Religion, Literature, and the Environment in the Work of Marilynne Robinson

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Abstract

Robinson's *Housekeeping* follows the interdependencies of humanity and nature that ecology implies to their most profound conclusions. The novel is an expression of how an ecologically-centered culture brings us to the edge of nihilism and thus renders metaphysical faith necessary if we are to choose meaningful action. Anticipating Robinson's two-pronged criticisms in her non-fiction, the novel assails civilization for its intolerance and fear of ecology—for its own denial of human biology—but it also recognizes the dangers of environmental advocacy based on a dichotomous embrace of nature as civilization's opposite. To mediate, *Housekeeping* offers an understanding of the need for a metaphysics of tolerance, forbearance, and humility in the face of humanity's ambiguous and liminal position between the animal and spiritual dimensions of experience.

Marilynne Robinson’s 1989 book *Mother Country* provides a trenchant critique of England’s dumping of nuclear waste into the sea at the Sellafield Nuclear Processing Plant, a fact of significant environmental and social devastation. She is not one to choose her topics lightly or to write quickly, but the book is not well known either in the United States or in England.¹ This is perhaps because the book challenges assumptions about what it means to be moral politically, environmentally, and socially. Robinson describes a long British history of cultivating an official morality toward the poor that has depended on their continued existence and suffering. She diagnoses that this is not merely a case of a divided nation but rather of a kind of strange co-dependence between a social ill and its supposed political cures, what she calls a kind of “moral aphasia” (*Mother Country* 193). In a review of the book and in an independent review of Sellafield’s actions, British scientist M.F. Perutz agrees with the government-sponsored studies that acknowledge the pool of plutonium off shore yet dispute that plutonium has anything to do with the high rates of cancer among citizens living in the area, especially the high rates of leukemia among the region’s children. Robinson responded by referring to

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¹ In a personal communication with this author, Robinson noted that among all of her publications, *Mother Country* was the book of which she was most proud.
a report by the Environmental Committee that was intended to dispel fears about the dangers posed by plutonium to children:

The report says there was discussion to the effect that “the only way in which incontrovertible evidence could be obtained of the effects of ingestion of contaminated shellfish on the human system was by finding a group which has never eaten shellfish, such as children.” Clearly the committee that is talking about the health effects of ingesting plutonium, in a setting where ill-health in children is the issue at hand. The implication of this discussion is that children are sheltered from the effects of contamination, even though the occasion and the starting point for all these inquiries is precisely the rate of leukemia deaths among Cumbrian children. When I described these reports in *Mother Country*, I interpreted them as an exercise in denial. I am not yet ready to retire the phrase “moral aphasia.” (1990)

Robinson concludes:

Doctors do not use the effects of atomic testing to discount the risk of x-rays to unborn children, and it is no more appropriate to use them to discount the importance of dumping plutonium into a populated environment, and into a sea from which fish are taken by many countries. This is especially true when the contamination is done in the course of producing weapons materials liable to being put to uses that will make Sellafield catastrophic by the most indulgent standard. (1990).

Robinson, in other words, has uncovered the frail and immoral logic of those who wish to choose risk over caution, especially risk to those most vulnerable.

While Steven Pinker is optimistic that human beings are evolving away from a more bloody and violent past and that death rates have dropped dramatically in warfare, other commentators on contemporary history are more skeptical. Rob Nixon, for example, notes the “slow violence” of nuclear waste, pollution, landmines, depleted uranium, climate change, and other disasters that leave consequences rarely measured or accounted for politically or legally. Those most vulnerable to this “slow violence” are the poor, the young, and the elderly; in other words, they are largely those who are deemed expendable by

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