MARILYNNE

ROBINSON

When I Was a Child I Read Books

'No other writer in English can write wonder like she can'

New Statesman

Copyrighted material

Copyright

Published by Hachette Digital

ISBN: 978-0-74812-936-2

Copyright © 2012 Marilynne Robinson

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

Hachette Digital
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London, EC4Y 0DY

www.hachette.co.uk

Copyrighted material

Contents

Also By Marilynne Robinson

Copyright

Dedication

Preface

Freedom of Thought

Imagination and Community

Austerity as Ideology

Open Thy Hand Wide: Moses and the Origins of American Liberalism

When I Was a Child

The Fate of Ideas: Moses

Wondrous Love

The Human Spirit and the Good Society

Who Was Oberlin?

Cosmology

Notes

Copyrighted material

For my brother David Summers,
first and best of my teachers

Copyrighted material

Preface

Writing in 1870, Walt Whitman said, “America, if eligible at all to downfall and ruin, is eligible within herself, not without; for I see clearly that the combined foreign world could not beat her down. But these savage, wolfish parties alarm me. Owning no law but their own will, more and more combative, less and less tolerant of the idea of ensemble and of equal brotherhood, the perfect equality of the States, the ever-overarching American Ideas, it behooves you to convey yourself implicitly to no party, nor submit blindly to their dictators, but steadily hold yourself judge and master over all of them.” And he said, “It is the fashion of dillettants [*sic*] and fops (perhaps I myself am not guiltless,) to decry the whole formulation of the active politics of America, as beyond redemption, and to be carefully kept away from. See that you do not fall into this error. America, it may be, is doing very well upon the whole, notwithstanding these antics of the parties and their leaders, these half-brained nominees, the many ignorant ballots, and many elected failures and blatherers.” These passages come from Whitman’s long essay *Democratic Vistas*, a virtual hymn of praise to America, and to Democracy, words which for him are interchangeable.

It is true that the period after the Civil War was a low point in American political history. And it is true also that the country came through it all at last, fairly intact by the standards that apply in such cases. This is reassuring to consider, since we now live in a political environment characterized by wolfishness and filled with blather. We have the passive pious, who feel they have proved their moral refinement in declaring the whole enterprise bankrupt, and we have the active pious, who agree with them, with the difference that they see some hope in a hastily arranged liquidation of cultural assets.

It was Whitman’s faith that a great presiding spirit of Democracy would check, or correct for, the worst deficiencies of the civilization. It may indeed have been that ideal that kept us on course, or allowed us finally to find our way back to a better and healthier national life, then and in all the other periods in our history when our politics have seemed to be beyond redemption. Whitman says Democracy “is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted.” It is for him like the word “Nature” in that its history, therefore its definition, remains partial and tentative, though some valuable phrases and paragraphs have been added from time to time.

What if we have ceased to aspire to Democracy, or even democracy? What if the words “Democracy” and “America” are severed, and no longer imply each other? It is not unusual now to hear that we have lost our values, that we have lost our way. In the desperations of the moment, justified or not, certain among us have turned on our heritage, the country that has emerged out of generations of attention to public education, public health, public safety, access to suffrage, equality under law. It turns out, by their reckoning, that the country they call the greatest on earth has spent most of its history acting against its own (great) nature, and that the enhancements of life it has provided for the generality of its

Copyrighted material

people, or to phrase it more democratically, that the people have provided for themselves, have made its citizens weak and dependent. How the greatest nation on earth maintains this exalted status while burdened with a population these patriots do not like or respect is an interesting question, certainly. In any case, the return to traditional values seems to them to mean, together with a bracing and punitive severity toward the vulnerable among us, the establishment of a kind of religious monoculture we have never had and our institutions have never encouraged.

Law in seventeenth-century Maryland forbade the use of the words “papist” (Catholic) or “round-head” (Puritan), fighting words in the Old World whose effects were muted here by methods still familiar to us. We learned early to live with diversity, at least by the standards of the time. It is useful to remember that the terrible Thirty Years War (1618–1648) was fought among European Christians during the early period of European settlement in America, and that New England was largely populated by British Protestant refugees of religious oppression and warfare in Protestant Britain. What might look like homogeneity in nostalgic retrospect was felt and acted upon as intolerable difference justifying enormity in these cultures of origin. Our national ancestors generally managed, by the standards then prevailing, to avoid encouraging the same conflicts here. Now it is seen as un-American in certain quarters to reject participation in the bitter excitements that can surround religious difference. This is a crucially important instance of self-declared patriots attacking the very substance of our heritage.

We have seen bad times and we will see more of them, like any other human community. The question is always whether America is indeed doing well upon the whole, whether the civilization at any present time is strong and resilient enough to sustain itself despite the crisis of the moment, or the decade, or the generation, and despite the bent toward malice and nonsense that is always present anywhere but seems harder to resist during periods of crisis.

What has been the basis of the enduring health that has so far made for the stability and the dynamism of the country? It is always necessary to stipulate, though of course it should be assumed, that a statement like this one implies comparison with the human norm, not with Utopia. As societies go, we have enjoyed the kind of prosperity and advancement that is possible only where there is domestic peace. We have managed this at the same time that we have created a population whose origins are increasingly various. The canard that associates “heterogeneity” with conflict and instability would have to be reexamined if comparison were made between America and countries that claim to be homogeneous or insist that they must be. The modern history of Europe is highly relevant here.

We are blessed with the impossibility of arriving at a definition of America that is either exhaustive or final not only because of our continuously changing and self-transforming population but also, as Whitman says, because we have never fully achieved democracy. This is a very reasonable light in which to consider a mingled heritage, full of lapses and errors and therefore often said to be hypocritical or failed, even by those who see themselves as its defenders. By Whitman’s lights this process of discovery, with all its setbacks, is a splendid, metaphysically brilliant passage in human history. It is moved by the power of religious imperative because it honors and liberates the sacred human person. He says:

Copyrighted material

> There is, in sanest hours, a consciousness, a thought that rises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal. This is the thought of identity—yours for you, whoever you are, as mine for me. Miracle of miracles, beyond statement, most spiritual and vaguest of earth's dreams, yet hardest basic fact, and only entrance to all facts. In such devout hours, in the midst of the significant wonders of heaven and earth, (significant only because of the Me in the centre,) creeds, conventions fall away and become of no account before this simple idea. Under the luminousness of real vision, it alone takes possession, takes value.

Language like this makes clear how far our vocabulary has drifted over the generations. So far from the sense of radical uniqueness Whitman evokes here, identity seems now to imply membership in a group, through ethnicity or affinity or religion or otherwise. Rather than acknowledging the miraculous privilege of existence as a conscious being (and, considering the overwhelming odds against anyone's existence, the word "miraculous" is an appropriate superlative), it has reference now to knowing one's place, culturally and historically speaking. And this is taken to be a good thing. Whitman himself has been charged with rampant egoism for pondering and celebrating the centrality of the perceiver, that "hardest basic fact." It seems fair to conclude that certain of his critics have no grasp of physics or of metaphysics. In other words, in changing, our vocabulary has not always advanced.

Whitman was a Quaker and he wrote as one: "I say the real and permanent grandeur of these States must be their religion, / Otherwise there is just no real and permanent grandeur; / (nor character nor life worthy the name without religion …)." This is from *Leaves of Grass*, and so is this: "All parts away for the progress of souls, / All religion, all solid things, arts, governments, all that was or is / apparent upon this globe or any globe, / falls into niches and corners / before the procession of souls along / the grand roads of the universe." The vision of the soul, all souls, realizing itself in the course of transforming everything that has constrained it and them, finds expression in many writers of the period, prominent among them Emerson, Melville, and Dickinson, and in later writers such as William James and Wallace Stevens. For all of them creeds fall away and consciousness has the character of revelation. To identify sacred mystery with every individual experience, every life, giving the word its largest sense, is to arrive at democracy as an ideal, and to accept the difficult obligation to honor others and oneself with something approaching due reverence. It is a vision that is wholly religious though by no means sectarian, wholly realist in acknowledging the great truth of the centrality of human consciousness, wholly open in that it anticipates and welcomes the disruption of present values in the course of finding truer ones. And it is fully as well attested as America's old-time religion as is any exclusivist or backward-looking tradition, though our ill-informed nostalgias elevate what is called fundamentalism to that place, with the result that those who cannot endorse fundamentalist religion scorn the past while those who embrace it despise the present.

I have spent most of my life studying American history and literature. I have

Copyrighted material

studied other histories and literatures largely to gain perspective on this civilization. The magnanimity of its greatest laws and institutions as well as its finest poetry and philosophy move me very deeply. I know that there are numberless acts of generosity, moral as well as material, carried out among its people every hour of the day. But the language of public life has lost the character of generosity, and the largeness of spirit that has created and supported the best of our institutions and brought reform to the worst of them has been erased out of historical memory. On both sides the sole motive force in our past is now said to have been capitalism. On both sides capitalism is understood as grasping materialism that has somehow or other yielded the comforts and liberties of modern life. Capitalism thus understood is seen on one side as providential, so good in its effects that it reduces Scripture with its do-unto-others to shibboleth. The other side sees it as more or less corrupting and contemptible but beyond human powers to resist.

And no one offers a definition of it. But in these days when its imperium is granted by virtually anyone who attends to such things, our great public education system is being starved and abandoned, and our prisons have declined to levels that disgrace us. The economics of the moment, and of the last several decades, is a corrosive influence, undermining everything it touches, from our industrial strength to our research capacity to the well-being of our children. I am not the first to suggest that it is undermining our politics as well.

What if good institutions were in fact the product of good intentions? What if the cynicism that is supposed to be rigor and the acquisitiveness that is supposed to be realism are making us forget the origins of the greatness we lay claim to—power and wealth as secondary consequences of the progress of freedom, or, as Whitman would prefer, Democracy? After all, these things rose together. The air is thick now with "the people," a phrase that is meant to give authority to the claims and the grievances of those who use it. That it is often invoked in good faith one may doubt, but the fact that resort is had to it so insistently means that we are still good enough democrats to feel that ultimately authority and reason do and should lie with the people. Then the old impulse that lay behind the dissemination of information and learning, the will to ensure that the public will be competent to make the weightiest decisions and to conform society to its best sense of the possible should be as powerful as it has ever been, and more powerful because of the fragility of the contemporary world. Instead we have slack and underfinanced journalism and the ebbing away of resources from our universities, libraries, and schools. The liberation of the human individual as a social value required optimism, which it also amply justified. This loyalty to democracy is the American value I fear we are gravely in danger of losing,

Copyrighted material

Freedom of Thought

Over the years of writing and teaching, I have tried to free myself of constraints I felt, limits to the range of exploration I could make, to the kind of intuition I could credit. I realized gradually that my own religion, and religion in general, could and should disrupt these constraints, which amount to a small and narrow definition of what human beings are and how human life is to be understood. And I have often wished my students would find religious standards present in the culture that would express a real love for human life and encourage them also to break out of these same constraints. For the educated among us, moldy theories we learned as sophomores, memorized for the test and never consciously thought of again, exert an authority that would embarrass us if we stopped to consider them. I was educated at a center of behaviorist psychology and spent a certain amount of time pestering rats. There was some sort of maze-learning experiment involved in my final grade, and since I remember the rat who was my colleague as uncooperative, or perhaps merely incompetent at being a rat, or tired of the whole thing, I don't remember how I passed. I'm sure coercion was not involved, since this rodent and I avoided contact. Bribery was, of course, central to the experiment and no black mark against either of us, though I must say, mine was an Eliot Ness among rats for its resistance to the lure of, say, Cheerios. I should probably have tried raising the stakes. The idea was, in any case, that behavior was conditioned by reward or its absence, and that one could extrapolate meaningfully from the straightforward demonstration of rattish self-interest promised in the literature, to the admittedly more complex question of human motivation. I have read subsequently that a female rat is so gratified at having an infant rat come down the reward chute that she will do whatever is demanded of her until she has filled her cage with them. This seems to me to complicate the definition of self-interest considerably, but complexity was not a concern of the behaviorism of my youth, which was reductionist in every sense of the word.

It wasn't all behaviorism. We also pondered Freud's argument that primordial persons, male, internalized the father as superego by actually eating the poor fellow. Since then we have all felt bad—well, the male among us, at least. Whence human complexity, whence civilization. I did better on that exam. The plot was catchy.

The situation of the undergraduate rarely encourages systematic doubt. What Freud thought was important because it was Freud who thought it, and so with B. F. Skinner and whomever else the curriculum held up for our admiration. There must be something to all this, even if it has only opened the door a degree or two on a fuller understanding. So I thought at the time. And I also thought it was a

Copyrighted material

very bleak light that shone through that door, and I shouldered my share of the supposedly inevitable gloom that came with being a modern. In English class we studied a poem by Robert Frost, "The Oven Bird." The poem asks "what to make of a diminished thing." That diminished thing, said the teacher, was human experience in the modern world. Oh dear. Modern aesthetics. We must learn from this poem "in singing not to sing." To my undergraduate self I thought, "But what if I like to sing?" And then my philosophy professor assigned us Jonathan Edwards's *Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*, in which Edwards argues for "the arbitrary constitution of the universe," illustrating his point with a gorgeous footnote about moonlight that even then began to dispel the dreary determinisms I was learning elsewhere. Improbable as that may sound to those who have not read the footnote.

At a certain point I decided that everything I took from studying and reading anthropology, psychology, economics, cultural history, and so on did not square at all with my sense of things, and that the tendency of much of it was to posit or assume a human simplicity within a simple reality and to marginalize the sense of the sacred, the beautiful, everything in any way lofty. I do not mean to suggest, and I underline this, that there was any sort of plot against religion, since religion in many instances abetted these tendencies and does still, not least by retreating from the cultivation and celebration of learning and of beauty, by dumbing down, as if people were less than God made them and in need of nothing so much as condescension. Who among us wishes the songs we sing, the sermons we hear, were just a little dumber? People today—television—video games—diminished things. This is always the pretext.

Simultaneously, and in a time of supposed religious revival, and among those especially inclined to feel religiously revived, we have a society increasingly defined by economics, and an economics increasingly reminiscent of my experience with that rat, so-called rational-choice economics, which assumes that we will all find the shortest way to the reward, and that this is basically what we should ask of ourselves and—this is at the center of it all—of one another. After all these years of rational choice, brother rat might like to take a look at the packaging just to see if there might be a little melamine in the inducements he was being offered, hoping, of course, that the vendor considered it rational to provide that kind of information. We do not deal with one another as soul to soul, and the churches are as answerable for this as anyone.

If we think we have done this voiding of content for the sake of other people, those to whom we suspect God may have given a somewhat lesser brilliance than our own, we are presumptuous and also irreverent. William Tyndale, who was burned at the stake for his translation of the Bible, who provided much of the most beautiful language in what is called by us the King James Bible, wrote, he said, in the language a plowboy could understand. He wrote to the comprehension of the profoundly poor, those who would be, and would have lived among, the utterly unlettered. And he created one of the undoubted masterpieces of the English language. Now we seem to feel beauty is an affectation of some sort. And this notion is as influential in the churches as it is anywhere. The Bible, Christianity, should have inoculated us against this kind of disrespect for ourselves and one another. Clearly it has not.

For me, at least, writing consists very largely of exploring intuition. A character is really the sense of a character, embodied, attired, and given voice as

Copyrighted material

he or she seems to require. Where does this creature come from? From watching, I suppose. From reading emotional significance in gestures and inflections, as we all do all the time. These moments of intuitive recognition float free from their particular occasions and recombine themselves into nonexistent people the writer and, if all goes well, the reader feel they know.

There is a great difference, in fiction and in life, between knowing someone and knowing *about* someone. When a writer knows *about* his character he is writing for plot. When he *knows* his character he is writing to explore, to feel reality on a set of nerves somehow not quite his own. Words like "sympathy," "empathy," and "compassion" are overworked and overcharged—there is no word for the experience of seeing an embrace at a subway stop or hearing an argument at the next table in a restaurant. Every such instant has its own emotional coloration, which memory retains or heightens, and so the most sidelong, unintended moment becomes a part of what we have seen of the world. Then, I suppose, these moments, as they have seemed to us, constellate themselves into something a little like a spirit, a little like a human presence in its mystery and distinctiveness.

Two questions I can't really answer about fiction are (1) where it comes from, and (2) why we need it. But that we do create it and also crave it is beyond dispute. There is a tendency, considered highly rational, to reason from a narrow set of interests, say survival and procreation, which are supposed to govern our lives, and then to treat everything that does not fit this model as anomalous clutter, extraneous to what we are and probably best done without. But all we really know about what we are is what we do. There is a tendency to fit a tight and awkward carapace of definition over humankind, and to try to trim the living creature to fit the dead shell. The advice I give my students is the same advice I give myself—forget definition, forget assumption, watch. We inhabit, we are part of, a reality for which explanation is much too poor and small. No physicist would dispute this, though he or she might be less ready than I am to have recourse to the old language and call reality miraculous. By my lights, fiction that does not acknowledge this at least tacitly is not true. Why is it possible to speak of fiction as true or false? I have no idea. But if a time comes when I seem not to be making the distinction with some degree of reliability in my own work, I hope someone will be kind enough to let me know.

when I write fiction, I suppose my attempt is to simulate the integrative work of a mind perceiving and reflecting, drawing upon culture, memory, conscience, belief or assumption, circumstance, fear, and desire—a mind shaping the moment of experience and response and then reshaping them both as narrative, holding one thought against another for the effect of affinity or contrast, evaluating and rationalizing, feeling compassion, taking offense. These things do happen simultaneously, after all. None of them is active by itself, and none of them is determinative, because there is that mysterious thing the cognitive scientists call self-awareness, the human ability to consider and appraise one's own thoughts. I suspect this self-awareness is what people used to call the soul.

Modern discourse is not really comfortable with the word "soul," and in my opinion the loss of the word has been disabling, not only to religion but to literature and political thought and to every humane pursuit. In contemporary religious circles, souls, if they are mentioned at all, tend to be spoken of as saved or lost, having answered some set of divine expectations or failed to answer them,

Copyrighted material

having arrived at some crucial realization or failed to arrive at it. So the soul, the masterpiece of creation, is more or less reduced to a token signifying cosmic acceptance or rejection, having little or nothing to do with that miraculous thing, the felt experience of life, except insofar as life offers distractions or temptations.

Having read recently that there are more neurons in the human brain than there are stars in the Milky Way, and having read any number of times that the human brain is the most complex object known to exist in the universe, and that the mind is not identical with the brain but is more mysterious still, it seems to me this astonishing nexus of the self, so uniquely elegant and capable, merits a name that would indicate a difference in kind from the ontological run of things, and for my purposes "soul" would do nicely. Perhaps I should pause here to clarify my meaning, since there are those who feel that the spiritual is diminished or denied when it is associated with the physical. I am not among them. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul says, "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made." If we are to consider the heavens, how much more are we to consider the magnificent energies of consciousness that make whomever we pass on the street a far grander marvel than our galaxy? At this point of dynamic convergence, call it self or call it soul, questions of right and wrong are weighed, love is felt, guilt and loss are suffered. And, over time, formation occurs, for weal or woe, governed in large part by that unaccountable capacity for self-awareness.

The locus of the human mystery is perception of this world. From it proceeds every thought, every art. I like Calvin's metaphor—nature is a shining garment in which God is revealed and concealed. As we perceive we interpret, and we make hypotheses. Something is happening, it has a certain character or meaning which we usually feel we understand at least tentatively, though experience is almost always available to reinterpretations based on subsequent experience or reflection. Here occurs the weighing of moral and ethical choice. Behavior proceeds from all this, and is interesting, to my mind, in the degree that it can be understood to proceed from it.

We are much afflicted now by tedious, fruitless controversy. Very often, perhaps typically, the most important aspect of a controversy is not the area of disagreement but the hardening of agreement, the tacit granting on all sides of assumptions that ought not to be granted on any side. The treatment of the physical as a distinct category antithetical to the spiritual is one example. There is a deeply rooted notion that the material exists in opposition to the spiritual, precludes or repels or trumps the sacred as an idea. This dichotomy goes back at least to the dualism of the Manichees, who believed the physical world was the creation of an evil god in perpetual conflict with a good god, and to related teachings within Christianity that encouraged mortification of the flesh, renunciation of the world, and so on.

For almost as long as there has been science in the West there has been a significant strain in scientific thought which assumed that the physical and material preclude the spiritual. The assumption persists among us still, vigorous as ever, that if a thing can be "explained," associated with a physical process, it has been excluded from the category of the spiritual. But the "physical" in this sense is only a disappearingly thin slice of being, selected, for our purposes, out of the totality of being by the fact that we perceive it as solid, substantial. We all know that if we were the size of atoms, chairs and tables would appear to us as

Copyrighted material

loose clouds of energy. It seems to me very amazing that the arbitrarily selected "physical" world we inhabit is coherent and lawful. An older vocabulary would offer the word "miraculous." Knowing what we know now, an earlier generation might see divine providence in the fact of a world coherent enough to be experienced by us as complete in itself, and as a basis upon which all claims to reality can be tested. A truly theological age would see in this divine Providence intent on making a human habitation within the wild roar of the cosmos.

But almost everyone, for generations now, has insisted on a sharp distinction between the physical and the spiritual. So we have had theologies that really proposed a "God of the gaps," as if God were not manifest in the creation, as the Bible is so inclined to insist, but instead survives in those dark places, those black boxes, where the light of science has not yet shone. And we have atheisms and agnosticisms that make precisely the same argument, only assuming that at some time the light of science will indeed dispel the last shadow in which the holy might have been thought to linger. Religious experience is said to be associated with activity in a particular part of the brain. For some reason this is supposed to imply that it is delusional. But all thought and experience can be located in some part of the brain, that brain more replete than the starry heaven God showed to Abraham, and we are not in the habit of assuming that it is all delusional on these grounds. Nothing could justify this reasoning, which many religious people take as seriously as any atheist could do, except the idea that the physical and the spiritual cannot abide together, that they cannot be one dispensation. We live in a time when many religious people feel fiercely threatened by science. O ye of little faith. Let them subscribe to *Scientific American* for a year and then tell me if their sense of the grandeur of God is not greatly enlarged by what they have learned from it. Of course many of the articles reflect the assumption at the root of many problems, that an account, however tentative, of some structure of the cosmos or some transaction of the nervous system successfully claims that part of reality for secularism. Those who encourage a fear of science are actually saying the same thing. If the old, untenable dualism is put aside, we are instructed in the endless brilliance of creation. Surely to do this is a privilege of modern life for which we should all be grateful.

For years I have been interested in ancient literature and religion. If they are not one and the same, certainly neither is imaginable without the other. Indeed, literature and religion seem to have come into being together, if by literature I can be understood to include pre-literature, narrative whose purpose is to put human life, causality, and meaning in relation, to make each of them in some degree intelligible in terms of the other two. I was taught, more or less, that we moderns had discovered other religions with narratives resembling our own, and that this discovery had brought all religion down to the level of anthropology. Sky gods and earth gods presiding over survival and procreation. Humankind pushing a lever in the hope of aperiodic reward in the form of rain or victory in the next tribal skirmish. From a very simple understanding of what religion has been we can extrapolate to what religion is now and is intrinsically, so the theory goes. This pattern, of proceeding from presumed simplicity to a degree of elaboration that never loses the primary character of simplicity, is strongly recurrent in modern thought.

I think much religious thought has also been intimidated by this supposed discovery, which is odd, since it certainly was not news to Paul, or Augustine, or

Copyrighted material

Thomas Aquinas, or Calvin. All of them quote the pagans with admiration. Perhaps only in Europe was one form of religion ever so dominant that the fact of other forms could constitute any sort of problem. There has been an influential modern tendency to make a sort of slurry of religious narratives, asserting the discovery of universals that don't actually exist among them. Mircea Eliade is a prominent example. And there is Joseph Campbell. My primary criticism of this kind of scholarship is that it does not bear scrutiny. A secondary criticism I would offer is that it erases all evidence that religion has, anywhere and in any form, expressed or stimulated thought. In any case, the anthropological bias among these writers, which may make it seem free of all parochialism, is in fact absolutely Western, since it regards all religion as human beings acting out their nature and no more than that, though I admit there is a gauziness about this worldview to which I will not attempt to do justice here.

This is the anthropologists' answer to the question, why are people almost always, almost everywhere, religious. Another answer, favored by those who claim to be defenders of science, is that religion formed around the desire to explain what prescientific humankind could not account for. Again, this notion does not bear scrutiny. The literatures of antiquity are clearly about other business.

Some of these narratives are so ancient that they clearly existed before writing, though no doubt in the forms we have them they were modified in being written down. Their importance in the development of human culture cannot be overstated. In antiquity people lived in complex city-states, carried out the work and planning required by primitive agriculture, built ships and navigated at great distances, traded, made law, waged war, and kept the records of their dynasties. But the one thing that seems to have predominated, to have laid out their cities and filled them with temples and monuments, to have established their identities and their cultural boundaries, to have governed their calendars and enthroned their kings, were the vivid, atemporal stories they told themselves about the gods, the gods in relation to humankind, to their city, to themselves.

I suppose it was in the eighteenth century of our era that the notion became solidly fixed in the Western mind that all this narrative was an attempt at explaining what science would one day explain truly and finally. Phoebus drives his chariot across the sky, and so the sun rises and sets. Marduk slays the sea monster Tiamat, who weeps, whence the Tigris and the Euphrates. It is true that in some cases physical reality is accounted for, or at least described, in the terms of these myths. But the beauty of the myths is not accounted for by this theory, nor is the fact that, in literary forms, they had a hold on the imaginations of the populations that embraced them which expressed itself again as beauty. Over time these narratives had at least as profound an effect on architecture and the visual arts as they did on literature. Anecdotes from them were painted and sculpted everywhere, even on household goods, vases, and drinking cups.

This kind of imaginative engagement bears no resemblance whatever to an assimilation of explanatory models by these civilizations. Perhaps the tendency to think of classical religion as an effort at explaining a world otherwise incomprehensible to them encourages us to forget how sophisticated ancient people really were. They were inevitably as immersed in the realm of the practical as we are. It is strangely easy to forget that they were capable of complex engineering, though so many of their monuments still stand. The Babylonians

Copyrighted material

used quadratic equations.

Yet in many instances ancient people seem to have obscured highly available real-world accounts of things. A sculptor would take an oath that the gods had made an idol, after he himself had made it. The gods were credited with walls and ziggurats, when cities themselves built them. Structures of enormous shaped stones went up in broad daylight in ancient cities, the walls built around the Temple by Herod in Roman-occupied Jerusalem being one example. The ancients knew, though we don't know, how this was done, obviously. But they left no account of it. This very remarkable evasion of the law of gravity was seemingly not of great interest to them. It was the gods themselves who walled in Troy.

In Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which the poet in effect interprets the ancient Greek epic tradition by attempting to renew it in the Latin language and for Roman purposes, there is one especially famous moment. The hero, Aeneas, a Trojan who has escaped the destruction of his city, sees a painting in Carthage of the war at Troy and is deeply moved by it and by what it evokes, the lacrimae rerum, the tears in things. This moment certainly refers to the place in classical civilization of art that pondered and interpreted the Homeric narratives, which were the basis of Greek and Roman religion. My point here is simply that pagan myth, which the Bible in various ways acknowledges as analogous to biblical narrative despite grave defects, is not a naive attempt at science.

It is true that almost a millennium separated Homer and Virgil. It is also true that through those centuries the classical civilizations had explored and interpreted their myths continuously. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides would surely have agreed with Virgil's Aeneas that the epics and the stories that surround them and flow from them are indeed about lacrimae rerum, about a great sadness that pervades human life. The Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* is about the inevitability of death and loss. This is not the kind of language, nor is it the kind of preoccupation, one would find in a tradition of narrative that had any significant interest in explaining how the leopard got his spots.

The notion that religion is intrinsically a crude explanatory strategy that should be dispelled and supplanted by science is based on a highly selective or tendentious reading of the literatures of religion. In some cases it is certainly fair to conclude that it is based on no reading of them at all. Be that as it may, the effect of this idea, which is very broadly assumed to be true, is again to reinforce the notion that science and religion are struggling for possession of a single piece of turf, and science holds the high ground and gets to choose the weapons. In fact there is no moment in which, no perspective from which, science as science can regard human life and say that there is a beautiful, terrible mystery in it all, a great pathos. Art, music, and religion tell us that. And what they tell us is true, not after the fashion of a magisterium that is legitimate only so long as it does not overlap the autonomous republic of science. It is true because it takes account of the universal variable, human nature, which shapes everything it touches, science as surely and profoundly as anything else. And it is true in the tentative, suggestive, ambivalent, self-contradictory style of the testimony of a hundred thousand witnesses, who might, taken all together, agree on no more than the shared sense that something of great moment has happened, is happening, will happen, here and among us.

I hasten to add that science is a great contributor to what is beautiful and also terrible in human existence. For example, I am deeply grateful to have lived in the

Copyrighted material

era of cosmic exploration. I am thrilled by those photographs of deep space, as many of us are. Still, if it is true, as they are saying now, that bacteria return from space a great deal more virulent than they were when they entered it, it is not difficult to imagine that some regrettable consequence might follow our sending people to tinker around up there. One article noted that a human being is full of bacteria, and there is nothing to be done about it.

Science might note with great care and precision how a new pathology emerged through this wholly unforeseen impact of space on our biosphere, but it could not, scientifically, absorb the fact of it and the origin of it into any larger frame of meaning. Scientists might mention the law of unintended consequences —mention it softly, because that would sound a little flippant in the circumstances. But religion would recognize in it what religion has always known, that there is a mystery in human nature and in human assertions of brilliance and intention, a recoil the Greeks would have called irony and attributed to some angry whim of the gods, to be interpreted as a rebuke of human pride if it could be interpreted at all. Christian theology has spoken of human limitation, fallen-ness, an individually and collectively disastrous bias toward error. I think we all know that the earth might be reaching the end of its tolerance for our presumptions. We all know we might at any time feel the force of unintended consequences, many times compounded. Science has no language to account for the fact that it may well overwhelm itself, and more and more stand helpless before its own effects.

Of course science must not be judged by the claims certain of its proponents have made for it. It is not in fact a standard of reasonableness or truth or objectivity. It is human, and has always been one strategy among others in the more general project of human self-awareness and self-assertion. Our problem with ourselves, which is much larger and vastly older than science, has by no means gone into abeyance since we learned to make penicillin or to split the atom. If antibiotics have been used without sufficient care and have pushed the evolution of bacteria beyond the reach of their own effectiveness, if nuclear fission has become a threat to us all in the insidious form of a disgruntled stranger with a suitcase, a rebuke to every illusion of safety we entertained under fine names like Strategic Defense Initiative, old Homer might say, “the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.” Shakespeare might say, “There is a destiny that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.”

The tendency of the schools of thought that have claimed to be most impressed by science has been to deny the legitimacy of the kind of statement it cannot make, the kind of exploration it cannot make. And yet science itself has been profoundly shaped by that larger bias toward irony, toward error, which has been the subject of religious thought since the emergence of the stories in Genesis that tell us we were given a lavishly beautiful world and are somehow, by our nature, complicit in its decline, its ruin. Science cannot think analogically, though this kind of thinking is very useful for making sense and meaning out of the tumult of human affairs.

We have given ourselves many lessons in the perils of being half right, yet I doubt we have learned a thing. Sophocles could tell us about this, or the book of Job. We all know about hubris. We know that pride goeth before a fall. The problem is that we don’t recognize pride or hubris in ourselves, any more than Oedipus did, any more than Job’s so-called comforters. It can be so innocuous-seeming a thing as confidence that one is right, is competent, is clear-sighted, or

Copyrighted material

confidence that one is pious or pure in one's motives. As the disciples said, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replied, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible," in this case speaking of the salvation of the pious rich. It is his consistent teaching that the comfortable, the confident, the pious stand in special need of the intervention of grace. Perhaps this is true because they are most vulnerable to error—like the young rich man who makes the astonishing decision to turn his back on Jesus's invitation to follow him, therefore on the salvation he sought—although there is another turn in the story, and we learn that Jesus will not condemn him. I suspect Jesus should be thought of as smiling at the irony of the young man's self-defeat—from which, since he is Jesus, he is also ready to rescue him ultimately. The Christian narrative tells us that we individually and we as a world turn our backs on what is true, essential, wholly to be desired. And it tells us that we can both know this about ourselves and forgive it in ourselves and one another, within the limits of our mortal capacities. To recognize our bias toward error should teach us modesty and reflection, and to forgive it should help us avoid the inhumanity of thinking we ourselves are not as fallible as those who, in any instance, seem most at fault. Science can give us knowledge, but it cannot give us wisdom. Nor can religion, until it puts aside nonsense and distraction and becomes itself again.

Copyrighted material

Imagination and Community

Over the years I have collected so many books that, in aggregate, they can fairly be called a library. I don't know what percentage of them I have read. Increasingly I wonder how many of them I ever will read. This has done nothing to dampen my pleasure in acquiring more books. But it has caused me to ponder the meaning they have for me, and the fact that to me they epitomize one great aspect of the goodness of life. Recently I bought a book titled *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts, Volume One: Classic Formulations.* The title itself is worth far more than the price of the book, and then there is the table of contents. So far I have read only the last and latest selection, from *The Wandering Cherub* by Silesius Angelus, who wrote in the seventeenth century.

In the stack of magazines, read and unread, that I can never bring myself to throw away, there are any number of articles suggesting that science, too, explores the apophatic—reality that eludes words—dark matter, dark energy, the unexpressed dimensions proposed by string theory, the imponderable strangeness described by quantum theory. These magazine essays might be titled "Learned Ignorance," or "The Cloud of Unknowing," or they might at least stand beside Plato's and Plotinus's demonstrations of the failures of language, which are, paradoxically, demonstrations of the extraordinary power of language to evoke a reality beyond its grasp, to evoke a sense of what cannot be said.

I love all this for a number of reasons, one of them being that, as a writer, I continuously attempt to make inroads on the vast terrain of what cannot be said—or said by me, at least. I seem to know by intuition a great deal that I cannot find words for, and to enlarge the field of my intuition every time I fail again to find these words. That is to say, the unnamed is overwhelmingly present and real for me. And this is truer because the moment it stops being a standard for what I do say is the moment my language goes slack and my imagination disengages itself. I would almost say it is the moment in which my language becomes false. The frontiers of the unsayable, and the avenues of approach to those frontiers, have been opened for me by every book I have ever read that was in any degree ambitious, earnest, or imaginative; by every good teacher I have had; by music and painting; by conversation that was in any way interesting, even conversation overheard as it passed between strangers.

As a fiction writer I do have to deal with the nuts and bolts of temporal reality—from time to time a character has to walk through a door and close it behind him, the creatures of imagination have to eat and sleep, as all other creatures do. I would have been a poet if I could, to have avoided this obligation to simulate the

Copyrighted material

hourliness and dailiness of human life. This is not to say that books could not be written about walking through a door—away from what? toward what? leaving what wake of consequence? creating what stir of displacement? To speak in the terms that are familiar to us all, there was a moment in which Jesus, as a man, a physical presence, left that supper at Emmaus. His leave-taking was a profound event for which the supper itself was precursor. Presence is a great mystery, and presence in absence, which Jesus promised and has epitomized, is, at a human scale, a great reality for all of us in the course of ordinary life.

I am persuaded for the moment that this is in fact the basis of community. I would say, for the moment, that community, at least community larger than the immediate family, consists very largely of imaginative love for people we do not know or whom we know very slightly. This thesis may be influenced by the fact that I have spent literal years of my life lovingly absorbed in the thoughts and perceptions of—who knows it better than I?—people who do not exist. And, just as writers are engrossed in the making of them, readers are profoundly moved and also influenced by the nonexistent, that great clan whose numbers increase prodigiously with every publishing season. I think fiction may be, whatever else, an exercise in the capacity for imaginative love, or sympathy, or identification.

I love the writers of my thousand books. It pleases me to think how astonished old Homer, whoever he was, would be to find his epics on the shelf of such an unimaginable being as myself, in the middle of an unrumored continent. I love the large minority of the writers on my shelves who have struggled with words and thoughts and, by my lights, have lost the struggle. All together they are my community, the creators of the very idea of books, poetry, and extended narratives, and of the amazing human conversation that has taken place across millennia, through weal and woe, over the heads of interest and utility.

We live on a little island of the articulable, which we tend to mistake for reality itself. We can and do make small and tedious lives as we sail through the cosmos on our uncannily lovely little planet, and this is surely remarkable. But we do so much else besides. For example, we make language. A language is a grand collaboration, a collective art form which we begin to master as babes and sucklings, and which we preserve, modify, cull, enlarge as we pass through our lives. Some students in France drew my attention to the enormous number of English words that describe the behavior of light. Glimmer, glitter, glister, glisten, gleam, glow, glare, shimmer, sparkle, shine, and so on. These old words are not utilitarian. They reflect an aesthetic attention to experience that has made, and allows us to make, pleasing distinctions among, say, a candle flame, the sun at its zenith, and the refraction of light by a drop of rain. How were these words coined and retained, and how have they been preserved through generations, so that English-speaking people use them with the precision necessary to preserving them? None of this can be ascribed to conscious choice on the part of anyone, but somehow the language created, so to speak, a prism through which light passes, by means of which its qualities are arrayed. One of the pleasures of writing is that so often I know that there is in fact a word that is perfect for the use I want to put it to, and when I summon it it comes, though I might not have thought of it for years. And then I think, somewhere someone was the first person to use that word. Then how did it make its way into the language, and how did it retain the specificity that makes it perfect for this present use? Language is profoundly communal, and in the mere fact of speaking, then writing, a wealth of language

Copyrighted material

sympathy and identification are only allowable within certain limits. I am convinced that the broadest possible exercise of imagination is the thing most conducive to human health, individual and global.

In fact, we in America have done pretty well. By human standards, which admittedly are low. That we have done relatively well, I submit, is due to the fact that we have many overlapping communities and that most of us identify with a number of them. I identify with my congregation, with my denomination, with Christianity, with the customs and institutions that express the human capacity for reverence, allowing for turbulence within these groups and phenomena. Since we are human beings, turbulence is to be expected. If the effect of turbulence is to drive me or anyone back on some narrower definition of identity, then the moderating effects of broader identification are lost. And this destroys every community—not only through outright suppression or conflict. Those who seemingly win are damaged inwardly and insidiously because they have betrayed the better nature and the highest teaching of their community in descending to exclusion, suppression, or violence. Those of us who accept a historical tradition find ourselves feeling burdened by its errors and excesses, especially when we are pressed to make some account of them. I would suggest that those who reject the old traditions on these grounds are refusing to accept the fact that the tragic mystery of human nature has by no means played itself out, and that wisdom, which is almost always another name for humility, lies in accepting one's own inevitable share in human fallibility.

I am a little sensitive on this point because another identification I hold passionately is with the academic community, which has its fair share of skeptics and agnostics, some of whom are well enough informed historically to mention Michael Servetus from time to time, to make an occasional offhand remark about the Thirty Years War. On all sorts of grounds I would go to the barricades to defend their right to make me uncomfortable, of course. They have caused me to ponder many things, to my great benefit. There are many examples now of friction between the extremes of these communities, and when it takes the form of radical opposition of either to the other the result is a decline from the humane standards that at best dignify them both. This university is an instance of the fact that they grew up together.

There are excitements that come with abandoning the constraints of moderation and reasonableness. Those whose work it is to sustain the endless palaver of radio and television increasingly stimulate these excitements. No great wonder if they are bored, or if they suspect their audiences might be. But the effect of this marketing of rancor has unquestionably been to turn debate or controversy increasingly into a form of tribal warfare, harming the national community and risking always greater harm. I think it is reasonable to wonder whether democracy can survive in this atmosphere. Democracy, in its essence and genius, is imaginative love for and identification with a community with which, much of the time and in many ways, one may be in profound disagreement.

Democracy wrote itself some interesting history in the second half of the last century. When I was in high school, there were essentially three choices available to a bright girl like myself. I could be a teacher, I could be a nurse, or I could be a homemaker. My chemistry teacher was so sure I would finally be a nurse that he gave me much better grades than I had earned, so that this path would not be closed to me. And my unknown in the final exam was sodium chloride. But my

Copyrighted material