



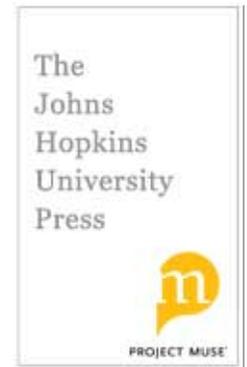
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*Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the
Modern Myth of the Self* by Marilynne Robinson (review)

Matthew Barrett

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(Review)

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in Lewis' writings without encountering his distaste for many aspects of modern science, philosophy, and literature. Perhaps Schwartz would see these instances as a rhetorical stance on Lewis' part, but this claim is one that would seem to require more evidence before we accept it wholesale. His reading of *That Hideous Strength* is also insightful, especially his suggestion that what Lewis transposes or "takes up" is the Gothic genre, which itself is a parody of Medieval Romance. This approach has numerous interpretive strengths; yet, it was not clear, to this reader at least, how the approach demonstrates the essential unity or sequencing related to developmental theories that is one of the book's key premises.

Overall, Schwartz does an admirable job of arguing and supporting his thesis. In the process, he illuminates the plot, structure, themes, and unity of the Space Trilogy in a way that will be valuable for readers of Lewis' science fiction. The book is well researched and exhaustively documented. For me, some of the most intriguing parts were those that dealt with Ransom as the hero of all three novels and his moral crises as important unifying elements in the structure and themes of the Trilogy. At the same time, I found Schwartz's efforts to fit *That Hideous Strength* into the patterns of character and structure identified in the first two novels to be somewhat forced, not least because Ransom's character seems to take a backseat in the finale when compared to his central role in the first two books. Still this reservation is minor compared to the overall success of Schwartz's argument, which is well supported and which makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of and appreciation for Lewis' achievement as a writer of science fiction and as a Christian intellectual responding to the cultural currents of his time.

Gary L. Tandy
George Fox University

Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self.
By Marilynne Robinson. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-300-14518-2. Pp. ix + 158. \$24.00.

Most know Marilynne Robinson from her novels *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, and *Home*. However, following in the genre of her 2005 work *The Death of Adam*, Robinson's most recent work, *Absence of Mind*, is a collection of essays—given as Yale University's Dwight H. Terry Foundation Lectures on Religion in the Light of Science and Philosophy—which “examine one side in the venerable controversy called the conflict between science and religion, in order to question the legitimacy of the claim its exponents make to speak with the authority of science and in order to raise questions about the quality of thought that lies behind it” (ix). The exponents of science that Robinson has in mind are writers who view science through the lens of influential thinkers of the early modern period, which sets science against the

claims of religion. *Absence of Mind* is an analytical look at such attempts to dismiss religion in the name of science.

Robinson's strength is her ability to be critical of thinkers who present a conception of humanity that is limited and insufficient. Robinson questions not the method of science "but the methods of a kind of argument that claims the authority of science or highly specialized knowledge, that assumes a protective coloration that allows it to pass for science yet does not practice the self-discipline or self-criticism for which science is distinguished" (2). Robinson has in mind sociologists, evolutionary psychologists, and even philosophers who believe religion creates a proneness to delusion. Bertrand Russell, for example, argues that anyone who believes the world had a beginning only contributes to the "poverty of our imagination" (13) and he, therefore, need not waste his time even refuting arguments for a First Cause. Russell's comment, which is common rhetoric today among atheistic evolutionists like Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens, not only fails to utilize scientific investigation as a method, but also "tends to reduce it [religion] to a matter of bones and feathers and wishful thinking, a matter of rituals and social bonding and false etiologies and the fear of death, and this makes its persistence very annoying to them" (15). To the contrary, such thinkers as these believe they have crossed the threshold. As Robinson explains, the theories of thinkers like Darwin, Marx, and Freud were so definitive that any criticism was "nostalgia" and any skepticism "meant the doubter's mind was closed and fearful" (21). How naive a response this is given the age of doubt they lived in. Nevertheless, such ideas "presented themselves as the last word in doubt, the *nec plus ultra* of intellectual skepticism" (21). Rather than making scientific arguments, they have taken the intellectual high ground which supposedly is enough to demonstrate the lack of need to even address the claims of religion. Moreover, the type of world these men of modernity have created is one where the creature is an accident. However, as Robinson observes, such a view not only removes the existence of God but introduces emptiness into human experience and fails to explain the meticulous complexity of the cosmos in which we find ourselves.

Robinson also has a keen eye for methodological inconsistency and contradiction, usually apparent in what she calls "parascientific literature." Naturalists like Dawkins and Dennett (a Nietzschean at heart) argue that we are an accident, a mere outcome of physical laws which are also accidental. The consequences for morality and ethics are devastating, as right and wrong are made relative. However, Robinson observes the major problem this poses for the history of altruism. Take social Darwinism for example. "Why would altruism persist as a trait, when evolution would necessarily select against the conferring of benefit to another at cost to oneself" (60). According to evolution, altruism should not continue to exist as a trait, since the survival of the fittest is a principle meant to defeat altruism altogether. Yet, evolution cannot explain the love and care one human being has for another. Moreover, what is to happen in society if the survival of the

fittest mentality is to be followed? Some Darwinists try to explain acts of altruism (a father saving his drowning son) by resorting to the genetic instinct to preserve one's own kind. Robinson acutely observes the fallacy of such an appeal, "Do elderly mothers go unrescued, being past their childbearing years? Do firefighters run into burning houses looking for kith and kin? In how many instances would those disposed to altruism die in the rescue of strangers whose genetic proclivities were entirely unknown to them?" (63). Clearly, the Darwinian model cannot explain the moral instinct human beings have for each other's welfare, especially in those cases where the survival of the fittest is sacrificed for the survival of the weak and ill. Additionally, such a theory has little place for benevolence, kindness, and sympathy for those in society who are at a disadvantage. Robinson explains this best in *The Death of Adam* when she states, "The modern fable is that science exposed religion as a delusion and more or less supplanted it. But science cannot serve in the place of religion because it cannot generate an ethics or a morality. It can give us no reason to prefer a child to a dog, or to choose honorable poverty over fraudulent wealth. It can give us no grounds for preferring what is excellent to what is sensationalistic.... It is no wonder that the major arts in virtually every civilization have centered around religion" (71).

The strength of Robinson's piercing "altruism" critique is again evident in her analysis of Freud and Nietzsche. "That we are seemingly free to behave altruistically ... and are able to sustain value systems that encourage generosity or selflessness, is an anomaly that has troubled Darwinist thinking since T. H. Huxley" (92-93). Referring to the anti-Semitism that eventually characterized Nazi Germany, Robinson explains, "Figures such as Freud and Nietzsche ... are both inevitably engrossed in the passions that were consuming Europe" (94). This is not surprising since, as Robinson points out in *The Death of Adam* (35), Darwin himself said in *The Descent of Man* that one day man would evolve to such a civilized state that the "negro" would be surpassed. Surely Robinson is correct when she concludes, "Darwinism is, intrinsically, a chilling doctrine" (36).

Moreover, atheists like Nietzsche believe that religion is a "constraining illusion, the basis of an archaic morality unworthy of the deference paid to it" (90). With religious morality disposed of, racial discrimination cannot be morally condemned as there is no basis on which to do so. It goes without saying that the consequences of an amoral mentality are deadly. Sadly, says Robinson, Freud could not see this. "In his role as scientist ... Freud tried to bring the assumptions of rationalism to bear on the myths and frenzies that were carrying Europe toward catastrophe. In the event, he brought to bear not reason but rationalization, treating the Europe of his time as timeless and normative, and therefore, in its fractious way, stable" (107). Yet, social Darwinist and neo-Darwinist assumptions continue to hold a place "among the great, sad, epochal insights that we say have made us modern" (107). Simply put, Robinson's critique is not only devastating but sobering as such thinking continues today.

Robinson then turns to a different theological intuition, namely, “that the order we see exists by divine fiat, that the heavens proclaim the glory of God” (122). Robinson concludes that she finds the language of scientific materialism, which espouses the evolutionary epic, unclear. To claim that this world in all its complexity and beauty is subject to a materialist explanation is unsatisfying. Again, the brilliance of Robinson’s work lies in her ability to see through Freud when he says of religion in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, “The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life” (127). Poignantly, Freud concludes that the purpose of human life has never received a satisfactory answer. Steven Pinker is no better when he concludes that religion is a desperate measure people resort to when they fail at everything else. To the contrary, says Pinker, we are not angels but mere organisms, not “pipelines to the truth” but mere brains and organs. Robinson responds, “How strange it would be, then, that this accident, this excess, should feel a tropism toward what Pinker himself calls ‘the truth’” (129). And again returning to the theme of altruism, “Who is that other self needing to be persuaded that there are more than genetic reasons for rescuing a son or daughter from drowning?” (132). Where is the value of human dignity and life in the Darwinist’s scheme? As Robinson explained in *The Death of Adam*, clearly it is here that the contrast between Darwinism and Christianity is obvious,

Darwinism is harsh and crude in its practical consequences, in a degree that sets it apart from all other respectable scientific hypotheses; not coincidentally, it had its origins in polemics against the poor, and against the irksome burden of extending charity to them—a burden laid on the back of Europe by Christianity. The Judeo-Christian ethic of charity derives from the assertion that human beings are made in the image of God, that is, that reverence is owed to human beings simply as such, and also that their misery or neglect or destruction is not, for God, a matter of indifference, or of merely compassionate interest, but is something in the nature of sacrilege. (47)

In *Absence of Mind*, Robinson is equally insightful:

A primary assumption of the evolutionary model behind neo-Darwinism is that development can be traced back through a series of subtly incremental changes. At what for our purposes is the terminus of all these changes there emerges, voilà, the world as we know it. The neatness of this argument has always bothered me ... If my metaphor only suggests the possibility that our species is more than an optimized ape, that something terrible and glorious befell us, a change gradualism could not predict—if this is merely another

fable, it might at least encourage an imagination of humankind large enough to acknowledge some small fragment of the mystery we are. (134-35)

In conclusion, Robinson has dealt a serious blow to the assumptions of parascientific literature, both old and new, of the neo-Darwinian schools of thought. The strength of Robinson's work is her ability to expose the lack of scientific methodology these social Darwinists actually make and in doing so she demonstrates the inability of such thought to supply a worldview that accounts for truth, morality, and the mystery of human life.

Matthew Barrett

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form. By Jeremy Biles. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. ISBN 9780823227785. Pp. 372. \$70.00.

Georges Bataille has long been an important figure in twentieth-century French intellectual culture, though it becomes increasingly unclear what to do with him. His fiction, a high art pornography, does not seem likely to bequeath significant fiction in our day (for which we might be thankful); his essays on, around, and against surrealism, and his work on Lascaux, remain of interest, yet are not regarded as foundational for contemporary reflections on art. His theory of the erotic now seems, in our age, at once unbuttoned and puritan, by turns nasty and prudish. His poems are plain bad. His writings on the sacred, especially its left hand, on sacrifice, and on transgression, still have power to captivate some people in Religious Studies, including Jeremy Biles, though response to them is mostly by way of thinking through what Bataille has said about these things, and of charting their ramifications in art and society at large. Few people want to make large claims for the truth of his theories or to build upon them. Perhaps the works of his that remain strongest, and retain their strangeness, are *Inner Experience* (1954) and *Guilty* (1961).

It has been usual to speak of Bataille and Blanchot in one breath, although the past two decades have seen some of their readers prizing them apart. Now Blanchot is seen more surely as the greater figure, and the one who has perhaps more diverse futures ahead of him. Doubtless he learned from Bataille, but he made what he learned his own, in part by testing it against ideas he found elsewhere (Hölderlin and Hegel, Sade and Lautréamont, Lévinas and Derrida). Both Bataille and Blanchot speak of communication and sacrifice in striking ways. In this book, *Ecce Monstrum*, Biles invites us to read Bataille again with a view to what he has to say about "the sacrifice of form." When form is sacrificed, there is monstrosity; and, we are told, the very concept of monstrosity is itself monstrous, being fraught with