



# Marilynne Robinson's Calvinist apology in fiction and essay<sup>1</sup>

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[T]he requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

*Westminster Confession of Faith XX.2.ii*

Calvinism has not fared particularly well in the mainstream Zeitgeist of recent times even though a number of towering figures, the likes of Karl Barth or Paul Ricœur, have left ineluctable oeuvres for many generations to ponder. Indeed, Calvinism, in spite of being the most coherent and consistent formulation of the Reformation concept that there is no authority over conscience other than the Word of God, has come to be regarded as just another form of totalitarianism, alongside Nazism and Communism, as the notable historian of ideas Richard Webster claimed.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the reason has not so much to do with modernist individualism and scepticism being able to marshal stronger forces, but, hopefully, with Calvinism becoming reserved, self-effacing and inward-turning in the clatter. Whatever the case, it has recently found a major defence in the slowly, unpretentiously and thoughtfully unfolding work of the American novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson. It might sound rather benumbing, a misnomer, to dub an imaginative, belletristic enterprise as Calvinist apologetics, but reasoning, reasoning justifying religion, has a pivotal role in both the fiction and essay writing of Robinson. There is little doubt that her essays, in their understated manner, attempt no less than a re-furnishing of Protestantism, Calvinism in particular, with the intellectual poignancy it used to bear in Western thought and imagination. Several

of her essays are polemics for religion and against atheism. This is the very stuff of apologetics, Calvinist apologetics in her case.

We are justified, however, in using the term apologetics for Robinson's novel *Gilead*,<sup>3</sup> an epistolary novel comprised of a long letter written by an old minister preparing for death. The letter is to be given to his son, now seven years of age, upon his growing up. It contains a number of essays on various theological and philosophical conceptions arguing for religion. Nevertheless, the term apologetics seems to me to be applicable to the strictly fictional element in Robinson's writing, too. Robinson's two novels *Gilead* and its twin, *Home*,<sup>4</sup> read as though they were allegories, like mediaeval moralities, that is, fictional outworkings of Christian concepts ancient and modern (such as vicariousness, prodigality, personalism, and dialogism). Robinson's strength as a novelist, in fact, derives partly from her ability to fulfil our expectations of verisimilitude, psychological plausibility and authenticity.

In the modernist exercise since the French Revolution, it has been regarded as the business of young men to revolt against their fathers, debunk authority in general, and carry this effort to its logical conclusion – to question, that is, the authority and existence of God, which is itself a projection of authority into the cosmos. Freud's Oedipus complex and the myth of killing and devouring the primordial father was a profoundly insightful and highly influential formulation of this disposition, which made the debunking enterprise seem an inevitable necessity driven by the unconscious. While the Christian message of reconciliation with God the Father through the Son's vicarious sacrifice might have been an adequate refutation of the Freudian claim, it seemed for too many to be an answer based on sheer authority as an argument coming from without, from transcendent sources ungraspable to reason. (Though, as we all know, reason was likewise debunked by, among others, the Freudian enterprise itself, having a share in twentieth-century intellectual-political disasters.)

It is this central intellectual field that Robinson enters with her story of a Midwestern, middle-of-nowhere Congregationalist-Calvinist minister, John Ames. Here, she studies the father-son relationship in the case of the very bearers of the Christian myth of reconciliation (to use the word myth in Northrop Frye's sense of archetypal story),

three generations, that is, of pastors and their children. Robinson plays out the conflict of father and son on two different planes. The first is that of moral and intellectual dispute; the second is that of total repudiation. On one plane the epistolean minister explains to his son the kinds of conflict there were between his grandfather and father, his father and himself. The grandfather had visions, conversed with Jesus Christ and preached abolitionism and fighting from his pulpit with a gun in his belt in the Civil War; the father, returning from the Civil War, became a pacifist, and preached loving kindness to the dismay of the radical grandfather. Historically grounded and bitter, their conflict remained unresolved. The conflict of the father and the son revolves around their response to atheism, with the father finally losing his faith and effectually betraying his son, the testamentizing John Ames. These are vast conflicts with no solution and without reconciliation, yet they are transcended by way of a religious consciousness more or less shared, by way of forgiveness offered only subsequently, when it is too late. It is offered all the same, for all its qualifications, and spite is un-Oedipally forgone.

The repudiatory playing out of the father-son conflict lies in the drama of the eldest son of John Ames' best friend, a Presbyterian minister, who says *nay* whenever his father says *yea*, and who is a veritable prodigal. Much of *Gilead* and all of *Home* is a poignant and cathartic retelling of the central Christian myth of the Prodigal Son. Robinson has the prodigal return home for the two elderly ministers to treat him as they had preached, according to Christ. Jack, this prodigal son, had done everything to shame his father – stealing, fathering and not accepting a natural child, not coming home for the funeral of his mother – and now the ageing father, with his once brilliant mind and sensitive soul, is unable to respond to his son as he should, as his faith would require him to, as he would want to. Feeble, indignant and wanting only to die, he is unable to give his son what he turns out to desire: a blessing from his father. Instead of undoing it, he hurls Oedipal shame upon shame. Yet, Robinson, in an extraordinary tour de force of plot, has John Ames, the friend, the fellow Christian, the Christian community at its best, recognise what is at stake and vicariously bless his friend's son to let him start a new life.

What Robinson accomplishes in these two novels is to uphold

and assert the Christian myth of reconciliation in the face of the Freudian myth, yet without recourse to authority. For all John Ames' metaphysical flights, he is a reasoner. He inherited his religion and calling from his father; he had no visionary experience to found his faith on, all he has is the God-given faculty of his mind – uniquely his own, unique in all the universe – to respond to and appreciate creation, to discover the meaning of whatever and whoever is sent his way. '[T]o find meaning in trouble' is the rational definition of prophesy he provides.<sup>5</sup> He grounds his religion in his mind, in his seeking to make sense of his experience, not in any external authority, which he cannot and does not claim to have encountered. This intensely personal approach to a life of faith conceived of as profound mental strife makes a delightful fictional vindication of Calvinism for our time.

As mentioned, Robinson has pursued her apologetic endeavour in her essay writing, too. She entitled her portrait study of Calvin, "Marguerite de Navarre"<sup>6</sup> to be deliberately eye-catching, since a title with the word 'Calvin' in it would have been deterring to the modern reader. In this study she delineates the timeliness of the Reformer's thought. Her sustained argument has to do with 'the unworthy soul in an unmediated encounter with Christ, for all the world as if there were no other souls in the universe whether more or less worthy, as if there were no time, no history, certainly neither merit nor extenuation [...] the classic Calvinist posture',<sup>7</sup> which Robinson identifies with the rise of the modern, complicated self. The other reason for her odd choice of title is that she discovers this posture already in the poetry of Marguerite de Navarre, who received Calvin in her court and probably influenced him. Of course, Robinson's portrait of Calvin has nothing to do with the usual authoritarian, stiff-necked and thought-police clichés the Reformed Church I belong to has not always gone out of its way to dispel. Calvin, as she portrays him, has a mind of great breadth, profundity, and openness. Through his humanist and scholarly influence, Geneva became a thriving centre of intellectual and spiritual inquiry and a haven of freedom in a Europe immersed in a Counter-Reformation frenzy. He held far less sway over the city state than is usually believed. Moreover, for all the totalitarian and authoritarian claims, Calvin's influence, as Robinson justly observes, undeniably furthered democratic development, the institutions of the

rule of law and free inquiry – I cannot recall Nazism or Communism ever exerting this kind of influence.

Robinson also removes part of the blame for the burning of Servetus from Calvin, arguing that it was not Calvin's own decision alone, but a collective agreement on the part of the city, made guardedly, upon consultation with other cities around. This, furthermore, was the only major breach of morality by Calvin and Geneva, when burning heretics, massacring Reformers and sometimes Roman Catholics was routine elsewhere. To be sure, grave dogmatic concerns were at stake: excusing Servetus with his Arminianism would have cut the Reformation movement off from fifteen hundred years of Trinitarian Christianity, throwing into doubt the Reformation's claim to represent mainstream Christianity. Robinson is right, Europe was not yet ready for religious tolerance, and it would be anachronistic to demand it. Beautifully written and insightful, Robinson's essay has done a great deal to rehabilitate Calvin's reputation, though obviously, it does not attempt to offer a full and complete account.

In 2010 Marilynne Robinson went on to publish a major book-length essay entitled *Absence of Mind*,<sup>8</sup> carrying further the idea that the human mind is a unique faculty in the universe. She takes to task what she mockingly calls 'parascience', i.e. scientific journalism claiming philosophical import, as distinct from genuine science. She targets and refutes the kind of reductionism that insists that what we do and think, our decisions and judgments, our very selves are actually self-deceptions, delusions; mere biological or genetic functions or impersonal drives of the psyche. The most important disproof of these attempts is the record of insight into human nature we have from ancient times, the testimonies of culture and history. And thus Robinson calls for an account of reality that includes the 'felt life of the mind', 'the beauty and strangeness of the individual soul', and the 'world as perceived in the course of a human life, of the mind as it exists in time'.<sup>9</sup> Such an account will not shrink from raising the ultimate questions of old and will not at all disrupt scientific inquiry, as the most recent achievements of the latter have come round to re-addressing those very questions, though at a much higher level of complexity and scientific truth.

The concept of mind Robinson puts forward goes back to or is

corroborated by Calvin's own extraordinary exaltation of the human mind, even the minds of reprobates or unredeemed pagans. Calvin, in fact, often admired and drew on their intellectual achievements. Furnished with this concept, Robinson also contends with Freud, which she implicitly did in *Gilead* and *Home*. She has great admiration for the father of psychoanalysis insofar as his attempt to provide a full-fledged account of mental reality based on the unconscious was a response to the racial myth increasingly engulfing German thought from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Had Freud, as Robinson argues, seriously encountered Protestant thinkers, Jonathan Edwards for instance, he might have promulgated a more balanced concept of mind.

Robinson's extolling of the mind might seem to be an unqualified espousal of an Enlightenment confidence in rationality, which is certainly unwarranted in the light of both the investigations into human thinking in the past two hundred years and the experience of history. For all her serene wisdom however, her tragic sensibilities dispose her to a longing for the hereafter. This is manifestly evident in Ames' alter ego, the Presbyterian minister Robert Boughton. This combination of serene wisdom and tragic sensibility is her way of making modern sense of the arch-Calvinian doctrine of predestination, which, of course, has little to share with the hubris of Enlightenment rationality. As she explains in a stunning essay on confession, predestination is 'attractive to me because it makes everything mysterious. We do not know how God acts or what he intends toward ourselves or toward others. We know only that his will precedes us, anticipates us, can never look away from us. I think a sense of mystery, therefore reverence, is appropriate to all the questions at hand.'<sup>10</sup>

These brief musings may not have done justice to the many ramifications and beauties of Marilynne Robinson's imaginative Calvinist apology, but readers and prize juries<sup>11</sup> have responded very appreciatively to her writing, revolving as it does around Calvinism. Robinson is increasingly seen as one of the major writers of our time – all the more flabbergasting it is then to see the old hammer of doctrinal correctness descending on Robinson's efforts. Well-meaning and erudite, the theologian I. John Hesselink has written a highly appreciative two-part essay on Robinson's work, but could not resist

the temptation of dogmatic censure. Robinson fails to give Christ his due, she lacks the Christology she could have learned from Calvin, he says.<sup>12</sup> To this unfair criticism, Robinson responded by saying that she writes for a secularized readership who would be put off by references to Christ they perceive as trite. But she could well have answered also that Professor Hesselink, before demanding doctrinal correctness, might have first asked why, because Christ, as in the Old Testament, is the hidden hero of her fiction,<sup>13</sup> which, by the by, has no obligation to doctrinal completeness. The professor has failed to notice that nearly every word Robinson has written is a call to pay attention to what ministers have to say, who have every means to offer an all-round Christology, and so might even suspend, perhaps forego, the use of old hammers and take their cue from Robinson who, after all, in her modern idiom, sings with the voice of the psalmist, Milton and Emily Dickinson.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of the paper read at the conference “Protestantism, Knowledge, and the World of Science” at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, Budapest, 29–30 November 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Webster, *A Brief History of Blasphemy: Liberalism, Censorship and ‘The Satanic Verses’* (Southwold: Orwell Press, 1990), 32–34.
- <sup>3</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), see also my Hungarian translation, *Gilead* (Budapest: Magvető, 2012).
- <sup>4</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).
- <sup>5</sup> Robinson, *Gilead*, 233.
- <sup>6</sup> In Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 2005).
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

- <sup>8</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2010).
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.
- <sup>10</sup> Marilynne Robinson, “Credo”, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 36 (Spring 2008): 24.
- <sup>11</sup> (Without attempting completeness) Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *Gilead* (2005); Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion (2006); Orange Prize for Fiction for *Home* (2009); National Humanities Medal (2012); and nomination for the Man Booker International Prize in 2011 and 2013.
- <sup>12</sup> I. John Hesselink, “Marilynne Robbinson: Distinctive Calvinist” and “Marilynne Robinson: Calvinian”, in *Perspectives* (January and March, 2011), see: <http://www.rca.org/page.aspx?pid=7142> and <http://www.rca.org/Page.aspx?pid=7223>
- <sup>13</sup> Not so hidden when in *Home* Robinson calls Jack ‘a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief’ (331), which is perhaps the pivotal Messianic reference of the Old Testament (Isaiah 53:3). The prodigal Jack turning into a saving figure is one of the great profundities of Robinson’s fiction I have not dwelt on here.