An Accent of Love: Response to Critics

Ryan S. Kemp and Jordan Rodgers
Wheaton College (IL) and Independent Scholar

We are truly gratified to read the responses to our book, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel*, by Sára Tóth, Naomi Fisher, and Steven DeLay. It has been a frequent worry of ours during the writing of the book that it suffered from a certain self-indulgence in its motivations. Its central ploy—to read Marilynne Robinson's novels through the lens of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity—is in a way doubly, maybe even triply, idiosyncratic. Marilynne Robinson's novels are not usually read primarily through a philosophical lens; our book is still, we believe, the first book-length treatment that attempts to do so. And if they were to be so read, Nietzsche does not exactly stand out at first glance as the obvious candidate for analysis. It is also—just to add insult to injury—not especially common to see Nietzsche's criticisms of Christianity taken seriously in the way our book does. Modern Christian thinkers usually don't see him as sympathetic enough to engage with, and modern secular scholars of his work don't, as a rule, take Christianity seriously enough to even think of his criticisms as calling for a Christian response. Of course, we think that all of these trends work together to obscure a very important set of ideas and concerns, but then (so we worried) we *would*, wouldn't we? We are both sons of Protestant ministers who developed obsessions with German philosophy and literary fiction. And so, it is a wonderful thing to see in these responses not just a willingness to think along with us, but also many invitations to develop those ideas further.

In what follows, we don't have the space to accept all of those invitations. We will focus on three different but interrelated lines of criticism that are either stated explicitly or suggested by our three critics: (1) from Fisher, that we focus too much on the life-denial critique of Christianity, and not enough on a critique of versions of Christianity that reduce it to a social/cultural message; (2) from DeLay, that the double predestination/universalism dynamic we take over from Robinson's novels obscures the orthodox Christian view that lies between these two positions, and that alone can make sense of Jack Boughton's moral agency; and finally, (3) from Tóth, that our treatment of Ruth in *Housekeeping*, among other things, evinces a kind of "anti-tragic bias" in the version of Christianity we attribute to Robinson.

One distinctive feature of our book that has been noted by many readers is that it doesn't deal heavily with psychological, social, or political issues, at least compared with other readings of the novels. This was a deliberate choice on our part, for better or worse. Robinson herself has had much to say in her own voice about her social and political views. But it is our belief that the novels, while of course not neglecting these issues entirely, are in their essence really *about* something else. Many readings of Robinson's work approach her from either a social/political point of view, often (naturally) focusing on the question of race, or from a psychological point of view, often (again, naturally) focusing on the ways in which characters like Jack in the *Gilead* novels and Ruth in *Housekeeping* struggle with the processing of past traumas. Our approach is different. We have tried hard to focus on the ways in which the individual characters in Robinson's novels, and the sort of interpersonal network they all form, are themselves embodiments of and experiments with certain philosophical and theological (one might even say existential) ideas. Psychological, social, and political issues are of course not irrelevant to these ideas—how could they be? But they are also not, to us, the things that matter most in the final analysis. We wanted to make sure we didn't get lost in them at the expense of the philosophy and theology.

It is of course a serious concern with an approach like this that it might subordinate character portrayal and development to the ideas, so that the characters become mere avatars for ideas, chess pieces in an ideological battle that is (or ought to be) external to their individual lives. We have tried in the book not to fall into that trap. One way in which that hopefully reveals itself is that our book does not have any one ideological "hero," as it were. Ames would of course have been the natural choice, and admittedly early versions of this material, which focused solely on *Gilead*, gave in somewhat to the temptation of treating him that way. But our decision to expand that material into a book that would deal with Robinson's fiction as a whole was fortuitous, in that it challenged us not just to explain why a character's ideas moved or inspired us, but to do justice to what we call in the subtitle of the book the "Christian vision" that emerges organically from Robinson's overall dramatization of all of these characters and their interactions. Even Della, Glory, and Lila, whom we perhaps elevate above the rest, are not themselves put forward as philosophical heroes overall. Rather, they are individuals whose lives contain crucial moments (Della's decision to love Jack, Glory's taking charge of the Boughton house, Lila's reverse baptism) that are, to be sure, rooted in their own characteristics, but are really the crystallization of a whole network of personal interactions, the overall significance of which can never really fully be explicated. We have tried only to

shed as much light on it as we can, and then hope the reader will return to the novels, ready this time to see things they didn't see before.

Fisher seems to share with us the view that we shouldn't be reading Robinson's novels primarily through a social and political lens. Picking up on some of our claims about Jack's relationship with his father, Fisher argues that one important thing that Robinson does in her novels is to show the way in which versions of Christianity that reduce it to a social and cultural message tend to treat individuals as instances of general principles rather than address them adequately in their particularity. Fisher suggests as well that it is a worry about this socialization of the Christian message, and not primarily worries about its potential obsession with an afterlife, that Robinson is most eager to address, at least in the novels where Jack takes center stage (*Home* and *Jack*). We might see Jack's opposition to Christianity as really more an opposition to, or at least a practical inability to live within, a particular social world than an opposition to theological claims.[1] And we ought to see that the "worldliness" of Robinson's gospel is emphatically *not* the worldliness of a social program, however well-intentioned.

In many ways, we are in full sympathy with Fisher's point, especially that last one. One of the reasons we chose to use Nietzsche as the philosophical lens through which to view the novels, rather than the more natural Feuerbach, is precisely that Feuerbach held out hope that the real truth (the "essence") of Christianity was worldly in this socialized way. Nietzsche, like Robinson, wants affirmation of this world, but not in the sense of some transformative new social paradigm. Nietzsche in fact saw modern socialism as a continuation of Christianity (in his life-denying sense) by other means. Fisher in particular captures our intentions precisely in saying that Robinson's gospel "transcends any particular social world or its enactment."

The difference here, if there is one, is likely a difference of emphasis. One thing in the book that we could probably have been clearer about is the relative broadness of our conception of the life-denial critique. While we often take issues about the afterlife to stand in for the whole of the critique, and while the famous "Troy passage" about the afterlife in *Gilead* (which we'll discuss more below) certainly is of central significance for us, the conception of the life-denial critique we take over from Nietzsche includes other elements. Those elements relate directly to questions of a merely cultural Christianity that insists on conformity and social membership. For Nietzsche, and for us in the book, this too is a problem to be understood in the context of a denial of "life." Part of what "life" is for Nietzsche, in its human and non-human forms, is irreducible particularity and endless variety. As we suggested in our discussion of the "moralism" of Christianity as Nietzsche saw it,[2] Nietzsche saw Christianity as a threat to life not just because

it posited an afterlife, but because of a deeper push to make human life into a thing that can only really take one satisfactory course, by means of what he calls the "morality of custom" or the "morality of mores" (the German is *die Sittlichkeit der Sitte*).[3] The traditional moralistic conception of the afterlife, where those who follow the standard path are rewarded and those deviants who don't are punished, is not itself the motive force of the life-denying worldview, but simply its natural culmination.

Ames's statement in *Gilead* that there are "a thousand thousand reasons to live this life, every one of them sufficient"[4] is emblematic of the contrary outlook Robinson tries to develop throughout her novels, and of course not only in the character of Ames himself. Ames's ecstatic vision of the wonder of this life, his love of the particular "existence" of individuals, is both emphatically Christian and emphatically opposed to the mere cultural conformity to any social world (even if Ames himself does not always live up to the idea). The authentically Christian response to this issue, we essentially argue, is downstream from the more fundamental question of life-affirmation or -denial.

It is true that things can seem otherwise with Jack, and both Fisher and DeLay have pressed us in different ways on his role in our analysis. He is oppressed in ways Ames never was by the social and cultural world of *Gilead*, and his various sins are obviously at least partially, though not completely, explicable by this oppression. Thus, Fisher speaks of Jack's behavior primarily through the lens of its "anti-social" character, calls Jack an "odd sort of hero," and compares him to Kierkegaard's knight of faith. She suggests that his actions evince a more or less conscious rejection of the social world in which he has lived and point toward a version of Christianity that would be something more than just a religious enshrining of the cultural mores of Gilead, Iowa, a Christianity that (in her words) "can track in the unintelligible, and thus . . . can transcend any particular culture."

While we share the overall sentiment, we're a little hesitant with how it is phrased. We certainly agree that Jack's situation plays a necessary role in the way the novels criticize conceptions of Christianity that identify it too readily with particular social instantiations and their accompanying mores. But the knight of faith comparison and the suggestion that Jack is a "hero" is a bit further than we'd like to go. Jack's story, for us, culminates not necessarily in anything in particular that he does or says in the novels, but in the ways in which other characters interact with him. Or, perhaps it's better to say that Jack's story doesn't *culminate* at all. He is not himself a symbol of Christianity's transcendence of any particular social world—for his sake, we wish that he was!; rather, he is (among other things, naturally) the unfortunate consequence of the fact that particular Christian communities so

often fail to achieve that transcendence. Because of that, he is an unavoidable call in the lives of those who love him—especially Ames and Glory—*not* to fail in that themselves. Jack suffers from a world in which the only thing that could really save him—real, authentic Christianity—appears to him in the guise of something that denies any life that could make sense to him. Because that Christian vision—the vision of his father, of Gilead generally, and Ames too in his worst moments—does not fully embrace Ames' claim that there are a thousand thousand sufficient reasons to live this life, Jack is left with no path forward. That is the tragedy of his life.

DeLay's reading of the case of Jack comes at our position from a very different, almost opposite, angle. While Fisher's language about Jack strikes us as a bit too permissive, DeLay's is too judgmental. DeLay begins from our claim that "for Jack, the central problem of his life is that he wants to be, or at least believes himself to be, responsible for the pain and difficulty of his life. But is he?"[5] DeLay takes us to be stating a rhetorical question whose implied answer is "yes," and locates his disagreement with us here. DeLay argues that Robinson's (and Ames's) Calvinist theological presuppositions set up the problem of Jack's life in a way that makes only two real responses possible, both of which undermine Jack's agency: Jack is predestined to damnation or Jack will be saved in any case (because we all will be saved in any case). DeLay in effect takes us to lump for the latter option, overlooking the more orthodox Christian view that Jack is a free, morally responsible agent who is capable of reconciliation with God and separation from God, and will face the consequences of which direction he chooses.

The first thing to say in response is that we didn't intend the question that DeLay quotes as a mere rhetorical device. We think the answer to it is frighteningly complex, in various respects both "yes" and "no." It is true that we do not think that he is simply predestined to damnation and incapable of change. We take it that the upshot of the crucial porch conversation on predestination that we see from two different perspectives in *Gilead* and *Home* is precisely Lila's insistence that "a person can change. Everything can change."[6] But that means that he is also certainly not merely a victim of circumstances either. Much of the suffering that Jack experiences in his life is indeed his fault; much of the suffering of the people he loves is his fault, too. God's punishment is upon him already. Of this he is all too painfully aware. What we wanted to stress in the book is that his awareness of this does not seem to help him. The most it seems to do for him is to produce a resolve (which he especially addresses in the novel that bears his name) to be as harmless as possible to those around him, since he is apparently so lost that attempting to do any active good to others only leads to harm anyway.

One could argue, of course, that all of this malaise is caused from the unfortunate fact that he takes the doctrine of predestination too seriously. But that seems a needlessly abstract and dismissive description of his problem. It is life that puts this problem to Jack, not theology. He tries to use the theological idea to grapple with it, of course, in part because the men who have had the biggest influence on his life, and of whose help he is in desperate need (i.e., Ames, and his father) take it seriously. He himself can't believe it straightforwardly, since of course he doesn't really hold the other theological beliefs that would have to go along with it. He is afraid that he is damned, but not in the high theological sense; what he is really afraid of is that his life is doomed, and that any attempt he might make to intervene will just end up making it worse. That is why Lila's injunction at the end of the porch conversation—"Everything can change"—matters so much to him, why he responds by telling her that that was what he really wanted to know. Theologically speaking, what Jack needs is the belief that God is with him already and can work in his life in ways that he could not possibly anticipate on his own (i.e., not just that he can change, but that "everything" can). But that belief, and real adherence to it, can't come out of nowhere; it starts with little gestures like Lila's (and others later like Ames's blessing)—real attempts on the part of others to see what's troubling him, to express solidarity with his suffering, to help him slowly but surely to open up to the saving forces present within him. It starts, in short, with real Christian love.

One of the most important lessons of the sermons of Father Zossima in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* is that each individual is "responsible for everyone and everything."[7] We should be thinking constantly, Zossima suggests, about how our behavior might be influencing those around us, and consider ourselves guilty when we are an occasion for their sin, *or* (often more importantly) when we could have been an occasion for their overcoming the temptation to sin and failed to be. We should be thinking constantly about how to engage in what Zossima elsewhere calls "active love." Zossima's idea is not meant to undermine the responsibility of others. He is careful *not* to say that only an elite group of people should take this on so as to save others from the weight of the awesome responsibility.[8] What Zossima's idea suggests is not any particular soteriological doctrine, but that our thinking about sin and grace is far too atomistic. We are responsible for everyone and everything—that means that whether our lives are doomed or not does not depend only on us, and whether others' lives are doomed or not does not depend only on them. Jack is responsible for everyone and everything too; that is why his situation is so desperate, so tragic. This thought about responsibility on its own wouldn't help him any more than the doctrine of predestination did; indeed, it might have been an even harder pill

to swallow. But the point of the thought isn't to have it "fix" a sinner like Jack when it occurs to him. Robinson's novels show the truth of the thought in action (just as Dostoevsky's novel does), by showing what a difference it makes to him that little chances to help, to love him, matter immensely when they are taken or not taken. The only proper response to Jack's situation, just because it's the only proper response to anyone's situation, is love.

We have now repeated a few times the claim that Jack's life is "tragic." One of the charges Tóth brings against us in her penetrating critical engagement is that we might fall prey to what George Steiner has called an "anti-tragic bias" in Christianity. Tóth sees evidence of this especially in our handling of the one Robinson novel that does *not* take place in Gilead, Iowa, namely *Housekeeping*. Our argument in the book is that the two central characters of the book, the sisters Ruth and Lucille, adapt to the traumatic circumstances of their life by means of two strategies that amount ultimately to a kind of escape from life—Lucille's, a flight into absorption into the conventions of social life; and Ruth's, a flight into radical loneliness and the consolations of imagination. In doing so, they point in oblique ways to the possibilities of life-affirmation Robinson develops more fully in the Gilead novels. Tóth suggests that we've done wrong by Ruth in particular, whose tragic outlook ought to be seen not as a flight from life, but a reflection of its "true workings."[9]

It is an objection that is close to our hearts, in part because it has roots in Nietzsche. Before Steiner, it was of course Nietzsche who argued—in his very first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*—that Christianity was essentially hostile to the tragic world view of the pre-Socratic ancient Greeks. And Nietzsche famously thought too that the Greeks could hold this tragic worldview while at the same time being the clearest example of a life-affirming culture the history of the West has to show. It would be a very serious mark against our view if the version of Christianity we developed in our book was anti-tragic, since we had consciously set out to develop a Christian vision that Nietzsche might find life-affirming on his own terms.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we don't think Robinson's Gilead novels, or our reading of them, is anti-tragic, though we find the impulse to that objection understandable. Obviously, there is a great deal of suffering in the novels, and our reading tries to do justice to it, but all of the suffering is in service of a vision of life-affirmation. These characters struggle, but our argument suggests that their struggle is not ultimately in vain. This naturally puts Ruth, and maybe even the whole of *Housekeeping*, in an awkward position. Tóth quotes a line from a passage near the end of the novel, in which Ruth waxes biblical. She cites the stories of Cain's murder of Abel, Job's sufferings, and Rachel and King David mourning the loss of their children.

"The force behind the movement of time," she says, "is a mourning that will not be comforted."[10] Ruth's life, and the way she conceives of it in her extravagant imaginings, bears obvious witness to this grand truth. Human life is, for her and seemingly for the author of *Housekeeping*, a fundamentally tragic affair—people die, people betray each other, families are broken up, and the ripple effects of these things never really spend themselves but ramify on and on throughout history. In the continuation of the above cited passage, Ruth imagines that God himself may not have realized, until after the great surprise of Cain's murder, that "shock will spend itself in waves; that our images will mimic every gesture, and that shattered they will multiply and mimic every gesture ten, a hundred, or a thousand times."[11] She imagines God purging the sadness created from that initial shock with a flood, but leaving behind a bit of the "taste of blood and hair." She imagines her own flooding lake in Fingerbone as similarly containing the sediment of suffering and despair, not totally being able to wash away a "certain pungency and savor in the water" that is, "however sad and wild, . . . clearly human."[12]

We don't wish to deny the force and the truth of Ruth's central contentions here. We didn't intend to "overlook the expansion of Ruth's personal suffering into a universal tragic vision of loss." We were in fact consciously attempting *not* to take an overly psychologistic approach to Ruth, as we saw readings like those of Christine Caver and others doing, but to show that *Housekeeping* is trying to show that "human life as such is traumatic."[13] A large part of our intention in our analysis of *Housekeeping* was to do justice to the hard truths unveiled in Ruth's experience, while still insisting that they are not the end of the story. Of course, we may not have fully lived up to that intention in the book, and perhaps we can make another effort to do so here.

Christianity makes a kind of impossible promise: It promises to save us from the tragedy of human life, without demoting that tragedy to a mere step along the way to the ultimately reconciliatory end. This paradox is at the center of the Gospel narrative—Jesus experiences the full tragedy of human life in the crucifixion, and the full reconciliation to the divine in the resurrection. The crucifixion *cannot* be a merely instrumentally necessary step on the way to the resurrection; if it were, then it could not be the image of human suffering par excellence that it needs to be to show that what Jesus is saved *from* is the real human plight. No one makes this point better than Simone Weil, whom Tóth cites. Weil continually emphasizes Jesus' crying out "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" as *the* central moment of the crucifixion.[14] Jesus not only undergoes extreme physical or psychological suffering, but in some mysterious way doesn't understand why it is necessary. He is not just in pain but "afflicted"—in Weil's own highly

distinctive sense of that term—attacked at his very core, left wide open to the merciless and meaningless laws of physics and the danger of other human beings, in the same way we all are. But at the same time, the Gospels insist, that affliction is not where the story ends. There is salvation, and not as an ideal to be approximated or a possible future to be imagined, but as a real event. Jesus submits fully to the affliction at the center of human life, and yet comes back.

What that means for how we should live, of course, is left open to a great deal of interpretation, which the various Christian churches have over the centuries attempted to provide. But at the least, we can say that the Gospels suggest that the way to salvation, the way to go down as far as it is possible to go and yet remain capable of coming up again, is through the active, self-sacrificial love that Jesus displays in his life, and which we have tried above to emphasize as the only possible authentically Christian response to the problems Jack faces in the Gilead novels. The question about Ruth, for us, is not whether her tragic picture of the world is correct; clearly it is. In fact, it is not even a question about whether that tragic picture is the final word; as Tóth herself shows, even Ruth thinks that it is not and holds out a hope throughout the novel for a final reconciliation. The question about Ruth is what her own tragic vision, and her own concept of hope for deliverance from it, does to her life. Tóth calls Ruth's experience "kenotic," but Ruth's posture seems to us more defensive than self-giving. This is, arguably, what sets her imaginings apart from those of Jack's sister, Glory, at the end of *Home*, to which we attach so much significance. Ruth's imaginings all lead to the need for a reunion with her mother, the person who cares for her, who might have defended her rather than left her to be, as it were, exposed to the elements.[15]

The point of Glory's imagining of her brother's son returning to the Gilead home is obviously self-sacrificial. Glory has deeply mixed feelings about the house and her upbringing, and her reasons for deciding to tend to it going forward stem entirely from her need both to care for her dying father and to do something for Jack that will help to pull him up from the tragedy that has been his relationship to his family, and his home, and his life. This sacrificial thrust to her imagining, we would suggest, is part of the reason it is earthier and more specific than Ruth's. Glory does not imagine anything spectral or highly symbolic, but *this* boy with his Southern accent and his overt politeness and his "tall man's slouch"[16] that evokes his father. She imagines that he will notice *this* barn, *these* petunias that his father told him about. She imagines not a future that will somehow fulfill her obscure desires, but a future in which she has an important but difficult part to play in making the good of another human being come about. What is for us the

most important thing about Glory's imagining at the end of *Home* is that her imagination of this course of events is capped by her pronouncement that "The Lord is wonderful."[17] Our argument in the book is that it is her imagining itself that gives evidence of the wonderfulness of the Lord; her imagining succeeds in making beautiful what might otherwise have appeared as an arduous path of life laid before her. And it is this above all that we found life-affirming in it—not an acknowledgement of the necessity of loss and a hope that it will be overcome, but an active commitment to a life of meaning *within* that necessity of loss.

In what has for us been the most important passage of all of Robinson's novels, Ames uses a striking metaphor to help himself understand the relationship between this temporal world and eternity. "In eternity," he suggests, "this world will be Troy . . . the epic of the universe."[18] What struck us at first was how unlikely the metaphor was from a Nietzschean perspective—Nietzsche loved Homer, loved the *Iliad*, and saw in its commitment to the memorialization of great deeds a fundamentally life-affirming and thus necessarily *anti*-Christian vision. And yet, here was a humble Christian pastor, reaching for the metaphor of Troy to describe the beauty of this life, a beauty that the reality of eternity will not be able to overshadow. We did not do much to develop that metaphor in our book. It would be easy to infer from it that Ames has a particularly rosy, optimistic picture of life. But that of course cannot be Ames's point.[19] Ames refers to "our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us."[20] What is crucial about his metaphor is not that it paints a rosy picture of this life, but that it holds two ideas in tension, symbolized by sex (procreation) and death (perishing), respectively—that the world is lovely and wonderful and full of hope, but that it can (and *will*) shatter us.

The same is obviously true of the story of Troy. Here, too, there is no better witness to call than Simone Weil, whose famous essay on the *Iliad* as the "poem of force" emphasizes for us the horror of the Trojan War, and (like Ames) sees the whole of human life in it.[21] Weil finds in the *Iliad* above all the terror of "force," human violence that is capable of turning another human being into a mere thing; this force enslaves both those who undergo it and those who exercise it. Its ubiquity is the central fact of human life, which makes the *Iliad* "the purest and loveliest of mirrors."[22] The *Iliad*'s principal achievement, according to Weil, is to express a kind of "bitterness that proceeds from tenderness and that spreads over the whole human race."[23] In this bitterness and tenderness, Weil finds the *Iliad* at one with the Gospels; in both, the great genius of the Greeks is expressed, the idea that "the sense of human misery is a pre-condition of justice and love."[24]

Weil's account is indeed a sobering one, and it is not hard to find in it much that resonates with Ruth's tragic vision we outlined above. But like Ames, Weil is at pains to hold in tension the horror and the beauty of Troy, and, reflected in it, of this world and our lives. Crucially, that beauty does not lie in looking away from the horror; nor does it lie merely in the hope of one day being delivered from it. The beauty of the poem lies in its truth—it looks squarely at the horrors of which we are capable and the sword that hangs over us at all times. It refuses to try to make exceptions or offer a way out. It simply bears witness; every line says to us: "I feel it, too." Weil admits that the justice and love that are the only possible response to this plight are not the primary subject of the epic, but nonetheless claims that they "bathe the work in their light without ever becoming noticeable themselves, except as a kind of accent."[25]

Though Robinson's novels are of course not as bleak as the *Iliad*, something similar is true of them. They too seek to portray the basic tragedy of human life, the various ways in which we fail to live up to the justice and love that are our only salvation, and how those failures ramify out, affecting everyone. The novels are full of missed opportunities to love and the suffering that inevitably must result from this. And they, like the *Iliad*, don't allow you to finish reading them thinking that you will be able to avoid this suffering, that you will somehow be an exception to the general rule. You will feel it, too. Perhaps there is a brighter tone, a lighter touch, here than in the *Iliad*, but here too love is present in a background sort of way, as an accent, a promise of another way of living, one that does not wallow in what is wrong or crudely step in to try to "fix" it. And even our great hope of something else, of an eternity that is somehow beyond this tragedy, is not a hope for a fix; even in that place we still won't want to stop singing the tragic song. It is "piety," Ames assures us, that forbids us from trying.

---

[1] This point of Fisher's, and its natural connection to the work of Kierkegaard, is advanced as well in one of the first really penetrating philosophical analyses of Robinson's work, that of Jonathan Lear, in his "Not at Home in Gilead," in *Raritan* 32, no. 1 (2012): 34–52.

[2] Ryan S. Kemp and Jordan Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel: A Philosophical Account of Her Christian Vision* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 31–34.

[3] This is a recurrent theme in Nietzsche's works, but see especially Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Random House, 1974), section 143.

[4] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 243.

[5] Kemp and Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel*, 125.

[6] Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (New York, NY: Picador, 2009), 227.
[7] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 270. Zossima's homily "Of Prayer, Love, and the Touching of Other Worlds," from which this is drawn, is of central importance both for Dostoevsky's novel and for much of what we say about Robinson's novels.
[8] Indeed, this is one of the ways (maybe *the* most crucial way) that Zossima's vision differs from the one Ivan Karamazov concocts in his poem about the "Grand Inquisitor." The Inquisitor sees himself as tragically set apart from the mass of mankind (who he claims to love but really loathes). Zossima sees himself as one broken human among many, tasked as we all are with an impossible responsibility.
[9] Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), 116.
[10] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 192.
[11] Ibid., 192.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Kemp and Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel*, 52.
[14] See, for instance, her "The Love of God and Affliction," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York, NY: Harper, 2009), 67–82.
[15] Of course there is no question of judging Ruth for this. More than most (more than Glory, certainly), she has reasons for taking up a defensive posture, and of course that's *why* her experience has universal significance. As we say in the book, there is much to admire in her honesty at fully facing her loss, and in maintaining a kind of spectral hope that it will be reconciled somehow at the end of all things. But that doesn't imply that the views she develops are the ideal ones.
[16] Robinson, *Home*, 324.
[17] Ibid., 325.
[18] Robinson, *Gilead*, 57.
[19] This is not meant to be a restatement of Tóth's criticisms above, which the reader will be able to see are more nuanced. But it is not an uncommon reaction to Robinson's novels. See, for example, Jessica Hooten Wilson, who suggests that "in *Gilead*, the cross is unnecessary," and that "her novels offer us the gospel that we want to be true – one that is easy, beautiful, and full only of light"; see Wilson, "Pushing Back Against Marilynne Robinson's Theology," May 13, 2019, online at https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/pushing-back-against-marilynne-robinsons-theology-2/.
[20] Robinson, *Gilead*, 57.
[21] In a particularly moving passage, Weil quotes the *Iliad*'s description of Hector as "far from hot baths," and insists that nearly all of the *Iliad* itself, and indeed "nearly all of human life, then and now, takes place far from hot baths." In *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1986), 164.
[22] *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 163.
[23] Ibid., 188.
[24] Ibid., 192.
[25] Ibid., 188.