

“The Radiant Astonishment of Experience”: Two Interviews with Marilynne Robinson, March 20, 2004, and February 9, 2007

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LL: I'm intrigued by something Wendell Berry once said about place, roughly paraphrased “we can't know who we are until we know where we are.”² To what degree does the self-knowledge of your characters depend on a consciousness and understanding of landscape?

MR: Hugely. Enormously. At this point I'm beginning to wonder if I could make a distinction between character and landscape.

LL: When you're in the middle of a novel, how do you conceive of the relationship between character and place? What comes first, or do the two intersect?

¹Marilynne Robinson is the author of the novel *Housekeeping* (1980), the environmental history *Mother Country* (1989), and the collection of essays *The Death of Adam* (1999). Her novel, *Gilead* (2004), won the Pulitzer Prize in 2005. This interview occurred at Brigham Young University in Provo, UT.

²Wallace Stegner, Berry's friend and former teacher, quotes Berry: “If you don't know *where* you are, you don't know *who* you are” (199).

MR: Well, there's probably nothing stranger than the fact that we exist on a planet. Very odd. Who does not feel the oddness of this? I mean, stop and think about where we actually are in the larger sense. It seems to me as if every local landscape is a version of the cosmic mystery, that it is very strange that we're here, and that it is very strange that we are what we are. In a certain sense the mystery of the physical reality of the human being is expressed in any individual case by the mystery of a present landscape. The landscape is ours in the sense that it is the landscape that we query. So, we're created in the fact of ourselves answering to a particular sense of amazement.

GH: Some people can walk in a beautiful landscape and see nothing. Did we stop loving places?

MR: I think that human beings feel strange in their circumstance. One of the ways that they have of hiding from human reality is to create artificial environments. Look at people from Babylon forward; when people have power, they create an artificial environment around themselves that can suggest to them that they're immune from the consequences of being mortal, and palaces, all these things, are monuments to this impulse; and as we have created a more technological civilization and one that is simply more profuse in its products, we can do more and more to artificialize our environment to the sense that we would have no idea where we are by looking around at what surrounds us.

GH: You have received some criticism of your views of environmentalism because it would seem to provide fuel for anti-environmentalists and thus put at risk the efficacy of the environmental movement's urgent aims. How would you respond to that criticism?

MR: Well, it hadn't been much on my mind to say this, but the fact is that I'm profoundly critical of the environmental movement. Not because I have any problem with the idea that the environment needs to be rescued, but in the sense that I think that they [environmental

activists] have been stunningly ineffective and in many cases a major part of the problem. I know they don't like to hear that, but I don't admire the kind of mentality that says "You mustn't criticize because somehow or another we are so virtuous and valuable that we're immune to criticism." They need criticism. One of the things that probably forms my reaction on this subject is that I've been sued by Greenpeace.

GH: For *Mother Country*?

MR: Yes. Greenpeace literature in America has no information of any substance about England's Sellafield Nuclear Processing Plant or about anything that's associated with it. There was a brochure that British Greenpeace circulated in which they listed their accomplishments; one of them was that they had "scored a ban"—that's their language—on nuclear dumping in the sea. Now, there is no ban on nuclear dumping in the sea. It happens continuously as a matter of daily business off the coast of England and off the coast of France; they also send ships out and dump it directly into the sea. Everything that you can think of comes into the sea in nitric acid—isn't this lovely? There's a lot of activity that is Greenpeace-associated relative to Sellafield in Britain. There is *no* possibility that Greenpeace in the United States ought not to have been fully informed about this very major problem in Britain.

GH: What was their response to your criticism?

MR: I couldn't get any response from Greenpeace about why they had not done anything to publicize this plutonium industry in the United States, why they gave out information that was, in fact, misleading. Under British law you can be sued for libel without respect to the truth of what you say. So they could sue me, which they did, and when a book is considered libelous it can't be mentioned in print, it can't be sold, it can't be reviewed, etc. So my book just disappeared in England. The condition on which they would allow the book to be republished was that I had to excise the passage that reflected badly

on Greenpeace. What Greenpeace was doing was acting to suppress information. Finally, I was interviewed on a television program, and there were the man who was the public relations director for Greenpeace, the public relations director for Sellafield, the British Nuclear Fuels rep., and I. And the only response I got to any question was, “You don’t know who your friends are,” i.e., “I’m an environmentalist; therefore, you must not criticize; you must not ask questions.” Now, Greenpeace absorbs more money in terms of environmental donations to their expenses than anything else in the world. They have vast media resources in Britain and so on. They have this sort of white-hat reputation that it’s considered embarrassing to challenge, which is one of the things that’s a great problem in contemporary culture altogether, and here is the largest nuclear phenomenon in the world that basically they have chosen not to inform about. Therefore, I am critical. Who else was there? Who else shows up in the newspaper in these arguments about Sellafield which are utter pillow fights and lead nowhere? Friends of the Earth. I’m unapologetic.

GH: In an interview you said you felt that solving the environmental problem really isn’t going to work through environmental organizations. So, where does one start, if it’s not through a kind of political activism or joining forces with institutions that are trying to do good?

MR: Well, the first thing that we have to do is have unambiguous institutions that are trying to do good. And when I’m talking about the ecological movement, I’m not talking about it as an abstract idea I’m talking about what we in fact have, which is highly ineffective. I don’t think that we can notch up an enormous number of truly significant victories. The global trade in plutonium—people make this the pretext for war, virtually, at the same time that the environmentalists don’t see fit to publish a pamphlet about it. My own approach to things is very private; I am who I am, and I write about landscape and the human investment in landscape and vice versa—I mean the investment of soul—because I want to make people love where they

are. I think that the best defense, the best sort of on-the-ground defense for any landscape is to have people love it, and any landscape deserves that.

GH: You've written that the problems that we face are of a nature that require a reorientation of our civilization that's massive. You also seem to suggest that part of that need for reorientation is a result of a flippant dismissal of our most fundamental traditions, at least in the western world and in the Judeo-Christian tradition. How do we start to reinvigorate those traditions?

MR: I think that one of the reasons that culture has lost its bearings is because religion has been trivialized, as much by its practitioners as by the people who stand aside and scoff. One of the things that's painful is that the most conspicuous of the religiously active give other people grounds for scorn a fair amount of the time. One of the things that was very characteristic of this country in earlier periods and very important to the whole formation of the democratic republic was that there was an incredible interest in the mystery of inwardness, this great mystery of the self, and developing a self, addressing it. It's that funny sort of sisterhood that one has with one's soul, of on one hand being profoundly identified with it and on the other hand continuously resenting it or protectively enthralled with it. I really do think that of all the adornments of human existence there is nothing more lovely and more universally distributed than the phenomenon of self and soul. That's what religion speaks to, arises from, and so on. What we have in a very large degree created is a consumer model of religion that diverts and flatters and makes people into sort of self-identified groups rather than people that have the courage and also the conception of this sort of true inwardness in terms of ethical, aesthetic, and all other ways. So, I think that the democratic impulses of this country are very much associated in the first instance with the fact that every human individual is a unique mystery and inviolable in that sense and beautiful in that sense, and that is very much lost in culture now. One of the things that interests me when people read my book *Housekeeping*,

especially, is this sort of idea that you have to really explain somebody who might have strayed from the broad path. Why? When in human history has it ever been true that there are not interesting ways to diverge? It's completely contrary to the positive sense of individualism that the country was based on that everybody has a pilgrimage to make, this idea that there's this nervous anxiety for herding people into recognizable sorts of stereotyped versions of human personality. Collectively, people are never as interesting as they are singularly. Any individual is more interesting than any group that you can place him in. And that is a conception that has really been very much lost. I think that the recovery of religion in the way that I understand it is identical with the recovery of political solvency, which always has to be based in self and mutual respect, along with an optimistic attention to other people and to oneself as capable of being amazing and wonderful, rather than being just normal. You can be normal and wonderful, but the idea of satisfying the expectations of the norm is a very reduced idea of what any human being is or ought to be and has a profound authority on culture at this time—a nervous, anxious, medicinal authority.

GH: My impression of the criticism of *Housekeeping* and *Death of Adam* is that, overall, it has to some degree missed some of the religious notions that you're wrestling with, because the critics are more inclined to assume that since *Housekeeping*, for example, deals with women, it can be reduced to a book with a feminist point to make. Do you feel like you're writing to a deaf audience sometimes?

MR: It's an interesting question. The whole literature enterprise assumes that there is no final, definitive judgment to be made of any piece of writing. That's what we're all doing all the time. That in itself doesn't bother me. When I read other critics on Wallace Stevens, I think, "That's not Wallace Stevens. Where did that come from?" because I have my own Wallace Stevens. It's a great mystery; it's very complex. Who knows? But I would feel as if I were perhaps a little subliterate if I were writing things that people just got, because that doesn't seem to be the way of literature. I'm not a public

person; I do very little to support my own place in the world, and I've published these books that I consider unpublishable, [but] people read them and they stay in print and all that sort of thing, and so I have nothing to complain about in terms of being neglected.

GH: Do you worry that *Housekeeping* or *Death of Adam* or *Gilead* are going to be works that are never fully going to be understood because the reception of them will miss that exploration of inwardness?

MR: On the one hand, I suppose I never feel that they are sufficiently responded to in some sense, although I have enough trouble explaining them myself, but people read them. I think that people miss the theology, the religious overtones, because people are not familiar with that language anymore. They just don't hear it. It's not an intentional insensitivity, but if a language is out of use, then bring it back into use.

LL: You describe the process of writing your novels as being linguistically intuitive; that is, you're tapping into emblematic and metaphoric language. How do you pair with the kind of architecture a novel demands?

MR: I think that the mind is the great architect. I really do think of consciousness as occurring on two levels; I would swear that it does. One of them is the sort of front-office mentality that answers the phone and keeps track of the calendar and that sort of thing, and the other is the great mind that dreams and remembers and associates and all the rest of it. I mean all the most interesting things that your mind does it does basically on its own, and you get the information afterward. It's just true! It's just how we are. But if I were to attempt to structure something from my diurnal, my daily mind, it would probably be conventional. It would preclude developments that are of interest and so on. Writing in that kind of intentional way is very second-rate. I think that when you begin writing from the deeper level of consciousness, that's when the architecture occurs, and that's

where you begin to find out that there are associations among the things that you're doing and so on, things have resonance that you don't, would not anticipate and can't explain. All the real building is basically out of your hands. It's really strange.

LL: Does that mean that you take wrong turns, and then you have to get back on track?

MR: Absolutely. And people talk about voice, and of course voice is very important to me, but one of the things that voice does is go wrong, you know? Suddenly, you're not recognizing a character, and you think, this is something that this voice cannot say, and then you have to go back, and you have to find its way again.

GH: You have been for some time quite enamored of the Transcendentalist writers and they're sort of considered to be the generation of the Adamic writer. The Adamic ideal has been completely tossed out in critical circles as racist, as xenophobic, and also as colonialist because it implies a kind of innocence in relationship to a landscape that had a history prior to your arrival. How do you defend that notion of Adam?

MR: My theological tradition does not locate blame on Eve, does not associate the Fall with sexuality, and so on, and so there are all sorts of burdens that I don't carry. I think that this is something that's difficult for people who have another religious tradition behind them. I'm on perfectly reasonable terms with Adam. To me, Adam simply means the sacredness of the human self; that's essentially it: ourselves as images of God.

GH: Do you see the idea of Adam being linked at all to colonialism or to a male prerogative?

MR: The idea of Adam does not exclude the other people who are also in the image of God. There is no definition that excludes them. And so if it has been used tendentiously, if it has been used colo-

nialistically, people misuse metaphors, but I'm not necessarily bound to accept their evaluation of any term. The first book published in the United States was a Bible translated into the Indian language by Father John Eliot—he was a Congregationalist, but that was his honorific—and there was certainly no assumption that the Indians were anything other than Adamic also.

GH: You said in your essay “My Western Roots” that the 1862 Homestead Act, which opened 270 million acres for settlement, was the most poetic act of legislation since Deuteronomy, which is a very bold claim. How do you explain your view of the Homestead Act in light of these kind of questions?

MR: Well, I think that the issue of Western settlement has been looked at in too narrow terms. The territory west of the Mississippi basically was up for grabs between slave-holding interests and free-soilers. The idea that if no one had moved west from America into these regions, it would have remained in the hands of Native Americans is very naïve. There were other countries like France, Great Britain, and Russia that had claims on the western territories along with whoever was controlling Mexico at any given time. One of the things that we don't talk about is the fact that Great Britain very nearly entered the Civil War on the side of the South because, economically, their textile industry was based on our slave system. Great Britain actually organized a plan to invade America from the north, from Canada, and they also put troops in Mexico. You can read about this in Charles Dana, who was Assistant Secretary of War under Lincoln. It was basically the northeast quadrant of the United States that was anti-slavery. Also, slavery was not by any means an isolated American phenomenon we were about five percent of it, and it was not ended by our war. We're not aware of the fact that the exportation of Africans from Africa as slaves by Europeans only came to an end in 1888. So between the period of the American Civil War and the notional end of enslavement by Europeans, ten million Africans left Africa and basically went into Latin America as slaves. The question of whether the U.S. economy would develop as a slave

or a free economy depended on the population of the open territories in the West. The Homestead Act simply pushed a huge population into the West or the middle West, made up of Germans and Swedes and Norwegians and so on, people who were often starving to death in Europe, and they were very anti-slavery because they came from the tiers of society where their labor was in direct competition with slave labor. So, the Homestead Act basically fills the empty territories with often destitute people who are anti-slavery. It was a way of stabilizing the continent so that there couldn't be a reenactment of the Civil War, and so that there couldn't be a resurgence of slavery by having it move up into the other territories. That was the nature of the conflict, that was the nature of the problem, and the solution was to populate the West. It would have been either populated by free-soil European immigrants and northerners, or it would have been populated by slave interests that were either from the American South or from Europe. So it's not a simple issue of "Should we have simply left that alone and let the Indians be the Indians." It was never that.

GH: How do you imagine Western places now in light of the overlapping histories of Euro-American settlement, Native Americans' displacement, the Mexican-American War, and so on? Presumably, identitarian politics is wanting to develop a kind of multilayered historical-cultural memory that is more aware of the ironies of history, more aware of overlapping intentions and unanticipated consequences.

MR: I'm all for that. I like layers. I like various narratives and certainly unintended consequences and the rest. There's no reason to think that if the anti-slavery culture that followed the Civil War had not stabilized the western part of the United States, there would not have been that kind of appropriation, which would have been much worse. To use a phrase, it's a fallen world and there's a lot of very tragic history involved in it. The last chapter of Marx's *Capital* (1867) is called "The Modern Theory of Colonization," and he talks about the fact that America is not capitalist because people do not live at a subsistence level; they're not day laborers. Under the European eco-

conomic system of the nineteenth century you were paid one day's subsistence for one day's work, which meant that if you were ever out of work, you died. Now, in the United States, and, of course, this is outside the South, people actually owned property; they could sustain themselves; they were not expropriated. So the idea of the Homestead Act was to create sufficiencies for people so that they did not become economically dependent on the model of European economics. The Homestead Act was something that was designed to prevent a kind of continuously starving proletariat by creating a sort of sufficiency universally. I think it without question is based on Deuteronomic law, which is very largely taken up with systems of provision for people who are destitute, so they don't remain destitute.

GH: Given predominant attitudes, when we look at European culture, we expect to see patriarchal, imperialist hypocrites, and yet you want to move away from that. Could this be because of your notion of the sacred nature of human beings and the fact that the individual, him or herself, cannot be reduced, cannot be summarized, cannot be captured by a certain ideological, philosophical "ism"?

MR: And we don't study European history, so we don't understand that the people who came here were the "tired," the "poor," the "huddled masses" in a very great degree (Lazarus 16). We tend to think that it's always this sort of Norseman or someone who has come across the ocean to experience privilege in enhanced form.

LL: What do you find to be the most difficult aspect of writing and the most rewarding?

MR: The most rewarding aspect is that it's very engrossing. There's just this sort of concentration it involves that is very pleasurable, even though it's very difficult, partly because you know that a certain degree of concentration is necessary, and so when you realize that you've achieved it, there's a great deal of satisfaction. Another thing that's most rewarding is that you find out what you think and you find out what you know and you find out that there are whole

reaches of your mind that you would not have access to under any normal circumstance. I think that's one of the reasons that people become writers, and if they become writers, they remain writers. They don't deviate into anything else because it's a way of experiencing yourself for which there's probably no equivalent. It's very, very engrossing in that sense.

LL: Do you think writers sometimes begin new projects too quickly?

MR: Yes, I think you're right. The hardest thing about it is waiting until it's time to do it, because there is something so arbitrary about the realization that you have something to say, and there's such an absolute difference between the times when you do and the times that you don't. You have to be patient, you know? I think there's a religious analogue here; there are periods in which you feel as if many things are happening and then long intervals during which you're simply waiting to find that place again.

LL: What about writers driven by the Ben Franklin model of writing, where you become a good citizen by sitting down in the chair at certain hours to write?

MR: For some people that seems to work. They swear by it. Frank Conroy swears by it. People think that if you invest enough time and you furrow your brow and if you really try, then there ought to be something at the end of it that is of indubitable value, [but] that is just not how it works. You do the work of writing when you're not writing by thinking and by being attentive and by reading and so on. That major sort of preparation—it's sort of like there has to be a sort of dense enough cloud mass before there can be any precipitation—that is real work, and the idea that working at writing yields pages of writing is an error, I think.

GH: Is that process the same when you're writing your essays or writing something like *Mother Country* versus writing *Housekeeping*? *Housekeeping* feels to me like something that's really deep in your

consciousness as a writer. Does the process have to become metaphorical, poetic, fictional, in order to tap into that “back office”?

MR: Well, it’s interesting. I do experience writing fiction and writing nonfiction differently; there’s no question about that. I recline to write fiction; I sit right up in a chair to write nonfiction. It’s still voice-based, and sometimes when I read my essays, I laugh because this bodacious voice is saying these bodacious things, and I think, a nice girl like me—where did I come up with that? It is a matter of voice, though, in terms of discipline and the argument. It is. There’s an impulse in me, as you may have noticed, to store information, and if anything comes up as a question in my mind, then I read about it. I want to control that in some sense. There’s a part of my mind that is the repository for that sort of thing, sort of very informational, and that very much comes into play when I’m writing essays. I want to build them with a sort of broad referential base, and so I’m sort of reaching around in my mind for references and analogies and so on. But it feels different, it really does feel different.

LL: What larger traditions of art—visual, musical, etc.—feed your work?

MR: My brother is an art historian, and we spent a lot of our youth walking around galleries, looking at all sorts of things, you know? I used to paint; I wasn’t any good at it, but I certainly enjoyed it. I became very aware then of how when you’re working on something that’s visual or spatial, one thing implies another.

LL: How does this spatial perspective influence your work?

MR: I think—more than most people perhaps—I think of a piece of writing as an object in the sense of working over a whole surface, rather than [as] something that exists linearly. That’s very important for me in terms of how I think. I listen to music all the time. I listen to Bach almost endlessly, and one of the reasons that I like him so much is that it seems to me that he is the absolute master of the long-sentence style.

LL: I can see that sort of contrapuntal style in your essays. Auden once said that “Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead” (qtd. in Levy 42). Besides Bach, what deceased writers or artists or musicians do you find yourself “breaking bread” with?

MR: Well, you know my dear old Transcendentalists. I love them all, I love them all. Emily Dickinson—I taught a class on American poetry, basically American poetry from the early nineteenth century, for a semester last year and spent a lot of time on Dickinson; she just knocks me dead every time. I just can’t believe her.

LL: What kind of literary or extra-literary advice would you give to an aspiring writer, maybe a very serious student writer?

MR: I think that one of the things that’s very important, of course, is to feed your mind—I really do—to give yourself a lot to work with, and that means, of course, pulling the plug on all kinds of diverting froth that modern culture throws at us. That’s important not only because it gives you something to think about, which is very important, but also because it’s staking your territory, which I think every writer needs—a feeling of autonomy, a feeling of actually, in fact, being what he or she is, which is another voice. There’s an odd tendency in American culture that I think might be postcolonial in the sense of thinking of oneself as a colony, and assuming somehow that you will not be a writer of the first order, as if you should hope to be adequately approved of, the idea that you might break the china—I mean, this is considered to be not a thing to be aspired to.

LL: How do you think this desire for adequacy affects contemporary writers?

MR: People tend to write perhaps more with respect to conventions. They tend to pick up the mannerisms of other writers too readily and so on, and of course there’s imitativeness, and it’s a phase of learning that people go through, but basically it has to be your own, and it has to be something that you feel is necessary to say on the basis of your

own witness of the world. Whenever I say, “individualism,” people seem to think that I mean Timothy O’Leary or something like that, which is sad, because it means that we’ve forgotten the meaning of the word. I really think that for anybody to be a good writer to have the nerve to be a young writer, with the courage to develop, you have to have a great capacity for valuing your own existence and your own experience, and it’s not egoism because that is the basis for valuing other people’s integrity and experience.

LL: Does this lack of individualism have to do with how pop culture programs us to see things in conventional ways?

MR: I think that there’s an odd sort of argument that [says], “You’re a human product,” and I think that in a way it’s a sort of closing of the eyes against this sort of radiant astonishment of a given existence, really. People go up into a mountain and get killed because they think it’s some sort of waterslide instead of being part of the great, fierce world. Even things that we see that are natural often are sort of post-cards in our apprehension of them, which is another bizarre thing.

LL: Can those same insights about existence occur in an urban environment as they do in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho?

MR: Well, I think that they certainly can. I see them in writing that students of mine do, who are very urban people in any case, and I think that in that case it tends more toward attentiveness to other people with other people being the major fauna in those settings.

GH: Everything you write seems infused with a sense of the sacred, but beyond that I really don’t know much about your beliefs or how your beliefs inform your relationship to the world around you.

MR: From an early period of my life I did adopt this habit of thought, that experience is a sacred transaction. There’s a beautiful passage in Calvin, where he talks about how if someone is confronting you, someone who might kill you—and, of course, this was a real problem for people in the Reformation—you had to remember that God

had seen fit to bestow his image on that person, and that however he might offend against you, Christ stood waiting to take his offenses on Himself. But the whole assumption is always that between the consciousness and what confronts the consciousness there is a sacred transaction. This does not in itself produce a kind of doctrinal mentality. Consider the image of God and the idea of Christ as waiting to take your enemy's transgressions on himself and so on. Obviously, there is a great deal of doctrine embedded in that, but I am much more interested in it experientially than I am dogmatically, shall we say? It seems to me as if it's something intrinsically difficult enough that the more you attempt to accept it as true, the more conceptually difficult it becomes—I mean in the sense of becoming richer. My religious tradition is very Reformation with two sacraments and an elected minister and no authority higher than the congregation itself. There's a great sort of simplicity in it and actually very few working parts. That's something that actually other people don't recognize. People have asked me before, "What is it you actually believe?" because there are so few working parts to my beliefs. I mean, I don't have to state any creed. Since most religions are so much more structured, people look for those signs of structure in order to recognize religiousness, but for me that is not the expression of my religion. I think of doctrine as basically a sort of ossification that occurs in what is ideally a living substance.

GH: Does this mean that literature can't preach?

MR: I think that a lot of literature has preached. Again, one of the things that's an aspect of my tradition, which is basically Calvinism, although nobody uses that word, is that there isn't a distinction between the sacred and the secular. He says creation is the shining garment in which God is revealed and concealed, which I think is very lovely. The assumption is that there is no more or less sacred, but everything is sacred—you know—which is why the experiential basis of it assumes that anything can be a visionary experience, or anything properly understood would be.

II³

GH: Do you feel that there's anything significant in the fact that you've now written two novels about very small towns, and what is it that attracts you to the idea of writing about a small place?

MR: Well, I spent my childhood in small towns. Then I went to school in Providence, Rhode Island. But, you know, you have such a contained experience in college that it doesn't matter much where you are. I've always chosen to live in smaller places. I understand them. I know how to live there and so on. I like cities, but I don't have enough of a kind of experience of them that would make me write about them with authority.

GH: Do you think there's something about the small-town experience that is getting lost in the cultural landscape?

MR: That's hard to know. My son lives in a story in New York, and it's a very special little community where they feel very much at home because within a certain area there are all the shops and all sorts of things. I can see that they have something equivalent to a small-town life; it just has a huge city around it. I think that one of the things that's always bothered me is the assumption that people who live in small towns have, therefore, small lives. That simply doesn't have any basis in my experience, and I think that perhaps part of my interest in writing about small towns is simply to break down these assumptions that once you leave the coast or leave a major city, you are in the land of meaninglessness.

GH: Could you talk a little bit about what a small-town religious community, like John Ames's community in *Gilead*, can do to prevent itself from becoming the kind of sheltered and parochial version of community or of Christianity that doesn't reach its full meaningfulness as a religious community?

³Ashley Sanders also participated in this second interview, which occurred in Salt Lake City, UT.

MR: Well, I think that all communities are dependent on their members for their integrity and their meaningfulness, and that any community, no matter how large, can become parochial. If it is true of Ames's community that these words are not appropriately applied to it, it's partially because he's a serious man, a thoughtful man, and presumably encourages thoughtfulness and seriousness among the people that he feels responsible to. I think that, again, in cities—my son and daughter-in-law go to a very small church in Queens—it's actually a Dutch Reformed church—in an environment where that is a very tiny minority of the population, and it's very intimate. It's all the macaroni salads and the sales where crocheted items are prominent and that sort of thing. I mean, there it is in the middle of the city, but if you lifted it out and put it on the landscape somewhere else, it would look exactly like a small church anywhere. It's important to them because the minister is a very thoughtful woman who preaches sermons that make them think about things. I think that the rules are pretty much the same, no matter where the community is.

GH: It strikes me as significant that Ames has been in implicit dialogue with Edward his entire life and that his readings and his thoughtfulness are in some way co-dependent on the disbelief of his brother, so I guess I'm wondering how you reconcile those two points of view. Is his thoughtfulness a function of his willingness to engage the seriousness of criticism of Christianity?

MR: Yes, I think you're correct in saying that.

GH: But then why dismiss the meaninglessness of attacks on belief, as he does?

MR: Well, it's one thing to criticize something in a way that makes it intelligently self-aware. If you take criticism of religion in a way that makes you deal with it at the level of its seriousness, it stimulates good religious thought. If you respond to it as dismissive, then you have made a mistake because the dismissiveness is uncomprehending, in effect. Things like the question of the existence of God,

I think, [are] very badly formulated questions for the reasons that he mentions, but which I would endorse, that if you consider existence to be a divine acts then you imply that there is something beyond existence that you can't imagine, that we don't have access to. So there's no way either to prove or disprove the existence of God, given what we have to work with in terms of the basis for that kind of reasoning, and so any argument against the existence of God that claims to be decisive on the basis of inappropriate information is, of course, meaningless.

GH: I see. So would you put Richard Dawkins in that category?

MR: Yes [laughing].

GH: Sort of an obvious answer [laughing]. How would you define religious fundamentalism as opposed to the kind of religious sensibility that John Ames has?

MR: They're cultures that have elaborated themselves distinct from one another over a very long period of time so that there are substantial differences. The essential difference is that somebody in John Ames's tradition would say that there is no one threshold that you cross and after that [comes] the kind of unique salvation experience that fundamentalists tend to talk about. He would say, "No, every moment is revelation." There is no either/or character to experience, in effect. If it's properly understood, it all emanates from the same divine intent. The categories of "saved" and "not saved" would not be categories that he could subscribe to because the whole of life is a process that is an instruction, ideally, and if you have a thousand experiences that predispose you towards atheism and one experience that predisposes you towards religion, God decides what matters. The idea that you can know about yourself or know about anybody else, what their state is—he would reject that. Recovering the mind of a child is interpreted in many traditions as simply recovering a condition of openness, innocence in *that* sense, and if you have it over against the context of the Pharisees, who felt

they knew everything they needed to know, you can see how children are not capable of hypocrisy.

GH: There's also a moment where Ames equates writing with prayer. It's a very deep concept that I think is more profoundly articulated in the novel than in any other place I've seen. It seems to me that there's a kind of aspiration for writing to become a discourse of the dead looking back on life. That's certainly how the novel starts. You seem to be implying that prayer is a kind of imagination toward God. At what point do you see that imagination or that projection of one's idea of who God might be; at what point does that transform into a genuine dialogue? How does one know that one is not fantasizing or inventing God but actually having a communion?

MR: When you pray, what you're actually trying to do—it's almost like what you were talking about before, the perspective, in a certain sense, of the dead—you are trying to understand at a level that almost absents you from what you were trying to understand, so that, for example, in my tradition at least often you are trying to appraise your circumstance: what is being asked of me; what should I do; how can I understand this? Then you would think, what does God want out of this situation? This is the motherly wisdom I gave my son for which he has always thanked me, actually—the idea, which I didn't of course come up with, that if you consider a situation and think, what does God want here, rather than what do I want, it's all transformed, and it gives you a purchase on reality that you never have, if you think of yourself as primarily the agent of your own interests, and if you think of it from that point of view, then it's in a certain sense an exploration of the nature of God because you're thinking, His sympathies are not on one side or the other; they're on both sides. You don't know the real meaning of this. You have to see; you have to wait. You're supposed to forgive and [ask], "What is there for me to forgive in this situation?"—you know what I mean?—so that it becomes an inquiry in which you're trying to be honest to your conception of God, and I think "grace," "forgiveness," and so on, are accurate descriptors. It doesn't require

you to make some kind of an effigy in your mind. It just creates the need to understand intentions that religion profoundly endorses. It's very liberating in that sense. You can get out of the trenches. You're not doomed to the meagerness of humanity, if you're trying to look at it from this other perspective. It seems to me as if granting all human fallibility, and I subscribe enthusiastically to human fallibility—but this serious intention to see from another perspective than the perspective of your own interests—it seems to me as if that is about as good an exploration of the nature of God as human beings are capable of, and the first thing that disciplines you is the fact that, like you as well as He might, He likes the other people too [laughing].

LL: I have a follow-up question here. On page nineteen of *Gilead*, you write, “My writing has always felt like praying even when I wasn't writing prayers, as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone.” It sounds as if writing is a way of being with God. Could you talk about that implied closeness?

MR: I don't imagine an audience when I write. I really don't. I don't know what I imagine, and it's probably something that resembles an audience of one perhaps. But the feeling of intimacy is very real, partly because when you're writing well, you are discovering what you think. It's kind of a discipline of honesty, and honesty, of course, would be what you engage in in a relationship of absolute trust and absolute intimacy.

GH: Is there something about reading and writing fiction that can connect to the experience of prayer or the experience of cultivating a kind of spirituality? What is the value of fiction in religious life?

MR: Well—I keep using the word “givens”—but one of the givens of our existence, and we know it from virtually every human relic, is that we are creatures that imagine, and one of our ways of knowing is by creating hypotheses, creating variants on reality that allow us, for example, to imagine a better reality. The whole business of empathy

or identification with other people is an act of the imagination, which can be correct or faulty. I don't see a clear line between reality and the imagined because imagination, in one way or another, is how we negotiate our existence. When you talk about all the things that people feel that they know, what is that? It's a non-real world that has the significance of reality to people. The idea that we can actually make a distinction between the real and the imagined is a failure in the first place, and in the second place, assuming God, then the whole reality, which includes the imagination and everything it makes, is within that larger definition of reality. It's one of the ornaments. A lot of Reformation theology bases arguments for the divinity of man—in effect, the image of God and so on—in the fact that we can invent and contrive and dream and imagine, that our minds are free of a narrowly defined reality. I would say that to oppose imagination and reality is, in a certain sense, to create too restricted a notion of what either of them actually is.

LL: At one point in the novel Ames suggests that writing is a kind of judgment: “I suppose it's natural to think about those old boxes of sermons upstairs. They are a record of my life, after all, a sort of fore-taste of the Last Judgment, really, so how can I not be curious?” (41). Somehow the act of putting his life down on paper for his son causes Ames to judge himself. How does this judgment affect you when you write a novel?

MR: Well, Ames is sort of afraid to go back and look at his sermons for fear that he wouldn't find anything of value there, and so he's thinking of it as, “I've lived my life trying to be adequate to certain things. If I go up in my attic, I might find evidence that I was not adequate.” He's using an idea of the Last Judgment as when the absolute truth of what you have done is revealed to you, which is different from saying that you would be damned on the basis of it. It simply means that you will be naked, in effect, before the reality of the life that you've actually been engaged in—to misuse the word “reality” a little bit there [laughing].

GH: I think my favorite moment in the novel is Jack's description of the man next to him who is fallen, falls out of an attack of grace, I guess. That's such a poignant moment in the novel because of that sense of a near miss, that it could have been him. Then there's that debate that takes place over the course of the novel about whether there's a lack of grace in Jack's life, or whether the fact that Jack can't follow in his father's footsteps, can't find himself capable of believing in his father's teachings, is itself a sort of function of grace. Could you talk about that?

MR: Well, I don't think that any kind of judgment of people is possible. I'm always referring to Calvin. It's a disease [laughing]! But there's a moment in the *Institutes* (1536) that I really love—and you have to remember that there was a hostile army around Geneva during the whole of his presence there, and people were being burned at the stake, and communities were being destroyed in France and so on, because he was writing theology that was important to them, and people could be killed for owning his books or reading them—but in any case, his enemies were very real. It was not a joke for him. But he writes this passage where, whenever you are confronted by another human being, whenever you encounter another human being, it's an image of God, someone, as he says, to whom God has given the beauty of his likeness. And the proper response is always reverence, no matter who; no matter if it's your enemy and he wants to kill you, the proper response is still to remember this essential reverence is due to him; and it seems to me as if, in a sense, that sacredness of the human oversteps any specific instance, any behavior, any self-acknowledged state of awareness or anything like that. That is something that lifts any person outside the range of what we can understand as condemnation. For example, when Ames is dealing with Jack, it's like when he's dealing with his brother. You might want to say a certain kind of thing or make a judgment if you had those kind of religious beliefs, or you might say, "This is the presence of God challenging me in a way that I'm being asked to respond to. That's what I know about this situation, that the judgment, if there is one, is on *me* and my response."

GH: So you seem to be defining grace in the novel as that awareness or that discovery of the presence, the existence, and the beauty of the existence of another person. But there's also that question of grace as a giver of belief or a giver of faith, and since that's what's torturing Jack, and Ames doesn't really have an answer to that, what's your theological view of that? Is there really nothing to say to Jack, other than, "I don't know why you haven't been able to find faith and I can't judge you. We don't know anything about what this means in any kind of eternal sense"? That's not very comforting to Jack.

MR: Well, you know, he wants Ames's blessing. When the suggestion is made, he doesn't care if there are people around.

LL: He doesn't want to come out of it either.

MR: Yes, exactly, and I hate to characterize my own characters, but it seems to me that the craving that he feels is in a certain sense a profound valuation of what he sees and does not feel that he can be a part of. I mean, he *loves* his father, and, again paraphrasing Calvin, religion is not there to make you psychologically comfortable, and maybe the desire for psychological comfort is one of the things that goes wrong with religion. But he says you can be pursued your whole life by misfortune or good fortune or whatever, but whatever these things are, they're God's attempt to attract you. Happiness itself or happiness at any particular interval of one's life does not equal having an appropriate relationship with God, or to say that you lack it does not mean that it is not incipient, or to say that you lack it is not to say that you are the occasion for other people to understand the mystery of it more deeply than they would otherwise.

GH: As a minister or as a Christian of any kind, what is one's role in cultivating faith in other people? Is that a fruitless exercise since it's dependent upon a grace that we can't control, or is there something we can do in Christian communities to make grace more likely to happen?

MR: Well, for one thing, it's just being adequate to the complexity and beauty and gravity of what you're talking about. That's one thing, I think. Never in my rather long life have I seen such hostility to religion as there is now—not that it's widespread, although people dramatize it all the time—but a lot of it is certainly the response of people to the bad behavior of individuals and groups that identify themselves as religious. If there is a Last Judgment, I think that a lot of people who have alienated *other* people are going to be the ones who get called on the carpet. A lot of people have made religion repressive, ignorant, and brutal, so, certainly the first obligation is not to do *those* things [laughing]; and then the second is certainly to have the humility to attempt to be adequate to the tradition itself, to all the difficult things it teaches about *forgiveness*.

GH: Ames seems to suggest that the nature of experience is always uncertain. What does the uncertainty of experience mean exactly? Why doesn't it lead to a kind of madness? Where does one find a reason for hope if the nature of experience is so elusive?

MR: Experience by itself is a great privilege—just by itself. As I was saying, the odds against the life of any human being are overwhelming. Most people's ancestors died in childhood—you know what I mean? The odds are that we're not here in the first place, and then we have an extraordinarily complex sensitivity to an extraordinarily complex reality. These are givens. I think if people stopped hoping and appreciated a little bit, they would realize that many things they take for granted are things that would worthily be hoped for. From my point of view, it has very often been true that I am very bad at evaluating anything that happens to me. Often, something that happens that I consider to be an out-and-out injustice or misfortune—and, thank God, for the last few years I haven't reached for those words terribly often—but, you know, life is life, and every once in a while you feel as though you've been slighted, or abandoned, or edged out, or some terrible reversal has occurred, and, looking back over my life, I am so indebted for every time that I feel as if I in real time felt that I had been mistreated or neglected, because you get

knocked out of one set of behaviors and into another one, and then you find out, “Oh, that’s what that was about. I had no idea, at the time, what was happening.” I think that the basis of human happiness ought not to be what you hope will happen but what you, appraising your life, can be glad *has* happened. Hope is a word that makes me nervous because it undervalues present experience and past experience.

GH: There’s a lot of talk in the novel about that issue. I’m wondering what you think of Christian millennialism in that regard. Why does that seem to distract Christians from the present so profoundly? How does Ames balance the physical and aesthetic pleasures of life with the social, moral obligation to improve society, to work for the betterment of the whole now? Is there a danger in saying, “Well, it’s in God’s hands. It will sort itself out later. I am just going to kick back and enjoy thing?”

MR: Yeah. Well, Jesus says, specifically, “You’re not going to know when this happens. I’m not going to tell you. You’re not going to know” (cf. Matt. 24:36), and the reading of signs and everything, he says, is delusional; it’s a mistake (cf. John 4:48); and I think that this, again, is asking us to consider the “lilies of the field” (Matt. 6:28), throwing back on the meaningfulness of present experience and the present obligations of experience, which are, too, these other images of God, of course. I think that this binary system of saved and damned, which I don’t subscribe to—the sort of large screen on which all this is projected—is millennialism, and that’s where all that excitement comes from. But I think the whole thing is a presumption, frankly.

LL: In what ways did channeling the voice of Ames surprise you or take you in directions you might not have expected? It’s a very different voice from the voice in *Housekeeping*, for instance.

MR: It *did* surprise me. I didn’t expect to be writing in a male voice. I felt very comfortable with it. I felt that I knew him. The fact that I

knew him meant that I didn't have to anticipate him. I didn't really know what he was going to tell me next, but, nevertheless, I felt confident in him. I could trust him, basically.

LL: Michael Ondaatje initially wrote *The English Patient* (1992) as a series of meditations without clear causal links. It strikes me that *Gilead* too is a series of linked meditations that have eventually coalesced into a narrative. To what degree did you write it in a linear fashion, and to what degree were some of the causal links pieced together after the fact?

MR: I wrote it pretty much in the form that it exists now. I thought of him as interacting. The problem of Jack, of course, becomes something that's very important—for what he thinks about—his awareness of the child is very important, so some of the time he's looking out the window, some of the time he's coming back from church, and so on. So it looks like pastiche, but at least to me it seemed as if things that happen in his experience stimulate his thinking in one way or another.

GH: Did you have the end arch in mind from the very beginning?

MR: No. I wondered about how I was going to end this book because I couldn't have the pencil fall out of his hand or whatever [laughing]. But then I realized that the arch of the novel would be completed by Boughton dying, that that would, in effect, complete the movement of it. But I found that out as I wrote, not because I anticipated it.

LL: Much well-intentioned religious writing has a shrillness to it that may be related to something you mentioned earlier—a closed system of language: characters addressing those who already believe. In contrast, you make Ames sympathetic and his language compelling which emphasize openness. How do you pull that off?

MR: I think, perhaps, one thing that's a factor is that for me the writing is exploratory. There are things that I find very beautiful and

essential in Christianity; that goes without saying. But I understand them as being central but not as describing reality in such a highly elaborated way. It seems to me as if they ought to be the beginning of inquiry rather than the end of inquiry. And he's testing things, he's wondering about things, he's trying to get beyond himself, in a sense, which I think is, perhaps, what does not happen often enough in religious writing.

AS: I read something that Arthur Henry King, a former professor at BYU, wrote the other day; he said that the purpose of reading scriptures or being religious is not to find the verses that we love and keep loving them, but to learn to love all of the verses that we read, equally (126), and it seems to me that that is one reason that religion gives something to people that mere psychology or something else can't give them. I'm wondering if you feel that Christianity in some ways provides this weight, this ballast that you have to return to again and again that makes you more and more honest, and that literature might do the same thing. So my question is, what are we reading for? Why do we read? What is it supposed to do to us as people that other things might not do to us as easily?

MR: It's very interesting that a lot of the oldest narratives we have are sacred. Homer's hard to understand as a sacred narrative, but that's what it is. So it's not as if this were anything peripheral to human concerns. It's something that they got to as early as they got to anything, and I think that the idea of the sacred implies the authority of something outside oneself, and I think that with psychology, and so on, because there is not the external demand, except something like social conformity or something like that, which actually usually asks you to be dishonest rather than honest, there is not something to answer to. There's not an obligation. What you were saying about loving the verses that you don't initially love, what that means is, this is something I have to answer to; this is something I have to return to. I cannot dismiss this. The fact of my liking it doesn't matter. The sacred calls people out of themselves, and there just isn't anything else that really does that; nothing else

does that. I think that's one of the reasons why so much great art and great music is religious—because it sets an extraordinarily high standard, which is to do more than I myself feel capable of doing, to say something that is truer than my own capacity for truth—and I think that the tendency to create self-indulgent religions, of one kind or another—whether they're self-indulgently condemnatory or self-indulgently it-doesn't-really-matter-this-is-a-pretty-idea—I think both of those deprive people of the rigor that a real idea of the sacred actually allows us, which I think is the most valuable thing that we have.

AS: My favorite line in *Gilead* is a line where the main character is talking to his son and says, "I'm trying to tell you things I might never have thought to tell you if I had brought them up myself, father and son, in the usual companionable way" (102), and I've always been struck by this power that art has to bring meaning to the everydayness of experience, something that we long to share that's really difficult to share in comments about the weather or what we're eating for dinner or something like that. Personally, I've always longed to make my everyday life match up with that art, and I've felt the pain of that a lot of times, that everyday life can't always be the same way, that art brings a permanence and meaning to something but it destroys, in some ways, the immediacy; and immediacy offers certain things, but it can't give you, sometimes, the permanence and meaning that you want. Do you feel like literature is supposed to be saying those things that you can't say in the everyday, and that that's okay, or do you feel like it's trying to create an equity between everyday experience and the things you want to be able to say?

MR: Well, I think that the everyday, which is all we have, is undervalued, and that the most commonplace things are, in fact, the ones that are the most available to being thought of as sacred—to use, again, the image of communion. One of the things that I find is very true and very touching to me is that, when you say [it] to people—like when I'm in the middle West, the paragraph that I'm always

asked to read is, “I love the prairie” (246)—and there are all of these people who say, “I’ve always *felt* that but I’ve never said it”—or the three of them having supper together when the little kid is coming in from the cold. These are things that are very moving to people, and the reason they’re moving is *because* they’re commonplace. Everybody knows what these things are. When you are presenting people with what they know in a way that makes them understand the sweetness of it, they recognize that, because at some level they have *felt* the sweetness of it, but for whatever reason other people have to sort of put the blessing on it and say, “Look what this is,” and you can really enhance people’s lives. I mean, one of the things that people often say that they take out of this book is that sentence, “a thousand, thousand reasons to live this life” (243), and I think, my goodness sakes! What if I have actually persuaded people of that and made them feel actually articulate, conscious of the fact that it’s true? And it’s not like you’re making anything up. You’re just saying a truth that they need to hear in order to apprehend.

LL: So, an Emersonian idea that our thoughts will return “to us with a certain alienated majesty” (43). He’s trying to get to a thing that we’ve all felt but haven’t put down in words, haven’t articulated.

MR: Exactly! I was somewhere, and this little girl came up to me and said, “What is the most interesting thing you’ve ever done in your life?” and I said, “Have children,” and she was shocked, you know, like this was not what I was supposed to say [laughing]. But, really, these profound central experiences—they’re the ones that really, really resonate. You can go on forever with them. There’s no poverty in them at all.

AS: So if John Ames had lived, and he had kept that sincerity, do you think that that desire would have let him say the things to his son that he said when he wrote them, or do you think that there’s something sacred reserved for writing and another sacred thing reserved for living?

MR: Interesting question. I think that he would not have been able to say the same things in the same way. Partly, it's the situation of having lived a solitary life, then suddenly having a child when he never anticipated that he would, that made him very, very aware of having an ordinary life, in effect making all the aspects of it very obviously sweet to him.

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