The Privilege of Loneliness, the Kindness of Home: “Felt Experience” in the Writing of Marilynne Robinson

Carolyn Allen*

Abstract

My essay takes home and housekeeping as related tropes through which to follow the archeology of Robinson's thinking about the ambiguities of home, the complications of filial exchange, and the resonances of affective habitations. I take as context for my literary reading Robinson's thinking on emotion and mind as it develops in her essays, often in contrast to the valuations of other recent writers on affect theory and theory of mind. I read the home as a site of affective interchange with particular attention to loneliness, kindness, and forgiveness, three “felt experiences” that ground and trouble the families in both Housekeeping and Home. Robinson's attention to the solitary and the transient in the earlier novel gives way to the domesticity, kindness and caretaking of Home, but loneliness remains as “the one great prerequisite for depth, and for truthfulness.”

When a writer's earliest novel is called Housekeeping and her latest, Home, it is difficult not to think of their relation, even when they are published almost 30 year apart and a book closely attuned to Home intervenes between them. What follows takes “home” and “housekeeping” as related tropes through which to trace the archeology of Robinson's thinking (to borrow a phrase she uses in” When I Was a Child I Read Books”) about the ambiguities of home, the complications of family exchange, and the resonances of affective habitations (93). Robinson might not wish to be referred to as a theorist of affect, given her recent arguments against what she calls “parascience,” in Absence of Mind and elsewhere, but her interest in “felt experience” shines through her novels.¹ She has spoken of her “profound respect for fiction as thought” (La Force, “A Teacher and her Student”), and I take as a context for my literary reading Robinson's thinking on emotion as it develops in her essays and interviews, with particular

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¹ The phrase occurs in several of her writings. See especially “the felt experience of thought” in "Thinking Again" (Absence 114) and “the felt experience of life” in “Freedom of Thought” (When I Was a Child 8).
attention to loneliness and kindness, two felt experiences that ground and trouble the families in both Housekeeping and Home. I will argue that Robinson's attention to the transient and the solitary in the earlier novel gives way to the domesticity, kindness, and caretaking of Home, but that loneliness remains as “the one great prerequisite for depth, and for truthfulness” (Painter 492). Although the relations of Jack to his father and of them both to the Ames household are crucial to Home (and to Gilead), I will focus particularly on the siblings in the two novels. Glory has not had much critical attention, and for arguments about affect and emotion, it would be difficult to skirt a character who is in tears for much of the novel.

In writing about Robinson’s attention to emotional narratives, I have chosen to use as my central hermeneutic her term “felt experience” rather than either “affect” or “emotion,” though those terms will necessarily appear as well. Scholars disagree about the meaning and discursive functions of these terms, and their discussions are inflected not only by historical and cultural difference, but also by varying disciplinary “homes” and terms of argument. “Affect,” having leapt old boundaries among the neurological sciences, psychology and psychoanalysis, entered critical theory in the humanities primarily through the work of Eve Sedgwick in her attention to 1960’s psychologist Silvan Tomkins, and Brian Massumi in his interest in Deleuze and Guattari (and their antecedents). Affect, for these theorists, maintains its earlier connection to the body’s physiological responses, but especially in the work of Massumi it is a pre-personal phenomenon: autonomic, transmissible, non-conscious and anti-intentional. Emotion, on the other hand, is “owned,” individual, and may be conscious or unconscious. Beginning around the millennium with the “affective turn” in the humanities, “affect” as a critical rubric began to appear frequently in studies

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2 A full discussion of the differences between affect and emotion, even when restricted to their recent use in the humanities, is beyond the scope of this essay. See Woodward’s introduction for a useful summary of some of these critical debates in recent cultural studies. For other recent book-length cultural and literary studies in the field, see among others, Terada, Ngai, Flatley, Ahmed, and Berlant. For a critique of new work in neurobiology and affect as studies from other disciplines enter critical exchanges in the humanities, see Leys. Although her objections follow different lines of inquiry, some of them are resonant with Robinson's critique of “parascience” in Absence of Mind. “Affect” is now the more frequently used term in the humanities. For representation of psychological states in fictional character, “affect,” with its attention to surfaces, emphasizes the linguistic construction of the text. However, its currency may result also from its history in the hard sciences, which makes it free from any possible association with “feminized” sentiment. Some critics have opted for “feelings” as the term of choice in this terrain. See especially Terada.