READINGS

[Essay]

A GREAT AMNESIA

By Marilynne Robinson, from a lecture delivered last year at Amherst College. Robinson formerly taught creative writing at Amherst and now teaches at the University of Iowa. Home, *her third novel, will be published in September by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.*

I have often wondered in what way forgotten history abides, and what the consequences are of its being forgotten or brought to mind again. I have always felt that people somehow immortalize themselves in a landscape, that the mere fact of a specific human presence in a place leaves it changed. Walt Whitman was right about everything, never more so than when he celebrated the epic and melancholy beauty created in a place by all the transient multitudes and generations that pass through it. Anonymity is beautiful, and so are names. Universalism is beautiful, and so are particulars.

We do not query our own experience, which in so many cases is formed by the generous intentions of well-meaning strangers, who, for example, collected and kept the many somber volumes here in Frost Library that I felt I needed to read in order to piece together in my mind a prehistory of the postmodern world. That is what I did while I was teaching at Amherst, in thrall to a compulsion that amazes me when I look back on it. Sometimes it seems as if one's own earlier self is a stranger to whom one is also indebted. At the time, I would descend to the dim interior of the library to read up on the political thought of Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, to slog through Frederick Eden, Thomas Carlyle, and the Fabians. I read the first volume of *Capital* and a number of the books Marx notes, including *England and America* by Edward Wakefield, which prompts the most direct discussion of the United States to occur in *Capital*, though Marx wrote a great deal elsewhere about America and for American publication. I read Thomas Malthus and Adam Smith. I found and read forgotten writers mentioned by those writers whose work is still invoked by educated people, though, as I learned again and again, it is actually read somewhere between seldom and never. I was reading my way through what is called the dismal science—no science at all, but thoroughly dismal. Its innumerable contributors called it "political economy." This immersion of mine was a strange project by any standard, made satisfying by the fact that the library was almost always equal to the demands I made on it.

So passed a certain percentage of my relative youth. I was in the clutches of an obsession. Like Persephone, I passed from a lovely, sunlit world into the darkness of old certitude and severity. There I learned that there was an iron—or, alternatively, a brazen—law of wages. This meant that the great class of those who lived by their labor could not earn more than subsistence—and subsistence very strictly defined. Even the "death clubs" in which workers pooled their pittances to pay for their own funerals furrowed these lofty brows, being evidence that wages exceeded the minimum required for survival and therefore transgressed against that iron law and threatened to destroy civilization. Starvation could be rationalized as the

friend of civilization, a natural mechanism for restoring balance in the labor market. What was forbidden in all these texts—to the great majority of the people—was precisely the pursuit of happiness, happiness in the eighteenth-century sense of that word, prosperity or well-being. This iron law has come into force again in much of the world as a consequence of a form of competition that has based national economies on the poverty and low expectations of the mass of their populations. To my sorrow, I have more use now than I could ever have imagined for the terms and assumptions I learned in the library. For this reason alone I would recommend this grueling mental pilgrimage to anyone who has an interest in the news.

A few hours given over to the realm of Pluto and then out into Amherst again, where other hopes, formed with precise reference to and rejection of that old, plutocratic resentment and severity, were still inscribed on the landscape, though invisible to me and to anyone I knew. I learned of a house nearby in the Utopian community of Florence, Massachusetts, that was said to be—and surely was—a part of the underground railway, which I knew had been active here. There were other hints at participation in the great issues of an earlier America, but their real significance did not strike me until I went into the Middle West and found any number of Amhersts, so to speak, scattered over the landscape. These colleges are younger by two or three decades but strikingly similar architecturally and in scale, and no wonder, because they also were built in the first instance by people whose determination was their primary resource. They were founded as stations on the underground railway, and as centers for humane learning of a kind that would make their graduates and those influenced by them resistant to the spread of slavery.

Their faculties seem to have been composed largely of graduates of divinity schools in New England and New York, which sent bands out into the West to advance the cause of liberal education and the reforms it was meant to promote, including the abolition of slavery and the advancement of women. Many of these colleges were racially integrated and integrated by gender also before the Civil War. Progressive philanthropists funded these schools because the reformist innovations undertaken by them were not tolerated in the East. These schools were radical despite the fact that an intense, if to us rather mysterious, piety was cultivated by them. There were instances of students being expelled for celebrating Christmas. The movement as a whole was inspired or stimulated by the Second Great Awakening, and its leaders were often referred to as revivalists. The elements of culture recombine and are changed by their changed associations. It would be interesting to trace the transformation in American society that broke the link between popular religion and high intellectual achievement, between religious enthusiasm and generous and transformative change. In my experience, many of the schools in the old abolitionist archipelago are entirely forgetful of their history, or are embarrassed by the little they know about it, in most cases because they are very progressive and enlightened and therefore do not wish to trace their paternity to a clutch of fiery preachers, and in some cases because they are piously conservative and do not enjoy association with a clutch of New England radicals.

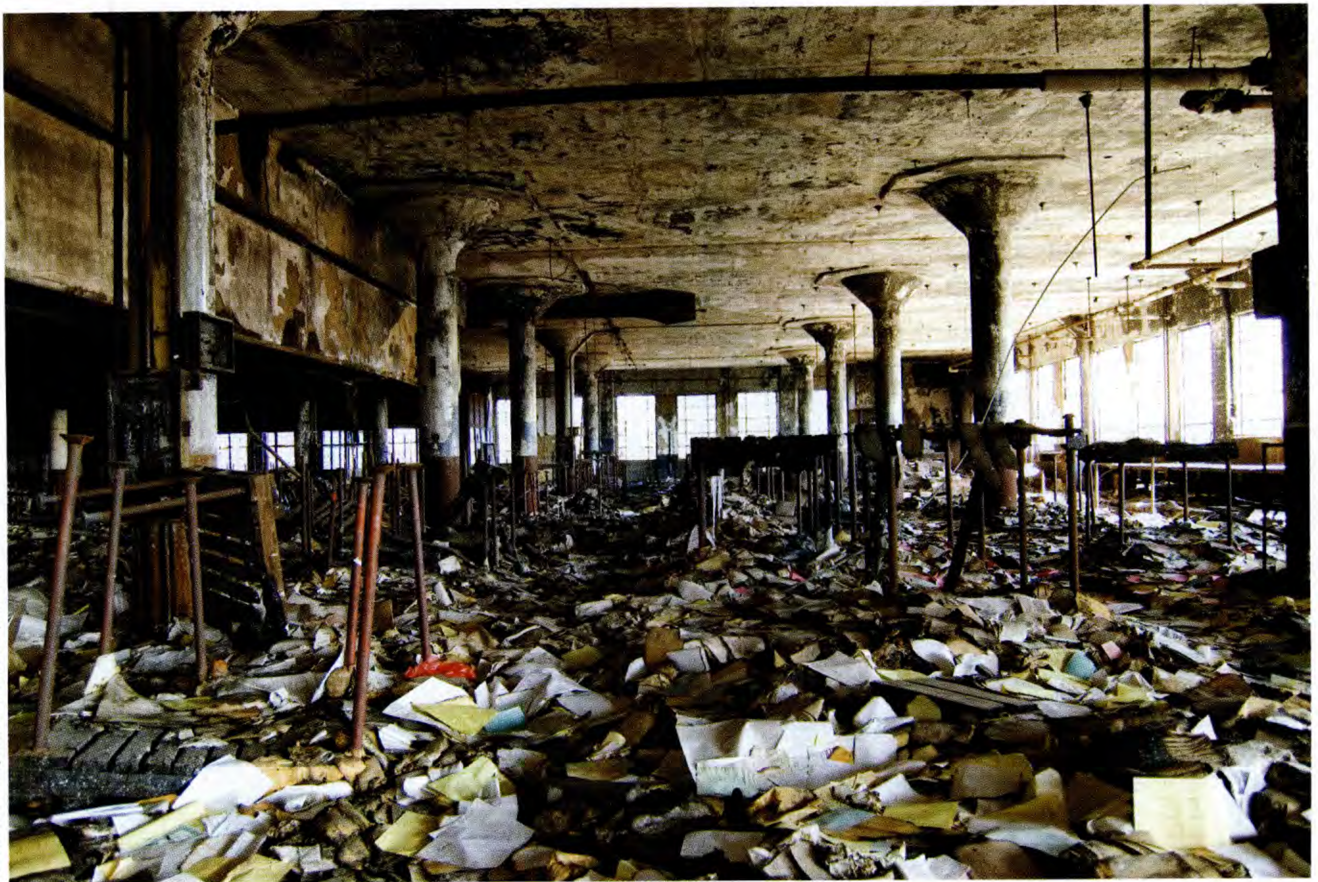
A very generous hope was abroad in America which undertook to realize itself in the wide diffusion of a kind of education historically associated with privilege. That it was intended to break down the barriers education had historically enforced is clear from the fact that it was open to oth-

[Poem]

THE UTOPIAN WARS

By Thomas Lux, in the March/April issue of The American Poetry Review. *Lux's collection* God Particles *is out from Houghton Mifflin.*

Amish raiding party attacks a Quaker
settlement at Muddy Crossing,
killing first the Quaker ferryman
(who is drunk, and never awakes until midstream
to find an Amish man tying an anvil to his neck)
before reaching the village
and killing dozens, quietly at first, by blade
and hatchet (hoping to blame the savages), and
burning nothing
as they work their way toward the center of
town. Kill on the way in, burn
on the way out. In the hills, meanwhile,
the Buddhists quick-change from bright orange
to camo robes, point their howitzers eastward
where they know the Episcopalians
milk cobras
to tip their arrows
and fill their bullets' hollow-points.
The Baha'i sit back and sharpen their knives and
saws.
The wily Mennonites withdraw,
their leaders meeting for three days
in upstate New York,
while at the same time the few remaining Jains
turn their cheeks
to reveal slashed and bloody jaws
from the last time
they turned their cheeks.



COURTESY SWEET JUNIPER MEDIA, INC., DETROIT

"Former Detroit Public Schools Book Depository," by James D. Griffioen, whose work can be viewed at sweet-juniper.com.

erwise excluded groups, African Americans and women. Also, many of these schools were organized according to what was called the Manual Labor System. This meant that everyone in the college community, including the faculty, did the work involved in keeping it fed and housed, in order to assure that there would be no economic barriers to education. On the frontier this meant everyone chopped weeds and butchered hogs and operated the printing presses that poured out abolitionist pamphlets, many of them mailed to the South. The association of learnedness with privilege or leisure was intentionally undercut.

Already in the early nineteenth century there was organized philanthropy. A group of wealthy individuals and families, called the Great Eight, met once a year in New York City to review plans for which their help was sought, and a fair amount of this help seems to have gone into the founding and sustaining of schools and colleges. Nevertheless, the strength of this movement was based on the willingness of a surprising number of highly educated people to leave the relative comfort of the East for lives of almost unimaginable difficulty, based on the assumption, which proved true, that the populations that found their way to the prairie would have an interest in Latin and Greek, mathematics and logic. To an extraordinary degree, the generations between the Second Great Awakening and the Civil War established lasting excellence in what would seem unlikely places, despite great practical difficulties and with very modest resources. Their intention was to re-create American society by practicing as well as promoting standards of justice and freedom to which the nation had not risen. If I had not read so deeply into the thinking that prevailed elsewhere, and had authority everywhere, about the natural order of society, the inevitable subordination of the many to the few that was the single condition under which high civilization could emerge and prosper, I would not have understood the gallant humanism reflected in the existence and flourishing of these lofty little institutions.

Yes, and then what happened? I mentioned the tendency of aspects of culture to recombine, and to change as they fall into new configurations. In the twentieth century, despite all I have said, higher education was resistant to the integration of wom-

en and people of color, as if this were a novelty and a threat to excellence. A great amnesia had settled over the whole society, a forgetfulness that there had been racially integrated towns with black mayors, even that there had been regiments of black soldiers in the Civil War. It is not only interesting but truly ominous that such a significant part of our history could just slide into eclipse. This is another thing I learned from moving to Iowa, and could have learned in Kansas and virtually anywhere else in the Middle West—that a society with a history full of hope and intention can forget that anything bold or generous, anything of interest, had ever happened there. We in the Middle West have our fine little colleges and our great universities, certainly. But recently legislatures have been finding it difficult to justify the cost of liberal education. What is it for, after all? Does it produce better workers? Does it attract investment? Does it prepare graduates for the kind of employment they will need to pay off the cost of their education as legislatures continue to back away from the obligation to maintain the universities and the universities increasingly make up the difference by raising tuition? (These are rhetorical questions—the answer yes is not welcome, even or especially if a good case can be made for it.) If rumors of such notions happened to reach the empyrean, those old worthies who established the culture of education along the frontier, defying poverty, frostbite, and yellow fever, would most certainly be tearing their beards. No doubt they had read many of the same books I read. They would have known from their own experience what kind of world results from the subordination of all other considerations to a utilitarian economics. They were profligate, pouring out the best treasures of learning in swamps and mud holes (their language) in a general project of liberation from which we all would have benefited more if we had simply been generous enough to remember it.

But something else happened. There was a recoil from the horror of the Civil War that affected the thinking of many of the abolitionists, and certainly affected public attitudes toward their movement. There was the emergence of Social Darwinism, which enjoyed a long run in this country, and which had precursors in many forms, not surprisingly, since there is nothing easier than persuading people of their natural superiority to other people. But when this view of things entered the culture as science, through those very institutions that had promoted social equality in earlier generations, it carried all before it. Those same hill towns that had provided the schools of New England with their students suddenly became proof of the dysgenic effects of inbreeding. Immigrants were worse than the people in the hill towns. And everywhere were to be found the marks of imbecility, degeneracy, parasitism. Since the future of humankind depended on the flourishing of superior types, the first duty of the favored was, of course, to look after themselves and one another. Social Darwinism always had racial assumptions—a "Mongoloid" was an evolutionary throwback from the superior status of Caucasoid and so on. This "science" was a catastrophe for anyone who labored under any kind of disadvantage, no matter how obviously the advantage was a consequence of social constructs, since society is, for these purposes, the field, or the forest, of evolutionary struggle, and losing is losing.

It is a dangerous error to imagine that opinion had to have been more benighted in 1835 than it was in 1935. The fact that black students had done well at Oberlin College—there was no use for that kind of information once racism became "scientific." So, for all purposes, that information disappeared, together with the history that surrounded it. Equality as an ideal was seen not only as impossible but also as undesirable, since it threatened the enhancement of the species that came with the rise of an elite. I think some of the intellectual leaders whose life spanned the Civil War chose to forget that they had ever espoused equality, though they might have championed it eloquently in their youth. And women—how half the species could be thought of as somehow not participating fully in its evolution I don't know, but our status fell precipitously in this Social Darwinist period, perhaps because we were considered unlikely to have stalked the woolly mammoth. There is no arguing with science.

I do not want to overstate the degree to which the ideals of the founders of these erstwhile charity schools, these Manual Labor System schools, have been abandoned. They have always been open to gifted students and ready to lower or remove the barriers of cost for anyone otherwise qualified, granting that for a long time whiteness and maleness were among these essential qualifications. Innovations such as intelligence testing, which has its origins in the eugenics movement, have given admissions something of the character of screening for a Spencerian elite, but perhaps this is inevitable. Immigration made these schools into Anglo-Protestant redoubts. This was understandable in terms of their origins, and it was intolerable because of their very great role in establishing social norms and conferring status. It may have been a factor in their marked tendency to forget where they came from, a creditable rejection of the nativist exclusivism with which they came to be associated.

That said, the old dream of integrating the highest levels of thought and learning into a life of humane labor in which everyone has a part, the ideal of equality without condescension, this is what we have lost. Every aspect of contemporary life assumes a lowest common denominator that is

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Schöner Tag 2 (Beautiful Day 2), *by Sven Kroner, was on exhibit in March at Yvon Lambert New York.*

very low indeed. What politician would be so bold as to refine a point, confess to an ambivalence, allude to literature or history? We have been at great pains to winnow thoughtful language out of public life, so perhaps we would all have to get used to the sound of it again. We would have to persuade the press not to bullyrag any utterance that seems to them too complex for the common mind. One of the Lincoln–Douglas debates was held on the lawn of Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, one of the oldest and most important of the abolitionist schools. Thousands of people stood in the open air to hear a very lengthy, unamplified debate. Lincoln's own few months of education might not have been unusual in that crowd. But no one now would dare speak to any crowd as substantively and respectfully as he spoke to them, and no one now would expect the patient attention they gave to Douglas and to him. Lincoln was well prepared by his own history to know that intelligence, eloquence, intuition, and sensitivity could emerge despite obstacles, and that they could be quietly present where no one might expect them.

We have not learned what we should have learned from the best experiments in democracy that have taken place among us. If I had not gone from Western Massachusetts to Iowa, and if I had not been struck by the anomalous presence of what might be New England schools surrounded by what might be New England villages, and if I had not wondered why these colleges should be the oldest things on the landscape and why there should be so many of them, I would never have learned that aspirations for American democracy had once been so generous and at the same time so high. I would not have known because it is not a story we tell ourselves. We praise democracy most of the time, but we practice it as if we had accepted every argument against it, as if we believed it must depress the level of culture and of public life.

So both of these are depressed, preemptively. In the absence of the romance of the individual, the Emersonian celebration of consciousness, the Whitmanesque openness to the beauty and grandeur of the mortal throng, we slide back toward that dark world whose testaments I read in Frost Library. Now we speak of the great mass of people as workers who must be conditioned and pressed toward always greater efficiency, toward accepting lives they do not define or control, lived in service to some supposed greater good that is never in any humane or democratic sense their own good or their children's good.

Those who are ignorant of the past are condemned to repeat it, and society does indeed seem to be reverting to a dismal past, which, in our ignorance, we call an inevitable future. But this is true too: Those who are ignorant of history deprive themselves of the hope that they might learn from what is best in it. Generous hope is embedded in this landscape and in the national landscape, waiting to be remembered.