# Our Fantastic Condition: A Forum on *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel*

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> "And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts"
> —William Wordsworth[1]
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> "This world, this life!"—Reverend John Ames[2]
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> "Somehow, Ames's Christian beliefs seem to intensify rather than diminish his love for this life."—Ryan S. Kemp and Jordan Rodgers[3]

When I first heard, glossed in a single, simple sentence, the basic thesis of *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel*—"Robinson's fiction provides a stirring response to Nietzsche's famous critique of Christianity as life denying and world disparaging"—my mind was quickly populated with snappy retorts by imagined interlocutors. (I'm a philosopher, which can encourage becoming a twitchy, well-oiled objection machine.)

One disputatious figment argued: Of course, Christians might *enjoy* Robinson's novels, and even be *deeply grateful* for her quietly touching representations of religious life: Reverend John Ames, the central character of *Gilead*, truly is a lovely soul. But does Christianity *need* a 21st century novelist to establish that, contrary to Nietzsche, it affirms the world? The very first passage in Genesis repeatedly punctuates acts of divine creation with the refrain, "And He saw that it was good." What greater endorsement of "this world" could be conceived than beginning a sacred text with divine avowals of, not only image-bearing humanity, but of the stars and the sky and the swimming and creeping things? In brief, a fully-fledged doctrine of creation walked to and fro upon this storied earth many ages before any "world disparaging" critique glinted in Nietzsche's eye.

Another character somewhat curtly remarked: Here and there, a clever thinker infers—invalidly—that a belief in transcendence implies a "diminishment" of the immanent.[4] But "lesser" doesn't imply "bad": 100

thousand bucks is less than 105 thousand, but is, even so, an enviable salary. Simply put, the word "finite" is not an insult, certainly not within any faith tradition trumpeting an infinite God who has taken on human form.

A third specter raised this critical eyebrow: Nietzsche, who professes to be a "psychologist" more so than a philosopher, might suppose a religious tradition is defined not fundamentally by the content of its central tenets, but in terms of the underlying motives that prompt "commitment" to it. Why, though, play in Nietzsche's hermeneutical sandbox? Why, for example, let him get away with a grand unifying dismissal such as: "the Christian decision to find the world ugly and bad has made the world ugly and bad"?[5]

Pithy objections such as these could make us wonder how promising *Worldly Gospel*, written by Ryan S. Kemp and Jordan Rodgers, truly is.

## Robinson, Sociologist and Anthropologist of a Christian Vision

It's a very promising book, indeed. And in my view it tends to keep its—hefty—promises. As the contributors to this forum univocally testify, Kemp and Rodgers's book is a lovely, penetrating, and beautifully written book about Robinson's lovely, penetrating, and beautifully written novels. (Not to mention, their response to critics at the end of this forum is a *tour de force*.)

So, what, in particular, does their book accomplish?

First, though Kemp and Rodgers don't put things this way, they resoundingly make the case that Robinson's fiction fulfills one of Alasdair MacIntyre's central criteria for novelistic excellence. In, among other places, *After Virtue*, MacIntyre exclaims the profound philosophical value of long-form storytelling to practical deliberation and moral education.[6] A "moral philosophy" implies, he tells us, a sociology and an anthropology, and a well-wrought novel insightfully displays how a system of ideas, intently incarnated by its characters within in an imagined human community, helps human beings flourish, or fails to. In MacIntyre's words, "we have not yet fully understood," for better or worse, "the claims of any . . . philosophy until we have spelled out what its social embodiment would be . . . what would the social world be like" if the relevant outlook's theory-defining doctrines "came to be widely presupposed?"[7] In other words, when made flesh, does its moral vision call out, giving us powerful reasons to strive to embody it?

The subtitle of *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel* is "A Philosophical Account of Her Christian Vision." As this intimates, Kemp and Rodger's book is an attempt, seemingly the first book-length attempt, to disclose the underlying philosophy that guides Robinson's fiction, a "deeply,

unmistakably Christian" worldview.[8] Robinson's *Gilead* series slowly, quietly, insistently dramatizes the strain of progressive, Protestant, Calvinist thinking Robinson has explicitly championed in many of her non-fiction essays.[9] Imaginatively embodied, does her Christian vision urge upon us forceful reasons to go and live likewise?

Robinson's fiction has most certainly struck a cultural nerve. The "earnest religiosity" of many of Robinson's characters—not only of Reverend Ames, but of Glory, Della, and Lila—has resonated with a wide, highly varied readership, even with many otherwise religiously allergic readers.[10] One such bibliophile, a self-described "more or less fully paid up atheist," has written, "I have read and loved a lot of literature about religion and religious experience—Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Flannery O'Connor, the Bible—but it's only with Robinson that I have actually felt what it must be like to live with a sense of the divine."[11] This is high praise, and—note—it signifies Robinson has done precisely what MacIntyre asks good novelists to do. Her fiction evokes a way of life, for the better.

Robinson's deeply, unmistakably Christian vision is deeply, unmissably committed to fits of astonished revelry, revelry in manifold earthly glories, whose name is legion and which span from the beauty of a young boy's "bright eyes" and of the "flickering shade" and of another person's "virtue or happiness" to the sublimity of violent thunderstorms.[12] (For a catalogue of Ames's immanent celebrations, see Steven DeLay's forum essay.) As Kemp and Rodgers astutely observe, it is Ames's particular Christian commitments that have conditioned him to exercise an especially commendable form of "virtuosic attentiveness"[13] to the "luminous" and sublime elements of creation,[14] especially to God's image bearers. Even more, not only do several of Robinson's characters fulsomely love our shared immanent reality, their growing ardor for it "draws them back into life," like Plato's twice-freed prisoner, who has beheld the gloriousness of the Good Itself, and yet returns into the cave, whatever its foibles and hardships, and however hapless its many inhabitants.[15] Accordingly, witness Ames's all-embracing judgment: "I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try."[16]

Robinson's evocative, elevating fiction has shown itself, then, to bear a notable power. It can tempt an unsuspecting reader to take a second, deeper glimpse into the underlying system of thought it makes flesh.[17] This in itself is an extremely valuable achievement, independent of whether Robinson's fiction would prompt Nietzsche to turn over in his grave to nod.

**Why Nietzsche?**

All that said, Kemp and Rodgers have self-consciously chosen to frame *Worldly Gospel* as a book-length argument that Robinson's fiction "as a whole" represents a stirring response to Nietzsche's life-denying and world-disparaging accusation, and that it does so "on his own terms." Does the book live up to this lofty promise, too?

No doubt, that depends, in part, upon what we take Nietzsche's stipulations to be. Arguably, Nietzsche countenances no greater insult than to accuse some thinker of life-denial. Each of us must say "yes" to this life. But will just any old "yes" do? Kemp and Rodgers gesture at two further, related expectations: to meet Nietzsche's conditions, any global avowal must be, in the very least, "honest" and characterized by "a certain pathos."[18]

But honest in what way? And with what sort of pathos?

It's easier to answer the first question than the second. To do so, we might step back to observe that the grounds are extensive and grave for an overarchingly negative existential posture—whether resignation, fear, dread, or despair. Consider philosophical pessimism, the view of human life that makes "dismal predictions about what nearly all of us can expect to experience in our private lives and interpersonal relationships, about the welfare of our fellow creatures, about the character of our social institutions and global politics, and about our prospects for progress on these matters in the future."[19] The Christian philosopher Hud Hudson has summarized the wide-ranging, weighty, and (he thinks) "underappreciated" case for philosophical pessimism.[20] He asks us to consider:

> the plight of animals, the natural dispositions of human persons, our checkered history of social and political institutions, [the teachings of] the world's religions and wisdom traditions [who have each cried out, in one way or another, "how long, Lord?"], and humanity's [most affecting] achievements in art, literature, music, and philosophy.... [W]e live [whenever and wherever we live] in an exceedingly rough neighborhood and in very trying times.[21]

In light of such trenchant observations, *Worldly Gospel* urges each of us to ask this existential question: given the "more harrowing and anxiety-inducing aspects of the human condition,"[22] are you and I able to "love life without falsifying it?"

This captures Nietzsche's *first* condition. To warrant his hard-earned respect, a would-be yea-sayer can turn *absolutely no blind eye*. Any affirmation must emerge through an unblinkered confrontation with the whole

of existence, hard truths included. In this vein, Reverend Ames, who wretchedly lost a wife and child early in his life, acknowledges a related "duty to avoid naivety."[23] Callow responses won't do.

The *second* condition is more difficult to spell out. When Kemp and Rodgers speak of "the pathos at which Nietzsche's own philosophy seemed to aim,"[24] they make clear that the required sort of affirmation, an avowal which emerges through a conscious confrontation with the stark reality of "mortality and impermanence,"[25] is likely to evince a complex, profound sentiment towards existence, tinged with the tragic, suffused with a sense of loss. Such life-affirmation holds (as they elaborate in their response to Sára Tóth's forum essay) "two ideas in tension": "that the world is lovely and full of hope, but that it can (and will) shatter us."[26]

So, why, in the end, Nietzsche? The answer: Kemp and Rodgers are willing to play in Nietzsche's hermeneutical sandbox because, in their view, his basic analysis of our modern, existential predicament is accurate, even incisive, and his demands upon modern souls are legitimate. Importantly, according to their analysis, Nietzsche finds the temptation to life-denial especially powerful in modernity: "our *instincts* as denizens of the modern, thoroughly secular world are," as Nietzsche diagnoses, "life-denying."[27] In our modern malaise, there is a felt loss of meaning that reverberates through the layers of our souls, a sense of "fading moral horizons."[28] Given this loss of an accepted cosmic order—given, as Nietzsche puts it, "the death of God"—our culture suffers from (what Kemp and Rodgers helpfully call) a "default nihilism,"[29] which has burrowed into our hearts, like a worm into an apple core.[30] This is what life-affirmation must overcome. An adequate worldview must exemplify, Kemp and Rodgers agree, the eyes-wide-open pathos Nietzsche seeks, without denying the tragic elements of the human condition. Though an author such as Robinson needn't have Nietzsche explicitly in mind when she figures the world in her fiction, her bright, shining response must pierce through modernity's nihilistic temper.

Some responses do not. As Kemp and Rodgers remark, even some responses that attach the label "Christian" to themselves are, at heart, "world weary and depressed."[31] As examples, they mention forms of Christianity that are fundamentally moralistic, or politically opportunistic; or that are predominately built to protect a life of middle class comfort; or that are "purely consolatory," encouraging believers to close their eyes and heave most of their existential eggs into a future, heavenly basket. (Naomi Fisher's forum essay contributes to this element of Kemp and Rodgers's discussion.) Such impoverished "Christian visions," and the impoverished human lives they encourage, are capitulations to default nihilism. *Worldly*

*Gospel* grants, in the very least, *that particular* aspect of Nietzsche's "anti-Christian" judgment.

That particular aspect, but not more. In their view, Robinson's fiction promises to help us transcend our culture's deepest malaise.[32] In the final analysis, *Worldly Gospel* asks, "Is it possible to love life without falsifying it?" Kemp and Rodgers say "yes" to that: "Christianity can . . . muster powerful resources for fighting" default nihilism.[33]

Note, Kemp and Rodgers emphasize that it is Robinson's fiction "as a whole" that constitutes her strongest response, and not merely the life and thought of Reverend Ames. Sometimes, and in various ways, other characters in the *Gilead* series outshine his beacon.[34] That said, this quiet, mid-century Iowa pastor is certainly crucial to Kemp and Rodgers's argument about how best to respond to default nihilism. When Reverend Ames envisions creation, he does not witness a universe bereft of beauty and value, but wildly, rampantly replete with it. And, it must be said, his exuberant rhapsodies about "this life" do not give off any impression—however subtle our hermeneutics of suspicion—of a weak, reactionary, nay-saying stance. Like his own Father, Ames has beheld creation—even after it has been broken—and declared "it is good."[35]

So, what about the pithy objections of my imagined interlocutors? Their objections do raise important questions; the arguments they sketch do matter. But these phantoms begin to grow a bit pale in comparison to Kemp and Rodgers's rich, multifaceted discussion of Robinson's fiction. *Worldly Gospel* treats Nietzsche's critique of Christianity as a special challenge to people of faith living today, within modernity. And—as a careful reading of their book and of this forum makes clear—their discussion's richness validates this contextualizing framework and truly does help to clarify Robinson's underlying messages.

## Is the Sublime in the Air?

For the sake of argument, let's grant *Worldly Gospel*'s central claim. Let's suppose Robinson has adequately responded to the default nihilism perspicaciously diagnosed by Nietzsche, and does so on the several terms we've specified. (For what it's worth, no objections from twitchy ol' me.)

Is there a second explanation—importantly distinct from Nietzschean cultural diagnosis—for Robinson's timeliness? Is there yet another reason that many readers, even those who are "otherwise religiously allergic," have found Robinson's fiction especially gripping, perhaps even liberating?

Consider the following (charmingly frenzied) question, directed at Robinson by a *New York Times* journalist, Dave Marchese, during a February 2024 interview:

> I'm embarrassing myself, but [this is] going to compel a confession from me. One real motivation for why I wanted to talk to you is that there are experiences of transcendence that you write about in your books that connect people to God or the divine. I feel as if I have transcendent experiences: being on my train ride into Midtown Manhattan and seeing an egret . . . in the water of industrial New Jersey; listening to a song and being blown away that people can create that beauty; . . . experiencing the goodness of my family—any number of things. And I was raised with some religious instruction: I had a bar mitzvah; half of my family is Catholic. My father converted to Judaism, if you're wondering. But for whatever reason, my heart cannot osmosize religious feeling. What am I missing?[36]

Precisely what, we might wonder, is this journalist embarrassed about? According to my reading, about admitting, in a public, highly literate venue, that he has soul-stirring "transcendent experiences." Is that something to be particularly ashamed of?

It would be, I suppose, if we were to *presuppose* an empiricist, evidentialist model of rationality, according to which we ought to have "sufficient evidence" for our various beliefs, and any such evidential support ought to derive from sources countenanced by modern scientific thought, such as sensory observation and standard, commonly accepted empirical methods.[37] According to this epistemological viewpoint, if we are to count as "reasonable" people, we ought to marginalize any prospective beliefs that don't fit naturally within the arc of modern scientific thought.[38] Certainly, a purported experience of some aspect of "supersensible" reality—of transcendent goodness or beauty, say—doesn't fit especially comfortably within such strictures.

This raises the question: Is our modern intellectual climate characterized, not only by default nihilism, but by (what we might call) "default empiricism"?

The philosopher Charles Taylor thinks so. He speaks of our culture's prevailing "naturalist temper," which is characterized by a belief in the "obvious" and "greater" reality of the empirical. In his view, this temperament "permeates much of our philosophic thought."[39] We moderns, *duly* impressed by the power of modern science to make great advances in our understanding of empirical reality, seem frequently to infer that knowledge

can be gained *only* by such methods. This sort of presumption, as Taylor points out, places any attempts to discover knowledge of normative, practical, and moral matters, not to mention theological matters, under a "great epistemological cloud."[40]

As Taylor discusses in his 2024 book *Cosmic Connections*, the naturalist temper encourages a reductive impulse. Default empiricism goads a person, when she has powerful, seemingly sublime experiences—whether prompted by art, nature, ritual, or moral reflection—to worry that such happenings are merely "nice feelings." This ontologically abstemious spirit whispers into our souls that such experiences are illusions of some sort; they lack any meaning or value that is, as it were, "really there."[41] Instead, beauty is "merely in the eye of the beholder"; experiences of seeming value are "subjective," reflecting "something about the psychology" of the relevant person, nothing more.[42] Or, in the very least, this model of rationality places the intellectual burden—which is generally taken to be especially weighty—upon the person who would like to argue otherwise.

Taylor has chosen to take upon himself this particular intellectual millstone. *Cosmic Connections* is, among other things, an extended argument against the naturalist temper and the "disenchanted world" it validates. In his lengthy book, Taylor wishes to legitimize, intellectually, treating at least some "felt experiences" and "felt intuitions" as having a valid, even crucial role to play in our decisions about what to believe, ethically and ontologically.

With this "empiricist vs. non-" dialectic in the forefront of our minds, return to Marchese's blushing remark, his endearingly school-boyish joy in simply getting to speak with Robinson. And consider this proposal: Is there, in the cultural air "these days," an earnest, sincere intellectual curiosity about beautiful and sublime encounters? And is this intellectual curiosity about seemingly transcendent experiences animated by the question whether we might, in an intellectually serious way, regard ourselves as having epiphanies: what Taylor himself has called "epiphanies of being or beauty"?[43]

Notably, Taylor *anticipates* Marchese-style embarrassment. As he remarks, a "felt intuition" is, for several reasons, "hard to communicate to others."[44] The other person might not react in the same way to the phenomenon that so stirs your own soul: As *you* are brought to tears, or as your mouth hangs agape, *she* looks at you quizzically. You could worry, as Marchese does, that you will seem intellectually callow. Not to mention, in such instances, however open to transcendence you might happen to be, the epistemological and ontological questions often flood out more quickly than you can articulate them (with even a modicum of precision): Are such

experiences more than merely a "nice feeling"? Is the beauty "real," or a signpost to "something real"? Is there any sense in which such experiences are objective? Is the sublime an aspect of reality, an aspect which our "default empiricism" obscures or even conceals? Is Beauty itself right there, in the air, as it were? And if so, what would that mean, ontologically?

Is it not in this vein that Marchese asks, "What am I missing?" Otherwise put, "What might be *there*? And what might it *portend*?"

Two thoughts are worth mentioning in this context.

First, of no such epistemological or ontological nervousness is the novelist Marilynne Robinson guilty. She is most certainly utterly uncowed by empiricist, evidentialist epistemology. And she is anything but bashful about the transcendent. (As Kemp and Rodgers remarks, Robinson is, on the contrary, "unapologetically, even aggressively, Christian."[45]) In this way, we might see Robinson as though she were the undeniably smart kid in the classroom who, once she's expressed a profound but unusual thought that we've "all" been half-thinking, we can—relieved that our idea isn't "stupid" —speak up, too. What a relief such a thing can be!

Second, Kemp and Rodgers do broach these ideas in *Worldly Gospel*. They explicitly assert that it is Ames's Christian worldview which makes him willing to see "something there." And without much hand-wringing consternation, Ames displays an openness to constructing his ethical and ontological (even theological) outlook on the basis of trust in such purported epiphanies. Even more, Kemp and Rodgers wonder aloud whether the naturalist, empiricist, reductive mindset—which is represented in *Worldly Gospel* by Ludwig Feuerbach—"leads someone to mistrust their *best* experiences" in life (emphasis mine).[46] Akin to Robinson and Taylor, Kemp and Rodgers treat our most profound experiences of joy, which they describe as hinting "at the supersensible," as (among) the strongest grounds for a "refutation" of the naturalist temper and its restrictive epistemology.[47]

From these reflections, a "next question" emerges—a question raised, but not explored, by *Worldly Gospel*. What is the underlying anti-empiricist epistemology implicit within the *Gilead* series? *Urging us to trust* our "best experiences" is not equivalent to *disclosing* which model of rationality permits us to. Can Robinson's guiding anti-empiricist epistemological outlook be described overtly? (Is it, we might wonder, similar to the one developed by the avowed Calvinist philosophers who call themselves "Reformed epistemologists?[48])

### Default Empiricism and the Case against Default Nihilism

To sum up, I'm suggesting Robinson's fiction has a second cultural target, one that is "not quite Nietzsche." Marchese isn't, it seems, in a flight from anxiety-inducing nihilism. Instead, he's worried that treating seemingly transcendent experiences as (even defeasible) signposts of transcendence lacks intellectual credibility. To the degree Robinson's fiction is "responsive" to this particular epistemological anxiety, she's placed a bull's eye on the heart of our culture's "default empiricism."

This isn't to say we can't identify a highly significant connection between anti-empiricism and anti-nihilism. In fairness, Robinson's implicit rejection of an empiricist, evidentialist model of rationality is, arguably, tantamount to—a giant leap forward in the direction of—her Christian rejection of nihilism. As Kemp and Rodgers allude in their chapter on *Gilead*, Robinson's own fiction *figures a world* that is not bereft of value, but wildly, rampantly replete with it. And if you and I were willing to take her implicit, less-restrictive epistemology of transcendent experience seriously, we would come to take her anti-nihilism, and so her response to Nietzsche's "life-denying" critique, seriously, too. No doubt, Ames's unabashed openness to the transcendent opens him to his exuberant love of creation and its manifold glories.

Accordingly, one especially fetching element of Robinson's treatment of Taylor-style felt intuitions and felt experiences—an element *Worldly Gospel* articulates with great depth—is that her characters enjoy an especially wide panoply of luminous and sublime experiences: of the august power of nature, of beauty in "small" and "ordinary" things, of moral beauty, and on and on. These polymorphous experiences make for fertile ground for an especially rich emotional life: awe and humility in the face of the sublime; gratitude in response to our immanent world's manifold gifts; surprise at the wonders of creation; and joyous revelry in it all. On this theme, might I recommend a close reading of Kemp and Rodgers's remark that Ames's Christian outlook, given his willingness to "see" the world's legionary beauty, creates wondrous "feedback loops" within his life: "experiences of joy feed rituals of [virtuosic] attention which lead back again to" more experiences of joy.[49]

### Last Words

How impressed would Nietzsche be with Ames's willingness to treat his "best experiences," whether aesthetic or natural or moral, as validating his theological convictions? Would he dig in and deny the underlying

epistemology that treats doing so as reasonable or otherwise acceptable? Probably, yes.

Does this create another Nietzschean "stipulation" Robinson's fiction needs to meet? I'm not strongly inclined to think so. But before you answer, why not take a second glimpse, with help from Kemp and Rodgers's lovely, penetrating, and beautifully written book, at the lives of Robinson's central characters, to see whether or not these "quiet, boring characters" from rural mid-century Iowa seem to be examples of any particularly worrisome form of irrationality, or whether their ways of living and believing are worthy of far more intellectual respect than that?

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[1] William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798," *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 1797–1800, eds. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 118.
[2] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 9.
[3] Ryan S. Kemp and Jordan Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel: A Philosophical Account of Her Christian Vision* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).
[4] For example, see Martin Hagglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2019): "To be religious . . . is to regard our finitude as a lack, an illusion, or a fallen state of being" (6).
[5] Friederich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kauffmann (New York, NY: Random House, 1974), 130.
[6] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* 2nd ed. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 23.
[7] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 23–24.
[8] Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 6.
[9] For example, see *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1998). (Consider taking a peek at this review of the book: Roger Kimball, "John Calvin Got a Bad Rap," *New York Times*, February 7, 1999, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/02/07/reviews/990207.07kimbalt.html.)
[10] Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 6.
[11] Mark O'Connell, "The First Church of Marilyn Robinson," *The New Yorker*, May 2012.
[12] The examples are from *Gilead*, pages 101, 188, and 243, respectively.
[13] Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 1, 92, 206.
[14] Ibid., 7.
[15] Ibid., 6.
[16] Robinson, *Gilead*, 57.

[17] Hegel is said to have wished for a "mythology of reason," a fulsome embrace between a "philosophy that makes people reasonable" and a corresponding "mythology that makes philosophy sensuous." Would it be too giddy to say that Hegel's dream—for philosophy and myth to embrace—has been fulfilled, perhaps in various places, but in the *Gilead* series, too? Whatever the case may be, note that this quotation, which was written by Hegel's hand, is attributed by some scholars to his friend, the poet Hölderlin. See Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2007), 324.

[18] Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 6, 2.

[19] Hud Hudson, *Fallenness and Flourishing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2.

[20] Hudson, *Fallenness and Flourishing*, viii–ix.

[21] Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 8.

[22] Ibid., 3.

[23] Robinson, *Gilead*, 154; discussed in Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 86.

[24] Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 2.

[25] Robinson, *Gilead*, 57; also, discussed in Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 209.

[26] Kemp and Rodgers, "An Accent of Love: Response to Critics." (This is an internal reference; it's on the second to last page of their forum essay.)

[27] Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 6.

[28] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 10. Or, as he puts it in *Cosmic Connections*, a "fading of solidly accepted metaphysico-moral orders," 86.

[29] Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 2.

[30] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1991).

[31] Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 3.

[32] Ibid., 7.

[33] Ibid., 11.

[34] Ibid., 7.

[35] One of *Worldly Gospel*'s more surprising, even thesis-validating, insights is its discussion of the self-directed process of "learning to love." In an underappreciated passage, Nietzsche speaks of the process of training necessary for coming to love, among other things, the world. In Kemp and Rodgers's view, Ames, who has spent his life practicing a specific form of attention, a "virtuosic attentiveness" to people, places, and things, can be seen as an embodiment of this Nietzsche-prescribed practice, 206-207.

[36] Dave Marchese, "Marilyn Robinson Considers Biden a Gift of God," *New York Times Magazine*, February 23, 2024, which can be found at: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/02/18/magazine/marilynne-robinson-interview.html. I appreciate President Biden, as well. But the title is in several ways ridiculous. Most saliently for my purposes, it doesn't capture what's most interesting about the content of the interview.

[37] For a brief, relatively clear, and boisterous expression of this particular model of rationality, see William K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," *Lectures and Essays*, eds. Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock (London: MacMillan and Co., 1886).
[38] I've made this same point elsewhere. See Regan Lance Reitsma, "Transcendence on the Cut-Rate: The Case for 'More Metaphysics'," *Zeal: A Journal for the Liberal Arts*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2024), 111–28, https://zeal.kings.edu/zeal/article/view/70/58.
[39] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 78. For a succinct but helpful sketch of modernity's presumption that the empirical has "greater" reality, see Christine Korsgaard's "A Concise History of Western Metaphysics," which is the preface to her: *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–5.
[40] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 5.
[41] Ibid., 55.
[42] Charles Taylor, *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in an Age of Disenchantment* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2024), 49–50.
[43] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, "Epiphanies of Modernism," 419–93.
[44] Taylor, *Cosmic Connections*, 48.
[45] Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 210.
[46] Ibid., 92.
[47] Taylor, *Cosmic Connections*, 50.
[48] Perhaps the richest and deepest book-length example is: Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000). For an early, seminal collection of essays, see Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).
[49] Kemp and Rodgers, *Worldly Gospel*, 92. As it turns out, this is also an important theme in *Cosmic Connections*. Following the sociologist Hartmut Rosa, Taylor promises that the interpreter—whether of the world as a whole, or of relevant poetry or music—enters an "axis of resonance," a sensed resonance between the self and the world, one which is a powerful antidote to our particularly modern sense of alienation and sensitizes us to experience even more resonances (50).