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On Influence and Appropriation

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Interviews with Marilynne Robinson

WHEN MARILYNNE ROBINSON came to Iowa City in the fall of 1990, we promptly planned an interview. So did other readers, for reasons of their own. As we became aware of these other interviews, and were given a chance to see them, we decided each had its own character, that they were complementary far more than redundant, and that a collection of short interviews would offer a fine portrait of a writer we very much admire. That is what we offer here. Each, of course, is much reduced. We have eliminated most, but not quite all of the redundancies and accentuated the main themes of each interview.

ON INFLUENCE AND APPROPRIATION

Tace Hedrick

TH: In an article in the *New York Times Book Review* you talk about writers such as Poe and Dickinson, Melville and Emerson, as being your “old aunts and uncles,” and you say, “I will always answer to them in my mind.” Do you feel that these authors have left questions behind that you have to answer?

MR: Yes, I think that any vigorous tradition stirs up an enormous number of questions—I think it’s characteristic. But I feel very strongly that, for some reason I’m not sure of, there has been a rupture in the conversation of this culture, and that all sorts of things that were brought up in the early conversation were dropped without being resolved, and that nothing of comparable interest has taken their place. In a way, in writing *Housekeeping* I was consciously trying to participate in the conversation they had carried on and that I felt had been dropped.

TH: What do you think is the rupture?

MR: I don’t know what it is. If you talk to people about American culture, they never assume that you mean high culture. If you say, “I find American culture very interesting,” they assume you’re talking about the movies. But we have a prodigiously developed high culture. I suppose part of my interest in American high culture comes from the fact that it is so

disowned. That makes it more interesting than it would be if it were truly institutionalized.

TH: In an article called “Extending the American Range,” Martha Ravits comments that you “shift the vantage point to a female strength.” Let us suppose she is talking of your part in that conversation. I think she’s trying to imply that yours is a feminine strategy, or a female writer’s response to precursor texts which might be overpowering—possibly in some patriarchal way. Do you agree with that?

MR: Well, it’s certainly true that I appropriated traditions that in many cases had been associated with men. But again, nobody is more daunting than Dickinson—and then of course the Book of Ruth is in there.

TH: I had wondered about Ruth. Can you tell us more of how Ruth figures in *Housekeeping*?

MR: Actually I’m not sure myself how it does. I was very struck after I had written the book at the analogy between *Housekeeping* and the Book of Ruth. If I had thought, I’m going to write a book that bears analogy to the Book of Ruth, I couldn’t have done that. But I think I did do it by not telling myself that’s what I was doing. In many ways it probably lurked behind my decisions to an extent that I never was aware of at the time. The name Ruth has such powerful suggestions for me. I know that simply making the choice of the narrator’s name was important—which was a thing that I did very early—having to do with pity and grief and compassion and also vulnerability. I mean, again, feeding from the Book of Ruth itself rather than just the meaning of the name. The Book of Ruth was the name that was suggested to me by people who read the book, but that didn’t seem appropriate.

The issue in the Book of Ruth—the question is—who to follow. And the decision that Ruth makes is, “Where thou goest I shall go; thy people shall be my people and thy God, my God.” It seems to me that in a certain way the Ruth in my book makes that kind of radical choice about whose terms of reality will she accept. When she follows Sylvie, she’s passing from one civilization to another.

TH: Yes, they abandon something. There’s so much abandonment in *Housekeeping*, a kind of releasing, of letting-go. It seems to me that there is also a kind of letting-go echoed in your appropriation of your influences—at the same time as you pick up on them, there’s a letting-go of them.

MR: I don’t know if I let them go or not. I certainly am *trying* them, but

then that's the essence of the tradition. I think that's the most interesting thing about all those writers, they create models of understanding and then they destroy them, so that the larger apprehension you get is the inadequacy of any particular apprehension, which seems very brilliant to me.

TH: That passing from one state to another involves time and mourning. Somewhere you write that the force behind the movement of time is mourning, so that what drives time and any story forward, what makes time what it is, is mourning. But of Sylvie, you also say, she "inhabited a millennial present," and elsewhere you imagine immortality as "this life held in poise and arrest."

MR: One of the really strong influences on my imagination was reading a treatise by Jonathon Edwards called "The Doctrine of Original Sin Defended." In it original sin is the little mote that makes him create a pearl. He talks about the world being continuously renewed so that if the energy of creation ceased, it would all collapse — there is no intrinsic momentum behind being, there is simply the continuous recreation of being. I think that's an interesting model: if you think that the inner workings of things are actually sustaining them, no, that's not true. So when I imagine time not existing, I fairly well assume that there would be a new shuffling of the deck, a very radical beginning.

TH: It seems as though Sylvie is continually sensing radical beginnings. She's opening things up unlike people in the town who don't want to move, who want to stay behind the walls of their houses, and wash the windows, and clear the leaves. Sylvie leaves the doors open, and nature comes into the house, and it seems like she does that because hers is another way of being in the world than the people in the town know.

MR: But it's possible to overstate the differences between them.

TH: Well, this Sylvie-like experience seems dangerous to the people of the town. They do seem to want to make her stay put.

MR: She's threatening to them in the way that someone who tempts you is threatening. That's the way I see it. At the same time the townspeople acknowledge her and Ruth as a family even though they're obviously not suited to being one; and by virtue of having some expectations of Sylvie, they're acknowledging the legitimacy of her relationship with the child, her responsibility for the child. The book is supposed to operate on the level of reality to the extent that people might actually think that Ruth was in danger. For all that people know at the end of the book, the worst possi-

ble thing might have happened. So it's not wrong for them to be anxious. When I write in general I try not to create oppositions. What I've tried to do whenever there are conflicts is to make both sides as equal as possible.

TH: Most readers want to be on the side of Ruth and Sylvie, but that's not how you see it.

MR: I see it as an inevitable conflict.

TH: But not as something by which you judge the townspeople—or Lucille, for that matter.

MR: Exactly.

TH: Ravits also writes that in *Housekeeping*, “the sensible is not ultimate reality, but a system of signs to be deciphered.” I don't see the perceptible world in this book as a system of signs to be deciphered; I see it more as a place to be in, rather than this thing that you read all the time.

MR: I don't know exactly what she meant by that, but those things are not so incompatible. If you take a book like *Walden*, which of course I had very much in mind, those two strategies are simultaneous. Because—again, this is something which is characteristic of those writers—if you say something like experience is meaningful, which is what Emerson was so eager to insist on, then that doesn't have to be true in any simple sense. It seems to me that Dickinson and Thoreau and Melville are all seeing how far this argument can be carried, the degree to which this idea can penetrate experience. None of them assumed that whatever reality was telling them was anything simple, and none of them had any notion that reality would mediate itself to them in anything except very complex and subtle forms.

TH: You mentioned *Walden* just now. Tell us about *Walden*.

MR: I used to say to myself that *Walden* could have been called *Housekeeping*. It seems to me that in *Walden*, Thoreau is trying to create, in terms of physical existence, in terms of food and shelter, a life, a physical life in the world that is both minimal and optimum. It's the reduction of being to essentials with the assumption that this kind of reduction is an enhancement. Which is like the oldest meditative traditions of Judaism or Christianity, you know, desert saints, or desert prophets, or people who tried to make the connection between their physical existence and . . . I mean, to reduce the terms of their physical existence to such a point of essentiality was a sort of sacramental . . . I mean, these were the things that preserve life—there was nothing non-essential. And the process of *Housekeeping*, which is not *Walden*, but which is commenting on *Walden*, is to ponder

what is essential and what is inessential. If you carry deprivation beyond the limits that Thoreau asserted for it, beyond a sort of austere adequacy, then what?

TH: Then you get to Poe.

MR: It's an odd thing, but I've probably thought of Poe at least once a day every day since I was ten years old. I've never quite understood this incredible affinity. It's probably unhealthy. I just really, really like him, more than practically anyone I know or have met. I can feel his intelligence, a very fine intelligence.

TH: Then Poe must also be in *Housekeeping*.

MR: Well, I think that to the extent that I'm doing things with Poe in the book, there is a sort of luxuriance of language that I allow myself—some people like it a lot, some people don't like it at all—but that doesn't mean it's ornamental. I suppose what I admire most in Poe is the sense he has of language being so potent that it has a freestanding existence. You give it enough mass and momentum and it takes over everything. Which is simply a very interesting phenomenon of consciousness.

TH: It has its own sufficiency.

MR: Yes, its own implications, its own order. There are other people—Melville, for example, who has extremely beautiful writing—but for him it's not quite the same thing that language takes over. Poe is just on the edge of excess. That's the risk that he characteristically runs. Also there's a deep emotionalism in Poe—sometimes I wonder how much of the quality of his writing comes from the fact that he was so isolated as a Southern writer at a time when the New Englanders were really dominating. And were hostile to Southerners, too. The isolated person is a characteristic American figure, but only Poe makes you feel the darkness of that isolation. With Melville, the tone of his voice is, I'm talking to you and you're going to be really interested in what I'm saying. Emerson is always alone in a pulpit, and Thoreau is writing a tract on the proper conduct of life. Neither of these are solitary behaviors. But Poe really feels as though he's writing to himself.

TH: Yes, he's in a crypt somewhere.

MR: Or he's simply somebody with no expectation of an understanding audience. In a simplistic way now he's one of the most “popular” of them all. One of the great brilliances of Poe is that he understood the dream quality of popular forms. If something is repeated and repeated as a for-

mula, it's because it's a kind of dream the culture can't stop dreaming. He picks up these formulas, and pulls out of them what they seem to contain.

Can you imagine a better metaphor for his situation than little Virginia Clemm? She was buried alive, in a sense. And Poe was continuously afraid of her actually being buried alive because when she had her attacks they didn't know if she was dead or not. It's a mark of his sensitivity and conscientiousness that that was such a profound fear of his.

TH: I've been wanting to ask you about *Housekeeping* in relation to *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*. "My name is Ruth." "My name is Arthur Gordon Pym." Those are the first sentences of each book, and in each, the next couple of sentences are about family. Then you have a wreck of a house with the water rising, and Ruth and Sylvie sort of vanishing in the end, to you don't know where, but not to death. Pym comes back enough to tell his story. He even says that Dirk Peters is then living in Illinois, which I suppose is beyond the pale from Poe's point of view, but it's not Antarctica. I wondered whether you were particularly conscious of that narrative, as a parallel.

MR: Frankly, when I wrote that first sentence, what I was specifically thinking of was "Call me Ishmael." But I think that Melville might very well have been thinking of "My name is Arthur Gordon Pym."

Arthur Gordon Pym and *Moby Dick* have the same—and for that matter, *Huckleberry Finn*—have that characteristic pattern of so much American literature where people go through a journey that leads to a kind of realization that is just at the limits of their ability to comprehend or articulate, and after that, there's an openness where earlier experience becomes impossible, and you're abandoned into a new terrain without being able to use your old assumptions about how to find your way.

This is so compulsively repeated in the culture, or at least it was for a long time, and I think it has to do with . . . Well, for one thing it kind of reenacts what I take to be the characteristic mode of thought of most of the classic American writers, which is based on the assumption that the only way to understand the world is metaphorical, and all metaphors are inadequate, and that you press them far enough and you're delivered into something that requires a new articulation. What I was saying in effect is that this larger shape of narrative is in a sense a reenactment on a larger scale of the smaller narrative events and smaller movements of prose or meditation in Melville, Poe, or others, and that's part of the reason it feels

right, it feels like resolution, even though in any strict sense it's not.

TH: One difference, it seems to me, is that Ruth and Sylvie look back to Lucille with some wonder, some concern, some question. I don't know that Huck gives Tom or Aunt Polly much of a thought, and I have the sense that Pym and Peters, though they may be back physically, are little concerned with the world they first knew. But Ruth still feels sisterly toward Lucille.

MR: No question. I don't know. It might be the difference to some extent between—I never use language like this—but between male and female narrative. I think that, as in Dickinson, there's a great deal that's poignant and expressive about domestic life, and all of it is saturated with very strong statements about what people are and what becomes of them and so on. Perhaps it's more inevitable for female consciousness, as we have been acculturated at any rate, to regret, to feel the loveliness of what is being put aside.

TH: Where else does Dickinson appear in *Housekeeping*? I keep thinking about the place where Ruth thinks about the Dickinson poem she had to learn in school, "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died." When she thinks about this poem, it seems to encompass all that she thinks about school—dull dreary dusty places.

MR: The use of household objects in the book—the idea of ruined and faded spaces, and the idea of the sacramental quality of eating together, and the effect on the household of a death having physically occurred there, with its consequences—I think of those as Dickinson. I of course had to memorize Dickinson when I was in school.

TH: And did you feel the same way about her that Ruth does?

MR: Yes—people had a good idea of what to teach you, but they had no particular understanding of *why* they should teach you these things, and so there would just be some little duty you had to perform, and it was ironic because they were forcing on you things of incredible value without having any way of telling you that that's what they were in fact doing. So I would acquire under duress things that I was so glad afterward I had to learn. Maybe educating children is always like that.