

# “I Do Not Consider the Profane and the Sacred to be Separate Things or Opposed Things”: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson, September 15, 2016

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**George Handley (GH):** What led you to conceive of more novels beyond *Gilead*? What triggered you to begin imagining and writing beyond that first story about the same community and the same lives?

**Marilynne Robinson (MR):**<sup>1</sup> One thing is that I find that when I write—I learned this from *Housekeeping*—that the characters in the novel become so real to me that they completely overflow the limits I happen to put them into. It’s just a train passing as far as I’m concerned. So I missed, I lamented the characters in *Housekeeping*. Then when I wrote *Gilead*, I had that same feeling again. And then I thought, well if these characters have so much life in my mind, give them their book. That was one reason for writing *Home*. Another was that when you write a book, you inevitably, and however cautiously you approach this, you inevitably find out how people read it. I meant for Jack to be clearly a much more sympathetic character, a

<sup>1</sup>Marilynne Robinson is the author of several novels and essay collections and has been awarded both the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction. In April of 2016, *Time* magazine included Robinson in its annual list, “The 100 Most Influential People.”

much more, in a certain sense religious or holy character than people chose to read him as being. It's terrible but when you write a character where you say you could look at this very superficially and draw a certain set of conclusions or you can look at it closely and draw another set of conclusions, there are lots of readers that take the first option, you know? And you end up feeling that you have reinforced attitudes that you in fact meant to criticize.

So I wanted to write a novel that gave more attention to Jack and then also to Glory. I have the profoundest sympathy for people who keep things going. The sort of quiet people who are moved to do what is needed out of love and are not necessarily noticed in the process of doing it. That's been the situation of a lot of women, of course. And there's a way in which feminism has talked about those long passages, those endless passages of our history, as if it meant we did nothing, when in fact I think we probably kept the world together. And so I wanted to create a sense of Glory as being a person of that kind, where you could understand the intensity that lies behind even her quiet. So my theological intention is always to celebrate by exploration in effect a human consciousness, a human self. We are capable of awful things but amazing at the same time, always amazing, you know? I talk about this probably more than anyone else in the world, but it really does bother me that there's a persistence and pressure in the culture now to undervalue human beings, human minds, and so on. And that is against my religion. [laughs]

**GH:** Why does that impulse lead you to return to the same place and characters instead of having moved on and written something else about a new place and people? Does doing so more emphatically highlight a kind of inadequacy or insufficiency either in the writing or in the reading or both that says, "You and I couldn't capture this mysterious person, so I'm going to have to try it again." That seems like an especially loving gesture towards your characters.

**MR:** It seems to me as if we see in glimpses and that a great deal of what is, incredibly, central to our lives in fact is in our peripheral vision,

that we probably go through life not knowing what has actually mattered. So it's just in a way my respect for the peripheral. You just move your head and it's a new center, you know? I find when I'm writing that what I write gives me opportunities. And when I write, I begin at the beginning and write sequentially, trying to see what the fiction itself is proposing. And of course, it proposes a great deal more than I can be adequate to in one book. So *Gilead* opened many opportunities for me, including the character of Lila and so on. So I've just exploited them.

**GH:** You have described your writing process as waiting to move on to the next paragraph until you are confident what you have written is finished, so it doesn't end up needing much revision at all. Do you think there is a relationship between that linear writing style and the need to go back and then say, I want to try this another way? If you had been rewriting *Gilead* over and over again, would you have written a novel that was three times as long and had all those peripheral stories included?

**MR:** I don't think so. The problems that I set [for] myself when I am writing tend to be highly focused. In *Gilead*, I thought about how do you account for your own life to someone who will not know you, to whom you will be important all the same? For *Lila*, I wanted to create the consciousness of someone who did not participate in this kind of intense acculturation that Ames would have, one in a series of ministers and so on. I wanted to imagine a world that did not have the vocabulary of interpretation that I exploited so extensively in *Gilead*. I *don't* have a strategy. I write something down, and then I think, "Hmm." Then I write down what seems to be implied by it. Then I think, "Hmm." [laughs]

**Stan Benfell (SB):** You've talked about how your characters become almost outside of your control. In your essay "Cosmology," you talk about the neo-Darwinian conception of human beings, which you often say is one of the things that leads us to undervalue human beings. And you wrote that students' understanding of human nature

“has had significant consequences for their fiction.” What do you think that relationship is between our assumptions about humanity and the kinds of characters that you can create, even when it seems that for fiction writers those characters can take on a life of their own?

**MR:** Well, I mean at best they do. And when people come into writing with the wrong assumptions about human nature and so on, they constrain the movement of their own imagination. But one of the things that bothers me about Darwinism—the way it has been read, the way it’s been understood—is [that] he was, for one thing, one to undervalue animals. [Darwinism] assumes a kind of greedy primitivism at the basis of all behavior. And this is a very pervasive assumption—amazing. If this is the essence of human motivation, therefore anything that looks like generosity or kindness or an impulse towards gentleness or something is false. It can’t be called authentic in kind with what is primary in motivation. And so people either are limited in their behavior to things that are clearly self-interest of one kind or another, you know, even of the most quotidian and tedious kind, or they are hypocrites of some sort. And this is a very, very unpleasant little range within which character is possible. And so I’m always trying to open that up—I mean, these kids are just kids. Ha! [laughs] Some of them are MDs and so on, but they are just as idealistic and just as gentle spirited as people *are*. And it’s because they have been acculturated to believe something that really, viscerally they don’t believe. That’s what bothers me! Always trying to get people to write out of what they would think on their death bed, you know? What do you *absolutely* believe? Look at it! Live with it! Find out what it implies for you. I have all kinds of students from various cultures and so on. Hindus and all sorts of people. And there’s that shyness about frankly claiming the right they have as human beings to ask absolute questions about human beings. To whom do we defer? It’s just absolutely bizarre to me. And the closer you come—I teach Old Testament and New Testament and so on all the time—the closer you come to something beautiful, I mean, you know, the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians or something. They know that’s beautiful; they know that’s in another category. It’s as if

asking them to write from their deepest experience of themselves and asking them to write something actually beautiful are simultaneous demands.

**SB:** You saw with *Gilead* that people were misreading it, misreading Jack in particular. I've been rereading *Gilead* in the light of what you learn with the latter two novels. I remember the first time I read *Gilead*, I shared Ames's worries about Jack. Who was this guy trying to move in on his wife and child? And I think it sort of took me a second reading, especially after reading *Home*, to realize how much Ames is able to recognize his own failings and change after Jack reveals to him his big secret. I don't know why I didn't appreciate it the first time, but it was interesting that the second novel changed the way I read the first novel. And then the third novel, even more so after that. So is that the kind of thing that you had in mind in writing those novels? You give voice to these characters but it also illuminates the original story.

**MR:** I do have that in mind. I mean, you do kind of fall in love with your characters. I don't have any characters I don't like just because I don't want to spend time with characters I don't like. Old Boughton, for example. I mean he's a fragile, disappointed man in continuous pain, of all, of many kinds. And people are so harsh, and they make him into this stereotype minister who is unforgiving and all that. One of the things I would go back and change, almost under the weight of misunderstanding, is when Jack tries to shake hands with him, saying good-bye to him, and he will not shake hands with him and says, "I'm tired of it." What he's talking about is tired of having Jack gone, you know? And people read that as his refusal of forgiveness, which is not the issue then. And never is the issue. Boughton does nothing but forgive him.

**GH:** The three novels create different windows into relationships, say between Lila and Ames or Jack and Ames. If you were to read *Home* first before *Gilead*, you might think that Ames comes across as a little hard to figure out: cold and not very communicative. You

just don't know what's motivating him. And you might assume worse intentions than he has, or that we at least learn he has from reading *Gilead*. Because in *Gilead* we hear this rich inner voice, we see him deliberating and measuring himself and even retracting things, even when he is describing sermons he never gave or things he has never said. So I'm wondering if you think the three novels together give a fuller and truer picture of everyone. Or do they somehow create different characters in the process? Is there a truthfulness to Ames's distance and coldness in *Home* that's perceived by Jack that Ames himself doesn't see and that we have to see just to fully understand him, or are you presenting a slightly different person?

**MR:** I don't really see him as a different person. Jack, of course, knows that Ames looks on him with a cold eye because Jack is tormented. And then Ames is presented with the expectation that he will be the father, the spiritual father, to this youth that he has absolutely no kinship with or influence on that he can see. One of the things that I take to be true is that our interior lives are really between ourselves and God. Someone of whom it might be possible to conclude nothing interesting or terribly positive might have a really very beautiful perception of the world. There might be some sort of aesthetic sense that we aren't ever given access to or a certain burden has been resolved invisibly. This is one of the reasons why I am writing theology when I write fiction because I think that it is absolutely true that there is a sort of contained brilliance of a unique kind in any human experience and that we're not good translators of our inwardness to people around us. Some people are hopelessly bad at it, in fact. If you just think what a human being is in terms of being able to perceive and integrate perception and integrate memory and all the things we do, you know, every one of us is unbelievable.

**GH:** It's that difficulty of translating that the novels in companionship with one another convey more powerfully than they might by themselves.

**MR:** Absolutely. Absolutely. But when you see people differently when they're trying to live in the world and when you have access to what they're actually thinking or feeling, you're not seeing different people; you're seeing the fact that we are awkward relative to the world no matter how brilliant our own interior experience is.

**SB:** And Jack is certainly awkward toward the world—that's one of his biggest problems. He's always inadvertently stepping on people's toes and so on.

**MR:** Yes.

**SB:** About this idea of writing theology when you write fiction, I'm very interested in that scene that you narrate both in *Gilead* and in *Home* where Ames is talking to Boughton and Jack comes out and asks him about predestination. And Ames is very wary, right? He thinks Jack is trying to catch him out or something. And then you have that great moment where Lila wants to say something and she says that everything can change. And Jack just says, "Well, that's just what I wanted to know." Could this be read as an argument about the dangers of the kind of systematic theologizing that Ames is involved with? Does fiction provide a better way of theologizing than an abstract treatise might? Lila speaks out of the truth of her experience rather than on the basis of knowledge of theological debates back through the centuries that Ames knows so well. Lila has no knowledge of any of these debates, but she speaks just out of her own experience, and that moment becomes even more profound having read *Lila*.

**MR:** Right. Well, I don't really see it as either/or, you know? I like the debates. I plan to try my hand at some of those theological tracks. But it is interesting to see how people who are learned in that kind of tradition live with what they know, live with what they are faithful to. There's always this sort of limbus, a sort of intermediate place between tenet in a certain sense—although that's too harsh a word—and then the application of any kind of religious understanding to life.

**SB:** It is interesting because Jack seems to be trying to get Ames to admit or pronounce judgment on the question of his own predestination: “Am I or am I not irremediably a bad seed?” And Lila’s able to answer more easily because she lived through a profound change. I suppose maybe that’s why you write both essays and fiction—you like to explore both an existential and a more systematic or discursive approach to theology.

**MR:** Absolutely—I prefer discursive to systematic. [laughs]

**GH:** I have a related question. In *Gilead*, Ames is talking about his grandfather’s visions, and he says maybe he had too narrow an idea of what a vision should be. Is your fiction intent on broadening the definition of what a vision might be in a way that theology can’t? And by that I’m thinking of the sort of ground-level experience of what you call “the felt life of the mind” that you can represent in fiction in a way you can’t through essay writing. You can expose the miracle of self-consciousness and creativity, and so on, in a way you can only talk about and represent in abstract ways through theology. (Although here I am quoting your essay in order to illuminate the novel! And the novel itself, especially *Gilead*, contains a lot of Ames’s theological musings.) Does the writing of fiction expand the definition of what a vision is for you in some ways? Is that part of your project?

**MR:** Well, it seems to me as if the distinction that you’re making is pretty modern. And that Isaiah and Milton and all sorts of good writers have actually written beautifully to this point. I think that these things are on a spectrum and a certain kind of thinking sort of blends invisibly depending on use into another kind of thinking and so on. And then there’s always language! If anything is amazing, it’s certainly language and the fact that you can choose words out of this vocabulary that popped up in Northern Europe a million years ago, you know? And it actually stimulates sensations in people that feel both recognizable and new. That’s bizarre! That’s amazing. And it’s the mind, of course, but it’s the collective mind. It always amazes

me when I'm writing and I think there's a word that would be perfect here. This is not it. And then I think for a while longer and then I think, that's it. And I think, I haven't used that word in ten years! How does it remain with all its specificity in my mind? Why do I know it is there when I don't know what it is? That sort of thing is just amazing. Vision—that's one thing—and then there is the experience of articulation which seems to me to be just as extraordinary.

**GH:** Let me go back to that particular incident and rephrase the question a little bit. His grandfather has these conversations with Jesus, whereas Ames sees glory in the morning dew. Ames sees God or he sees divinity or sees holiness everywhere. And that seems to be something that I see from *Housekeeping* all the way through your fiction. It seems to me that's something that you're very passionate about, and I hear a theological argument behind that that says to people of faith, "Don't get too narrow in terms of your idea of a vision." Certainly, there's something really forceful about the narrowing of a vision. And I think you acknowledge in *Gilead* that there's a kind of prophetic force such narrowing has in causing someone to want to act with urgency in the world. But Ames is not that character. He's more patient and more tolerant and less violent. And that seems to be the kind of Christianity you're trying to urge on people.

**MR:** Yes. It's interesting, during that generation of the grandfather, people did have visions of Jesus. It was very characteristic of people who were activists in the way that he was. You can read their accounts, and they're really amazing. Hair blowing back, you know, this sort of thing. And then the age of visions passed, and people were left with this sort of uninterpretable heritage in a way. As wonderful as I think John Ames is, I mean, I love him, he's probably my favorite character, at least for the moment [laughs], but I still think that he feels as though he lives in the after-effects of something of greater consequence. He's waiting for the embers to be stirred, whatever that might mean.

**SB:** Well, he does have that regret again at the end after he meets with Jack and Jack tells him about Della. And then he gets up the next morning and says, “I woke up this morning thinking this town might as well be standing on the absolute floor of hell for all the truth there is in it. And the fault is mine as much as anyone’s.” And he talks about the one sermon after the flu epidemic and the Great War that he doesn’t give, right? But he says, “That’s one sermon I would not mind being held accountable for.”

**MR:** Right. [laughs]

**SB:** Does he feel that we live in this much more cautious age or much more measured age? It seems like in those moments he’s drawn towards that model of the grandfather, the fearless speaker of prophetic truth that doesn’t care about his reputation, or doesn’t care about those things. And that’s maybe a cost of living in an age that’s more peaceful and less visionary in that way.

**GH:** Well, and more secular, too.

**MR:** Yeah, secular.

**GH:** I wonder if this is also kind of a diffusion. The image of the embers is really powerful to me because it does seem like it’s the after-effect of this visionary age, which is now, and he’s trying to keep some sort of divine light alive in a more secular age, which you are doing, too, in many ways, right?

**MR:** Yeah, well, one thing that I have learned is to be skeptical of the idea of secularism. It’s a very important category in our thinking. Did you see that article in *Harper’s* talking about, actually, *me*. [laughs]<sup>2</sup> But only the last 20 percent of it or something. Basically I

<sup>2</sup>The article referenced is Alan Jacobs’s “The Watchmen: What Became of the Christian Intellectuals?” in the September 2016 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*.

don't come up to snuff by his standards of Christian intellectual. He himself apparently is his model for this. But in any case, I'm compromised by the fact that I taught in a secular university. A secular university, I think, probably has as many religious people in it as a religious [laughs] university does, based on my tours among these places. The fact that people don't make an articulated issue of their religious belief does not mean they don't have it. All those churches are clustered around the university for a reason. Because I write about religion, I'm identified with it, which doesn't mean I'm the only religious faculty member, but nevertheless, I'm the "religious faculty member," you know. And people come in and talk to me about religion all the time, students who talk to me. For one thing, they are very diverse. Nevertheless, they're earnest. They are observant. And this whole idea that the secular university is some great machine that massages your brain into unbelief is just some kind of weird myth. It is irritating to me. It's a huge insult to people about whom, by definition, one knows nothing.

**SB:** Are you familiar with the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and his recent and very large book called *A Secular Age*?

**MR:** Yes, everyone gives that to me for Christmas. [laughs]

**SB:** He makes, in some ways, a similar point—that you can't view the secular age as just being devoid of religious belief.

**MR:** It just completely misrepresents everything.

**GH:** Well it's interesting you say that because Brigham Young University, of course, is a religious institution and very proudly so. And part of its self-narrative is that it's sort of a last bastion.

**MR:** There are a million last bastions in this country. [laughs]

**SB:** Don't tell us that! [laughs]

**GH:** But going back to the novels for a moment, at the end of *Lila* she's thinking about Doll and the others. It's never quite clear that you're going so far as to suggest that this is some kind of a vision, that this is some kind of witness or revelation that she's gained that gives her assurance of their salvation. That is, the fact that she imagines it to be true and needs it to be true in order to, not so much to give her life meaning, but to explain the meaning that she's experienced. That becomes "evidence of things not seen."

**SB:** I think the last line of the novel is "Someday she would tell him what she knew." She does call it knowledge at the end.

**GH:** Elsewhere in your essays, you've talked about the imagination as the capacity to look at people and observe them talking and to then start to imagine the backstory that explains the surface of what we're seeing. But you also describe this imaginative activity as inherently a spiritual activity, and that novel writing, therefore, becomes a very heightened sense of spiritual activity for human beings. And she's doing that in that moment. It's not so much a backstory as a projection forward, a way of making sense of the bare facts that we know about these people. To what degree can you separate imagination from what religious people would call spiritual witnessing or revelation?

**MR:** I think imagination is a subtler knowledge, a more intuitive knowledge. Imagination, I think, makes a system of relevance out of things that might occur randomly. Language is based on that, every kind of knowledge that we have really is based on it. Imagination, I think, occurs at another level in that it's based very strongly in private experience, in the singularity of anyone's experience of life rather than being something that is sort of articulated with the expectation that there will be consent on the part of the public. Of course, you know there will be consent because everybody has this sort of hidden life. I see everything on a continuum, really. I do not consider the profane and the sacred to be separate things or opposed things.

**SB:** It's very medieval.

**MR:** Yeah, it is very medieval. [laughs] I mean, everything is in the regime of grace. I don't think that any high use of the mind is less sacred than any other high use of the mind whether that's vision or insight of some good and valuable kind. I just read an essay of Jonathan Edwards's, I can't remember which one it was. Maybe it's "A Divine and Supernatural Light." Anyway, he has all being radiating from God in using the metaphor of the sun. And he says that the richness of this light, which he tells you is not light, is so profound that things good in themselves, in a sense, are captures of it. And so you have all goodness emanating from God but having these very brilliant local occasions so that when you see goodness in a human being, you are seeing this emanation of goodness from God. So goodness where you see it, is itself metaphysically of that standing. And so if you think about the world in those terms, then what Lila has seen in all these occasions of kindness or people in need of forgiveness or whatever, you're seeing something that is real and sacred. And so from that point of view, if you think of some sort of ingathering, it's very hard to think that these loci of divine goodness can be relativized or then dismissed. This is just a metaphor for me, and Jonathan Edwards would say, "Right. I intended this metaphor." But nevertheless, it seems to me as if it's a very highly viable understanding of the fact that people who know *nothing* about religion, have *no* conception of it, or are *completely* outside any culture that would articulate things for them are nevertheless often profoundly generous people, profoundly good people. And I don't think I'm wrong in thinking that they are also included in the great scheme.

**SB:** On that point, in the essay "Givenness," you say: "Faith takes its authority from subjective experience, from an inward sense of the substance and meaning of inner experience."

**GH:** Does Lila gain a knowledge that what she wants to be true is true because she wants it badly enough? Are you saying that because she wants it to be true that it is? Or are you saying that she intuits it

on a deeper level that is spiritual? I guess, I'm still interested in the distinction between delusion and revelation.

**MR:** Very interesting and important distinction that I think few people have ever made to this point. [laughs]

**GH:** Well, go for it.

**MR:** Well, the reason that she thinks of these things in the way that she does is because she has actually—she's experienced—she loves these people. I have a feeling that probably I'm not capable of loving anyone that God would not love also. And then [laughs] I assume that God would love a great many people whose lovability would be obscured to me. So it seems to me that you're saying something pretty absolute about a person if you love them. It's just a fact. She loves them generously. It's only because she values them so that she can't imagine that they're lost. She will not imagine that they're lost, you know?

**SB:** Well, she can't make sense of her experience if they're lost.

**MR:** Exactly, exactly. They kept her alive. They've made her able to live. They had their ways.

**SB:** One of things that was interesting to me with *Home* was how it relates to the end of *Gilead*, when Jack tells Ames about Della, the struggles he's had, how he was fired when he was at the park with his family, and so on. Civil rights issues come up at the end of the novel, but I was not fully aware of how integral they are to your story. Perhaps I wasn't attentive enough. But in *Home*, when the Boughtons get a new TV, and we hear coverage of the Montgomery bus boycott . . .

**MR:** I fudged the chronology a little [laughs].

**SB:** Yes, but put within that context, the struggles over civil rights become much more central to both of those novels. I imagine that

must have been intentional. And so here is my question: in *The Givenness of Things*, you are particularly concerned about the state of Christianity in the United States. Are the two related? That is, are Jack's struggles with the consequences of a mixed-race marriage in a Christian place similar to the current problems you see in American Christianity? Jack makes the consequences of Christian blindness regarding civil rights real for the reader.

**MR:** Yes. And you know, there were two states that never had laws against miscegenation: Maine and Iowa. Iowa has actually a pretty impeccable civil rights history.

**SB:** The shining star of radicalism.

**MR:** Yes, yes. But people there aren't aware of that. I mean, Iowa and Ohio were absolutely essential in the Union army especially towards the end of the war and so on. Iowa City practically had to fold its cards because so many men left for the Union army. But in any case, there's a history that still has an impact, but at the same time it is forgotten as history. And so, at any point in time, a mixed-race couple could have come to Iowa and been married, and they did. At the same time, Iowa is not aware of itself or has not been aware of itself historically as singular in that regard. And so on the one hand it functions with the memory of an older culture, and on the other hand it in a way gets associated with Missouri. It's a mysterious thing—the history of it.

**GH:** So is that why it's a swing state?

**MR:** Yes, exactly. And, you know, oddly enough, since it's a Civil War state, there are people there who have been Republicans forever and will be Republicans forever because their father's grandfather's grandfather was in the Union army fighting slavery [laughs]. And so they get folded into a party that has an ambiguous modern tradition on that subject simply because they're Republicans, and that's why it's a swing state because its sympathies are actually rather more to the left than that.

**SB:** So when you wrote *Gilead*, did you try to restore some of that history to people living in Iowa?

**MR:** Yes.

**SB:** All of these novels really are historical novels, right?

**MR:** Yes, yes they are.

**GH:** Is that a role fiction can perform better in some ways than straightforward history—to impress upon people the relevance of the past for the present?

**MR:** Yes, it's more widely read than straightforward history. That's one thing. Also, you can put things in relation in more complex ways. The fact that a very formative history could exist and also not exist, that this tectonics of an era could occur, so that what seemed absolutely urgent and overwhelming and present suddenly just falls out of sight. It's really quite extraordinary, what we think history is and then how it actually works when you look at it. I find that history really is important to people. When I'm here [in Utah] I have the very strong sense that there's a reiterated collective history that is very controlling, in the sense that it defines the community and so on. I went to Illinois College which is the first of the middle-western liberal arts colleges. The first president was Harriett Beecher Stowe's brother, Edward. And it was where there was a famous martyrdom of a publisher who printed things that were anti-slavery, and he's right on the river there. And he was murdered finally. Henry Ward Beecher and Lyman Beecher carried weapons, trying to protect this man and so on. But in any case, I talked at this college about this famous event, and they had not heard it, and they didn't know they had any association with it—these kids—and they were thrilled; they were moved. And, you know, here they are—who knows where they're from and ended up at Illinois College, but you say to them, "This place has a kind of a sacred history," and it's as if their lives are dignified by knowing this is true. I don't understand that. I think

it's probably something primordial in human nature. But we have had a very long history of erasing away moments of history that people could orient themselves around or identify themselves in terms of. And, I think that's a great loss.

**GH:** Mormon people anywhere have a strong sense of Mormon history, but especially here in Utah there's a very strong attachment to place and a very keen awareness of history, and there's a theological emphasis on genealogy. So people not only tend to know the broad outlines of Mormon history, but they'll know their family history *much* better than most Americans will typically know their grandparents and great-grandparents and so on. But with that comes a kind of forgetting, too. I mean, the history ends up being quite selective, and so the indigenous history of Utah is deemed largely irrelevant, for example. There [are] all kinds of conflict here in the state about public lands, and a lot of the debate pretends as if these lands didn't belong to anyone ever. And that the rock art that's on the walls of these cliffs are just, you know, doodlings or something.

**MR:** Right.

**GH:** So a sense of history shores up identity but it has its downside because of what is forgotten. Like your fiction, it's a question of periphery. A community can have this sense of rootedness and this sense of identity and not see what's immediately obvious right in front of them—three hundred thousand Hispanics live in this state, for example, many of whom are illegal.

**MR:** Wow.

**GH:** On a related note, you've talked about the worlds we create, and you have different phrases for them, but you talk about a small reality, or something small relative to the whole range of human experience or the cosmos, and that novels are a kind of articulation of the small reality of the world. How does a novel help us to transcend our own smallness? I would argue your novels expose those

limits, but not all novels do. Many works of art, many works of fiction are poor projections of a small reality onto the world that don't ironize themselves. They don't see their own limits. What's the difference for you?

**MR:** Well, it seems to me as if basically that's a human ethical problem. And I'm interested in it as an ethical problem, maybe that's why I write about it. As someone who teaches writers, I have felt very much as though I had to respect the fact that basically people write what they have to write. I mean, I guess that's what they're doing. And sometimes I think, "Boy, I'm glad I didn't write that book." But at the same time, that's not the standard by which I can judge. Talking about limits, my own tastes and aspirations have characteristic limits. And I have to assume that a great deal that goes on around me that doesn't answer to either of these things is valuable. So I see fiction that I don't particularly admire that moves people. What can I say? It's not too surprising to me that we have our own sort of interior dialects, as I think I said somewhere, and that certain kinds of things answer to them and certain things don't. I don't really know how to answer that question. I don't want to make general statements about fiction. I don't typically think they're appropriate, frankly.

**GH:** That's sounds very commonsensical, but it's not always how people judge. I mean, people prefer to moralize.

**MR:** They do. I mean, morals are wonderful. I'm here to endorse the whole phenomenon of morality. But so much that intends to be moral is actually judgmental. And I think that these are actually opposite terms. It seems to me that morality is generous. Judgmentalism is narrow and inhumane. Every once in a while, people call me a moralist, which slides over into moralizing and moralistic and all of that stuff. And it's a little bit of a narrow path to show the beauty of goodness without being somebody who's judging the world at large. I mean, God forbid, it's against my religion. [laughs]

**SB:** What you just described as being moral, that seems to be your sense, and my sense, too, of what Shakespeare does. He's interested in these characters and in ideas in how they shape characters, but he lets them exist. He doesn't constrain them and moralize about them.

**MR:** Right.

**SB:** So "moralistic" fiction might be something where you take your characters and you're trying to constrain them into this particular way that ensures a particular moral. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Miss Prism says, "the good ended happily and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means." So, how would you say your novels are related to these broader issues, not just theological issues but also these social concerns you talk about with the state of Christianity and your parallel concern with the broad disparagement in certain intellectual circles about religious belief or religious discourse? How do your novels relate to those concerns?

**MR:** Well, you know, it's an odd thing and a kind of a painful thing to live in this particular moment. [laughs] Because it seems to me without question that Christianity's great enemy is Christianity now. It has done itself harm like nothing else could do, partly by running absolutely counter to its own prohibitions. I just read some religious leader saying "If somebody ran on the Sermon on the Mount, I'd run from him as far as I can." I believe that. I think that was a man speaking the truth. There are two things that Calvin links, which I think are entirely appropriate: fear of God and reverence for man. They are completely irreverent in the second category. They're like cartoon images of everything that is intolerant and hypocritical associated with the worst moments in religion. I was just reading an article about how this religious writer basically dropped the pretense of being religious. They were just a power group. And I think that's true and has been true. And that in the course of their emerging, they have done harm—I mean, I'm talking to young people. I know this is true. If their whole instruction of

Christianity comes from television and the newspapers, they think it's mean and crazy. Religious thought has been incredibly important and valuable to me through my whole life. And I do have a desire to have people know how one can think in religious terms without being mean or crazy.

**SB:** Or mean *and* crazy at the same time.

**MR:** Yes.

**GH:** How do you respond to religious critics who see you as too secular, too liberal? Some might argue that while your fiction is more neutral, your essays expose you as a political liberal.

**MR:** Ha! I certainly am a political liberal! I hope everything I do exposes me in that way.

**GH:** Is that letting ideology get ahead of theology? Is it possible to be a political conservative within your theological constructs?

**MR:** Well, for one thing people are looking back now at historical, political conservatives and realizing that they passed a lot of very humane legislation that would never make it through Congress now, I mean, Bushes and Reagans and Doles and all sorts of people. What people call conservatism now is not historical conservatism. So [people talk about contemporary conservatism] like it's anchored in the Rock of Gibraltar, when in fact it's not twenty years old probably. It's very bizarre. But also—there's this thing about "I was hungry and you fed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was in prison and you visited me." That kind of language has an authority for me. I don't find conservatives tending toward the feeding of the hungry and the clothing of the naked. I just don't. And they can argue forever on theological, on economic grounds that if everything were done the way they said . . .

**GH:** Everyone *would* get fed.

**MR:** Exactly. But this has never been proved, right? And in the moment, the question is: there are hungry people here, there's food here. What are we supposed to do about that? You know? Wait for some sort of a paradise on earth of pure capitalism? Good grief!

**SB:** Some conservatives would argue that yes, we should feed the hungry but that's not the purview of government. That's private organizations, churches, nonprofit organizations, and so on.

**MR:** And you go to places where that argument prevails, in the South, for example, and you find people who are just plain hungry. And if there were not the government intervening as it can, there'd be a lot more of them.

**GH:** It is surprising how little attention is given by many Christians to issues like poverty and caring for the creation and non-violence that seem so important to biblical values. If we could agree that those are central issues, then maybe we could give them more attention instead of arguing over whether or not one deserves to call oneself a Christian.

**MR:** It is so toxic.

**GH:** I can't understand what's Christian about such divisiveness.

**MR:** I certainly can't. I found on the web one time—accident, I swear—but there was somebody who accused me of being a “red-letter Christian.” And what that meant was that I was all hung up on the sayings of Christ. [laughs] To which I confess!

**SB:** I've never heard that phrase.

**MR:** Isn't that wild?

**SB:** Paying too much attention to the words of Jesus, so that's why you're not a good Christian.

**MR:** There you go.

**GH:** Studies have shown that on issues like the environment, for example, people's attitudes are more strongly determined by their partisan affiliation than by their religion.

**MR:** It's amazing. It's amazing.

**GH:** You're trying to use your methods to change that, right? You're using fiction. You're using essays and theology. You're a powerful force. I don't know if we have evidence that you're changing minds in the most recalcitrant camps, but you certainly are getting a lot of traction and a lot of attention for what you're doing. So you must believe that it matters to use theology and fiction in the way you're doing.

**MR:** Well, I suppose that my own theological tradition encourages me very strongly to feel that God loves people, wants to be in relation with people, that just from the Bible forward this is humanly mediated. Somebody has to explain the scripture, describe the ethos or the vision. My books are translated all over the world. They're in Persian and Chinese. I think that if you say what you take to be true, you say what you take to be sayable, that you can look for a sort of aided recognition in people. People are predisposed to being religious. My books are in Arabic—you know what I mean. People respond to them because they're about families, they're about religion. We ought to have it as a common language, even despite the differences of coloration that occur in different regions. My books are read in Europe, and when I go to Europe and I'm interviewed there, the journalists always ask me questions about theology. Always. It's something that's receded, well maybe not now, but in modern history it's receded farther in Europe and Britain than it has here, maybe, maybe not Britain. But there's a craving. People want a sense of value that is proportionate with their own experience of

being in the world. Religion articulates this and nothing else does. But really, nothing else does. So I would not have known in anticipation, but I know now that if you try to write very well and say what you believe in whatever terms you choose, that the resonance is there. It's just there, you know? That's one of the reasons it bothers me so much the way people throw around terms like "secular." This idea that people are coerced and intimidated and they can't possibly do this or that. They can't express their faith in a secular environment and so on. *Who says?* A) This assumes a secular environment of a kind that I think exists nowhere outside of the former Soviet Union. And B) who wants to be such a coward? If you believe something, if you actually believe it, if you have to be sneaky about it, there's something wrong with it. And if you can't be straightforward about it, there's something wrong with you, you know? I mean, how much of this sort of paralysis that we've gotten ourselves into culturally is just plain lack of courage? A lack of courage that is leveraged against a very appalling failure of respect for other people.

**GH:** I don't know what explains that lack of courage. It does seem that there is a sense that Christians want to feel embattled and that's an important narrative. And I don't say that out of disrespect. I mean, I disagree with the tendency, because I understand that there are real oppositional forces and there are conflicts and problems. I had a very secular education, so to speak, at Stanford and Berkeley as a Mormon. And it wasn't always the most comfortable place to be, and people did from time to time antagonistically question me for having decided to go on a mission and for getting married at a shockingly young age for them, things like that. But if I was going to go serve a mission for two years in a foreign country, I deserved to be asked why I thought I had the right to do that.

**MR:** Exactly. There's that and there's also the fact that you are benefitting from the fact that Berkeley is a really fine university. I mean, things have to be granted the respect that they deserve, but if there's a discomfort associated in some way, you know . . .

**GH:** In your lecture here, you spoke admiringly of President Obama's Christian character. Can you say more about that?

**MR:** Well, the first time that I spoke with him was at this dinner party. I sat beside him, and he talked continuously, and the courses would come and they would look very beautiful and elegant, and they would go away and then the next course would come. And he never stopped talking to me, and he never stopped making eye contact with me. So virtually I had no food. He didn't either, but he doesn't eat so far as I can tell. [laughs] In any case, there was this kind of conversation going around—what he's interested in is the coherence of civilizations, which he just considers to be beautiful and amazing—how people, numberless people go out every day and do the necessary things to keep a civilization going. That sort of thing. He was just talking about things like the character of perception, about how mysterious it is, how things are in fact, and how we are able to perceive them and construct them. He's a very interesting man, you know? There were about eight of us there. Some sort of murmuring started up about Mitch McConnell or something like that. He will not hear it. He doesn't want to hear anything negative; he doesn't hear anything negative about people. And I'm sure that that's a *huge* strategy of survival on his part. But also he's always ready to assume that he could deal honorably with anyone at any time in any moment of possibility. It even came up in that interview. He thinks I have a dark view of the world. And when I say something critical about people that have been making me miserable for years because of him, he won't hear it. It's extraordinary. I mean, what kind of moral musculature would be necessary to sustain the generosity of his view? I can't even imagine. And I think that comes partly from being black and having dealt with God knows what for God knows how long. I think a lot of black people reach a very extraordinary equilibrium in effect. But he has this tremendous character of affection. It's really extraordinary. He's very hard to describe because I've never known anybody like him.

**GH:** And yet that side of him is invisible to so many people.

**MR:** Oh! It drives me nuts!

**SB:** Well, yeah, there's the joke sometimes you hear—whenever anything bad happens, someone will say, "Thanks Obama!" You get that assumption that the president is responsible for anything bad that happens.

**MR:** This myth of him as the great puppet master that controls everything, when at this time he can't get his Zika bill to Congress. I had no idea that he was going to quote me or call me his friend, you know, in his speech. Everybody emailed me because I hadn't watched it. I didn't have TV. But, you know, he wrote to me afterward, "I thought you wouldn't mind." He said, "Your letter was just lying on my desk." You know, that's what he was quoting.

**SB:** Oh, so he quoted a letter, not a published thing?

**MR:** Right, exactly. But the idea that my letter was lying on his desk is just pleasing to me.

**GH:** We are so appreciative of your visit here. As a religious university, we value good and tough Christian thinking, and you are certainly one of the best models of how to do it well.

**SB:** Yes, thank you for your time.

**MR:** Well, I teach Bible classes in the workshop. I've done it for years; it's part of my job description. And they're popular classes. They're well attended. But students are embarrassed to be seen carrying Bibles. And who did that? Pat Robertson did that, you know?

**SB:** It's true that, in people's minds, the Bible stands for intolerance and bigotry.

**MR:** Ah! It's such a shame, such a shame.

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