square brackets and when necessary with further explanation.

Anne Dromache

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¹ <https://www.latextemplates.com/template/ebook>

Chapter 1

*“Gilead” – an epiphany
of another America*

...So he fled with all that he had...and headed toward the mountains of Gilead...Jacob had pitched his tent in the mountains, and Laban with his brethren pitched in the mountains of Gilead.

–Genesis 31:21-25

[I should begin by saying that...] I live in Germany, and Germany has what many other countries also have

and tout, or aspire to have if only to tout, and that is, a special relationship with the United States. And this often translates as a complicated relationship, and is reductive and too often simplified. I thought about this recently while reading reports in the German media, ostensibly about the end to Bruce Springsteen's much acclaimed Broadway show, but where the overriding tenor was of "another" America, a better America, an "America the Beautiful", as one particularly good piece was titled, and this America being personified by Springsteen. (Hallelujah to that I would say! But I am not here to talk about the Boss, or the original me as fan blah! and what that says about one's age!) The comparison with the other America defined from another perspective is obvious enough and need not be pursued; my point here is the inherent diversity of place and people, and what if anything this has to say about a nation and national character.

This thinking about the everyman and everywoman, and how affected their narrative is by place, and how our perceptions are formed and informed

by place, coincided with my reading of Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*¹. Written in 2004, I come to it belatedly I know, and I am in fact reading Robinson for the first time; her reputation of course is well known to me, at the latest with a legendary tête-à-tête with Barack Obama for the *The New York Review of Books* a couple of years ago.

Rev. John Ames' epiphany, for Marilynne Robinson's novel is just that – the revelatory testimony to a life well lived, is a monument of sorts to a gentler, kinder America. It could be fairly stated that *Gilead* is a religious book, moralizing perhaps in content and tone, but it is one that remarkably transcends a religious reading. The man, the father, the son, the husband, the brother, the friend John Ames explains himself, and while it is the Reverend Ames that bears witness with all the tools of his vocation, the thoughtful reader doesn't need scriptural literacy nor to have read Calvin's "Institutes"² nor flirted with

¹ *Gilead* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 2004)

² *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin, 1559

and rejected, or maybe not, Feuerbach ³; interesting as that all may be, needed only is an open mind (and heart) to explore beyond the particular (Christianity, for instance) to what is being said of the greater human experience. The Reverend I indeed wanted very much to believe. I wanted to believe in the grace and goodness of his God. In the end though, it was the very human, less virtuous, John Ames that I journeyed with through the years and a landscape that could well be described as biblical, and with whom I felt the burden he carried of being the less favoured, less gifted son, but the one who stayed. I shared with him his self-imposed solitude and unrequited longings, and bemoaned an intellectual curiosity that had nowhere to go so went everywhere. I imagined intimately his losses and the wonder that came with the new so unexpected, so late in life. *And I sat right there alongside him as he wrote it all down those last long nights through. . .*

I must say, too, how very much I was captivated by

³ *The Essence of Christianity*, Ludwig Feuerbach, 1841

John Ames' voice – the cadence, the warmth – and found myself on occasions talking it out loud with some sort of (what I imagine to be!) mid-western accentuation, and even had moments of casting fantasies ranging from Henry Fonda to Sam Elliott – which sort of unites heaven and earth. A temptation a serious reader should resist I know!

Gilead is so embedded in a very particular America; in the hardships, social norms and contradictions, and injustices, of a century gone, that it takes a leap of faith (is that a pun?) to insist upon its relevance. But I will. This old and dying man, from the more prosperous Fifties looking back and passing review on his own life and that of his forbears, allows a glimpse into an historic America; radically formed by its puritan roots, an ever evolving politic and the contrary demands of its vastness and a people displaced sometimes freely and often not, and always searching. But the themes that drive the narrative – of memory, of legacy, of the point of it all – are universal themes that transcend place and religion.

Just a wonderful read in my opinion – profound,

uplifting and beautifully written – to be followed now by *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014), Robinson's sequel novels to *Gilead* that apparently run parallel but with different voices. *Home* tells of the family of Reverend Boughton, Ames' best friend, expanding upon the murky past of Jack Boughton (or more precisely John Ames Boughton), the fallen prodigal son; more than just alluded to in *Gilead*. And then *Lila*, told from the perspective of Ames' wife, she who brought light and love to his later years, but with a story too of her own to tell. I look forward very much to completing the trilogy in the days ahead, and writing a little about them.

And I sat right there alongside him as he wrote it all down those last long nights through . . . *I see before me the son reading the father's testimonial in years hence. . . And the son will surely know so much more – he will know what happened next. He will know his mother and Jack as is his father did not. He will know of Presidents who have lived and died. He will see wrongs being put right, but new wrongs being created. . . He is a young man leaving Gilead*

tomorrow, and with his father's blessing. . .

My imagination runs away with me! But I can't help but want to put together all the elegant shards of memory and fragmented personal narratives that Marilynne Robinson has left with me, but perhaps she will do the putting together – I did read somewhere that a quartet was always intended. That I post this on the Christian feast day of Epiphany is only half coincidental!

January 6th 2019

Chapter 2

On being at home...

I just never knew another child who didn't feel at home in the house where he was born.

—Rev. Boughton (to his son Jack)

Home may well mean many things for many people; there is that of birth or formative years and that “where the heart is”, there is a physical place and a sensory place, and a home of the imagination. And, too, there is the home one recognizes and that which one denies, and the home you take with you and the

one you leave behind. There is that state so sought but often denied, of being at home with oneself. It is remarkably elusive this “home” thing.

“Home” is also the title of Marilynne Robinson’s 2008 follow-up novel ¹ to *Gilead*, which so captivated me with the radicality of its givenness. More a companion of sorts than a sequel, *Home* runs parallel in time, say through the Spring and Summer of 1956 – sometimes taking its own trajectory and sometimes entwined with Ames’ record; enhancing that, putting things right, begging the question of where reliability lies. I could only approach *Home* in the context of that first reading, which brought with it all the sympathies and associations I had formed. I like to think of it in this way: whilst the good Reverend Ames is sitting down writing his very personal testimonial for his son, over at the Boughton household the recently returned Glory and that wayward, beloved brother Jack are caring for a dying father and coming to their own reckoning of sorts with themselves and

¹ *Home* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 2008)

one another.

I see now those themes that predominated in *Gilead* – loneliness, forgiveness, sorrow, all that weariness and wariness – as being observed and described by Rev. Ames; in more soul searching moments in terms of himself, more often though pertaining to those nearest and dearest, but in *Home* the emotionally engaged reader lives them with the protagonists; the psychology of it all becomes reality. The change of narrative style to the third person, predominately from Glory's point of view, and the wonderful dialogic exchanges facilitates this new rendering.

Glory, seemingly peripheral for Ames' story, is central to this narrative, and I loved getting to know this woman – intelligent, duped by a bounder, and ashamed, felt left behind by life and her own aspirations. I even loved the tears. Teary rhymes with weary I know.

It is through Glory's eyes that we see the tormented Jack, and with her we approach some knowledge and understanding of the lonely, desperate boy

who never felt at home in this the family home, but treasures every memory, every detail. Dutifully, have the other siblings come “home” over all the years – and been glad enough to leave – but Jack has carried that “home” to which he never felt as if he belonged with him every day; and the burden is heavy. What is home?

Jack and Glory: their trials and tribulations, what they bring home with them, and what they seek and what they find instead; it may not be the sought for resolution, but there is a way there – and the reader’s hope: that it be found. With *Home*, Marilynne Robinson delivers again her deep Christian and human convictions in a prose that is sometimes more beautiful and profound than the profane heart or head can bear – but borne it is, and one is just left wondering at the limits of own profanity!

February 4th 2019

Chapter 3

Mrs. Ames

As we accompany Rev. Ames as he leaves testament to a good life lived in *Gilead*, his wife has been at his side for eight years perhaps, borne his child, grown into herself – distant still, but accepted. She is, after all, Mrs. Ames. Lila.

Different again is this third novel of the series.¹ *Lila* is told in the third person, but from the very reliable point of view of the subject – Lila's voice

¹ *Lila* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux 2018)

shines through. Lacking the intellectual stringency of the first and the emotional roller-coaster ride of the second, and the complexity of both; it shines instead with its honesty and integrity, and the more simple and direct tone, fitting precisely the woman who is so much more than the Reverend's Mrs. Ames.

Ah, Lila! Taken, kidnapped, saved, however one may look at it, as a feeble five year old by the wandering Doll; and from the most desolate and abused circumstances. Their bonding and time together, with and without the company of itinerant workers, was, in those pre-Depression years and the harsher times to come, what was to define her, and give her the inner strength in the times spent alone on the road and in a St. Louis brothel.

One is left to imagine the many years from childhood to adulthood, to ponder quite how this clever woman, this kind woman, lived her life, to imagine it as equal and as flawed in all its goodness to that of the Reverend Ames; he who she on whim, or an inner sense of destiny, pleaded for, and who took then her as wife, and without

hesitation – that wondrous lost soul; searching there for shelter one day at his church door. Did Rev. Ames presume himself to be her saviour? Who saved whom, and from what, as the heavens opened and wept her tears that day at God's door?



Figure 3.1: *Woman at Church Door*, George Henry Boughton, 1860

Marilynne Robinson delivers again, and with her unique voice that promises at least the hope of another deliverance. In *Lila* we have a fine character portrait from which the narrative springs; drawing one near to the essence and limits of the loneliness, weariness and wariness that pervades the little big world of Gilead and that greater world of humankind, and along the way fosters a belief in the capacity to grow and change. Remarkable.

February 9th 2019

Chapter 4

What's in a name

I found it really quite interesting and often enlightening to consider Marilynne Robinson's various name choices in her *Gilead* trilogy (that is – to date, trilogy!), and seeking out hidden meanings and symbolic. And they are certainly there aplenty; first and foremost, Gilead, that biblical place offering balm for souls searching, and in the names of siblings and children – all those Edwards and Johns, and Glory and Grace. Not immediately apparent to me was the significance one could give to the two family names.

It must be said, Robinson could of course have chosen them from the recesses of her mind, or even at random! But anyway for what it's worth. . .

WILLIAM AMES (1576-1633)

William Ames was an important Protestant theologian, educated at Christ's College, Cambridge, who by and by fell afoul of the clerical elite with his rigid Calvinist and staunch Puritan views (can they be anything but?), and specifically in relation to the debauchery and excesses (again, to his mind) surrounding the Twelve Days of Christmas.

Persona non-grata on the Isles, he travelled to the



The Portraiture of the Reverend and worthy Minister of God, William Ames B.D. sometime of Christs Colledge in Cambridge. And Professor of Divinity in the Famous University of Francker in Frieland.

Figure 4.1: *Engraving by William Graves, 1633* © National Portrait Gallery

Netherlands, and immediately courted controversy – this time with a dispute involving the Arminian position of predestination. Nevertheless, Ames obtained important university teaching positions, and his person and writings were to become influential in reformed theological circles in Holland, and flourished across the Atlantic in the fledgling New England colony (where he had hoped to go before being hindered by ill health) and the purity of faith embraced there.

JONATHAN EDWARDS (1703-1758)

Probably the most prominent American theologian of the colonial time, Jonathan Edwards' fusion of Calvinism and Puritanism became one of the defining aspects of American protestantism, especially through the Great Awakening and Revival Theology period

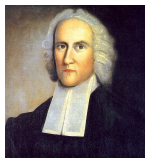


Figure 4.2: *Jonathan Edwards (public domain)*

of the mid-eighteenth century, and his influence and legacy remain to this day theologically pertinent, and absolute to an understanding of American colonial history (see all things Perry Miller.)

GEORGE HENRY BOUGHTON

(1833-1905)

A bit of a stretch – but anyway. George Henry Boughton was born in Norwich in England but grew up in Albany, New York. No learned man of church and theology here, Boughton was a painter and illustrator! The subject matter of his work though was very often drawn from New England colonial history, and therefore often representative of Puritan society. Interestingly, Boughton also illustrated the 1881 edition of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and when I think of Lila, I can't help but think of Hester Prynne and the inner dignity and strength that that they share, enabling them to surmount extreme denigration and hardship.



Figure 4.3: *"Pilgrims Going to Church"*, George Henry Boughton, 1867 (New York Historical Society)

tion similar to that which had a rain drenched Lila seeking sanctuary one Pentecost at the portal of Rev. Ames's church.

February 12th 2019

Previously, with my thoughts focused on Lila Ames I included an image from George Henry Boughton, and here is another that may very well be seen as representative of the many on a quest for grace and salva-

Chapter 5

*Remembering race and
hate in 1950s America...*

...as portrayed in *Home*. This middle book of the series is certainly the most political; offering a socially critical view of that immediate post-war decade, as “out the ashes of...” , these prosperous times are relativized by a simmering discontent as many old norms

are being questioned, and young men and women begin to come to the fore unencumbered by the prejudices of previous generations. I am especially thinking here about Jack Boughton's increasing despair at his father's ambivalence to the plight of black Americans and the rising tide of civil unrest. For example, whilst watching the Montgomery riots on the newly bought TV:

The old man said, "I do believe it is necessary to enforce the law. The Apostle Paul says we should do everything 'decently and in order' You can't have people running around the streets like that.

—"Home", Marilynne Robinson, Virago UK paperback ed. p. 102

And when Jack raises the matter of Emmett Till the following exchange ensues:

"[...]the Negro [...] attacked the white woman?" Jack said, "He was a kid [...]fourteen [...]he whistled at a white woman." His father said, "I think there must have been more to it [...]. There was a

trial.” Jack said, “There was no trial. He was murdered. He was a child and they murdered him.”

—p. 163

[These thoughts and more came to mind on happening upon [this particularly remarkable feature](#) put together by a team from "The New York Times"; both an interactive photo journalistic piece and a virtual reality video, exploring the legacy of the murder of the 14 year old Emmett Till in 1955 and the repercussions for a particular Mississippi community, for the greater civil rights movement, and more specifically the ways we (we all!) choose to, or not to, memorialize events of such (diabolical) magnitude and the very special role "place" plays in that remembrance.]

Literature is one way of memorializing, and Marilynne Robinson incorporates in her writing the racial tensions and ambivalences (that were so often to evolve into acts of hate) remembered vividly from her years growing up and as a young woman. I dare say too she may admit her anger and sadness that so much remains unresolved to this day, and have



Figure 5.1: A sign marking where Emmett's mutilated corpse was found was unveiled in June, 2018 - and vandalized 35 days later. (Emmett Till Interpretive Center)

even, in ways unforeseen all those years ago, become exacerbated rather than tempered by the passing of time. One just has to consider the circumstances surrounding any number of murders perpetrated on predominately young African-American men by (predominately) white police officers, the Charleston church massacre in 2015, church burnings in the South, to mention just a few. And then

there is the rhetoric spewed forth from the echelons of power that has more in common with pre-Civil Rights society than the more enlightened times that many had envisioned.

[Whatever happened to the promise of a post-racial America?]

February 27th 2019

Chapter 6

Epilogue

Reading Marilynne Robinson's novels are much more than an interesting interlude, they are an intellectual adventure; and of the most unlikely sort, for the language is accessible, precise, but at the same time defies a simplistic reception, rather it encourages - demands even - deeper reflection. Remaining - hope, and belief in a gentler, kinder America so often lost amidst the divisive and ugly.

This ongoing *Lektüre* (Ger. a special sort of reading) of Robinson's work, and my conscious contem-

plation of many aspects taken from it, I see as just a beginning. In the future I intend delving more into her essays; some of which I have already read ¹ ². I should say, by the way, that I have not been at all irritated by Robinson's profound Christian beliefs being such an intrinsic element in her writing; a fair reading leads one beyond ontological or theological arguments to some universal moral truths, embedded in a liberal and socially conscious ethos, uniquely formed in the nation-building of colonial America, confused and diffused as it evolved - and now too often corrupted.

Marilynne Robinson has a vision of revival, for person and for community, that is kind and unprejudiced and wonderfully articulated in her literature.

¹ *The Givenness of Things: Essays* (Virago, 2015)

² *What are we doing here?: Essays* (Virago, 2018)