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Givenness of Things (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Givenness of Things. Robinson, Marilynne. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015. 304pp. ISBN: 978-0374298470. Reviewed by Walker Cosgrove, Associate Professor of History, Dordt College.

Toward the end of October a good friend of mine emailed me a link to an article regarding a conversation between President Obama and professor and writer Marilynne Robinson, in which President Obama interviewed Robinson.¹ The text of his email said jokingly that this article revealed that she had become “the high priestess of America.” My response was that we could do a whole lot worse than her, since she is thoughtful, articulate, learned, and supportive of the traditional arts and sciences in higher education. After reading her new book of essays, *The Givenness of Things*, I am further convinced that Robinson is quite sympathetic to intellectuals and writers, particularly those of a religious bent, who remain rooted in knowledge and education as historically conceived and have not embraced every educational fad of the past twenty years. She has little time for much of the nonsense that occurs in public, civic, and educational spheres. Her nonfiction has done much to shape my thinking in many areas, and this new volume furthers that influence.

Her magisterial fiction aside (her novels have won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer for *Gilead*), Robinson is a rare writer and intellectual today. To say she is learned and erudite would be obvious, but she wears this learnedness comfortably. Furthermore, she is a renaissance woman of sorts, dabbling not just in the world of her doctoral scholarship (Shakespeare) or teaching (creative writing), but easily conversant in theology, history, philosophy, political science, and the hard sciences, particularly physics. Moreover, she is a woman of faith, a subject she does not shy from at all. Unlike many celebrated writers and artists of faith, Robinson is an unabashed Calvinist, not the theological camp one joins to win friends and influence people.

Robinson’s nonfiction is best categorized as two different types. The first type, books that meditate on a universal whole, includes *Mother Country* and

Absence of Mind. What I mean by universal whole is that each volume takes up a common, dominant theme. *Mother Country* is an extended essay over 250 pages regarding the British welfare state and nuclear waste, and *Absence of Mind* is a series of lectures on religion and science, her attempt to restore the primacy of human consciousness into conversations between the two. The second type of nonfiction she writes is looser and more free-wheeling, including collections of occasional pieces such as *The Death of Adam* and *When I Was a Child*. *The Givenness of Things* fits into this latter type, a characteristic that makes doing it justice in a review more difficult. Because I cannot touch upon every essay in a brief review, I will highlight a couple of persistent themes in this new book.

Something I most appreciate about Robinson’s nonfiction is her persistent critique of what she elsewhere (in *The Absence of Mind*) calls “parascience.” She defines this term as a theory which bases its claims about the world, humanity, and ultimate reality upon nineteenth-century positivistic notions of science as extolled by Auguste Comte, though she clearly demonstrates that these claims are not scientific in the least, but instead metaphysical.² Her criticism of parascience is stronger for her profound respect of true science displayed across her nonfiction, including this newest volume.³ And while she is justly critical of this theory masquerading as science, she frequently extols the “achievements and insights” that science has brought over the past hundred or so years (4-5). The main focus of her criticism of parascience, especially in this volume on neuroscience, is that it operates with a model of reality that is reductionistic, based ultimately in positivism ([73ff]; she even compares parascience with religious literalism and religious liberalism [see 167, 211]). To Robinson, this reductionism leads to an unwillingness to consider the depth of mystery that surrounds the mind and personhood; as she writes, “Neuroscientists seem predisposed to

the conclusion that there is no 'self'.... The real assertion being made in all this (neuroscience is remarkable among the sciences for its tendency to bypass hypothesis and even theory and to go directly to assertion) is that there is no soul" (8). She points to Alexis de Tocqueville as a prophetic voice, who connected the view of "progress" in his own day and the eventual reduction of the human to mere material (75). Let me be clear, however. This is not a criticism of true science and its search for knowledge and truth: "If there is a scientific mode of thought that is crowding out and demoralizing the humanities, it is not research in the biology of the cell or the quest for life on other planets" (12).

The antidote to this materialist reductionism, for Robinson, is found in the arts and humanities, which help us better explore, process, and understand the human experience in all of its complexity, diversity, and uniqueness (10-11, 118-119). Regarding the mysteriousness of the human mind, she writes, "If Shakespeare had undergone an MRI there is no reason to believe there would be any more evidence of extraordinary brilliance in him than there would be of a self or a soul. He left a formidable body of evidence that he was both brilliant and singular, but it has fallen under the rubric of Renaissance drama and is somehow not germane, perhaps because this places the mind so squarely at the center of the humanities" (11). True science, she is right to emphasize, welcomes and embraces mystery, as can be seen in the recent developments in a variety of fields in which what we know continues to grow, but these fields humbly acknowledge what we do not know as well. Not so for parascience, which assumes that we can know all that is knowable and that mystery will be dispelled; both assumptions are limited ideas that are dangerously reductionistic in defining what "human" is (14, 230).

In light of this emphasis on the arts and humanities, I find curious Robinson's praises of the philosophy of pragmatism in general and William James in particular (73ff). I am well aware of my own lack of knowledge regarding pragmatism as a philosophy and James as one of its principle practitioners, so I tread lightly in my criticism here. Part of the problem may be that I am unfamiliar with ideas within pragmatism to which she is drawn, and I am especially thrown off when

she suggests that Jonathan Edwards is a pragmatist of a kind (77). I've read a lot of Edwards and know him to be many things, but I've never considered him a pragmatist.

The reason I find Robinson's support of pragmatism so curious is because of what I mentioned above about her encouragement of the traditional arts and sciences generally, and the humanities specifically.⁴ Robinson argues that in order to understand the deepest part of being human, if that is even possible, "we must encourage the study of the aptly named humanities" (119). Likewise, she is critical of colleges and universities because they "now seem obsessed with marketing themselves and ensuring the marketability of their product, which will make the institution itself more marketable—a loop of mutual reinforcement of the kind that sets in when thinking becomes pathologically narrow" (123). It is pragmatism, at least as I think of the philosophy, that causes us to focus mainly on economic aspect—James' own metaphor is the "cash value" of an idea—thus "ransacking our public school system, [while] we have been turning a coldly utilitarian eye on our great universities" (114). I agree wholeheartedly with Robinson that the way forward is to encourage the humanities in academic institutions, because they "teach us respect for what we are—we, in the largest sense. Or they should, because there is another reality, greater than the markets, and that is the reality in which the planet is fragile, and peace among nations, where it exists, is also fragile" (123). Amen.

A second important theme in these essays is the cultural importance and influence of Calvinism, which helps shape her thought and writing, giving much of it a theological tenor. Calvinism, for Robinson, is important as a metaphysics because it allows one to weather various scientific discoveries, particularly in physics, that force us to rethink reality as we know it (87-88, 145, 171). According to her, much religious thought (literalism and liberalism) and parascience is rooted in outdated modes of knowing, particularly positivism, and thus they lack the framework to wrestle with these discoveries in helpful ways.

Robinson's Calvinism is unconventional, even if theologically conservative (for examples, see 73, 89, 142, 170, 188, 209, 212, 243). It transcends typical Calvinist categories, whether doctrinalism,

pietism, transformationalism, or any mix of the three. What I find interesting is her ability to see Calvinism's pervasive influence in various historical eras, even among those that do not seem to evidence that influence (61). For example, she finds Calvinist influence in Shakespeare and Elizabethan England as a whole (50, 62-63, 65-66), as well as in nineteenth-century American thought, such as Lincoln's use of Calvinist categories regarding the acceptance of suffering with humility (100-101) and in Emily Dickinson's poetry (145). Robinson finds Calvinist influence in more traditional places, like Jonathan Edwards (87-88) and the Puritans (60). She also considers Calvinism's influence in Reformation Era England, particularly in terms of the dignity of the working class it encouraged, in the move from Latin to vernacular connected with the beauty and poetics of English as a written language, and in the English Renaissance (19-27, 53-55, 60-61).

Perhaps my favorite item in *The Givenness of Things* is a new, or renewed, strain of her thought in the return to Shakespeare, the subject of her doctoral research. I particularly enjoy her theological reading of Shakespeare, and not simply because her readings transcend the endless debate as to whether Shakespeare was a Protestant or a Catholic. Perhaps because I read and enjoy Shakespeare for pleasure only and because he is not a subject of scholarly study for me, I find her theological readings so compelling. She argues that in some sense Shakespeare transcends categories of orthodoxy and heresy (or of Protestant and Catholic) and instead wrestles with much deeper and grander human questions (35, 65), such as *The Tempest*, which "takes us as far into the thinnest upper atmosphere as anything I know, whether art, metaphysics, or theology" (222).

She considers Shakespeare's wrestling with evil, forgiveness, and grace in various plays, asking, "How is life to be lived in this fallen world, with all its dangers and temptations, if grace is taken to be the standard of a virtuous life?" (33) Robinson goes on to write, "I propose that, in his later plays, Shakespeare gives grace a scale and aesthetic power, and a structural importance, that reach toward a greater sufficiency of expression—not a definition or a demonstration of grace or even an objective correlative for it, but the intimation of a great reality of another order, which pervades

human experience, even manifests itself in human actions and relations, yet is always purely itself" (34). Plays as diverse as *Cymbeline*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* receive mention because "reconciliation is their subject" and that "[t]hey are about forgiveness that is unmerited, unexpected, unasked, unconditional. In other words, they are about grace" (39). That said, Robinson focuses most of her creative and interpretive energy on *Hamlet* (40-45) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (45-49).

Not content to deal simply with reconciliation, she also considers scenes of recognition that precede those of reconciliation, as Robinson writes, "[a]gain and again they tell us really to see the people we thought we knew, and really to feel the sanctity of the bonds we think we cherish. They open onto the inarticulate richness concealed in the garments of the ordinary—in the manner of Christianity, properly understood" (223). Ultimately, she argues, to read Shakespeare is to participate in metaphysics. Or in theology (224).

There is so much more I could say. I should have mentioned her essay on fear as a driving force in contemporary America, which is in many ways prophetic of Donald Trump's dramatic political rise. I find fascinating the ease with which she transcends typical religious categories (e.g., liberal vs. conservative). In this review I have said nothing regarding her civic mindedness and engagement, her scriptural interpretation, or her thoughts on Bonhoeffer and Barth. I implore you to take up and read and reread *The Givenness of Things* to discover much more. But if you have not read Robinson before, this is not the place to start; begin instead with her fiction. Then move to her nonfiction, and even so, I prefer the tight coherence of *Absence of Mind* or the essays in *The Death of Adam* to this present volume, and especially the more subdued argumentation in her previous nonfiction to the more forceful tone of *The Givenness of Things*.

Endnotes

1. For that article, see: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/05/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation/>
2. Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 32-33, 43.

3. See also, for example, her guest appearance with astrophysicist Marcelo Gleiser on the radio show *On Being*, “The Mystery We Are,” January 2, 2014. The transcript can be found at <http://www.onbeing.org/program>.
4. See, for example, her 2015 Presidential Lecture in the Arts and Humanities at Stanford: <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2015/november/robinson-humanities-lecture-110315.html>

The Political World of Bob Dylan: Freedom and Justice, Power and Sin. Taylor, Jeff, and Chad Israelson, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. 304pp. ISBN: 978-1137482341. Reviewed by Dave Schelhaas, Professor Emeritus of English, Dordt College.

For anyone who is a lifelong Dylanophile—and they are legion—this book is a treasure trove. It teems with historical material about the iconic artist’s life and career, with piquant Dylan quotations drawn from countless interviews, with analyses of lyrics (though, sadly, lyrics are not quoted in the book—probably because of copyright prohibitions) and analyses of his relationship with the Jesus people in the 1970s who were instrumental in his conversion. It establishes that from the time of his conversion Dylan has remained a believer in Jesus Christ. Most importantly, it integrates all of this data to defend a thesis concerning Dylan’s political and spiritual beliefs. *The Political World of Bob Dylan* explores Dylan’s relationship to many ideologies and movements, but at its core is the contention and the attempt to show that after his conversion Dylan became a Christian anarchist.

Chad Israelson, author of the first three chapters, writes about Dylan’s early years in Hibbing, Minnesota, living on the iron range where it was more of a stigma to be rich than poor. Here Dylan—then Robert Zimmerman—learned of the ravages caused by economic downturns. Here he developed from his Jewish tradition a sense of the sacred. Here he came to appreciate spirituality and recognize that Christianity and the Jewish faith were inextricably linked. But here he also learned that the demand for conformity was powerful in his small, tightly-knit community, and that he would have to leave it and “keep running” to fulfill his dreams.

In Chapter 2, “Voice of a Generation,” Israelson traces Dylan’s life from his early fame in the 1960s until the present. He shows how his music fits with some of the ideas of the New Left, the Peace Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement, and then he moves on to show Dylan’s continuing

influence and experiences up to the present.

Early in Chapter 3, Israelson writes that “over a span of a career from the early 1960s into the twenty-first century Dylan has called into question all power structures be they political, legal, economic or social” (94). He then goes on to illustrate this point by examining more than twenty of Dylan’s songs that deal with freedom and justice. Analyses of “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” and “Only a Pawn in Their Game” (about the shooting of Medgar Evers) are especially effective in showing Dylan’s nuanced understanding of evil. Dylan does not blame the deaths of Carroll and Evers simply on the evil men who killed them but on “a system of institutional racism that pitted poor whites against Blacks” and the “absence of legal equality” (99). Here, perhaps, we see the beginnings of Dylan as anarchist.

What, you may ask, is a Christian anarchist? The word *anarchy* usually means a “state of lawlessness or political disorder brought about by the absence of government” and is often associated with people who go around blowing up government buildings. This is *not* the meaning of “Christian anarchist.”

According to Jeff Taylor, the primary author of the last four chapters, “when used in its political, non-pejorative sense, anarchy refers to the absence of political authority,” and “anarchists are persons who advocate the elimination of government” but without violence. People who embrace this philosophy for “Christian” reasons are Christian anarchists. Examples of Christian anarchists given by Taylor are Leo Tolstoy and Albert Schweitzer.

Using H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* with its five responses to culture, Taylor places Christian anarchism in the “Christ Against Culture” category. He notes that even before he became a Christian, Dylan, with his protest