Love and the Social World in *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel*

Naomi Fisher
Loyola University Chicago

Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel is an earnest and lovely book, clearly written out of a genuine love of Robinson's fiction. Free of the anxieties and foibles of academic literary criticism, it is pleasurable to read and accessible to anyone who is familiar with Robinson's work. Reading this book feels like a discussion among good and thoughtful friends about the significance of these characters and these stories.

In the spirit of such a discussion, I offer a few remarks and friendly challenges: first, I'll lay out the central claims of the book and Kemp and Rodgers's helpful discussions of Feuerbach and Nietzsche as a frame in which to read Robinson's Christian vision—this is a convincing account, particularly of John Ames and *Gilead*, which opens up the text in new ways. However, I argue that this frame is not as fruitful for Robinson's other novels, particularly *Home* and *Jack*. In these, one can find a critical exploration of Christianity as a merely cultural or social phenomenon, centered on principles and social mores rather than on love of individuals. As a way into this critical exploration, I will briefly present Kierkegaard's critique of a default cultural Christianity and examine the character of Jack in light of this critique. That Kemp and Rodgers do not focus on Robinson's critical presentation of social Christianity is not in itself a problem with their book; there are many possible alternative frames of approach to a text. But I'll argue that we can clarify and make more precise the titular claim that Robinson's gospel is "worldly" if we examine Robinson's fiction through this frame. I'll end with a brief discussion of this "worldliness," in which we see a Christianity that stands beyond the social, pious lives of the inhabitants of *Gilead*.

The text divides into chapters, each addressing a different novel: After an introduction and a framing chapter, there is one chapter each for *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, *Home*, *Jack*, and *Lila*. Yet the primary claims and heart of the book primarily address *Gilead* and its central character, John Ames. Kemp and Rodgers's guiding thought is that Robinson's fiction can be read as a response to the Nietzschean critique of Christianity as a devaluation of the world: Christianity, in its prizing of transcendence and otherworldly goodness, rejects the meaning and value of *this* life and retreats into

a life-denying moralism. As Kemp and Rodgers argue convincingly, Robinson's Christianity does no such thing; Robinson presents a life-affirming Christianity in *Gilead* and other novels. These arguments are bolstered through Ames's own fondness for the proto-Nietzschean Feuerbach, as presented in *Gilead*. Ames states that Feuerbach "is marvelous on the subject of joy, and also on its religious expressions."[1] And he dog-ears a passage in Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, which he then, significantly, gives to Jack: "Only that which is apart from my own being is capable of being doubted by me. How then can I doubt of God, who is my being? To doubt of God is to doubt myself."[2]

This gift of Feuerbach from Ames to Jack Boughton affirms that our being or essence is somehow divine; there is something of the divine in Jack. While *of course* Ames would affirm all along that Jack is made in the image of God, that there is a divine element essential to all human beings and *therefore* to Jack, Ames's struggle is not in admitting these pieties, but in actually seeing Jack as divine, as his own (god)son and child of God, rather than as a danger, a sinner, a problem. Ames's own failures in this regard are often opaque to him, which renders him a somewhat unreliable, even if entirely sympathetic narrator.

We understand Ames's feelings in this regard: He lost a beloved wife to childbirth and his newborn daughter shortly thereafter; he watched with envy and grief as his peers, particularly Robert Boughton, grew large and happy families. Jack, his namesake, was thrust upon him as a godson. This seemed to add to, rather than calm his grief; this strange and seemingly cruel child was a poor consolation for the child, wife, and life that he lost. As a culminating grief, Jack impregnated and then promptly abandoned an impoverished girl, leaving his newly created family destitute, which eventually led to the death of his young daughter. That Jack, his namesake, lackadaisically squandered and killed through neglect what Ames lost and so desperately grieved over must have seemed to be the ultimate insult, an irony so painful it was difficult to think about. Moreover, Ames is anxious that Jack might take his place in the lives of Ames's wife, Lila, and child, Robby, after he is dead, to their detriment.

And yet: Ames is well-trained in love, in gratitude, in finding God in things. Perhaps in part because of his grief, he has trained himself to see and appreciate beauty in all things, particularly in people. That Ames can forgive, love, and bless his godson is thus the culminating action in *Gilead*. He whispers this secret to the sleeping, dying Robert Boughton, Jack's father. "I blessed that boy of yours for you. I still feel the weight of his brow on my hand. I said, I love him as much as you meant me to."[3] Unlike others, Ames offers no excuses for Jack; he does not come to "understand" or lessen

Jack's responsibility for his awful sins. The reader, too, wants an exculpatory explanation: *Why* did Jack do this? Otherwise, we are led to conclude that Jack himself is the source of his own wickedness. Robinson's refusal to give such an explanation is in part an indictment of our own inability to forgive, rather than explain away, wrongdoing; this failure is embodied in Jack's father Boughton, who cannot forgive his son and instead tries to excuse him.[4] We don't want to believe that someone is *just* bad, depraved, a sinner; and, if we are able to manage it, we are unable to hold that together with the belief that this very same person is *just* good, beautiful, a beloved child of God—despite these two beliefs being pillars of Christianity. They are reconciled in *Gilead*, not philosophically or logically, but in the person of John Ames, who can recognize both the horror of Jack's sin and nevertheless love him. Ames's reconciliation here is no easy feat, but representative of Robinson's positive Christian vision, in which Ames, through a deep faith in God and training in love, has a profound love of Gilead and ability to find beauty in ordinary things, even to love and see beauty in a man who has done what is hateful. Kemp and Rodgers deftly present this reconciliation, Ames's affirmation and eventual love of Jack, as one element of Robinson's response to the Nietzschean critique. Being able to love and appreciate a person, especially a person whom others might find unlovable, is a central part of being able to love and appreciate the world more generally.

The other novels addressed by Kemp and Rodgers are presented in accord with this theme of a Christian life-affirmation. *Housekeeping* contrasts the oblivion of the lake and the immersive forgetfulness of the social world of Fingerbone, mirrored in the ways of life pursued by Lucille and Ruth, respectively. While the novel may appear unconnected to the others in both setting and themes, Kemp and Rodgers present these two "ways" as ways of life-denial, convincingly (even if not *merely*) setting the stage for Ames's life-affirmation in *Gilead*. In this way, Ames in *Gilead* provides a way out of what is presented as a dilemma between ways of life in *Housekeeping*. *Home* focuses on the Boughton family, Robert Boughton's failure as discussed above and Glory Boughton's love for her brother Jack, the "prodigal son" who returns to Gilead. *Jack* is a love story, recounting the courtship of Jack and Della prior to their unofficial marriage and the birth of their child. And *Lila* presents the courtship of Lila and John Ames, culminating in the birth of their child, Robert. In what follows, I'll address these themes of love, forgiveness, and affirmation, particularly as they center around the character Jack.

Kemp and Rodgers pinpoint the failures of the Christian social world in its shallow notions of love and forgiveness. In *Home*, Glory offers a respite in the fierce and unfailing love of a sister for her brother, despite

knowing the worst. Della offers a parallel in *Jack*: she sees and loves Jack (his "soul") and is loyal to him, despite knowing almost nothing about him and the particularities of his past. These are, in their own ways and for their own reasons, presented by Kemp and Rodgers as similar in kind to Ames's eventual acceptance of Jack, building on and complicating the life-affirming Christianity presented through Ames in *Gilead*. While this frame of access illuminates these novels, I venture that further attention to Robinson's treatment of the social world and Jack's own anti-social tendencies makes clearer the contours of Robinson's "worldly gospel." Below I argue that Robinson's worldliness is not just an affirmation of this world as opposed to devaluing it in contrast to another, but also that individuals are to be affirmed and valued over principles and social order.

Robinson's fiction offers a critique of a cultural or social Christianity, present there in two distinct ways: one in the busy, pious lives of Gilead's inhabitants, the other in the social programs advanced by both Ames's abolitionist grandfather and by Della Miles's Black separatist father, Bishop Miles. These two Christianities are opposed: the one cultural and complacent, the other transformative and social. The opposition between these two Christianities is exemplified in Ames's grandfather emptying the collection plate into his hat at Boughton's father's well-to-do Presbyterian church, to the dismay of the pastor and congregants. We readers recognize that the theft is in service of Ames's ideals, and that it may be just, perhaps even what justice requires. And yet, both the complacent cultural Christianity and these just social programs suffer from a common inadequacy as Christianity.

In *Jack*, Jack and Della discuss the experience of being the child of a pastor: the lack of personal attention received, the way that their fathers treat them through the pious generalities with which they treat all their children and congregants. This dynamic is also emphasized in *Home*. Kemp and Rodgers discuss an event in which the children (Jack excluded, significantly) ruin a plot of alfalfa that neighbors have been growing on the Boughton land without permission. The neighbor is nasty to Jack in particular: She states that Boughton "deserves" him, "the boy thief, the boy drunkard." When Jack relays this to Boughton, he replies, "I will be sure to thank her. I hope I deserve you, Jack. All of you."[5] As Kemp and Rodgers point out, Boughton reinterprets the insult to be affirming of the value of Jack, of *all* his children, perhaps of all human beings generally.[6] This evades the issue: "Boughton's high-minded, universal response doesn't touch the *particular* offense directed at Jack, who knows there is a sense in which 'deserving' him is not a good thing … Jack is left to wonder whether his father perhaps thinks so too."[7] Boughton's response is indicative of the failures of a

kind of cultural Christianity, in which difficulties (and difficult or "strange" people like Jack) are addressed via generalities, affirmed by all. Boughton is a tragic character in that the reader can tell that he feels his own inadequacy, but because he remains committed to these general principles over the particularities of his son, he cannot help but find his son's behavior unconscionable and his own impeccable. Because he interprets his world primarily through this intelligible moral calculus, he cannot ever fully embrace his son.

As indicated in *Jack*, Bishop Miles, while certainly not engaged in a kind of complacent or merely cultural Christianity, nevertheless in his commitment to the separatist movement treats Della via principles, rather than as an individual. While he does not inhabit the *dominant* social world, he (like Ames's grandfather) inhabits an intelligible social world, with its own set of rules, which he remains committed to over and above care for any particular person. This set of rules makes it impossible for him to accept Della and Jack's marriage.[8] Jack also suspects that Boughton would not accept the marriage, so much so that he does not tell the dying Boughton about his daughter-in-law and grandchild. Boughton's potential rejection, however, rests on baldly racist reasons, the cultural racism that makes it impossible for Jack to return to Gilead in *Home*, despite the fact that they could be legally married there. Once again, principles reign. There is thus a strong parallel between the two fathers here.

Kemp and Rodgers point to a criticism levied by some readers of *Jack*, that Della is "altogether too accepting of Jack's many and various character flaws."[9] Why would this woman, who has so many good things going for her—the educated young woman of a prominent Black family, engaged in the extremely important, meaningful work teaching at a Black high school in St. Louis—throw it all away for this decidedly unimpressive rogue with thinning hair? Kemp and Rodgers point to Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* to illuminate Della's love for Jack.[10] I admit I find Kierkegaard's book challenging. Kierkegaard emphasizes that one must love whomever one "sees," not because of some perfection or good feature but because of what is "unseen" in the person, that which persists throughout any change, no matter how radical.[11] It was never quite clear to me how a love that abstracts from all particulars, to love each soul equally, can be a love at all. And it seems particularly ill-suited to capture something like Christian charity. However, Kemp and Rodgers point to Kierkegaard's example of an *artist*, and how a true artist is able to find beauty everywhere, in the mundane.[12] What this helpfully indicates is that this love is not *abstract* (i.e., "I love you because you have a soul") but is rather *hyper-particular*, so much so that it cannot be captured or exhausted by any statement about a characteristic,

which is its own kind of generality. That is, does Della love Jack because of his odd habits, his thinning hair, his love of literature and poetry? Presumably, *yes* to all that, and *no*—it is not as if some other person with all those qualities came along, Della would feel for them what she feels for Jack. She loves *him*, in *all* his particularity, *inexplicably*—and so there is not much one can say to motivate it.

Della's unintelligibility, I venture, mirrors Jack's own unintelligibility. While Jack lives outside of all social worlds habitually, Della does so particularly in the act of loving and marrying Jack, despite the very high cost. Jack is a baffling character; *Jack* is a baffling book. I did not quite know what to make of it when I read it the first time, and I am grateful for the opportunity to revisit it. What the reader (at least, this reader) desires is to *make sense* of Jack. I read the book with anticipation, thinking, "Finally I will understand Jack!" I was disappointed in that anticipation. But now, after having read Kemp and Rodgers's book, I believe that is the point. Robinson presents Jack as irrevocably *strange*, not just to the other characters, but to the reader as well. His anti-social tendencies are not in service of some end he wants to achieve (unlike those of his original namesake, Ames's grandfather, also apparently a thief). Rather, he seems to act this way inexplicably, just as a reaction against social order generally. The petty thefts are indicative of this. He does not desire the item he steals, but the act of thieving is itself the temptation. What is intelligible is intelligible in relation to a social world. Jack is anti-social and therefore unintelligible in a broad sense, not just reacting against some particular principles or culture, but against all generally, and thus is not at home anywhere.

Jack can, therefore, be interpreted as a kind of hero in Robinson's books, an odd kind of hero, standing as an indictment of the shallowness of the cultures and rules that dictate our behavior. He has some things in common with Kierkegaard's knight of faith, in that he behaves in ways that transcend the ethical order embodied in culture. "Transcend" is perhaps too grand a term for Jack's behavior, as these anti-social tendencies are manifested by taking things that are dear to others, or in spontaneous acts of cruelty (insulting Lila, for instance, to Ames at the end of *Gilead*). In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard (writing under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus) critiques the complacent Christianity shaped by Hegelianism, and the idea that Christianity *can* be fully intelligible, embodied in a culture. In *Postscript* this is framed as objectivity and subjectivity, where what is objective is intelligible and rational, whereas (famously) truth, particularly the truth of faith, is subjective:

> If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith. If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast to the objective uncertainty, see to it that in the objective uncertainty I am "out on 70,000 fathoms of water" and still have faith.[13]

Jack's very strangeness, his rejection of the mores of his social world, is a kind of objective uncertainty. His major decisions seem to be directed against social mores; he thus (at the very least) fulfills Climacus's prerequisite of faith, that "I must see to it that I hold fast to the objective uncertainty." Faith cannot be adopted on grounds that it "makes sense" or is intelligible, and thus it is not an intelligible social order. Jack's anti-social tendencies thus highlight how Christianity can track in the unintelligible, and thus how it can transcend any particular culture.

While the above is not any kind of modification of the thesis of Kemp and Rodgers's book (or so I think!), it helps clarify the contours of the claim that Robinson's gospel is "worldly." That is, it is not worldly in the sense that it is a transformative social program. One can imagine a person stating that the gospel is worldly just in this sense: A gospel could be "this-worldly" in that it works for the implementation of a just social order, rather than moralistically, life-denyingly working and waiting for some other-worldly salvation. Robinson appears to reject both the life-denying other-worldliness *and* the "worldly" reduction of Christianity to a social program. This gospel transcends any particular social world or its enactment. While this does not deny its transformative power, it locates the gospel primarily in an appreciation of the beauty of creation, particularly, the beauty of people. This relation to truth surely animates social change: Jack and Della, after all, are seeking a more just social order in which to live together and raise their son. Moreover, there is a subtle indictment of John Ames as well, in his indifference toward the racial justice so fiercely advocated by his grandfather. And yet, that advocacy suffers from narrowness if it is detached from appreciation and love of individuals. This appreciation and love is Ames's great strength.

Yet it is Lila, rather than Ames, who appears to be the culmination of this worldliness. She has lived her entire life on the margins and is innocent of society. Kemp and Rodgers point to her "reverse baptism" as her true baptism. Lila learns that her friends, Doll in particular, may be destined for hell according to Christian doctrine. She washes off her baptism, preferring to be wherever her friends are. She chooses love of her friends over the social Christianity that Ames and Boughton explain to her, keeping her priorities in order even as she enters, for a time, into that social world.

In some ways, Robinson's critique of a social Christianity is the more timely one (as indicated by the unease it generates), since we seem now more prone than ever to see everything, Christianity included, in purely political terms. We are tempted to levy Christianity for or against various political ends, subordinating the gospel to this-or-that political program. As Kemp and Rodgers show, Robinson's Christianity puts the prioritization the other way around. Ames's love of the world, his eventual love and appreciation of Jack, Della's inexplicable leap into marriage despite the cost, Glory's fierce love and affirmation of Jack, her immediate acceptance and love of his wife and child—All this is presented as a Christianity that affirms the world, but is not reducible to its "worldly" consequences. It is a Christianity that trains one to find what is divine in all things and people. I am grateful to Rodgers and Kemp for this book; it invites and enables a deeper level of engagement with and appreciation for Robinson's fiction, which is itself a rare and beautiful gift.

---

[1] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: 2004), 24.
[2] Ibid., 239.
[3] Ibid., 244. Given the frequent talk of stolen blessings, this final blessing in *Gilead* reads as a reversal of the story of Jacob and Esau. Rather than the younger son stealing the blessing of the elder, Ames "steals" the act of the father's blessing. Boughton could not love Jack as he ought to have, despite loving him dearly, because he could not see what was uniquely lovely in Jack. But John Ames eventually succeeds in loving Jack and finding him beautiful, imagining Boughton's hand covering his own in the act of blessing.
[4] Ryan S. Kemp and Jordan Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel: A Philosophical Account of Her Christian Vision* (London: Bloomsbury Academic: 2023), 128.
[5] Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: 2008), 12–13.
[6] Kemp and Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel,* 120.
[7] Ibid., 121.
[8] In *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly* Gospel, 164–70, there is an insightful discussion Bishop Miles's Christianity, connecting it with Ames's grandfather's totalizing commitment to abolition. That these just social causes are presented problematically in Robinson's fiction make some uneasy; one critic argues that the questions naturally arise: "Do you see God everywhere? Now what will you do?" (Elisa Gonzalez, "No Good Has Come: Marilynne Robinson's Testimony for the White Church" *The Point Magazine* 24 (March 2021), as cited in *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel,* 167). This critic wants to prioritize the transformative (the "doing") aspects of Christianity as a kind of social program. But Robinson, I believe, takes a substantive position against this prioritization. This is not a stand against *justice,* but against the prioritization of any social world, *even a just one*, over love of people as individuals. Della's father's treatment of her, of her marriage, is a

subtle critique of such prioritization. Bishop Miles's explanation to Jack, "My objection is not to you as an individual" (Marilynne Robinson, *Jack* [New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: 2020], 305), mirrors his own father's love. That is, Boughton's behavior toward Jack sometimes communicates something like, "My love is not for you as an individual." Whether one's Christian duty is to love or to reject Jack, it makes him feel "harmless" (Ibid., 248), since it has nothing to do with *him*.

[9] Kemp and Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel,* 148.

[10] Ibid., 159–61.

[11] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Hong and Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 159–61.

[12] Ibid., 158.

[13] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to* Philosophical Fragments, trans. Hong and Hong (Princeton, NJ Princeton University Press: 1992), 204.