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MARILYNNE ROBINSON, *GILEAD*, AND THE BATTLE FOR THE SOUL

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ABSTRACT. A widespread view among contemporary philosophers and scientists is that the soul is a mystification. For Marilynne Robinson, American essayist and novelist, the crux of the matter is not the existence of the soul in itself, since this cannot be settled by debate. Rather, she challenges the sort of evidence that her opponents—mostly basing themselves on the work of neuroscientists, and evolutionary biologists—deem to be decisive in determining the question. The soul, she claims, does not appear at the level of our genes and neurons. Rather it is encountered in the many works of art and reflection that human beings have produced from the earliest times. This paper will focus on one such document, Robinson's novel *Gilead* (2004), in which she proposes a vision of the soul closely allied to the notion of blessing. Blessing, in turn, is inseparable from metaphor, pointing us to mystery, an elusive reality whose presence we experience only intermittently, although it is always there. Although Robinson's several collections of essays provide needed context for the view of the soul displayed in the novel, it is our claim that it is the novel that truly turns the tables in the debate, inviting the reader to affirm or deny the soul's reality not on the basis of the pronouncement of experts but on the basis of the way a given language aligns with experience. The internalization that such a process requires reveals the soul in action. This paper is thus a reading of Robinson's writings on the soul.

KEY WORDS: blessing, metaphor, soul, mystery, reductionist science

Introduction

A widespread view among philosophers and scientists, disseminated both in the popular press and in scholarly works, is that the soul is a mystification. We are 'an assembly of biochemical algorithms', as John Naughton, the historian of science described it in *The Guardian* (2016). Philosopher David Chambers, quoted in *The New York Times* (2016), states that 'The scientific and philosophic consensus is that there is no nonphysical soul or ego, or at least no evidence for that.' This quotation might suggest that some physically grounded version of the soul might pass the bar, but as is clear from two

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philosophers who want to reinstate the usage of the term, it seems that the word 'soul' is more globally rejected. 'It is a commonplace today to treat souls as relics of an obsolete metaphysics' (Goodman and Caramenico 2013: 1). Marilynne Robinson, a contemporary American essayist and novelist, opposes this view. The crux of the matter for her is not the existence of the soul in itself, since this cannot be settled by debate. Rather, she challenges the limits on the sort evidence that her opponents—mostly basing themselves on the work of neuroscientists and evolutionary biologists—impose in order to determine the question. 'Mind as felt experience', she says, 'has been excluded from many fields of human thought' (Robinson 2010:13). 'It is, in fact, a very naïve conception of reality, and of its accessibility to human understanding, that would exclude so much of what human beings have found to be meaningful' (Robinson 1998: 3).

While it is possible to gain an idea of her position on the basis of her essay collections alone, it is in her novels that the soul, embodied in he activities of her characters, becomes more than an abstraction. In painting the inner life of her protagonists, Robinson insists on their relation to mystery. Mystery, as she presents it, is not a puzzle yet unsolved, but the individual's experience of a reality that constantly reveals itself in unexpected ways. We will thus first focus on one of Robinson's novels, *Gilead*, as an illustration of what she means by mystery. In the second part of the paper, we will set this understanding of mystery within the polemic that Robinson wages in her essays against reducing the human to algorithms or to genetic material. The novel, we claim, while an integral part of that polemic, conducts it on an entirely different plane, in which the very form becomes an argument in its right.

Blessing and Mystery

Gilead is told in the voice of John Ames, an old Protestant minister, recently diagnosed with a fatal heart condition. In letters addressed to his young son, Ames provides a family history but mostly attempts to disclose his way of thinking and acting to someone who will not have a chance to know him as an adult. In the course of his narrative, the minister often characterizes discrete events in his life as blessings. Even though the term seems transparent, signaling an unadulterated good entering into an individual's life, in Robinson's text, the nature of that good begets unending readings, the character's as well as our own, as if it were the key to a reality that, by definition, one could never exhaust. The confrontation with mystery begins with this very notion of blessing.

Before we start our exegesis proper, it behooves us to point out that despite her focus on individual experience, the subjectivity Robinson presents in *Gilead* does not exist in splendid isolation. John Ames encounters the

term through its frequent usage in his milieu. He grew up around his grandfather, who lost an eye in battle during the Civil War. His reaction, so often cited in his family as to become a source of play, was, 'I am confident that I will find great blessing in it' (Robinson 2004: 36). That same grandfather also associated blessing with 'getting bloodied,' the etymology of the word in English, which the grandson does not accept, but nonetheless acknowledges as part of his background (Robinson 2004: 36). Because Ames is an inveterate reader, his sense of the word transcends his family's usage and even that of his immediate community. The nineteenth century German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, for example, influences his understanding of the way the natural world becomes a source of symbolic meaning (Robinson 2004: 23-24). Yet, although looking for blessing is common currency in both his milieu and his intellectual upbringing, Ames's discovery of blessing remains completely tied to his very private experience, even when Ames communicates it to his son, and by extension to us, his readers.

Our first example of the inescapably individual encounter with blessing occurs early in the book when the narrator comments on a trip he took with his father when he was twelve years old. 'That journey was a great blessing to me', he says (Robinson 2004: 17). Since the rest of the paragraph is a description of his father, the meaning seems evident. 'I realize, looking back how young my father was back then. He couldn't have been more than forty-five or –six.' Ames then departs from the trip itself to reminisce about his father's later years. 'He was a fine, vigorous man into his old age. We played catch in the evenings after supper for years, till the sun went down and it was too dark for us to see the ball…' (Robinson 2004: 17). The good the blessing indicates lies in the companionship he developed with his father during the trip. Yet Ames places the sentence 'that journey was a great blessing to me', not only against what immediately follows but also against what immediately precedes it, and makes references to that trip throughout the novel. With each context, the content of the blessing shifts and widens, never leaving the original association with his father, but nevertheless metamorphosing from a containable and pat equivalence between one event and one meaning to something that permeates his entire life in visible and invisible ways.

'That journey was a great blessing to me' occurs immediately after Ames's description of his mother's rule-bound child rearing. 'Before I was born she had bought herself a new home health care book. It was large and expensive, and it was a good deal more particular than Leviticus… when I got home she scrubbed me down and put me to bed and fed me six or seven times a day and forbade me the use of my brain after every single meal. The tedium was considerable' (Robinson 2004:17). We can infer that the blessing of the trip with his father, in a desolate part of Kansas during a

very severe drought, broadened his horizon, introducing him to a life of passion and risk. In later references to the journey, he speaks of the intense feelings he experienced, shortly after the moon and the sun were in the sky at the same time, coinciding with the discovery of the grave they had come there to find. 'It was like one of those dreams where you are filled with an extravagant feeling… and you learn from it what an amazing instrument you are, so to speak, what a power you have to experience beyond anything you might actually need' (Robinson 2004: 48-49). Knowing such passion exists, beyond the narrow bonds of his mother's pedagogy, becomes an aspect of the blessing.

If we zigzag to a yet earlier part of the novel, we find out that the purpose of his father's journey was related to his falling out with his own father, who had abruptly left for Kansas, after the latest episode of a long standing dispute between them. Having learned that the old man had died, the narrator's father 'was set on finding that grave despite any hardship.' (Robinson 2004: 11) Although it was not part of his plan to risk his life and that of his son, in fact, they often had nothing to eat or drink in that parched, barren part of the country. Ames's father's desire to reconcile with his father, in whatever way, was so strong that perhaps this, and not merely his physical strength, is what the narrator refers to when he talks of the vigor of his father throughout most of his life. We find out later that when the father retires to Florida, the two of them in turn become estranged, precisely over the issue of the basic passion that animates them (Robinson 2004: 235-236). In yet another place in the novel, Ames returns to the journey and finds yet another layer of meaning in it. It becomes a metaphor for utter disorientation. 'I have wandered the limits of my understanding any number of times, out into desolation, that Horeb, that Kansas, and I've scared myself, too, a good many times, leaving all landmarks behind me, or so it seemed' (Robinson 2004: 191). That first experience of being completely without the usual supports, of enduring a test, permeates all the others.

'That journey was a great blessing to me' becomes many things, all tied to the mystery of time. Whatever is a blessing in the original moment does not reveal itself in one straight line, appearing now here, now there, as new events unfold, and as Ames reflects on them. A particular event passes and yet it remains present, itself, forever becoming more than just its initial meaning. This mystery of continuity in change, what the French philosopher Henri Bergson referred to as duration, becomes tied to the mystery of our subjectivity. We never know in advance what an event will mean, and the original event keeps on releasing new meanings while the person lives. 'My point here is', says Ames, 'that you never do know the actual nature of your own experience. Or perhaps it has no fixed and certain nature' (Robinson 2004: 95).

The second instance of blessing, although it preserves the mystery of time, puts emphasis on the utterly individual appropriation that turns event into blessing. Soon after his statement about the trip to Kansas, for example, Ames tells us about the loss of his first family when he was still very young. His wife, whom he had known since childhood, died in childbirth, herself very young, and the baby died very soon thereafter. He had been away, not thinking that the child would be born so many weeks early, but did manage to get back to hold his infant daughter before she died. 'I saw the baby while she lived, and I held her for a few minutes, and that was a blessing' (Robinson 2004: 17). Nothing in what follows is directly related. He mentions that his very good friend, another minister, had baptized the child in his absence but this is not the source of the blessing he describes. It is the very act of holding her while she was still alive that he considers to have been the gift. Later, he comes back to describe the experience more fully. The baby had opened her eyes and looked at him. Although he realizes that she was not examining him the way someone older would, he insists that it was a face-to-face encounter. 'I realize there is nothing more astonishing than a human face… You feel your obligation to a child when you have seen it and held it. Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help feeling the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it. But this is truest of the face of an infant.' He considers this realization to have been 'a kind of vision, as mystical as any' (Robinson 2004: 66).

A silence seems to surround what he means by blessing in this event. The first time he mentions holding his infant daughter, he does not explain at all what he means by calling the experience a blessing, and the second time, although he describes the experience in more detail, it still does not cede what makes it a blessing. He describes it as a mystical vision, no doubt because it is so inseparable from his own person, from a revelation specifically to him. The sense of responsibility he felt cannot be transferred. It cannot be generalized as a typical reaction to the death of an infant. In that sense, the silence surrounding his experience is reminiscent of that surrounding Kierkegaard's theological suspension of the ethical. Sensing that moment as a blessing is Ames's alone, and the way it extends in time is also his, reappearing as a unique responsibility every time he baptizes a child, and every time he writes a sermon, as reminder called forth by that initial experience (Robinson 2004: 20).

Because the accent in this episode is so much on the secrecy that accompanies blessing, on its inseparability from the way an event is internalized, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to turn the seeking for blessing into a formulaic discovery of the good that supposedly cancels out the bad. In the first place, as Ames is portrayed, the good does not cancel out the bad. Whatever the blessing in holding his infant child, it coexists with a life-long

suffering. He admits to an unrelenting loneliness for the nearly fifty years that followed the loss of his family. Even his troubled relationship with his now grown godchild, Jack Boughton, which haunts him for the last third of the novel, has something to do with the son who could not compensate for the lost daughter, and who, in abandoning his own child as a young man, only makes more bitter his own un-chosen loss (Robinson 2004: 88). In the second place, because one's reaction to events remains unpredictable, there is no one-to-one correlation between an event and the blessing in it. Some events may be too heavy to bear, as Ames hints when he contemplates the possibility that his godson could cause harm to the wife and child he has now (Robinson 2004: 190). As a result, one should not seek the suffering for the sake of the blessing (Robinson 2004: 31). The blessing retains its mystery, tied to the specific, unpredictable reactions of particular human beings.

In our third reference to blessing, perhaps more forcefully than in the first two instances, we see a meditation on the notion of blessing as such, and not just specific examples of how it works. It does start out, however, as a response to a particular event. Ames sees a young couple walking ahead of him on a sunny day after a heavy rain. The young man spontaneously jumps up to grab a branch of a tree, spraying both himself and the young girl, and they both run away laughing. The old man reflects, 'It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. I do not know why I thought of that now, except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash. I wish I had paid more attention to it... This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention we can give it' (Robinson 2004: 28).

The passage is saturated with metaphors. In fact, it is difficult to distinguish the literal from the figurative, so closely are they intertwined. Water is literally and symbolically a means of blessing in baptism, but here the water poured in the church ritual is a metaphor for the source of vitality and exuberance that the young people are exhibiting, as if it were the result of the rainwater from the trees. The young people's exuberance after the rain becomes a metaphor for the vivifying property of baptism at the same time that the water of baptism becomes a metaphor for the source of the young people's vitality. Either way, water, the source of life, becomes a metaphor for blessing. Might this not be because, as Ames experiences it, life is itself the great blessing undergirding every specific blessing? In any case, he associates life, as vitality, and as fresh beginning, as in that sunny day after the rain, and as in two young people experiencing their very youth, with blessing.

In the paragraph that immediately follows the description of the couple, Ames remarks on the difficulty of expressing this vitality in things and people in formal written language. It requires reverting to the spoken word, trying to capture emphatic intonation. 'I almost wish I could have written that the sun just *shone* and that the tree just *glistened*, and the water just *poured* out of it and the girl just *laughed*' (Robinson 2004: 28). We find references to this vitality, ordinary and yet remarkable, throughout the book. It always requires a peculiar attentiveness, as when, instead of focusing only the details of what his parishioners come to tell him, Ames sees in them the life they manifest. 'By "life", I mean something like energy (as the scientists use the word) or "vitality", and also something very different' (Robinson 2004: 44). What differs from scientific usage seems to lie in the specificity of that energy, centered around an 'I', which he compares to a flame or a wick (Robinson 2004: 44).

In meditating on the notion of blessing as a whole, as in the passage about the young couple, Ames invokes most directly the realm of metaphysics. We bathe in Being, Ames muses, but it eludes us (Robinson 2004: 178). At certain moments, his awareness of the vitality in which we participate intensifies but that awareness is not continuous. To indicate those moments of intensification, Ames often uses images of light, as when he says, contrasting his own understanding to that of his grandfather, that the latter had too narrow a view of what a vision is. One does not need to hear and see Jesus at one's right shoulder as his grandfather did, to claim access to a visionary experience. 'An impressive sun shines on us all', Ames says (Robinson 2004: 91). The grandson wants to understand vision as something more ordinary than his grandfather's conversations with Christ, although still exceptional. All of us can occasionally glimpse what he calls Being by simply paying attention to what is always there, symbolized by the impressive sun over us all. The imagery of the constant light in which we bathe, recurs when he describes dawn on the prairies of Kansas and Iowa. The beauty of the physical light, breaking in on such a huge flat surface all at once becomes a metaphor for the light at the beginning of creation. That light, which, according to Genesis, was created before the sun and the moon, has never gone away. 'But it has all been one day, that first day. Light is constant, we just turn over in it' (Robinson 2004: 210). Presumably, to have a vision, in Ames's terms, is to see that light.

To convey the constant presence that we do not ordinarily perceive, Ames refers to the moon in daylight. 'The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just as a candle looks beautiful in the light of morning. Light within light' (Robinson 2004: 119). The moon rarely appears in daylight, and yet it is there, even if we do not see it. But even a very bright moon against a night sky evokes a similar meaning for Ames, revealing the

darkness in which all things exist. 'I remember walking out into the dark and feeling as if the dark were a great cool sea and the houses and the sheds and the woods were all adrift in it, just about to ease off their moorings… This morning the world by moonlight seemed to me an immemorial acquaintance I had always meant to befriend. If there was ever a chance, it had passed. Strange to say, I feel a little that way about myself' (Robinson 2004: 74). We swim in a medium that far exceeds us, and that medium is both the world outside us and the world inside it. Occasionally, we come into contact with it, through an intensification of experience. This, ultimately, is what blessing is, in Ames's view.

Without any explicit transition, the light/dark imagery begins to refer not to the neutral being that surrounds us but to the love and goodness of a personal God. In speaking of the love he feels for his son, Ames refers 'to the splendor God has hidden from the world and revealed to me in your sweetly ordinary face' (Robinson 2004: 237). The splendor, the light evoked by his son's face, is not mere existence. It is love. Every specific instance of love, he says, 'is a parable of an embracing, incomprehensible reality' (Robinson 2004: 238). Even the light on the prairie mentioned earlier, associated with the light of creation, now becomes associated with the good. 'So often I have seen the dawn come and the light flood over the land and everything radiant at once, the word "good" so profoundly affirmed in my soul that I am amazed that I should be allowed to witness such a thing' (Robinson 2004: 246).

Trying to account for the reason that we do not perceive this light all the time, Ames toys with the idea that God withdraws at times and then returns to reinvigorate his creation. But then he thinks better of it. 'But the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like a transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness. Only who would have the courage to see it' (Robinson 2004: 245). It is surprising, given all the passages in which vitality is the ultimate mystery, that seeing it would require courage. After all it does not take much courage to see the beauty and purity of a day after the rain. But if the light ultimately refers to love and goodness, coming in contact with it is not merely aesthetic. One witnesses to their presence through being penetrated by them, expressed as one's generosity, as 'making oneself useful', a phrase that, in Ames's mouth, refers to the way of talking of his grandfather's generation. For them, it meant trying to remedy the social and political ills of their society, in ways that required sacrifice, as evidenced by his grandfather's lost eye in the civil war, and his eventual isolation after the war, when his fiery ways alienated others.

It is impossible in the end to reduce blessing, as *Gilead* presents it, to just one meaning. It is tied to so much that eludes our understanding—time in

all its unpredictability and nonlinearity, the vitality within everything that we both see and do not see, and the love or passion that animates us or fails to do so. To have a soul is to experience all these mysteries. It is not a matter of passive receptivity but of an activity much akin to reading. Seeking blessing is to see the nonlinear connection between events, requiring attention to the layers within surface details. In this sense, Ames's experience of blessing matches our own experience as readers. We crisscross the text, and see meaning coiled within details of wording and juxtapositions, just as Ames sees blessing coiled within certain events and their juxtapositions. In both instances, the layers we unpeel are deeply connected to our own person, and to the larger tradition that has formed us. The very fact of multiplicity, both of blessings and of readings, testifies to the excess that Ames describes metaphorically as the darkness in which we swim, or the light that is constant over us. Metaphor becomes inseparable from the activity of the soul since the associations it makes apparent are so compact that they preserve the hidden dimension while revealing it, like the moon in a dark sky. Blessing and reading, then, are not just the ability to relate things to each other horizontally, as it were. It is to the ability to see in two dimensions at once—literal and figurative. But this may not be accurate enough because it implies a separation. In *Gilead,* the literal is never just literal. Everything has the potential of becoming light within light. 'Light within light. It seems like a metaphor for something. So much does' (Robinson 2004*:* 119).

But blessing can be a double-edged sword, revealing our failure or incapacity to see what the surface reveals. This unresponsiveness unexpectedly brings us into the realm of ethics, in this case, the failure to respond to suffering across the social and political divide. One of the main themes of *Gilead*, in fact, is just such a failure. The story of Jack Boughton, is not only the story of the troubled relations between two individuals, Ames and his godson. It is the story of the troubled relations of an entire society. We find out toward the end of the book that Jack has had a child with an African American woman, that they consider themselves man and wife, but that they are unable to marry because of the laws against mixed race marriage in the State of Missouri, where they have tried to live together, despite discriminatory measures against them. Jack is now in his hometown of Gilead, where he and his partner could legally marry, but he is not sure that they would be allowed to live their lives in peace there. He discovers that the last African American families have left the town some time before, and that someone had tried to burn the African American church down. When he reveals to Ames that he has an African American wife and child, it is in order to find out whether his own father, old Boughton as Ames calls him, would approve of the union. Ames does not know the answer. He acknowledges that

the two older men had never had a conversation on this topic (Robinson 2004: 229-232).

Surprising here is that the town of Gilead had been a stop on the Underground Railroad, and that it was originally founded by abolitionists like Ames's grandfather, who came to Kansas and to Iowa from New England to stop the spread of slavery. Ames mentions parts of this history frequently, wishing his son to know about his great grandfather, and yet, he exhibits a peculiar blindness toward contemporary racial issues. When the African American minister leaves town, he never asks why (Robinson 2004: 36). He mentions the Church fire as one possible reason his grandfather might have left Gilead, but he also minimizes the arson. The fire was put out quickly and did very little damage to the property, he says (Robinson 2004: 36). When reading about the poor state of Christianity in the United States in an article upon which he comments at length, he simply skips the part that criticizes the Church's failure to come to grips with racial issues. Jack Boughton has to draw his attention to it (Robinson 2004: 147). Even though he begins writing letters to his son in 1956, he never once brings up the issue of segregation.

Only toward the very end of the novel does Ames speak of the lost promise of Gilead. Referring to the hope upon which the town was built, he quotes Zechariah. 'There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for every age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls of every age' (Robinson 2004: 242). This passage occurs just after Jack leaves Gilead, knowing that it is not such a place for his family (Robinson 2004: 242). 'This whole town does look like whatever hope became after it begins to weary a little, then weary a little more' (Robinson 2004: 247). Ames ends his letters to his son, on a note of hope. 'Well, as I have said, it is all ember now, and the good Lord will surely someday breathe it into flame again' (Robinson 2004: 246). The metaphor of light—the ember becoming flame-- comes back, as it does when Ames, facing his imminent death, refers to the final resurrection. 'I love this town. I think sometimes of going into the ground here as a last wild gesture of love—I too will smolder away the time until the great and general incandescence' (Robinson 2004: 247). His hope for resurrection after death is inseparable from his hope for the town's resurrection as a place of social action on behalf of peace for all. Which is the literal resurrection and which is the metaphorical one? In both cases, an infusion of vitality and love occurs, referring us back to blessing.

Robinson's novel does not provide any kind of systematic theology. The two dimensions of the darkness that surrounds us—vitality and love—lie side by side in the novel with little attempt to think about the relation between them, even though they are quite dissimilar. There is not much spec-

ulation either as to what triggers the attentiveness to blessing or blindness to it. Be that as it may, what we can be sure of is that, according to *Gilead*, the soul is that part of us that encounters what is hidden and yet present all around us. The concept of blessing, as deployed here, means experiencing layer upon layer of that hiddenness, without end. Metaphor becomes a counterpart to blessing, indispensable as a means of situating a fleeting presence in the midst of the unlimited possibilities.

The Soul between Religion and Science

Read strictly in this way, *Gilead* may appear to be an elegiac novel, mourning the loss of a sensibility in which words like soul, mystery, and even exegesis were central pillars of experience. Given Robinson's feistiness in her collections of essays, her multi-pronged attacks against those who see right through our own self-understanding to the biological markers that determine us, it is at the very least unlikely that when it comes to her fiction she is merely pining away for a lost universe. She insists, for instance, in contrast to those who wish to dismiss our subjectivity that 'the human mind itself yields the only evidence we can have of the scale of human reality' (Robinson 2010: 34). She does not mince words in her accusations of the claims of neuroscience about the illusory nature of our subjectivity: 'Neuroscience does not know what the mind or the self is, and has made a project of talking them out of existence for the sake of its theories which exclude them' (Robinson 2015: 77). *Gilead* continues this affirmation of our subjectivity by other means.

To situate *Gilead* within a combat of any sort seems at first counterintuitive. *Gilead* does not argue, and even though it is replete with metaphysical and theological reflections, they are far from systematic, as already mentioned. The novel eschews argument on principle, if we are to believe both its narrator and its author. John Ames tells his son that one should never engage in debate about matters of inward conviction, like the existence of God. 'So my advice is this—don't look for proofs. Don't bother with them at all. They are never sufficient to the question, and they're always a little impertinent because they claim for God a place within our conceptual grasp' (Robinson 2004: 179). But refusal to engage in producing proof does not mean there is no evidence for one's commitments. Robinson, in one of her essays, remarks, 'In fact, we live in a world where there is seldom anything deserving the name "proof", where we must be content with evidence' (Robinson 2015: 250). Robinson does adduce evidence, but through the formal properties of *Gilead* rather than through explicit arguments against the soul's deniers.

The very fact that Gilead is a work of fiction is one such formal element. According to Robinson, creativity is closely tied to grace, a free gift that lifts

off the weight lying on us (Robinson 2015: 273). Fiction, and art more generally, testify to the lifting of that weight. Something unanticipated comes as if from the outside, independent of the will of the author. 'The character on the page speaks in her own voice, goes her own way. The paintbrush takes life in the painter's hand, the violin plays itself' (Robinson 2015: 273-274). Describing the creation of her own novels, she says that it is 'a phenomenon I cannot will and, in an important degree, do not control' (Robinson 2015: 218). Robinson dubs this intrusion a contact with 'a second order of reality' (Robinson 2015: 274). We who are not artists know this contact as well, 'when we try something difficult and find that, for a moment or two, perhaps, we succeed beyond our aspirations' (Robinson 2015: 273). Artistic creativity becomes an intensification of our ordinary experience of being lifted above ourselves, of being surprised by a new feat that exceeds what we imagined possible.

This second order of reality, allowing for this expansion of possibility, recalls the Being Ames talks about in *Gilead*, which at moments becomes intensely present in an unexpected way. But presence is not argument. The moon in daylight does not argue. It shines. Its very independence from argument is its power, in the way that embodying a teaching is a stronger argument than logical proof. *Gilead*, for instance, if Robinson has succeeded in having John Ames 'speak in his own voice, go his own way', becomes a presence in our world. This presence is the kind of evidence that subtly turns the tables on the current debate about the soul. 'I do not share the common assumption', says Robinson, 'that religion is always in need of defending. What is needed here is a defense of Darwinism' (Robinson 1998: 52). Not to be on the defensive is an argument in its own right. It assumes self-evidence.

This is not to say that Robinson underestimates the weight of the reductionist model of the human not only on our culture in general but also on herself. 'As a fiction writer, I feel smothered by this collective reality' (Robinson 1998: 76). She is not sanguine that a novel like *Gilead* will suddenly shift the weight in favor of a culture in which the word 'soul' regains its seat at the table (Robinson 1998: 76). Given these circumstances, *Gilead* can be read as an act of defiance regarding the proper place to look for evidence about the soul. It expresses her confidence that the neo-Darwinian denial of our subjectivity, far from being a timeless truth, remains a product of culture just like *Gilead* itself. The neo-Darwinians see themselves as above the fray, but there is no reason to see what they say about the self as anything else but another possibility. Their denial of the self arises out of a specific cultural moment, in which religion was rejected as the enemy of authentic knowledge, a claim that some contemporary scientists have accepted uncritically (Robinson 2010: xiii). She disputes this view by pointing to the myriad

evidence on the other side—the human reflections from all times and places in which the soul has been discussed. Her own view, as she paints it in *Gilead*, does not match many expressed in those reflections. The very multiplicity, however, is itself testimony to the mystery that she wants to bring to light (Robinson 2010: 72). Writing novels such as *Gilead* is to make an epistemological argument. One can deny the existence of the soul only by engaging these documents, and at their level.

The second formal element of *Gilead* that silently responds to what she calls neo-Darwinist assumptions about the soul involves language. John Ames and the other characters in *Gilead* use Christian terminology, as inflected by American Calvinist tradition. In her essays, Robinson argues that those who dismiss the soul are largely unaware of what they are dismissing. Not only are they unacquainted with the traditions of thought around these terms but also they are not interested in becoming acquainted with those traditions. As a result, when they dismiss religion, they are dismissing not any actual religion but their own narrow idea of religion in general. 'The characterization of religion by those who dismiss it tends to reduce it to a matter of bones and feathers and wishful thinking, a matter of rituals and social bonding and false etiologies and the fear of death…' (Robinson 2010: 15). In using language that expresses a Calvinist sensibility in *Gilead*, she is not claiming that only that vocabulary captures the nature of the soul. Rather, she is emphasizing that whatever one's position on the soul, it must wrestle with a particular tradition that has elaborated a rich terminology, irreducible to schematic understandings.

Much is at stake, Robinson claims, in the language that we use to describe ourselves. 'Whoever controls the definition of mind controls the definition of humankind itself, and culture and history' (Robinson 2010: 32). The authority that biological reductionism wields in our culture is a result not only of the scientific technology to which its proponents appeal but also of the way that technology interacts with a certain language (Robinson 2015: 7). To refuse to use that language is in itself a refusal to yield the public square. It is also the refusal to yield to the narrow view of religion expressed in the quotation about bones and feathers. Religion is not belief, if belief is reduced to wishful thinking or blind faith, as it so often is. To see blessing, as John Ames understands it, is to read one's experience in light of a certain language, and language cannot be reduced to a proposition. It shifts and deepens in the course of a lifetime, and leaves empty spaces around it, indicating personal appropriation not completely accessible to others (Robinson 2015: 45). When individual gives his or her assent to that language, it means that it illuminates daily events, releasing layers of meaning. Of course, one can be mistaken. Assenting to a certain language to describe one's reality is a risk.

One of Robinson's chief objections to the debunkers is their desire to eliminate that risk by claiming objective knowledge about human beings, requiring no confirmation by the life lived but rather the pronouncements of experts. 'A central tenet of the modern worldview is that we do not know our own minds, our own motives, our own desires. And, an important corollary—certain well qualified others *do* know them' (Robinson 2010: 59). Yet these experts, when they make pronouncements about the self, have no more proof than anyone else, and, she goes so far as to say, considerably less. Who is to say that altruism, for instance, is merely a gene pool's desire to propagate itself or the survival of a given group, bypassing all the motives that the person who jumps into a lake to save a drowning child might give, if asked? 'All this is plausible if the experience and testimony of humankind is not to be credited; if reflection and emotion are only the means by which the genes that have colonized us manipulate us for their purposes' (Robinson 2010: 61). Speaking of a scientific theory that reduce altruism to a cost benefit analysis, she remarks that it 'can never be made subject to any test in a human population' (Robinson 2010: 63) Robinson is not claiming that we necessarily understand our own motives. She denies, however, that looking through us at our genes gives us any kind of proof as to our true motivations. 'And a reader of this literature has no more chance of testing the validity of their observation than of splitting a photon' (Robinson 2010: 63). In the process, that speculation turns us into objects that researchers view from a safe distance, obfuscating what is really at stake. A language becomes real, however, only once it has become internalized and begins to serve as a way of reading experience. A proposition is not an objective fact in itself, and so the proof always lies in the pudding, and the pudding is not the fMRI machine or the genome sequencing. It is the way the language of neurons or genes enters into daily life and people begin to act in accordance with its implications. We cannot get rid of our subjectivity.

Robinson's manner of embedding Christian vocabulary in the events the terms illuminate requires that the readers of *Gilead* engage their subjectivity as well. We are not being asked to join a Church, or even to assent to the conception of time, and self, and cosmos that the book is proposing. But, as readers, we become involved in an act of pitting proposition against personal experience. Even if we do not recognize 'energy' or 'vitality' or 'love' as the integral quality of all life, we still need to test that language, embedded in particulars, against the particulars of our own life to come to that conclusion. 'Reading', says Robinson, 'above the level of the simplest information, is an act of great inwardness and subjectivity… the soul encounters itself in response to a text...' (Robinson 1998: 9). Robinson's *Gilead*, then, rather than making us choose sides in a debate about the soul, engages us in the kind of activity characteristic of souls. As long as we keep reading—

both books, and our experience--and the two are related for her, we escape the objectifying gaze of the experts.

In taking a stand against neo-Darwinian claims about the human, Robinson is also taking a stand against a Christian tradition that she feels has been too heavily marked by its influence. She claims that, 'sadly, too many religious have abandoned their own language, accommodating to the utilitarian expectations of these demanding outsiders who have no understanding of the language or culture and refuse on principle to acquire any' (Robinson 2015: 212). Even theologians have ceded ground 'in order to blend more thoroughly into a disheartened cultural landscape' (Robinson 2012: 35). Part of this impoverishment is the abandonment of metaphysics (Robinson 2015: 190). According to Robinson's interpretation of Christianity, the soul is the perceiver of mysteries that reach into the very core of reality. We have seen that in *Gilead*, John Ames sees love as the all-embracing, incomprehensible reality of which every instance of human love is a glimpse (Robinson 2004: 238). Revealed in human interchange, it holds the entire universe together. Human love is the microcosm though which the macrocosm is revealed. (Robinson 2015: 107, 208) In her essays, this is translated as the fact 'that moral structures are essential elements of cosmic reality' (Robinson 2015: 84, 93).

Because first principles are at stake, Robinson's description is not on the same plane as the cosmology described in physics. But Robinson, perhaps contrary to expectation, finds an ally in contemporary physics. What attracts her is the elusive nature of the matter that physicists study (Robinson 2015: 8, 84). For example, black holes and anti-matter do not operate according to the laws of cause and effect, and do not fit into our notions of space and time. 'We now know that only a small fraction of the universe is in any sense visible, that the adjective "dark" is applied to most of it, meaning that the presence of unanticipated forms of matter and energy can be discerned or inferred though not "explained"' (Robinson 2010: 124). Robinson recognizes that scientists want to push back against this darkness to explain more and more phenomena, but those discoveries will inevitably uncover yet another layer of mystery. From this angle, the world physicists interpret resembles John Ames's experience of blessing. Unpeeling one aspect of it eventually leads to that elusive darkness within which we float.

It is worth emphasizing that Robinson does not equate the discoveries of physics with Christian theology. The only role she sees for the natural sciences, and it is a big one, is to free us from a conception of matter that takes off the table the experience of those infinite layers. 'Science is the invaluable handmaiden of theology in that it tells us how astonishing and gigantically elusive are the particulars of existence. And nothing is more unfathomable than ourselves…' (Robinson 2010: 198-199). A science like contemporary

physics frees us from understanding the operations of our mind as mechanisms we can break down and reconstruct along predictable lines. Since what we call the physical is only in four percent of the known universe (Robinson 2015: 228), might our interior life not be better understood as analogous to 'the strange ways of quarks and photons'? (Robinson 2010: xiv) Speaking about love in *Gilead*, Ames says of it, 'how could it subordinate itself to cause and consequence?' (Robinson 2004: 238).

Gilead can be read as a translation of the implications of physics for Christian theology. This does not mean that physicists themselves see these implications or that they need to. It is the job of religious thinkers. To an extent, Ames's speculations on mystery are given impetus by the scientific literature that Robinson has been reading, just as, within the novel, one of his meditations on blessing originates with his reading of a philosopher, Feuerbach, who disclaimed Christianity as revelation. In doing so, both Ames and his author build a bridge to other sources of authoritative knowledge than their religious texts, without accepting their authority in the realm of metaphysics itself. Read in this way, Robinson's portrait about the soul's encounter with mystery is not elegiac at all, but an immersion in a present in which religion and science are once again on the same page, allied in their understanding of infinite possibility. The point of the multiverse hypothesis, she says, a theory which may never be confirmed or denied, 'is precisely to enlarge and even to explode conventional and restrictive notions of the possible' (Robinson 2010: 122). The exploration of blessing in Gilead, in leading us to the unpredictable ways in which life reveals itself to us, becomes the theologian's equivalent of the physicist's work. It is only an analogy, but an analogy made possible by the very fact that we are made of the very material that physicists study. The lines between the figurative and the literal are again blurred.

Conclusions

We should see more clearly at this point that the stakes in the debate about the soul are hardly academic, for Robinson. If human beings are irreducible to what can be learned about them from the outside, their own self-understanding is key. 'The advance of science as such need not and should not preclude acknowledgment of so indubitable a feature of reality as human subjectivity' (Robinson 2010: 59). If this is the case, we need to immerse ourselves in what human beings say about their inner lives in order to garner at least some partial knowledge. 'As proof of the existence of mind, we have only history and civilization, art, science, and philosophy' Robinson 2010: 120). The documents thus at our disposal do not prove the reality of our subjectivity, or that that subjectivity is in contact with mystery, but they do provide evidence. 'I am not prepared to concede objectivity to

the arbitrarily reductionist model of reality that has so long claimed, and has been granted this virtue' (Robinson 2015: 9). The struggle to define the human remains a matter of risk and thus of passion. Looked at from John Ames's perspective, this passion is a form of blessing, giving us access to that vitality which is the very stuff of the universe.

But, surely, the passion is not an end in itself but a vehicle for 'making oneself useful.' It is to protest stripping human beings of their history and their culture (Robinson 2015: 12). To reduce our rich expressions to our gene pool's imperative to perpetuate itself is to get rid of our particularity as individuals. History has shown, she says, that those who we denied selfhood, as in the institution of slavery, were dehumanized (Robinson 2015: 15). To be engaged in the battle for the soul is to be watchful for signs of that dehumanization for, increasingly, the objectifying gaze is not just a matter of contemplation but also of projected manipulation through biotechnical means. If we are just an assembly of biochemical algorithms, why not improve on them, take evolution into our hands? Surprisingly, perhaps, Robinson does not focus much on these consequences, although she is aware of them (Robinson 2015: 233). For her, the very idea of dismissing our subjectivity is dangerous, even if no genetic engineering is performed, because it makes people discount their most intimate experiences, of love and beauty, of grace, as the realities they are. (Robinson 2010: 41)

Her stress on the importance of ideas has an old-fashioned ring. She maintains, though, that one cannot dismiss the power of ideas. 'We may never know the full consequences of the introduction of the potato into Europe… We can, however, read major writers, and establish within rough limits what they did or did not say… While the significance of such figures has its limits, it is also true that their influence has been very great indeed' (Robinson 1998: 11). The very authority of the neo-Darwinian model of the human rests on the power of simplification, on its claim to have solved the baffling question mark as to who we are. It is an idea that permeates daily life, as all authoritative ideas do. Understanding our behavior as that which promotes the survival of our gene pool has a way of shaping that behavior and is not a merely theoretical construct. Robinson is not claiming that this view has completely conquered our daily life. There are still too many remnants of older traditions. This does not mean that it has no impact at all.

If we take Robinson seriously, time is that mysterious medium in which instants that have passed come back in a new context, and perhaps no moment is ever really lost (Robinson 2004: 105). 'And memory is not strictly mortal in its nature, either. It is a strange thing, after all, to return to a moment…' (Robinson 2004: 162). Her novels and her essays are testimony to the fact that we need to write, think and act in a more expansive imagination of ourselves than the last pronouncements from reductionist science.

To cultivate that imagination, we need to immerse ourselves in the documents of all periods (Robinson 2015: 154), but also in the writings of contemporary scientists who expand our awareness of the mind-boggling mystery of it all.

Finally, if a novel like *Gilead* is not just an illustration of her points in her essays but a means of turning the tables in the debate about the soul and about subjectivity more generally, we need to pay more attention to her notion of metaphor. Metaphor becomes a key way of knowing. It is the sign and expression of a moment of intensification in a flow we cannot grasp in its totality. As Robinson presents it, the tool of the poet and religious thinker may be well suited to the physicist as well, given the latest discoveries about the elusiveness of matter. Since blessing and metaphor seem to be two versions of the same phenomenon in Robinson's *Gilead*, a religious notion so tied to an antiquated metaphysics becomes an unexpected but plausible metaphor for the way the material world reveals itself to us.

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