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All That

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Garrity:
Henry
Kissinger

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Bridges:
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Cheryl
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Franzen

Joseph
Epstein:
Isaiah
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Samuelson:
Hamilton
on
Broadway

David P.
Goldman:
Flailing
Abroad

Mark
Bauerlein:
Queer
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Kries:
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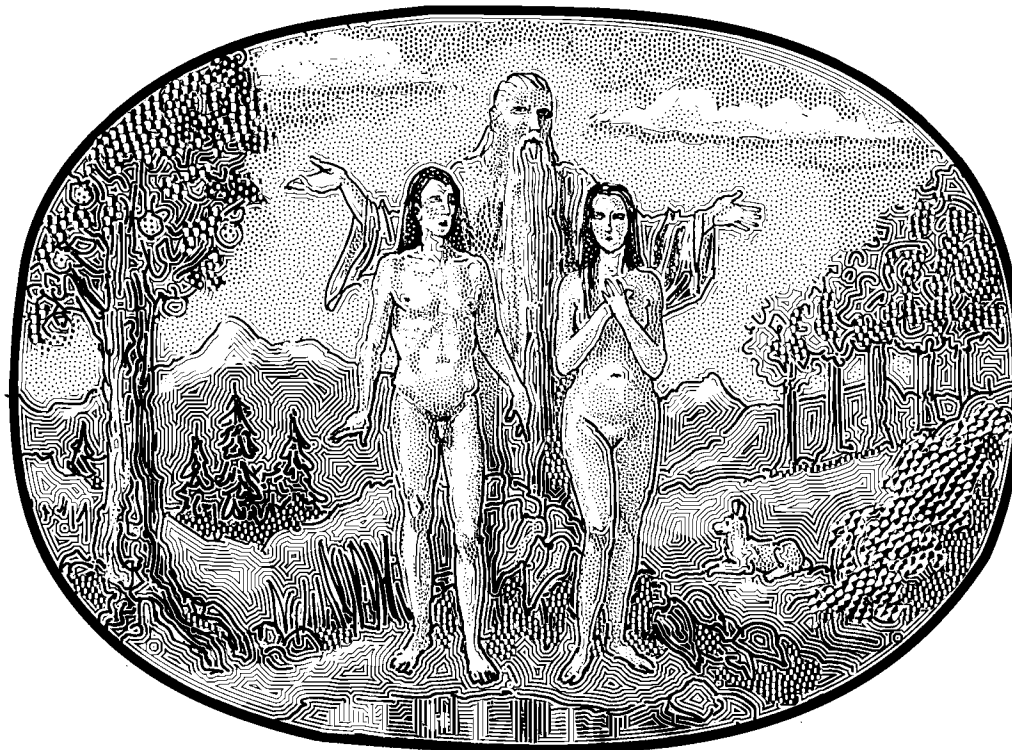
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Novelist and Calvinist

The Givenness of Things: Essays, by Marilynne Robinson.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 304 pages, \$26



Genesis, Chapter One

From the hour that, early in this century at the urging of our college librarian, I entered Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2004), the first of a trilogy with *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014) still to come, I knew that I'd found a great contemporary writer. Although I'm an indiscriminate lover of fiction, from airport blockbusters to *War and Peace*, I've always been eager to understand that truly distinct class, the classics. Here's my list of features that mark great fiction writing:

(1) *The anti-heroes have their own moment of redemptive goodness.* As in *Paradise Lost*, even the devil gets his due. Satan "stood...stupidly good" within sight of Eve in paradise.

(2) *The fates of these actions begin to matter:* what is Iowa's Gilead to me or I (a German Jew grown up in Brooklyn) to Gilead? And yet I've woken up at night wondering: will Jack be with Lila?

(3) *As the story approaches one of its culminations the reader becomes anxious for the author.* Can this come off? And behold! Who'd have thought it would be like this, and yet, how else

could it have been? As in Thomas Mann's Joseph novels, the grand resolution, the brothers' arrival in Joseph's Egypt, a Biblical scene indistinct to us before, is now documented for good.

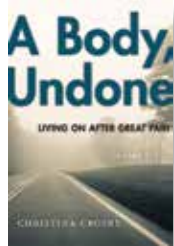
(4) *The tale may pretend to make itself up as it goes, but in truth its author has conceived it from its end backward.* As certain theologians reconcile human freedom with God's omniscience by understanding Him not as driving events causally forward from the beginning of time but as contemplating them backwards permissively from the end of days, so the earthly god of novels, the author, knows the outcome of a novel's events and the afterlife of its people, and by these the story is back-lit. As in her letters Jane Austen gives information about Emma's living arrangements beyond her marriage to Mr. Knightley, and I would bet she knew it before she began to write. Great writers leave much unsaid, but they don't turn their creatures over to terminal indeterminacy; they know the outcome before going in.

(5) *Great novels are philosophical,* some explicitly so, like George Eliot's *Middlemarch*,

most implicitly, namely in setting out their worlds as through and through significant, as thought-inducing. I here mean "philosophy" not as a professional pursuit but as the human urge to get to the bottom of things, the former being to the latter as coming to survey some rural real estate with a theodolite in hand is to taking a morning walk in a spring meadow with your senses alive.

To my mind, Marilynne Robinson's three novels bear all these marks in plus and overplus. As in real, ordinary life, nothing much happens in these books, but that unspectacular little shimmers with significance, which the simple language in its colloquial American beauty conveys with piercing accuracy. And whether she tells how it all came out or not, we're sure that it did as it must.

Yet as she herself says, she lives the double life of a novelist and a scholar. As a scholar she is the author of books of essays, of which the latest has the lovely title *The Givenness of Things*. "Givenness" implies both God's gifts,



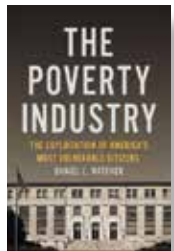
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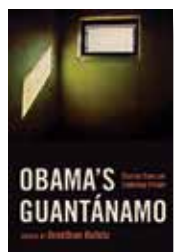
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bestowals of sheer existence to be apprehended by laypeople, and *data*, “givens” (plural of Latin *datum*), facts behind existence to be revealed by scientists. Her—late-found—theological learning, which bears the marks of not having been attained in fulfillment of any professional requirement—“I really *am* a Calvinist”—illuminates her writing in both realms.

us of the two pastors whose parallel lives are the armature of the Gilead trilogy, the one whom, I suspect, she loves the better, John Ames, sees what the 18th-century Calvinist theologian whom she also loves, Jonathan Edwards, saw: the cause of a rainbow, the sun shining full upon drops of rain from heaven for Edwards and drops dispersed by a sprinkler for Ames. So too a remarkable feature of *The Giveness of Things*, that science is understood as an aid—even a savior—rather than an enemy of faith, seems to be, if not derived from, at least supported by Edwards. The primary guiding texts, preferred over Edwards's writings, are however John Calvin's own. I teach at a—secular—school in which selections from Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are required reading for us all, and so I am bound to respect this classical work, but I can't take to its severity, as anyone could to Edwards's charm—my deficiency as a non-Christian.

But are the novelist and the essayist really one? Is the novelist, who is essentially sweet-tempered, who is generous to all her characters and makes them matter, who is imaginatively fulfilling and not given to sloppy indeterminacies, whose story is fraught with the most humanly serious questions, and whose people ply practical theology—is that writer identical with the sometimes a little cranky scholar-advocate of the essays, who is learned, to be sure, but also impassioned?

Well, there are 17 of these essays, brief treatments of everything under—and above—the sun: “Humanism,” “Servanthood,” “Fear,” “Value,” “Experience,” “Realism,” to name but a few. They treat of everything from the glorious ordinariness of the world to the insurmountable injustice of society, along with some wonderfully Talmudic textual exegesis.

us a question becomes permissible of the learned essayist that would be grossly beside the point if asked of a true novelist: what are her politics? I have the sense that they are, in true postmodern style (of which her fiction shows not a trace) constricted: admittedly liberal in her outrage at social injustice (she writes as if no one in jail had done hurt to others), but conservative by background and

in her appreciation of the *given* (which is the literal meaning of conservatism: intense devotion to what is). But then again that same duality is to be found in the Lollards, the “poor priests” of the 14th century whom she admires, and their Bible-translating mentors.

They were populists, who tend to be both right-wingers in their love of tradition and defenders of the poor in their poverty and thus of the left.

A book of nearly 300 pages bristling with strong opinion gives ample occasion for cavil. But the spirit of argumentative refutation would just glance off a book so chock-full of right-mindedness. A most appealing example is her skewering of the materialistic postulates of neuroscience insofar as they foreclose inquiry into the soul. Yet there are certain terms that would, I think, have benefited from conversation with unlikeminded friends. I have the impression (how wrong one can be!) that these essays were essentially conceived in solitude.

So I'll end with some terms that might have worked differently in the book with more collaborative thinking-out, the kind that never crowds out ultimate thinking-by-oneself.

In the author's Christian world, where every creature is created individually by the Creator, radical individuality is to be principally cherished and by it human ordinariness is sanctified. Robinson is deeply interested in ontology, which she links with metaphysics, that is, in an inquiry into, and account of, such Being as is beyond nature and its basic study, physics. Among my colleagues it is a question frequently broached (and not unacknowledged by her) whether faithful theologians can in fact be uncompromised ontologists. At any rate, in the grand—originally pagan—metaphysical tradition, radical individuality is eclipsed by prior commonality: essence (*transcendent* Being) precedes existence (being *here and now*). This possibility, that human *commonality* is even more wonderful than personal *particularity*, seems to me to be suppressed in the essays.

A second cavil concerns not a missing possibility but an unresolved ambivalence. As a believing Protestant, Robinson is, true to the name, a protesting critic and consequently “subjective.” For her “the phenomenon of consciousness, rather than the objective cosmic order, [is] the central reality.” Accordingly, the philosopher who incarnates Protestantism, Immanuel Kant, the author of three “Critiques,” advances a cognition that goes out from the subject to form the world rather

than coming in to inform the soul from the world. Here is the problem: the very givenness of God's gift of the world as addressed to our receptivity seems at odds with the centrality of human consciousness in construing it. How interesting it would be to hear her working out this problem. Perhaps it is asking her to leaven her Protestant view with a pinch of Catholicism.

A last difficulty concerns too unprotesting a faith: an excess of belief in science. The root problem here is the trust in analogy and its poetic mode called metaphor. Imaginative scientists, eager to bring their difficult theories back to common understanding, invent enticing names such as "special and general relativity," which seems to throw nature on the side of moral relativism, and "(quantum) entanglement," which seems to gain physics entrance to the metaphysics of space and time. But while the philosophers' physical metaphors for soul matters are simply unavoidable, the physicists' philosophical analogies for quantified nature seem to me generally misleading.

They white out the mathematical context that would make nonsense of the application. For example, the trajectory of an event in Special Relativity is set into a so-called "absolute world" (the Minkowski diagram) which puts paid, if it does anything, to the notion that "everything is relative." And the space-time of entanglement does not immediately propel us into a deeper understanding of the space our bodies inhabit and the time our souls live in, since, when hyphenated, space and time are each no longer what they were when they were immediately experienced by us as separate. Hence I'm heart and soul with the author in thinking that at least an elementary knowledge of classical physics is a civic duty, as is an amateur's acquaintance with postmodern science, the theories that have gone past verification by sensory observation. I also think, however, that it is highly problematic to regard science, which, to be sure, transforms human affairs through technology, as explicating through its theories the human condition.

Two notions in particular which appear in *The Givenness of Things* seem to me questionable: One is that science is complex and that complexity is a cure for reductionism, the "nothing but" mode of explication. To me it seems, on the contrary, that science is reductionism, namely the description—analytical, formal, and complete—of everything in terms of the complicated interrelations among simple units. I think that such simpli-

cations are overcome not by more complexity but its cognitive antithesis, depth. Depth seeks for meaning-fraught simplicities in ways that are surely thoughtful but probably ultimately not formalizable and always at once persuasive and tentative.

Another questionable notion is that advancing science relegates past systems to the "out of date." Not so. They usually become localized to very small regions of the new world system. Thus we, as humans, live in a tiny sub-astronomical locale, within our own Euclidean geometry, where classical physics operates. The same holds for the subatomic physics that makes our classically causal world look big and in which we continue to carry on. That puts us, as does our privileged position on a planet located in a small strip of organic viability, in the perfect place to initiate the search into the near-infinite spaces above us and into the near-infinite realms below us. For our local geometry, in which our immediate environment and our cognitive constitution cooperate more simply than they would in Non-Euclidean spaces, seems to put us uniquely *in medias res*, uniquely placed for the inquiry into our Beyond. In fact, the author herself acknowledges our "providentially scaled" model of reality.

Ill end with two passages for which I simply thank her. One speaks of the "durance vile of rationalist thought," the very long prison sentence of a certain kind of simplistic or ideological thinking. I would go further: "Rationalist thought" is really a *contradiction in terms*.

Here's the other:

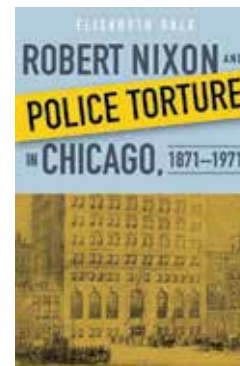
There is a word that fell like a curse on American religious culture—"relevance." Any number of assumptions are packed into this word, for example, that the substance and the boundaries of a life can be known, and that they should not be enriched or expanded beyond the circle of the familiar, the colloquial.

I would add to "religious culture" *education*, where the curse of relevance is currently doing its worst.

Eva Brann is a longtime tutor and former dean at St. John's College, Annapolis, and the author, most recently, of Doublethink/Doubletalk: Naturalizing Second Thought and Twofold Speech (Paul Dry Books). In 2005 she was the recipient of the National Humanities Medal.

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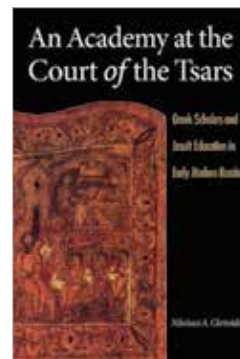
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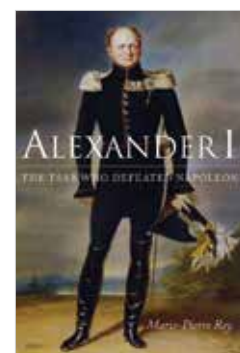
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