I. Triumph, then Collapse:

Vatican II and American Mainline Protestantism

Nearly fifty years after its commencement, few topics continue to generate as much debate within Roman Catholicism as “the spirit of Vatican II.” Should the pastoral council of the 1960s be understood as continuous with earlier magisterial teachings or as a dramatic departure from them that redefines what it means to be Catholic? Numerous observers have offered conflicting interpretations of the council and of its effects in the lives of Catholics. Most agree, however, that whether the changes should be applauded or deplored, Vatican II coincides with the collapse of a distinctively Catholic subculture in the United States—one founded largely by immigrants; one considered dogmatic, pious, and self-consciously insular; and one long regarded with suspicion by mainstream America. Ironically, this collapse followed swiftly upon what many American Catholics perceived to be their moment of cultural arrival. In the period following the Second World War, the celebrity of Catholic television personalities such as

Fulton Sheen, the idealized portrayals of priests and nuns in Hollywood films, the association of Catholic politicians such as Joseph McCarthy with an adamant anticommunism, and above all the election of John F. Kennedy as president contributed to a short-lived sense of American Catholic triumphalism. Its sudden disappearance provoked consternation among many mainline Protestants as well as Catholics. As Garry Wills put it, “Catholics were the last believers; dubiety among them is an omen. . . . if this thing falls, then what can hope to stand?” (4).

Wills’s tongue-in-cheek description of Catholics as “the last believers” was published in 1972, at a time when the postconciliar tumult was perhaps obscuring a comparable shift in American Protestantism—the rapid decline of mainline Protestantism and the corresponding growth of Protestant churches that, for all their differences (expressed under such labels as “fundamentalist,” “evangelical,” “charismatic,” and “emergent”) emphasize a relative indifference to extrascriptural traditions, liturgies, and ecclesiology. The denominations that constitute the mainline have long histories that extend back into the colonial era, rich theological traditions, and a history of frequent dispute with each other that did not preclude broad agreement on morals and manners—indeed, arguably, enough of a consensus to determine the distinct character of American society. As Joseph Bottum puts it, “Perhaps precisely because they were aimed inward, the Protestant churches were able to radiate outward, giving a characteristic shape to the nation: the centrality of families, the pattern of marriages and funerals, the vague but widespread patriotism, the strong localism, and the ongoing sense of some providential purpose at work in the existence of the United States” (24). For Bottum, the decline of mainline Protestantism and its cultural effects are unprecedented:

The death of the Mainline is the central historical fact of our time: the event that distinguishes the past several decades from every other period in American history. Almost every one of our current political and cultural oddities, our contradictions and obscurities, derives from this fact: The Mainline used [sic] has lost the capacity to set, or even significantly influence, the national vocabulary or the national self-understanding. . . . Since the 1970s, we have faced a unique kind of political dilemma, in which no agreement can be reached even on the terms by which we will disagree with one another. (24, 25)

Bottum’s thesis about the political implications of the decline may be overstated, but the decline in numbers is indisputable, as is the bitterness of struggles within the denominations since the 1970s—struggles typically
described, like comparable clashes in Catholicism, as disputes between “traditionalists” and “progressives.”

To date, Vatican II has generated more interest among fiction writers and literary critics than the decline of mainline Protestantism, though this interest has taken largely predictable forms. Catholic writers who depict the effects of the council do tend to portray a general sense of triumph followed by collapse, as well as little consensus about what either the triumph or the collapse portends. In Testing the Faith: The New Catholic Fiction in America, Anita J. Gandolfo, borrowing Thomas Kuhn’s notion of “paradigm shifts,” argues that while the preconciliar church “reflected the classical paradigm of a fixed and static reality . . . the rest of Western civilization responded to a more modern paradigm informed by the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Age of Romanticism” (5). Though Gandolfo’s opposition between “classical” and “modern” paradigms is crude and overdrawn, it cannot simply be dismissed, for it does reflect something of the self-understanding of American Catholics and non-Catholics alike, who have tended to view Vatican II as one aspect of the broader rubric “the Sixties.” Gandolfo is faithful to this general understanding, which implies belief in a progressive concept of history and conceals unacknowledged affinities to Hegel behind its more up-to-date Kuhnian vocabulary. Because history is progressive, its movements are authoritative and irreversible—so that when the conditions for a “paradigm shift” are present, the old paradigm necessarily crumbles, no matter how strenuously its partisans might protest. For Gandolfo, the predicament of the postconciliar church is that while the old paradigm has been discredited, a new one has not yet been identified to take its place. Catholic fictions reveal this confusion, yet because they deploy “the imagination as a source of knowledge about reality,” one might, through a synthesis of such texts, be able to pursue “the present task of Catholicism”—namely, “to discover the new paradigm” (21, 22). The very use of the word “discover” here suggests the systemic, impersonal nature of the shift—it has already happened, and one can understand its nature only after the fact. One cannot consciously forge it, in the sense of arguing on its behalf and hoping that one’s efforts will succeed—or, more precisely, one can, but it will not avail unless one’s position happens to conform to the historical avant garde. And this one can know only by studying and plotting the course of history, whose path is the primary means through which God (or Geist) reveals himself.

There is a forced quality in Gandolfo’s argument, as in most attempts to discern the teleology of contemporary events. If the old paradigm has been shattered, and evidence of the new can be gleaned from current fiction, why the persistence of “conservative” Catholic novelists, or the emer-
gence of newer novelists such as Andrew Greeley, whose work, though undeniably popular, does not correspond to Gandolfo’s sense of what the new paradigm ought to contain? Indeed, how does the synthesizing work proceed—how does one recognize the insignia of the new? That differing, incompatible opinions about Catholic teaching and life exist is undeniable, and at times Gandolfo offers little more than a survey of them. Yet in implying that this confusion has a foreseeable end—that beneath it, a new and better paradigm already exists—she obscures her own argumentative commitments about this emerging paradigm’s content. At the very least, it is clear that Gandolfo is committed to an unspecified new paradigm and considers challenges to the old to be prima facie evidence of the shift underway. In the larger debate as to whether Vatican II signifies continuity or rupture within Catholicism, she stands on the side of rupture, rejecting

2. Greeley’s work, indeed, provides the biggest problem for Gandolfo’s argument, for popularity would intuitively seem a marker of fidelity to the Zeitgeist. If one can only “discover” a new paradigm, then Greeley’s combination of success and novelty ought to reveal something about what the new paradigm actually is, unless one wishes to deny that his work is “Catholic” in any meaningful sense at all. Gandolfo elides this problem. She views Greeley both as reactionary in his hostility to theological liberalism (a stance associated with the “old paradigm”) and as not genuinely Catholic in any sense because of his unacknowledged debts to what Leslie Fiedler called the “Sentimental Love Religion” and which Gandolfo calls the “Sentimental Love Ethic” (Gandolfo 49–50). These are defensible propositions, but precisely because her argument is premised upon the necessity of the paradigm shift underway, she must explain why so popular a novelist (who is also a Catholic priest) has nothing to teach about the new paradigm, why his work can only be a projection of his own obsessions or a relic of an irrelevant past. Gandolfo’s answer is that Greeley’s readers are stupid: “Unfortunately, the more passive readers to whom these slick narratives appeal are internalizing not only Greeley’s unvarnished hostile opinions of the Catholic hierarchy, liberation theologians, nuns, feminists, academic administrators, and other assorted victims of the Greeley mythic system, but they are also absorbing his theology of sex, a view Greeley propagates with the same glibness that characterizes his self-defense” (59–60). Even if this is true, it remains to be shown why stupidity, bad sexual theology, and Sentimental Love Religion cannot possibly be elements of the new paradigm. To do so, however, would be to make Gandolfo’s own commitments more explicit, instead of letting them surreptitiously float under the passivity of “paradigms.” Richard Rorty, who radicalizes Kuhn’s notion of the paradigm shift, is more forthright about the sleight-of-hand involved here: the existence of paradigm shifts suggests that change of some kind will probably happen, but since I cannot honestly regard any change as an inevitable change for the better (that would be buying into the metaphysics of an inevitable historical progress), I am better off appealing to the impersonality and inevitability of changes that I desire instead of arguing about their merits. My rhetorical efforts work thus work to convey that resistance is futile, even though I know there is nothing inevitable about the program I espouse.

3. This is not to say that the content of Gandolfo’s desires for a new paradigm are altogether concealed—only that it must be inferred from her positive references to thinkers such as James Fowler, Carol Gilligan, Mary Daly, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The resulting picture is impressionistic but discernible as what I described in the introduction as a “spirituality.”
the possibility that recent developments might be either historical dead-
ends or recuperable, given enough hindsight, within the framework of the
older paradigm. Surely a more prudent investigation would find the jury
to be still out on this question, and a more confident advocate of the new
would not shrink from arguing boldly on its behalf, instead of gesturing
toward its inevitability or reacting irritably to those more skeptical of its
superiority.

In Postmodern Belief, Amy Hungerford proposes an interpretation
of the fate of “belief” in American literature after about 1960 that paral-
lels Gandolfo’s account of the “new Catholic novel” but seems especially
suggestive (and far more subtle) when applied to mainline Protestantism.
Beginning during the Eisenhower administration—and coinciding with the
rise of New Criticism, which Hungerford reads as the latest stage in the
effort to make literature fulfill the function or religion—the notion of “faith
in faith . . . a version of religious thinking that minimizes the specificity
of religious doctrine in service to usually nationalistic goals of civil con-
nection” comes to stand “in contrast to the version of religion that stresses
doctrinal content, a kind that in 1950s America most prominently includes
the multiple version of Christianity, from committed mainline Protestant-
ism and Catholicism to the more evangelical strains” (3). A harbinger of
this development in American political life can be found in a widely quoted
speech by Eisenhower: “[O]ur form of government makes no sense unless
it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is. With
us of course it is the Judeo-Christian concept but it must be a religion that
all men are created equal” (qtd. in Hungerford 2).

As Hungerford notes, the notion of the “Judeo-Christian tradition,”
developed by “the star theologians of the day, including Paul Tillich and
Reinhold Niebuhr,” is “itself a notion that mediates between pluralism and
doctrinal specificity” (3), making up in civic idealism for what it lacks in
robust particularity. As I have suggested in chapter 3, the career of Updike
can be viewed in part as a reaction against this emerging conception of
American religion, which looks to the Reformed tradition and especially to
Karl Barth in its rejection of Tillich and his half-secularized Protestantism.
Updike is, undoubtedly, the most prominent doctrinally Protestant Ameri-
can novelist since the 1960s, and his example might suggest that something
as bland as the “Judeo-Christian tradition” proves thin gruel for Christian
novelists, for whom the rendition of the particular remains a key criterion
of aesthetic success. Despite the narcissism that I have identified as the cen-
tral preoccupation of his work—and even despite the Emersonian commit-
ments that he evinces in his most autobiographical writing—I maintain that
in resisting this “faith in faith,” Updike proves not only a better Christian but also a more aesthetically satisfying writer than many of those whom Hungerford considers exemplary.

In this chapter I turn to the work of Mary Gordon, a Catholic, and Marilynne Robinson, a Congregationalist—two writers who, unlike Updike, appropriate Christian orthodoxy in the period after 1960 rather than arguing straightforwardly on its behalf. For Gordon, the turmoil that followed Vatican II provides both opportunities and losses for the Catholic who wishes to identify with the Church’s aesthetic heritage yet withholds assent from much in Catholic moral teaching. Robinson, writing in the first decade of the twenty-first century, looks back to the mainline Protestantism of the 1950s, at exactly the moment when large sections of it were beginning to espouse something like Hungerford’s “postmodern belief,” in order to highlight what she perceives as a suppressed link between political liberalism and Christian faith. The fictive commitments of both writers, I argue, are primarily political and aesthetic rather than religious, for both ultimately affirm tolerance and spirituality more than the content of orthodox Christian doctrine and practice. Gordon’s project of affirming aesthetic value and sexual freedom—two values mediated by the concept of “the body” that are not endorsed by Christian orthodoxy in the terms that she prefers—is an intelligent effort that nevertheless proves, in the end, even more narcissistic than Updike’s work. Robinson, a greater novelist than Gordon, has nevertheless been misread by many of her recent critics, who do not perceive that the doctrinal content that she so lovingly examines in her novels and essays is not the main point but rather a means to her own political and aesthetic ends.

II. The Church and the Body: The Aesthetic of Mary Gordon

Gandolfo’s half-acknowledged desires for a particular kind of new Catholic paradigm find stronger advocacy in the work of Gordon, who is probably the most prominent postconciliar Catholic fiction writer in the United States to enjoy both mass appeal (her first two novels, Final Payments [1978] and The Company of Women [1980], were bestsellers) and widespread critical acclaim. Like Gandolfo, Gordon regards Vatican II as an event that divides American Catholic experience into a “before” and an “after.” “Before” was as much a place as a time, the milieu of Gordon’s own childhood—working-class Irish communities in and near northeastern cities, with their traditional religious piety and gender roles, right-wing politics, and suspicion of
the larger world. “After” is the world wrought by the 1960s and their aftermath, characterized by sexual and economic freedom for women on the one hand and the rush of American Catholics into the cultural mainstream on the other. If the trajectory of Gordon’s own life as recounted in her memoirs and imaginatively transformed in her fiction resembles an immigrant success story—perhaps a kind of Catholic feminist counterpart to Norman Podhoretz’s Making It—it never turns its back on the world of her childhood, seeking, in a manner that Gandolfo would probably approve, a just yet deeply personal measure of what has been gained and lost since Vatican II.

Gordon portrays sexuality, politics, and aesthetics as the primary lenses through which to scrutinize these gains and losses, and her general assessment is that changes in Catholicism have been good for the first two (indeed, Gordon’s central political commitments, being feminist, turn primarily on sexual matters) but bad for the third. Although she dissents from magisterial teaching on a range of matters related to sexuality and gender—the permissibility of pre- and extramarital sex, divorce, birth control, abortion, the ordination of women—Gordon also continues to identify herself as a Catholic. Rhetorically, such a stance both exaggerates and minimizes the status of sex. In a 1986 interview with Lynn Neary, Gordon explained her position:

I refuse to lose the richness and truth of the Catholic Church for issues which do not make up the whole of a religious life. . . . What in fact the Church hierarchy does is, by placing so much emphasis on a very narrow interpretation of sexuality, they cut many people off from a religious life, because most people who are in the modern world and live as moderns cannot go along with the Church’s position on sexuality. Therefore, what the Church does is say: if you don’t agree with us on this one small issue, you must leave. Most people do. It seems to me that both the Church and those people lose a lot. I’m not going to let them do that to me. (Conversations 40–41)

The church’s teachings on sexuality are “one small issue,” nothing close to “the whole of a religious life,” but they are also, for “most people who are in the modern world,” impossible to affirm. It follows that remaining Catholic even when one identifies as “modern” in this way requires a redefinition of Catholic identity, a distinction between the “institutional church” and the church proper that, Gordon suggests, is thinkable only after Vatican II. In a 1987 interview, she clarifies: “I come in and go out of the institutional church as I have more or less patience for it. . . . It’s not a great cost
to me to be in or out of the church” (*Conversations* 42). Secure in her knowledge of the “richness and truth” of Catholicism—a formulation that suggests the priority of the aesthetic over the ontological—the “institution’s” teachings become greater or lesser inconveniences, not provocations that one must address.

On the other hand, if Vatican II has made such flexibility conceivable, it has also trashed the aesthetic heritage of the Catholic Church—what Gordon calls, in the same interview, “a kind of solemnity in the sense of formal beauty—the beauty of the prayers, the beauty of the music.” Current Catholic ritual, she maintains, is, “at best . . . nondescript. Sometimes it’s actively ugly. . . . It’s really a grief to hear ugly music, to be in ugly buildings, to hear ugly or stupid or hackneyed language. It hurts me.” Unfortunately, however, Gordon finds many Catholics who appreciate and wish to revive the older rituals to be “politically abhorrent” (*Conversations* 43), and this mismatch among politics, sexuality, and aesthetics was evident to her even as a college student, as she recounts in her memoir *Seeing Through Places*:

The archdiocese was presided over by Cardinal Spellman, a great supporter of Vietnam. If I went into a church, everyone would know I was having sex, and would order me to stop, and I knew I wouldn’t because I liked it too much. I understood that there were priests who opposed the war, but they were saying folk masses, and I couldn’t stand singing about transubstantiation to the tune of Peter, Paul and Mary songs, and I suspected they loved themselves too much for consecrating whole wheat bread instead of Hosts, and that, despite the antiwar protest and the whole wheat bread, they would still be telling me to stop having sex. I needed formality, but formality was in the hands of men who were shouting about communism and free love, just as the country was in the hands of men who were lying about burning the flesh of children. (244–45)

Gordon’s desire not just for purely subjective aesthetic delights but for “formality” suggests that despite the influence of second-wave feminism on her politics, she does not subscribe to either of the aesthetic stances most often associated with this feminism—the wholesale debunking of the aesthetic as a patriarchal ideology on the one hand or the embrace of a fluid and avowedly “feminine” aesthetic on the other.4 Her tastes are traditional,
even in the visual arts, where her admiration for painters such as Pierre Bonnard complicates any attempt to align her with feminist critiques of the male gaze. Yet her delight in a formal aesthetic is not presented merely as preference—for Gordon it is objectively better, as measured by competent authorities (which is to say, artists themselves) who know whereof they speak. Gordon proposes, in short, the sovereignty of art within its own realm and denies its necessary connection to ethical, religious, or political stances of any kind. The implication is that while feminism may be essential to Gordon’s own art, it would be inappropriate to use feminist (or indeed, any other ethically charged) criteria to critique non- or antifeminist art qua art. Gordon’s own artist-protagonists, such as Monica Szabo from Spending, are consistent in separating aesthetic judgments from politics in this way.

In Cathedrals of Bone: The Role of the Body in Contemporary Catholic Literature, John Waldmeir has argued that for a number of post–Vatican II Catholic writers, including Gordon, “the body in all its physical specificity—desire and pain, aroma and sweat—becomes . . . a source for mediating God’s presence to the world [and] takes shape as a sacramental reality” (7). Such an approach has the merit of proposing a mediating term—“the body”—at the juncture of Gordon’s primary interests: religion, aesthetics, and sex. Aesthetics, as Terry Eagleton notes, “is born as a discourse of the body” (Ideology 13), and the sensory nature of artistic production and perception is irreducibly corporeal. Liturgy, too, is bodily in nature: the congregating of worshippers at Mass; the physical movements of standing, kneeling, sitting, and approaching the altar; and, above all, the Eucharist, in which bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ and are consumed by faithful who themselves constitute the Body of Christ. Vatican II, Waldmeir suggests, placed a corrective emphasis on the reality of the body as a vehicle for sacramental grace, in contradistinction to an earlier

5. On Gordon’s admiration for Bonnard and his famous portraits of bathing women, see Circling My Mother (3–16).

6. To characterize Gordon’s position as affirming the sovereignty of art in its own realm is not, necessarily, to make of the aesthetic a religion. As she puts it in “Getting Here from There”: “Well, how did I get from there to here? An easy answer would be that I substituted art for faith, so that I found my new priesthood. That would be an easy answer, but it’s not true. I don’t believe in the religion of art, although I do believe in the vocation of the artist—altogether a more slogging enterprise. I don’t believe that the aesthetic and the religious are one. . . . Great art need have nothing in it of the ethical, although the greatness of some great literature is enhanced by ethical components. But some is not” (173). As I hope to show, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious may not be “one,” but Gordon’s work reveals them to be far more mutually implicated than this summary definition would suggest.
“anthropology that privileges the cognitive domain of human experience, specifically, human rationality” (12).

What is the significance of this emphasis on the body for Gordon’s work? One can agree with Waldmeir that human life, art, and religion, are necessarily embodied, and yet not be convinced that constant, loving attention to this fact is any more successful at resolving the problem of mind-body dualism, or any less selective in its investments, than an approach that overinvests in the cognitive.7 Waldmeir’s readings of texts draw attention to moments when bodies are foregrounded, as if the very act of dwelling upon the corporeal were a priori an outpouring of grace, irrespective of what the body in question does or thinks. His method has affinities with Bakhtin’s celebration of the grotesque, in that human equality is affirmed in bodily lowliness. Moreover, it resonates with Gordon’s own preoccupation with bodies—her narrators frequently scrutinize bodies, in an effort to grasp not just their aesthetic features but also their phenomenology and agency. Yet what rings false in Waldmeir’s frame when applied to Gordon is its blanket dismissal of hierarchy and its concomitant urging not just to accept human limitation and failure, but to celebrate it—two impulses that I identify in Gordon’s nonfiction but not in her fiction. As a committed liberal, Gordon is programmatically hostile to hierarchy in political terms, yet sexually and aesthetically, she affirms it: some bodies, some works of art, and some liturgical practices are more beautiful than others, and to say otherwise is to lie. Insofar as “the body”—itself an abstraction from the multitude of actually existing human bodies—lives and acts in the political, the sexual, and the aesthetic realms, it is no less entangled with hierarchy and with the necessity of hierarchical judgments than “the mind.” (Indeed, it may be that it is impossible to escape the problem of dualism, that the overemphasis on one of these terms leads inevitably to an overemphasis on the other, and that one still, perhaps as a result of one’s fallenness, lack a vocabulary for speaking of the whole human person in a coherent and meaningful way.)8

7. Much of Waldmeir’s argument is rhetorically deployed against the notion of hierarchy wherever it rears its head, but his own preferences reinscribe hierarchies of their own: the Church Fathers and Renaissance Humanism, not the wasteland between the Council of Trent and Vatican II; in the New Testament, the letters to the Romans and Corinthians but not those to the Ephesians and Colossians; the John Paul II who wrote Fides et Ratio, not the one who wrote Theology of the Body (5, 11–13). The problem is not that Waldmeir cannot make his argument—of course he can—but that he writes as if making this argument precludes hierarchical judgments or remains faithful to the totality of Christian thinking any more than do the arguments of those whom he opposes.

8. This is why, for instance, Gordon is only half correct when she defines abstraction as “the error that results from refusing to admit that one has a body and is an inhabitant of the physical world,” and “[d]ualism, its first cousin” as that which “admits that there is
Beginning with the fact of such entanglement and with her own commitments to a particular sexual politics on the one hand and to a formalist aesthetic on the other, Gordon’s novels ask the questions that such divergent commitments compel: how does one recognize the legitimacy and interaction of different kinds of moral, religious, and aesthetic authority? How does one weigh their various claims against each other? Of what does readers’ authority consist, and what justification beyond desire does it require, if any? Why is hierarchy essential to aesthetic judgments but inadmissible in matters of politics or sex? Catholicism cuts across all of these questions in unpredictable ways. The church claims for itself binding and ultimately infallible authority in the realm of faith and morality, so Gordon’s dissent from its teachings becomes rhetorically figured as a blow for freedom.9 (Hence her assertion that as a student she would not stop having sex because she “liked it too much”—no argument, she implies, could or should hold sway against her own desires here, even if there might be reasonable points to make about the advantages of sexual abstinence.) Yet when one turns to strictly aesthetic matters, the church professes no competence to judge, and there is no necessary relationship between the moral and theological claims that the church propounds and the media through which artists might engage them—certainly no single approved style or set

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9. “Infallible” here does not refer solely to statements of the Pope spoken ex cathedra, which carry the explicit mark of infallibility. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Christ endowed the Church’s shepherds with the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals. . . . The infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter’s successor, they exercise the supreme Magisterium, above all in an Ecumenical Council” (256). But even teachings not expressly marked as “infallible” are nevertheless binding: “Divine assistance is also given to the successors of the apostles, teaching in communion with the successor of Peter, and, in a particular way, to the bishop of Rome, pastor of the whole Church, when, without arriving at an infallible definition and without pronouncing in a ‘definitive manner,’ they propose in the exercise of the ordinary Magisterium a teaching that leads to a better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals. To this ordinary teaching the faithful ‘are to adhere to it [sic] with religious assent’” (256–57). The consistent teachings of the Church on sexuality, whether stated in a “definitive manner” or not, fall under this “ordinary Magisterium,” so that challenging them is an act of dissent.
of techniques. Catholicism has inspired great art and kitsch, and if today the kitsch predominates, this may be because modern artists find intolerable the subordination of their egos to the service of God that earlier religious artists freely acknowledged—which, arguably, leaves a freer field for the always numerous purveyors of kitsch (“Getting Here” 172). Gordon often seems to endorse Milan Kundera’s famous claim that “[t]he brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch” (251)—and if so, she wants no part of it.

In practice, it is not so easy to distinguish aesthetic from ethical values, and Gordon is honest enough to grant that the poor and the afflicted are frequently ugly, spiteful, unintelligent, and distinctly unlovable. Such admissions, however, pose a problem for avowed leftists, and especially for those influenced by the Christian injunctions to love the poor and to care for the needy, whether this love is appreciated or not. Like Muriel Spark, Gordon gestures toward the superior aesthetic pleasures of Catholicism while casting a jaundiced eye upon the mass of Catholics oblivious to them. Yet there is little of Spark’s cold whimsicality or assured snobbery in Gordon’s fictive world: aesthetic pleasures are always more sensual than intellectual, and there is a note of defiant indulgence in their depiction, as if Gordon’s characters assert that they deserve such pleasure, as if their superior taste ensures greater freedom from conventional moralism. It is difficult not to conclude that the aesthetic is Gordon’s supreme value, despite her disavowal of the “religion of art,” and that political and religious judgments are, ultimately, aesthetic as well: Catholicism thus deserves credit for enabling Chartres Cathedral or the music of Palestrina but blame for preventing people from pursuing sexual delights outside of a fairly restricted context. It deserves credit for making notions of human equality an ideal toward which to strive but blame for trying to realize these ideals primarily through charity—which necessitates contact with the unappealing, and which can be redeemed only if it takes on an aesthetic of self-renunciation that few can make work convincingly. As Isabel Moore puts it in *Final Payments*, “Charity is tedious, and sacrifice is not, as Christ deceived us into thinking, anything so dramatic as a crucifixion. Most of the time it is profoundly boring” (46).

Indeed, despite Gordon’s hostility toward Updike and often her shrewd observations about his unacknowledged assumptions, the narcissism of her characters often resembles the pervading attitude of his work: her protagonists, no less than Updike’s, resonate with Tocqueville’s observation that democratic people are preoccupied with themselves and bestow value on objects only insofar as the objects flatter their self-images or prove forceful enough to tear people away from themselves. Broadly speaking, aesthetic
commitment and sensitivity serve the same role as Christian orthodoxy in much of Updike’s work—they make up for a multitude of sins, including selfishness, contempt toward the dull and unsexy, and the tendency to instrumentalize human relationships. Moreover, if Updike associates orthodoxy with good fortune and primordial innocence of being an American, Gordon associates her own aesthetics with the good fortune of being a Catholic woman privileged enough to live after feminism and Vatican II.

In a harsh critique of Gordon’s early work, Carol Iannone argues that her novels “are about the monumental self-centeredness released by the collapse of orthodoxy, the agitated emptiness that finds an expression in movements like feminism.” They resemble “those books and articles on ‘having it all’ that are written for women, with their advice on cramming in as much as possible, keeping track of one’s needs, making sure they’re satisfied, the whole informed by a lurking fear that nothing will really suffice” (66). Such an account is probably overstated, and Ross Labrie is no doubt correct that more nuanced judgments of Gordon’s work will come in the future, after its “artistic merits . . . become separated from her role as a feminist ideologue” (265). Yet the linking of Gordon’s novels to a posture of self-centeredness is appropriate, even if the connections between this self-centeredness and feminism are contingent rather than necessary. If Updike’s work suggests that a commitment to Christian orthodoxy, however strained, may in practice coexist alongside a monstrous selfishness, Gordon’s suggests that orthodoxy’s value lies precisely in its aesthetic potential, which can also facilitate selfishness. Both writers’ work, accordingly, is problematic yet also revealing of the dilemmas that even appeals to or uses of orthodoxy must confront in the contemporary world.

III. The Daughter, the Father, the Body:

*Final Payments*

Gordon’s first novel, *Final Payments*, derives much of its power from the way its working-class American Catholic world is at once familiar and unbelievably distant—a place of constriction and horror from which one escapes, but which, one must admit, continues to mark one’s life, in many ways for the better. Isabel Moore, the protagonist, introduces herself in this way:

I gave up my life for [my father]; only if you understand my father will you understand that I make that statement not with self-pity but with extreme pride. He had a stroke when I was nineteen; I nursed him until
he died eleven years later. This strikes everyone in our decade as unusual, barbarous, cruel. To me, it was not only inevitable but natural. The Church exists and has endured for this, not only to preserve itself but to keep certain scenes intact: My father and me living by ourselves in a one-family house in Queens. My decision at nineteen to care for my father in his illness. We were rare in our situation but not unique. It could happen again.

(4)

If “keep[ing] certain scenes intact,” rather than saving souls, is the raison d’être of the Church, then the Church must be judged on the desirability of these scenes. Are they in fact merely “barbarous” and “cruel”? Isabel’s insistence that she feels pride rather than self-pity for her actions suggests that choosing a figurative martyrdom provides aesthetic bliss and confirms one’s superiority. The equivocal claim that “it could happen again,” no doubt shocking to those who, like Isabel’s future lover Hugh Slade, consider her background “as strange . . . as if [she’d] been brought up in the Fiji Islands” (160), emphasizes that such situations do not persist unless people derive some benefit from them, and such conditions could conceivably return. In this way Gordon proves less susceptible to the teleological grandiosity of a critic such as Gandolfo—she does not believe progress to be irreversible, nor does she see the past merely as something to be overcome.

Even though Isabel calls her case “rare but not unique,” she locates its rarity less in the actual care for her father than in the extraordinary nature of her relationship with him. A devout Catholic intellectual who “loved the sense of his own orthodoxy, of holding out for the purest and the finest and the most refined sense of truth against the slick hucksters who promised happiness on earth and the supremacy of human reason” (4), David Moore rejects the Enlightenment and all its works, but he nourishes his daughter’s aesthetic sense and encourages her intellectual aspirations: “He always said he was raising a Theresa of Avila, not a Thérèse of Lisieux: someone who would found orders and insult recalcitrant bishops, not someone who would submit to having dirty water thrown on her by her sisters in Christ and die a perfect death at twenty-four” (28). Above all, however, he expresses his love for her with shocking, even blasphemous, honesty: “My father looked had once looked at me and said, ‘I love you more than I love God. I love you more than God loves you’” (251).

At the heart of Isabel’s relationship with her father, then, is the association of Catholic orthodoxy with beauty and intellectual accomplishment—an association unusual in the working-class, largely Irish American world that she inhabits—and a tendency to measure the genuineness of love by
one’s capacity for its betrayal. David’s love for his daughter is proven precisely because it endangers his soul. The six-year old Isabel who hears his declaration knows the statement to be sinful on its face, because the claim that his love exceeds God’s cannot be true—yet Isabel suggests that this sin in no way calls into question his love for God. It seems retrospectively fitting that Isabel elects to care for her father only after she has betrayed him, by sleeping with his favorite student and, she believes, thereby causing the stroke that incapacitates him: her betrayal proves the occasion for demonstrating the depth of her own love. In this relationship, then, Gordon manages to compress many of her characteristic preoccupations—the capacity of Catholicism to nourish beauty and (within limits) independence of thought, the privileged status of sexual desire, and the attractions and possible dangers of martyrdom. If Isabel remains proud of what she has done, even after she has changed radically, she does so not out of any commitment to the Church or to its way of life, but because her father, bestowing such astonishing love on her, deserves comparable love in return, the exercise of which allows even greater opportunities for self-satisfaction.

Gordon has acknowledged that Isabel’s father is largely modeled upon her own, David Israel Gordon: a convert from Judaism, a self-taught Catholic intellectual and polemicist, an admirer of both Franco and Joseph McCarthy, and, the evidence of his published texts suggests, an anti-Semite. Suggesting in her memoir The Shadow Man (1996) that she never presented him outright as a fictional character because “the details of his life, presented as fiction, would be too bizarre to be believed” (xiv), Gordon presents him as a tissue of contradictions: a brilliant and sincerely religious man who was also a fraud (“[h]is ‘work’ was a series of schemes to bankroll him and his magazines” [xv]), a convinced antifeminist who nonetheless envisioned his daughter as a great intellectual, an insecure man whose own writing was hopelessly marred by name-dropping, a liar who concealed from his family the real place of his birth (Lithuania, not Ohio) and the fact that before his conversion he had edited a “girlie” magazine called Hot Dog. The Shadow Man is, simultaneously, an indictment of her father and a desire to understand him and in doing so, perhaps, to exculpate him. Hence its peculiar tone, which veers sharply from self-aggrandizing righteousness to an almost abject sense that her beloved has been taken from her. At one point she sententiously declares, “[m]y silence about his part in the evil [of

10. Here is the real-life counterpart of David Moore’s declaration of love to his daughter, as Gordon reports it in The Shadow Man: “‘I love you more than God,’ he once told me. This was serious; he was a religious man. I didn’t know, and still don’t, if he meant he loved me more than he loved God or more than God loved me. It almost doesn’t matter. It was a serious thing to say and it scared me. Whichever he meant, he was right” (xviii).
the Holocaust] would be a sin. Against the commandment ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness’” (94); at another point, she lines up photographs of Bernard Berenson, H. L. Mencken, Ezra Pound, and Henry Roth, “looking for the face that stalked my father” (182), and accuses them of “murder[ing] the father I could have loved without stain” (185).

The intense particularity of this love, threatened by the “stain” of his political convictions, becomes, in Final Payments, the background against which Isabel’s confused negotiation of the post–Vatican II world must be evaluated. Isabel insists both on the philosophical rightness of her devotion to her father—the day on which she learns of his stroke is the day “[she] felt most purely alive,” because “[c]ertainty was mine, and purity; I was encased in meaning like crystal” (6)—and on justifying this rightness in terms of bodily connection: “[W]e were connected by the flesh, so if anyone should minister to the decay of my father’s, it should be I” (7). Waldmeir argues that the novel’s central thematic concern is the home, the place where one lives and where one’s body has its appropriate work, and that Isabel’s loss of her father is simultaneously a loss of home and a loss of identity for her body. Accordingly, this “sense of homelessness leads Isabel to treat her own body as though it were an object, something wandering and foreign to the rest of her” (50). Isabel is free now, as she was not when she cared for her father, to equip herself with an IUD and to pursue affairs with two married men, but it is true that in all of these cases, the text emphasizes her detachment from her body. The first affair, with the husband of a high-school friend, is unsatisfying because it is based only on lust (and because he will not leave her alone after she loses interest in him). The second affair with Hugh Slade, however, is described as falling in love, and the language Isabel uses recalls her relationship with her father: “I was saying over and over, ‘I am the beloved; the beloved is mine.’ And I thought of the depths of selfishness in those words” (162). Even when she exposes her breasts as a kindness to the elderly Mr. Spenser (one of her cases in her new job as a social worker), because he has not had sexual intercourse in eight years, she distances herself from the act: “I had given him what he wanted and neither of us had suffered loss. . . . I had not believed it possible: giving and getting, as if no one had to suffer, as if it were possible not to feel cheated in the act of giving” (200). Even if no one has been “cheated,” the language of economic exchange here testifies to the use of the body, and hence to one’s alienation from it.

But if Isabel suffers alienation both from home and body in the wake of her father’s death, she also expresses unalloyed revulsion against the body (and person) of Margaret Casey, the woman who had worked as her father’s housekeeper and who had loved him:
You can imagine how unbearable the brown patches on her skin—they were not moles but large, irregular in shape, like the beginning of a cancer—were to a child, or even worse, to an adolescent. I wondered how she managed to keep the house so tidy and yet look so inevitably germ-ridden herself. All her clothes seemed damp, as if her body were giving off a tropical discharge. I believed it to be contagious, although I could neither isolate nor identify it. Her feet were flat as fish, except where the bunions developed like small crops of winter onions. The sound of her slopping around the house in her slippers is the sound of my nightmares. (28)

Margaret has always distrusted Isabel, regarding her as a spoiled child and taking every opportunity to chide her for her sinfulness and ingratitude. Isabel remains proud of the fact that at thirteen, she managed to drive Margaret away by provoking her into declaring her love for her father—whereupon he fled in disgust. Since then, Margaret has lived in poverty, working in a box factory in a small town in upstate New York. When Isabel is confronted by Hugh’s wife, she feels such an extremity of guilt that she elects to go live with Margaret, explaining to Hugh, “If we can love the people we think are most unlovable, if we can get out of this ring of accident, of attraction, then it’s a pure act, love; then we mean something, we stand for something” (243). Here Isabel wishes to surpass the martyrdom of caring for her father, doing so without the self-interest of personal love or the unshakable responsibility implied by bodily connection. As she lives with Margaret, her detachment from her body becomes contempt toward it: not only does she renounce sex, she also allows herself to become overweight, subjects herself to anachronistic hairstyling à la Annette Funicello, and cultivates self-disgust as a mortification that would further validate her disinterested charity. Indeed, Gordon emphasizes the penitential nature of Isabel’s stay with Margaret by making it coincide with Lent. Her actual “final payment” to Margaret—a check for twenty thousand dollars—is delivered on Good Friday, and immediately afterward, Isabel is spirited away by her closest friends.

The turning point of the novel occurs when Isabel shouts “The poor you have always with you” in response to Margaret’s repeated proclamation of her poverty:

It is one of the marvels of a Catholic education that the impulse of a few words can bring whole narratives to light with an immediacy and a clarity that are utterly absorbing. “The poor you have always with you.” I knew where Christ had said that: at the house of Martha and Mary. Mary had opened a jar of ointment over Christ’s feet. . . . Judas had rebuked her; he
had said that the ointment ought to be sold for the poor. But, St. John had
noted, Judas had said that only because he kept the purse and the thief.
And Christ had said to Judas, Mary at his feet, her hair spread out around
him, “The poor you have always with you: but me you have not always.”

And until that moment . . . it was a passage I had not under-
stood. . . . What Christ was saying, what he meant, was that the plea-
sures of that hair, that ointment, must be taken. Because the accidents of
death would deprive us soon enough. We must not deprive ourselves, our
loved ones, of the luxury of our extravagant affections. We must not try to
second-guess death by refusing to love the ones we loved in favor of the
anonymous poor. (288–89)

Because Isabel cannot love Margaret for who she is, the best that she can do
is to provide for her, just as governments, motivated not by charity but by
an impersonal mandate, distribute money: “Governments gave money and
did not ask for love. Money was beautiful; if you could give money and
did not want love in return, you could change lives without giving up your
life” (295).

How are readers to understand this ending? Having “given up her life”
for Margaret, Isabel wants it back, but because she wants to resume the
relationship with Hugh, she must also make herself beautiful again, and
doing so involves a further objectification of her body: “The body changed,
went on changing, and could be changed. What I had done to myself was
not final. It would take time, but I believed, with the unlikely faith of an
early Christian, that I could make things happen to my body that would
allow [Hugh] to love it again” (291). For Waldmeir, Isabel’s relationship
with Hugh is problematic not because it is adulterous but because “Isa-
bel’s persistent sense of self-detachment contrasts so sharply with Hugh’s
confidence” (51). Isabel is wounded, for instance, when Hugh confronts
Isabel with a moldy coffee mug in her apartment and asks, “How could
I even contemplate living with someone who could live in such filth?”
(203). Waldmeir implies that the relationship might have a future if Isabel
could learn to inhabit her body and home—moldy mugs and all—without
being so easily reduced to shame. Yet because Waldmeir follows Gandolfo
in regarding novelistic closure as a “vestige of the preconciliar paradigm”
(Gandolfo 207), he also rejects the possibility that Isabel might find love
with Hugh on programmatic grounds. Indeed, he states simply that “their
relationship fails” (51), ignoring Hugh’s desire to get Isabel back and her
own desire to change for him—and criticizes Gordon for providing “the
illusion of closure” (55) in Isabel’s escape from Margaret.

If Waldmeir’s rejection of closure resembles Walker Percy’s own pref-
ereence for open-ended endings and conviction that even conversion does
not eliminate the messiness of life, he is nonetheless vague about what is at stake in this rejection. How does closure, for instance, denigrate “the body”? Isabel does continue to think of her body instrumentally, but she also acknowledges that it changes and might change again; she also states that the only real closure is death, the “accident” that would deprive one of one’s extravagant pleasures and commitments. She also affirms the particularity of her body’s desires—not the impersonal charity extended to Margaret, but the irreplaceable bonds between her and her father, between her and Hugh. I suspect that Waldmeir finds the end unsatisfying less because of its closure and more because it continues to affirm hierarchy, even—perhaps especially—where bodies are concerned. Isabel and Hugh’s bodies as bodies, instead of as metaphors deployed against the habit of abstraction, simply matter more than Margaret’s, and nothing can change this. In Final Payments, an ugly body reliably mirrors a petty, self-righteous, and grasping mind; a beautiful body, whether it embraces its loves or shrinks from its antipathies, can do no wrong.

One must acknowledge Gordon’s admirable honesty in Final Payments. Margaret is credible as a character, and her presence effectively demonstrates that if one chooses to love selflessly, one must not expect to be loved in return, just as Christ’s sacrifice was rewarded not just with his resurrection, but also, as Isabel points out, with “[y]ears of atrocities, monstrous ingratitude: who could make up to God for the stupidity, the selfishness of his people?” (293). Isabel’s relationship with Hugh is credible precisely to the extent that it celebrates the egoism of the lovers and argues that such egoism transcends merely moral concerns. Gordon’s error, from a Christian standpoint, is that God’s love for his people is never a matter of mere calculation, an attempt to secure martyrdom on behalf of “anonymous poor.” Nor is love for God properly understood as something equally anonymous and bloodless. Though it can be misdirected and tainted with selfishness, human desire points toward love of God, and God’s love is an individual love, demonstrated not by a painless act of divine will but through the incarnation and death of Jesus. Peter Augustine Lawler is closer to the truth when he writes (apropos of Alexandre Kojève and Francis Fukuyama) that Christians “believe in the empirically unverifiable existence of a God who sees clearly into men’s hearts and judges them according to their intentions. Each Christian believes that he or she is recognized by God as unique, free, and infinitely valuable” (33).

11. A father’s love for his daughter should intimate God’s love, but by its very nature, it cannot transcend it. Isabel is correct to perceive in a love that claims to transcend it “depths of

11. Incidentally, Marilynne Robinson’s John Ames, the narrator of Gilead, makes a similar point, invoking Augustine’s authority for the claim: “[T]he Lord loves each of us as an only child, and that has to be true” (245–46).
selfishness” (162). She is a human being of her time, and of ours. Her representative status is most clearly signaled by her willingness, in a time when spirituality rather than outright atheism is a dominant ethos, to appropriate the Christian gospel for selfish purposes instead of arguing directly against it.

IV. Nuancing Narcissism: 
*The Company of Women, Spending, Pearl, and “The Deacon”*

*Final Payments* is the keynote of Gordon’s career. Her subsequent novels complicate and deepen its commitments to the aesthetic and to the primacy of the self, registering occasional doubts about these commitments but not departing significantly from them. *The Company of Women*, Gordon’s best novel, surrounds its protagonist, Felicitas Taylor, with an ensemble cast that consists of Felicitas’s mother Charlotte; her circle of friends, all of whom she met while attending religious retreats for working women; Father Cyprian, a “conservative” and contentious priest, usually at odds with his superiors, who led these retreats; and Robert Cavendish, Felicitas’s professor at Barnard College, who seduces her and gets her pregnant. As in *Final Payments*, much of the novel’s skill comes from the rendering of a detailed world that has, after Vatican II, suddenly vanished. Felicitas herself shares much in common with Isabel Moore: A beloved, intellectually gifted child who is held up by Father Cyprian as “our only hope” (7) in degraded modernity, she has an even keener conviction than Isabel of her self-worth: “‘Domine, non sum dignus.’ She said the prayer but did not mean it. She believed she was worthy. Her soul she saw as glass filled with sky or water, as beautiful, as light, as silvery and as important” (6). Though she suffers from the doubts and confusions of adolescence, she never abandons this posture of certainty—loathing herself when she falls short of her ideals, professing that “she wouldn’t lie to make people happy” (72), and acknowledging only as an adult that the main reason she wants to marry her (intellectually inferior) lover Leo is that she “want[s] to be more human” (260).

The superiority of *The Company of Women* lies in its wider canvas, its revelation that all of its characters have crosses to bear and struggle against their private narcissisms. By following two sections set in 1963 and 1969–70 and narrated in third person with a section set in 1977 in which the major characters narrate in first person, Gordon suggests that however much readers may need to understand the historical moment of the novel and see its characters as shaped by larger social forces, their responses to events
and the retrospective significance that they attribute to them are always irreducibly personal. Waldmeir’s claim that the novel’s “‘open-ended’ narrative structure” (56) marks an advance over Final Payments also seems justified: the last word is given to Felicitas’s daughter, Linda, and its simple affirmation—“We are not dying” (291)—reminds the reader that, until death, anything remains possible. Father Cyprian and the circle of women have tried to be faithful Catholics, and their struggles against a variety of mundane but very real trials—the insane husband who has been committed but whose insanity does not render his marriage invalid (33), the younger generation of priests who dress inappropriately and “let souls under [their] care risk eternal damnation to swim with Methodists, eat hot dogs with Baptists” (51), even the fact that Shakespeare and Jane Austen can be more enthralling than Dante despite their purported lack of “a deeply spiritual vision” (74)—are genuinely moving, even when Gordon’s narrator makes her own ironic stance toward the commitments that fuel these struggles clear.

Ultimately, however, Felicitas remains the moral ideal of the novel, and, like Isabel Moore, her superiority is indicated both by her willingness to draw upon the best of the Catholicism that she has grown up with and her determination to reject it when it inconveniences her or offends against her reason. As a girl, she idolized Father Cyprian; as an adult, she continues to “revere him for his labor, for his passionate, excluding love, for the dignity of his priestly calling . . . the habit of his grand, impossible life” (264). She even values the fact that he “trained me too well, trained me against the sentimental, the susceptibility of the heart,” despite its consequences: “I will not accept the blandishments of religious life; I will not look to God for comfort, or for succor, or for sweetness. God will have to meet me on the high ground of reason, and there He’s a poor contender” (264). Yet she perceives Father Cyprian to be intellectually deficient: “He has three ideas: the authority of the Church, the corruption induced by Original Sin and the wickedness of large-scale government. All the rest is instinct and effusion” (264). It is arguable, however, that both Felicitas and Father Cyprian have been wrong here. Cyprian’s claim that “reason is a whore . . . [who] goes with anyone” (40) echoes Martin Luther rather than Thomas Aquinas and overlooks the real possibility that the modern world may have too little reason in it, not too much. Conversely, Felicitas’s belief that there can be nothing reasonable in one’s religious life, that it is primarily a matter of “instinct and effusion,” partakes of an admirable zeal against sentimentality and kitsch but also defines itself too narrowly, holding that the face of God would be worth something only if it could be perceived, as Kant might put it, “free from all necessity” (265). Even as she affirms Felicitas’s stance
more reliably than the positions of her other characters, Gordon honestly expresses doubt about whether her vision will prevail by turning at the end toward Linda, the representative of the future. Linda is an appealing blend of the old and the new: on the one hand, she knows, unlike her classmates, “four Greek words, ten Latin words, the names of angels” (290); on the other, she persuades Cyprian to pray for the ordination of women (288). It is tempting, if one subscribes to a teleology of succeeding paradigms, to see in this blending a synthesis that will reveal the new paradigm. But the novel’s last words suggest otherwise: as long as Linda isn’t “dying,” she can come to any possible relation with God and with the Church. Nothing is inevitable.

Indeed, as Vatican II has receded in time, Gordon’s novels have acknowledged—albeit with varying degrees of equanimity—that younger Catholics may feel little need to define themselves in relation to the Council, and even that there may be something inaccurate about the sense of world-historical rupture that Catholics of Gordon’s generation perceived in it. Spending: A Utopian Divertimento (1996) has relatively little to say about Catholicism, and its primary concern—the trials, opportunities, and significance of the woman artist—more explicitly subordinates religion to aesthetics than Gordon’s early work does. At one point, Monica Szabo, the painter who narrates the novel, remembers the devotional self-forgetfulness of Sister Imelda, a nun who taught her in the first grade, and emphasizes both the differences and the similarities between her vocation and Sister Imelda’s: “The object of my attention isn’t what Sister Imelda’s was. I tried to make it, for a while, the same as hers: God. It didn’t work. The object of my attention is the visible world. Whenever I feel I’m working the right way, I know it has something to do with that self-forgetfulness and attention I saw when I looked at Sister Imelda in the beam of blue light.” Her own series of paintings, depictions of the Deposition of Christ meant to suggest postcoital exhaustion, is described as “[t]he coming together of art and faith in the hands of a woman—me—whose life was no longer shaped by belief. The light presence, not oppressive, of a former impression, something traced, but lightly, barely visible” (132). What religion and art have in common is an aesthetic experience of self-forgetfulness, not content or doctrine, and the experience itself is what matters most. Moreover, artists themselves, not spectators, are the only ones who can properly judge the experience and the work that it produces. As Monica puts it, “I really envy brain surgeons. People aren’t always coming up to them . . . and saying, ‘You know I do a little brain surgery myself. Maybe you could come over . . . and look at a brain I just operated on’” (14).

It follows that whatever restricts this experience or calls into question the authority of artists is to be deplored—financial constraints, prohibitions
against certain subject matters, received ideas about the gender of artists. *Spending* is “utopian” because it asks what it might be like for a woman painter in the late twentieth century to enjoy the same advantages as the greatest painters of the past. Unlike feminist critics who would reject their art as tainted by sexism, Monica declares her admiration for their work: “There was nothing I was making fun of, no fault, either in execution or in interpretation, I was trying to show up. There was only the one thing that, as a woman artist, I was occasionally stunned to remember: for most of history, no woman was allowed to do what they did” (88). Monica gets the opportunity to “do what they did” when B., an immensely wealthy futures trader, stands up at a talk that Monica gives in Provincetown and declares his willingness to be her muse. He provides her with money for a new apartment, trips to Italy, luxurious meals, and lots of sex; he even agrees to serve as a nude model for her work. Monica embraces the arrangement despite periodic doubts about its implications, and the novel is indeed thought-provoking about the relationship between money and art and its ethical consequences.

Monica’s greatest enemy, however, is a former schoolmate, Alice Marie Cusalito, the representative of “the Catholic Defense League” (186), who leads a protest against the exhibition of Monica’s paintings of Jesus, arguing that they are blasphemous and offensive. Monica argues in response that people like Alice are stupid, for they disregard “the history of art and the history of thought,” “reinforcing [the world’s] prejudices that Catholics are a bunch of ill-educated, bigoted yahoos.” They believe that “[t]he truth is simple,” whereas “[w]hat I believe in won’t fit into a sound bite” (203). Alice herself is, predictably, ugly, with a “puddingy face” and “bad hair” (181)—indeed, when the Catholic Defense League’s efforts lead to a debate on the Charlie Rose show, Alice is replaced by “one of those exceptionally well-groomed right-wingers” (196)—and her deepest motive is probably a long-nursed desire for revenge: “[S]he didn’t even get nominated for senior class president at St. Augusta’s High School and I won the election” (194). When Monica tries to come to “a calm understanding of what they were doing,” she imagines that “what was driving [them] crazy was that I was taking images that they thought of as theirs and using them in a way that they didn’t like”—a formulation that concedes, at least provisionally, some validity to the criticism of spectators. Even so, “I didn’t want to come to a calm understanding of what they were doing. I wanted to pound their heads on the pavement” (188). The only way, Monica tells Theresa, to combat them in the public sphere is “to get across” that “they’re against fucking” (199). The autonomy of the artist, it would seem, is also the autonomy of the man or woman pursuing sexual satisfaction, and no one, least of all the Church, has the right to infringe upon it.
What is most interesting about Spending, however, is the novel’s reluctant suggestion that this argument about art and blasphemy, though it might (in Charlie Rose’s words) make for “good television” (204), is essentially a battle within Gordon’s generation, able to be plausibly recast as a high-school feud. Monica’s daughter Rachel, indeed, seems not only unconcerned with the debate but disapproving of her mother’s arrangements with B.—she goes so far as to suggest that her mother is lying to herself, that the arrangement amounts to prostitution, even if the money involved is ostensibly taken for “painting” rather than “fucking” (83). When her other daughter, Sara, decides to marry despite not being pregnant and to “live in the country and teach music to preschool children” while her husband “direct[s] a nature study center in Montana,” Monica is appalled because “[i]t’s so unadventurous” (261). While neither daughter speaks about Christianity—and while Sara even reassures her mother, “It’s not that I’m not a feminist” (264)—the implication is that a whole array of matters related to art, religion, and the politics of gender may no longer carry the heavy symbolic baggage that Gordon has perceived in it.

In Pearl (2005), Gordon takes the theme of daughters unwilling to fight their mother’s battles even further. Maria Meyers, a feisty, middle-aged woman of devout Catholic background who broke with her father and joined the political underground in the 1960s, has always been vaguely disappointed by her daughter, Pearl, who knows “that some things were hopeless,” that “some things no one could do anything about” (82). When Pearl, studying the Irish language in Dublin, becomes emotionally involved with partisans of the Irish Republican Army, she decides to starve herself to death because she believes that she has been responsible for a death and because she believes that her death will bear witness to the rightness of the Good Friday peace agreement of 1998. As in Final Payments, belief in one’s own responsibility for a loved one’s catastrophe leads to an embrace of martyrdom, which is simultaneously self-destructive and full of unsuspected potential for narcissism. Maria, having passed beyond the belief in martyrdom and the ideal of purity that it reflects, was perhaps “too hopeful about the ability of the human species to absorb quick change” (128), finds Pearl’s actions incomprehensible; Pearl, in turn, was once “obsessed with hatred for her mother’s body,” in part because she discovered and read her mother’s “adultery diary” (129). The anonymous narrator tacitly grants that there may be nothing unique about the changes that Maria lived through: “I am not a good enough historian to say whether or not there were other periods in history like those ten years, eleven maybe, 1962 to 1973 . . . years in which so easily, so quickly, you became a person you would not have recognized” (53). If such admissions gesture toward the
possibility of repeating struggles that were once thought to be finished, of daughters who seem to their mothers like throwbacks to an earlier era, then they also emphasize the lack of finality in any statement made about Vatican II, its legacy, and indeed, about the telos of the contemporary world.

If, despite these admissions, Gordon’s later novels still constitute a continuation and a nuancing of narcissism rather than a departure from it, it is because they do not finally question the subordination of orthodoxy to the aesthetic in any meaningful sense. Monica can accept Sara’s marriage if it can be reframed as a question of Sara’s own satisfaction rather than as a rebellion against Monica’s values; Maria and Pearl can exchange mutual forgiveness, and Maria can forgive her father, but the question of an ultimate value that transcends the self must remain in abeyance. When Pearl, having been saved from starvation, asks her mother, “Why is it that it’s life we want?” (339), Maria thinks, “It is a ridiculous thing to say, Life is worth living because of ice cream and your dog. But it seems preferable to saying, Life is worth living because you must live for me” (340). Her response to Pearl, “It seems we’re meant to” (341), is, as she realizes, inadequate.

From the perspective of orthodox Christian doctrine and practice, Gordon’s most successful work might be “The Deacon” (1999), a short story which, like Final Payments, associates Jesus’ words “The poor you always have with you” with an epiphany. Sister Joan Fitzgerald, a shrewd and competent nun, is made to accompany Gerard, an inept and unlovable (though not, like Margaret, hateful) deacon, to a celebratory meal on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ordination. Though Gerard inspires in her nothing “but a wish to flee from [his] presence” (82), she discovers that Gerard believes her to have cared about him, merely because she relieved him of his teaching duties at the parish school and installed him instead in the computer lab, where his incompetence would do less damage. In fact it had been the parish priest, Steve, who “had prevented her from throwing him out on the street” (82). Like Isabel Moore, Joan longs for—and interprets Jesus as enjoining—“an active love that fills the soul and lightens it, that draws people to each other with the warmth of the spirit, that makes them able to be with each other as a brother is with a sister or a mother with her child” (82). Because she cannot feel such a love for Gerard, she is initially horrified to discover that Gerard believes that she has loved him. Yet the recollection of Jesus’ words eventually reconciles her to her role and clarifies the more difficult nature of Christian love: “[S]he knew that she would always have Gerard. He was poorer than Estrelita Dominguez, thirteen years old and three months pregnant, or LaTrobe Sandford, who might be in jail this time next year” (82). Yet while Isabel believes that she can fulfill her duty to the comparably poor Margaret with money instead of love, Joan acknowl-
edges the need to go on doing what she can for Gerard, despite her feelings. When the waiter appears at the end of the story to offer her a drink, she orders only water because he “was an Irishman; he’d be scandalized by a nun’s ordering Scotch. She didn’t want to disappoint him” (83). It is clear that Joan appreciates the gustatory pleasures that Scotch represents; she apparently realizes that true charity involves not just doing good for others but refusing to let self-serving professions of honesty create scandal. This is a far cry from Maria’s claim at the end of Pearl that one should live because one is meant to. Perhaps Maria represents the best that a particular kind of contemporary consciousness—lacking any cultural consensus about what constitutes virtue—can muster when it is forced to look beyond itself. Joan’s example in “The Deacon,” however, provides grounds for hope that something much better remains available.

V. The Liberal Calvinism of Marilynne Robinson

When Marilynne Robinson’s Housekeeping was published in 1980, it was praised as an extremely impressive debut, yet for nearly two decades afterward, critics of the novel betrayed little suspicion that Christianity might be relevant to its interpretation. And with good reason: not only does Housekeeping lack an overtly Christian thematics, its spare but luminous prose, its suspension of traditional closure (its narrator becomes a drifter), and its meditations on desire, dailiness, transience, and the physical world seem to align it with one of the major critical trends of its historical moment: a discourse of second-wave feminist spirituality and poetics that includes writers as different as Hélène Cixous, Mary Daly, and Adrienne Rich. The keywords that regularly appear in published criticism of Housekeeping are characteristic: domesticity, feminine subjectivity, spirit, ecocriticism, women’s writing, pre-oedipal desire. In the terms that I invoked in the introduction of this book, many of the novel’s readers have regarded Housekeeping as “spiritual” but certainly not as “religious.”

After eighteen years of such a critical response, The Death of Adam (1998), a collection of essays, came as a surprise. “I miss civilization, and I want it back,” she declared in the opening pages (Introduction 4). Getting it back requires attending to the works of the past “in their own terms” (Introduction 3), rather than cynically assuming their lack of relevance except as a record of oppressions now overcome, ideologies now demystified. It might even require the resuscitation of John Calvin’s reputation. As if such statements were not difficult enough to reconcile with prevailing readings of Housekeeping, her essay “The Tyranny of Petty Coercion” (2004)
forthrightly announced, “I will make a shocking statement: I am a Christian” (16). The publication of *Gilead* (2004) seemed to confirm as much: its narrator, John Ames, is an aging Congregationalist minister in the town of Gilead, Iowa in the year 1956. He is, moreover, a good man and a reliable narrator, sincerely occupied with matters of religious faith and with self-criticism. In short, Ames is so square that Lee Siegel could write that *Gilead* “almost makes you—it’s embarrassing to admit this—want to start being ironic and urbane again” (83).

How does one reconcile such apparent traditionalism with the putatively feminist achievement of *Housekeeping*? Readers who prefer not to do so, it would seem, also prefer the earlier novel and are distinctly uncomfortable with the thought that it might be tainted by Christian concerns. Stefan Mattessich, for instance, acknowledges that Robinson’s Christianity complicates readings of *Housekeeping*, but rather than inquiring into how Christian doctrine might inform the novel, he assimilates it to metaphysical thought more generally, arguing that the novel “thinks the metaphysics that persist in every denial of metaphysics” (61)—a thesis, derived from Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, that violates Robinson’s own desire to take writing on its own terms. On the other hand, readers who laud *Gilead* and its sequel, *Home* (2008) (which presents the same story told in *Gilead* from another perspective) seem to value (sometimes with pleasant surprise, sometimes with unpleasantly self-righteous vindication) its demonstration that unfashionably Christian doctrines and virtues can remain, even after so much secular tub-thumping, the raw materials of great art.

In what follows, I will argue that *The Death of Adam*, *Gilead*, and *Home* reveal Robinson’s use of Protestant Christianity to be more slippery—though not necessarily ineffective as a rhetorical tool—than both groups of readers allow. On the one hand, in declaring allegiance not just to mainstream Protestantism but to the thought and legacy of John Calvin (whom she prefers to call Jean Cauvin, so as to minimize the prejudices that have accumulated around his more familiar name), Robinson does indeed challenge a pervasive contemporary cynicism, which she defines as “nothing more than an understanding of how arbitrary morality is, how unpredictable and unenforceable, how insecurely grounded in self-interest” (“Puritans”

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12. Mattessich, to be sure, is quite honest about doing so: “It may be that *Housekeeping*, refractory to the secular presuppositions that critical culture brings to bear on it, rejoins her readers’ interest in agency only by driving its stakes more willingly than we might like into the ground of a metaphysical tradition of thought about subjectivity” (61). The implication seems to be that “we,” the practitioners of “critical culture,” might not find what “we might like” in such an overtly Christian writer, though we might be generous enough to admit that we, too, might be haunted by metaphysics even in our denial.
Second-hand judgments of Calvin, deriving from the work of Weber or from blinkered understandings of what the term “Puritan” connotes, have reduced Calvin’s career to the doctrine of double predestination and the death of Michael Servetus, his legacy to the triumph of unrestrained, exploitative capitalism. Robinson is correct that such judgments are not just distortions but obstacles to Americans who seek ways to implement a more humane future that are nevertheless rooted in the national past. Merely by presenting the goodness that a Calvinist worldview has nourished, whether in Jonathan Edwards’s condemnation of his New England congregation’s neglect of the hungry (“Puritans” 151) or in the fictional John Ames’s capacity for self-scrutiny, moral action, and joy in creation, Robinson powerfully testifies to the benefits of Christian orthodoxy.

On the other hand, I maintain that this presentation remains, in Robinson’s work, a use of orthodoxy more than a commitment to it. This is not to doubt Robinson’s explicit statements of Christian belief, but rather to suggest that in her work, the starting points for a consideration of Christianity are always the primacy of religious experience and the benefits—including civil order and prosperity—that Christian belief can afford. In some respects she resembles Percy, whose foregrounding of the modern predicament is, nearly always, the place from which his protagonists struggle toward Christian belief. Yet while Percy used a similar rhetorical strategy both in his fiction and his essays, Robinson uses the two genres for different purposes. In The Death of Adam, she emphasizes the deficiencies of contemporary life that might be remedied if Christianity were taken more seriously; in Gilead and Home, she creates a fictional world in which Christianity is the norm, a quietly sustaining reality against which the central unbelieving character, Jack Boughton, appears to be less an existential hero (as some readers might initially suspect) than one who torments himself needlessly—even, perhaps, one predestined to perdition. Her strategy has been so successful that Siegel has gone so far as to declare (wrongly, I believe) that one “cannot truly understand” Gilead unless one is “a believing Christian with strong fundamentalist leanings” (82). If I describe her rhetoric, then, as a “use” of orthodoxy, it is because ultimately she does not press the claims of whether the Calvinist Christianity that she advocates is true—only that it is more humane, and less obviously false, than the theories promulgated by the central theorists of modernity. I identify Robinson’s primary value as equality and hold that according to her novels, the value of Calvinism lies primarily in the degree to which it validates it. Here she departs from Percy, for whom the truth of Catholicism was precisely what guaranteed its efficacy against the modern malaise.
Robinson is, to be sure, aware of her somewhat unorthodox relationship to Christianity, and in the autobiographical essay “Psalm Eight,” she accounts for it as the continued unfolding of the mystic intimations that she enjoyed as a young girl:

All the old writers on the subject remark that in every age and nation people have had the idea of a god of some sort. So my archaic self might have been nothing other than a latter-day pagan whose intimations were not altogether at odds with, as it happened, Presbyterianism, and so were simply polished to that shape. Or it might have been that I was a mystic by vocation and, despite Presbyterianism, suffered atrophy of my gift in a life where I found little use for it. For all I know I am a mystic now, and simply too close to the phenomenon to have a clear view of it. In any case I began as a pagan and have ended as one, though only in the sense that I have never felt secure in the possession of the ideas and loyalties that are dearest to me. I am a Saxon in a basilica, refusing to admire so that anyone can see me, thrown back on impassivity as my only notion of decorum. I am surely wrong if I blame history for this sense I have of tenuous claim, wrong to invoke the notion of blame at all. Interloper thought I may be, I enjoy the thief’s privilege of pleasure in the simple preciousness of things that are not my own. I enjoy it far too much to attempt to regularize my situation. In my childhood, when the presence of God seemed everywhere and I seemed to myself a mote of exception, improbable as a flaw in the sun, the very sweetness of the experience lay in that stinging thought—not me, not like me, not mine. (229–30)

Robinson’s rhetorically subtle self-characterization begins with an appeal to the universality of religious experience (“the idea of a god of some sort”) rather than to the doctrines of Christianity. Her own experiences might then be conceivably filed under one of William James’s “varieties,” so that her religious belief could be assimilated to her psychology. Yet Robinson immediately complicates such a notion by aligning primordial religious consciousness with the word “pagan,” applying the term to herself, and then amplifying this term with the word “interloper.” To profess Christian belief while using such labels is to suggest that one’s claims upon Christian faith, tradition, and forms of life are “tenuous.” This is, in one sense, a confession of epistemic humility—an engaging admission that whatever she might say about God or faith will be inadequate to the reality of religious experience, combined with the presumption that others, for whatever reason more secure in their connection to these things, may be more knowledge-
able or more devout than she, though not (an interesting exception) more “historically” entitled to their security. A “pagan” sensibility, then, grasps the divinity that imbues creation—which could be characterized as a sense of the sacramental, but which here tends more toward panentheism—but professes not to deserve its relation to this divinity. (In this sense, the term is perhaps analogous to “Gentile,” as it is used in Christian discourse to refer to those who lack God’s original commitment to the Jews but who have nevertheless been “adopted” by him after Jesus’ sacrifice.)

The expression of humility, however, almost at once slides into an expression of privilege, even the defiant privilege of a “thief,” who will affirm what she finds experientially valuable in Christianity while reserving the right to judge its people and practices from this very position of the “outsider.” Robinson does not so much reject Calvinist doctrinal commitments as hold them at arm’s length, always evaluating them on the basis of whether they affirm or occlude this mystical consciousness. Theology must be judged in this light, and can be found lacking precisely to the degree that it can be intellectually understood. The Bible itself, Robinson maintains, is never lacking, because the sheer luminousness of its language cannot be mastered by the human intellect. She especially prizes “the devout old custom . . . of merely repeating verses, one or another luminous fragment, a hymn before and a hymn afterward. By grace of my abiding ignorance, it is always new to me. I am never not instructed” (“Psalm” 230–31).

Again, Robinson deploys the double move of humble receptivity and judgment predicated on exclusion: she is instructed only by virtue of her “abiding ignorance,” and thus implies that others, less ignorant, are to that degree incapable of “instruction.” So far, Robinson seems to position herself in relation to the many people who, in contemporary Western societies, might identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” but she also seems to suggest that to be spiritual within a religious tradition (an “interloper”) might be best of all, for religion is at bottom (as she explains elsewhere) a “framing mechanism,” a “language of orientation that presents itself as a series of questions” (Interview). Such a position need not reject other traditions within Christianity, although the differences between the traditions in such a view become differences in experience and in aesthetics: “[W]ould we be richer for the loss of Catholicism? Would we be richer for the loss of the Quakers? Isn’t it true that every one of these traditions expresses Christianity in a way that the other traditions could not? It’s prismatic” (Interview).

Robinson affirms her own doctrinal identity in this way: “I have shifted allegiances the doctrinal and demographic inch that separates Presbyterians from Congregationalists, but for all purposes I am where I ought to be,
as sociologists calculate, and I should feel right at home. I will concede only that the sensation of exclusion is more poignant to me in these precincts than in others, being after all these years so very familiar” (“Psalm” 231). A reader of Updike confronted with this passage will be reminded of the difference presented in Couples between Piet Hanema’s childhood faith and the religion of those Tarboxers who still go to church: “Piet had been raised in a sterner church, the Dutch Reformed, amid varnished oak and dour stained glass where shepherds were paralyzed in webs of lead. He had joined this sister church [Congregationalist], a milder daughter of Calvin, as a compromise with [his wife] Angela, who believed nothing” (20). From Updike’s standpoint, the Congregational church in Tarbox is insufficiently orthodox, and its destruction by lightning at the end of the novel confirms, as it were, God’s displeasure with it. Robinson, again, cannily positions herself both within and yet outside of an orthodox tradition: she is “sociologically” where she belongs, given (one presumes) her ancestry, politics, and aesthetic allegiances, yet the content of her belief is only imperfectly contained within Congregationalism, and she enjoys the piquancy of being not “at home” despite her long years of membership. She marvels on the occasions in church when “the minister will conclude something brave and absolute,” because she is “so far unregenerate that they never cease to impress [her] deeply” (“Psalm” 231). Once again, the implication is that those who take such statements as a matter of course are not “unregenerate” enough—too comfortable in their habitual piety to let the force of the words change them. At the same time, the doctrinal latitude of Congregationalism imbues such statements with a certain irony: how often, indeed, Robinson implies, does one hear something “brave and absolute” preached within such a venue? Only “[f]rom time to time, on the strength of the text” (“Psalm” 231).13

Here the question of how Robinson wishes readers to take the doctrines most associated with Calvin becomes relevant, for in the popular conception, few ideas are more “brave and absolute” than double predestination. In the two-part (and misleadingly titled) essay “Marguerite de Navarre,” Robinson affirms that for Calvin, the doctrine is a necessary consequence of his belief in the absolute freedom, power, and knowledge of God, and that Calvin’s opponents, such as Ignatius of Loyola, also affirmed predestination, though with greater caution and with a degree of “nuance” that one should understand as a rhetorical appeal to a very different audience: “Ignatius was writing for an elite of highly committed men; Calvin, for

13. Appropriately enough, the narrator of Gilead, John Ames, is a Congregationalist minister; his best friend, Robert Boughton, is a Presbyterian minister. Both are good men, but, as Home confirms, Ames is the better of the two.
anyone who could read him” (187). In the work of both men, “[t]he logical difficulties of their positions matter only if the question is understood in terms both explicitly reject” (188). This is, of course, true, and Robinson’s insistence on understanding Calvin in his own terms is admirable. She does not, however, explain whether she holds this doctrine to be true or merely worthy of intellectual respect.¹⁴ Nor does it explain whether what contemporary people might find valuable in Calvin is the doctrine itself or certain implications which, derivable from it, are nevertheless also to be found elsewhere. The doctrine of double predestination can indeed be, and historically has been, associated with the belief and practice of human equality, for human beings are all equally depraved, and the one distinction with real significance—whether one belongs to the elect or not—has to do with God’s efforts, not ours. But it does not follow that those who affirm the political or moral value of equality must ground their arguments on its behalf in Calvin’s work, even if it can be historically demonstrated that in the United States, Calvinism contributed much to creating a climate in which such values could thrive. Indeed, Robinson’s account of Calvinism becomes suspiciously selective: everything that tends to affirm the liberal humanism that Robinson herself espouses is underscored, while everything that offends contemporary sensibilities must be explained away. Thus, Calvin’s “extreme disparagements of the physical body” must be read not literally but as rhetoric “in the service of an extraordinarily exalted vision of the human soul” (“Marguerite” 182). Todd Shy’s judgment that Robinson is in fact closer to Montaigne and Erasmus than to Calvin, to Renaissance humanism than to Reformed faith, seems borne out here (257–58).

¹⁴. Robinson’s most explicit statement on the matter frankly indicates the difficulty: “I have never heard of even one persuasive case made for the compatibility of eternal damnation with the justice and mercy of God. But there it is, a conspicuous presence in Scripture and in tradition, and Calvin could hardly be expected to set it aside.” Here, she speaks not of double predestination per se, but of the existence and eternity of hell—a Christian doctrine much more widely accepted than double predestination. She then goes on to argue, correctly, that predestination itself is not a doctrine first invented by Calvin, and that a consequence of the doctrine is “to make the categories ‘redeemed’ and ‘unredeemed’ profoundly mysterious to mortal eyes, to remove every basis for our making any such radical judgments about our fellows” (“Calvinism” 183). In short, instead of answering the question “is double predestination true?” Robinson responds with something like “Consider instead its implications for human equality.” On whether double predestination is Calvin’s opinion (which again leaves Robinson’s own view of its possible truth unstated), Robinson astonishingly declares, “Whether predestination is ‘double’ or ‘single’ is a quibble with which Calvin was too honest to have patience” (“Polemic” 97). I would compare Robinson here with Newman, who similarly acknowledged that many Christian beliefs are also “beset with intellectual difficulties; and it is simple fact, that, for myself, I cannot answer these difficulties,” but whose position on the consequences of this fact is far more straightforward: “[t]en thousand difficulties do not make one doubt, as I understand the subject; difficulty and doubt are incommensurate” (Apologia 155).
Perhaps another way to approach this problem would be to investigate how Robinson understands what Newman called “development of doctrine.” To what extent do the doctrines of the Reformed faith prove capable of change, even change understood—to return to the terms that I invoked with respect to Vatican II—as continuity or deepening rather than as rupture? Robinson’s humanism is, of course, about the possibility of human improvement: she is friendly, or wishes to be friendly, toward science and art, and she wants to regard the habitus of democratic culture as it developed in the United States as an ideal environment for its flourishing. She must therefore account for the fact that much in contemporary American culture appalls her, and she discerns the cause in large part in a deliberate decision to reject the Calvinist heritage, to misread it as illiberal and repressive. Much of the blame she lays at the feet of Weber, whose famous argument that Calvinism helped create “the spirit of capitalism” she detests:

By comparison with Lutherans, Calvinists lack gemütlichkeit—they are not good fellows. Weber says you can see this in their faces. This is the new historical method. This is how spirit becomes a term suitable for use in economic analysis. I suppose I am unfair in saying that for Weber a prejudice is a proof. He offers none of the usual criticisms of capitalism itself—that it is exploitive, that it is crisis prone, that it creates extremes of wealth and poverty. His criticism is that, in its “modern” form, those who prosper from it do not enjoy their prosperity. He knows and says that Calvin did not encourage the accumulation of wealth, and that he insisted the “church”—in this sense, the elect—do not prosper in this world. . . . [Weber argues] that a social group defined by [him] as the people who adhere to or have been acculturated by a particular theology are, with generalizable and world-historical consistency, peculiarly inclined to behave in ways precisely contrary to the teaching of that theology. . . . Surely it is fair to wonder if any of this amounts to more than personal animus—which was the preferred historical method of much of the Western world at the beginning of this bitter century. . . . In fairness to Weber, he considered his conclusions in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism to be merely tentative, likely to be superseded when “comparative racial neurology and psychology shall have progressed beyond their present and in many ways very promising beginnings.” (“Introduction” 23–24)

Even if everything that Robinson argues here is correct, it does not necessarily invalidate Weber’s thesis, and it raises the question of what alternative explanations for the evolution of capitalism might be more convincing.
If the hypercapitalist, morally priggish yet licentious, and aesthetically desensitized specter of contemporary American life is a dramatic departure from the nation’s originally Calvinist ethos, rather than an unintended but retrospectively traceable consequence of this ethos, what enabled such dramatic changes? It is conceivable that it is precisely the democratic emphasis of Calvinist belief and practice that has facilitated the growth of capitalism and the lowering of aesthetic standards that Robinson deplores, contrary to her expectation that democracy should inculcate a high-minded humanism—some of Tocqueville’s observations of nineteenth-century America and concerns about the nation’s future, for instance, might be enlisted in support of such a claim.

Even if such an interpretation is not fully convincing, alternative accounts—Ann Douglas’s thesis, for instance—might not necessarily be more congenial to Robinson. What if the pursuit of equality leads not to human flourishing but to a degraded mass culture, and what if Calvinism delayed the emergence of such a mass culture precisely to the extent that it impeded political equality (even as it undeniably affirmed the equality of human souls in relation to each other)? In any event, the fact that capitalism has historically expanded the most rapidly and produced its most effective theorists in societies with long traditions of Calvinist belief and democratic polity (the United States, Scotland, the Netherlands) needs to be accounted for. Moreover, Robinson’s attempt to discredit Weber by linking him to eugenics not only violates her own injunction to read thinkers in terms of their own historical moment rather than to apply contemporary standards to them but also seems continuous with her own hostility toward Darwinism, which might just as conceivably be described as a “prejudice” based on the fact that for strict Darwinists, talk of the human soul and even the mind is inadmissible. Surely a thinker whose own religious thinking is grounded in the primacy of certain individual experiences should be more careful about castigating the “individual” perceptions of others, even if these concern the presence or lack of Gemütlichkeit in certain faces.

15. Douglas shares Robinson’s loathing for mass culture and her admiration for Calvinism, but not her sense that Calvinism and humanism are compatible: “Calvinism was a great faith, with great limitations: it was repressive, authoritarian, dogmatic, patriarchal to an extreme. Its demise was inevitable, and in some real sense, welcome. Yet it deserved, and elsewhere and at other times found, great opponents. One could argue that the logical antagonist of Calvinism was a fully humanistic, historically minded romanticism. Exponents of such romanticism appeared in mid-nineteenth-century America—one thinks particularly of Margaret Fuller and Herman Melville—but they were rare” (12–13). One might quarrel with the particulars of Douglas’s description here—Robinson, I feel certain, would bristle at the characterization of Calvinism as “patriarchal to an extreme” (see “Marguerite” 184–87, in which Robinson defends Calvin against the charge of misogyny)—but her affirmation of a “fully humanistic, historically minded romanticism” sounds exactly like Robinson’s own larger project.
In the most comprehensive situating of Robinson’s fiction within the tradition of American Puritan writing thus far, Christopher Leise argues that Robinson “is consciously reading the Puritan tradition against itself,” an approach that “looks at religion not as a stable entity at all but one that is fluid and—quite the opposite—actively destabilizing” (350). This overstates the case considerably. Leise’s argument is grounded not on the particulars of Robinson’s stated beliefs but rather on the theses of Derridean deconstruction as they are applied to religion via the work of Mark C. Taylor. Leise reduces the upshot of his argument to “[r]eligious are dynamic, not static” (351), but this, surely, is a fact and a platitude: one can endorse such a statement without writing off in principle, as Leise appears to do, the vexing questions of how one should understand which developments in a religious tradition are proper to it and which genuine departures. Robinson would, I am certain, describe her project as a faithful return to tradition rather than an ironic destabilization of it; she would also not be friendly to the implication that disagreements in how one understands a given tradition should simply be attributed to the inevitable self-undermining of any systems. Moreover, when she departs from the polemical strategy of her essays to the presentation of Calvinist Christianity in her two recent novels, Robinson is refreshingly free of the global irony that Taylor discovers in the phenomenon of religion—so free, in fact, that a common complaint from readers of *Gilead* it is that so good and sincere a man as John Ames is simply not credible.¹⁶ This lack of global irony makes the novels, as instances of rhetoric, unusually effective: to those put off by the pugnacity and the thorny doctrinal questions associated with Calvinism, Robinson offers the serenity of a Calvinist milieu that is simply assumed. That she must set her novels in 1956 to make such a milieu convincing, however, suggests her readers of the novel may have to struggle with—or be open to—an implicit nostalgia in the two novels, a desire (rather like Updike’s in *The Poorhouse Fair*) to return to a stronger, less riven America.

**VI. The Primacy of Religious Experience in *Gilead* and *Home***

*Gilead* takes the form of a letter written by Reverend John Ames, the seventy-six-year-old Congregationalist minister of Gilead, Iowa, to his seven-year-old son, the child of a second marriage entered into after a long widowerhood. Diagnosed with heart trouble and not expected to live long,

¹⁶. Again, Siegel makes this argument in the strongest possible terms: “[T]hese people finally seem sprung from some moral vanity, some secret disdain for their flesh-and-blood particularity” (83).
Ames expects that as a grown man, his son will read the letter and learn “things I believe it becomes me as a father to teach you” (133–34). Throughout the novel, three lessons recur obsessively: the beauty of the world, charged as it is with the glory and love of God; the opacity of human beings, even when they have known and loved each other their entire lives; and, consequently, the dangers of moral judgment. These lessons are consistent with Ames’s Jamesian conviction that “it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion, for the purposes of the individual believer” (145), and that it is therefore “presumptuous to judge the authenticity of anyone’s religion, except one’s own. And that is also presumptuous” (173). Many of the novel’s loveliest passages, indeed, are affirmations of dailiness that authenticate Ames’s own religious sense: a game of blowing bubbles with the pet cat, with its “effulgence of bubbles rising, and so much laughter” (9); a memory from childhood of a group of women singing in the rain and eating “the bread of affliction” (102) because their church has burned; the coming of dawn over the prairie (246). Knowing one’s own luminous self-awareness, the novel implies, one has no right to deny others their own. 17 To think otherwise, Ames holds, would entail that “people are disabled from trusting their thoughts, their expressions of belief, and their understanding” (146).

In the course of writing his letter, Ames finds that these beliefs are tested when Jack Boughton, the son of John’s best friend, returns to Gilead. As a child, Jack was constantly into “mischief only bordering on harm, generally speaking” (182); when he was older, he renounced his family’s Christian faith. He is a frequent liar, as he admits, and he struggles with alcoholism. Most spectacularly of all, as a young man he got a very poor young woman pregnant and abandoned her, never publicly acknowledging the child, who died at the age of three of an infected cut. Jack, now forty-three, wishes to confide in Ames, but Ames is nervous: although he “see[s] the error of assuming a person is not speaking with you in good faith,” he admits that “it is hard for me to see good faith in John Ames Boughton, and that is a terrible problem” (154). Indeed, one might suspect that the consistency of Jack’s reprehensible behavior is intended to give credence to the Calvinist dogma of double predestination—for, as Ames also avows, “[g]enerally, a person’s behavior is consistent with his nature” (151).

Both Gilead and Home reflect the degree to which Robinson regards total depravity—the doctrine that provides the precondition for predestination—

17. Robinson’s notion of “self-awareness,” as she describes it in Absence of Mind, is possibly relevant here: “I do not mean merely consciousness of one’s identity, or of the complex flow of thought, perception, memory, and desire, important as these are. I mean primarily the self that stands apart from itself, that questions, reconsiders, appraises” (118).
as essentially democratic in its implications. Yet Robinson is aware that belief in it can also make for complacency, a certain impatience with distinctions that may nevertheless be meaningful, as Jack’s sister Glory reflects in *Home*:

Maybe she had never before known anyone who felt, or admitted he felt, that the state of his soul was in question. Whatever might transpire in her father’s study, there had been only calm and confidence among his flock, to all appearances. Granting the many perils of spiritual complacency, and her father did grant them as often as Pharisees figured in the text, complacency was consistent with the customs and manners of Presbyterian Gilead and was therefore assumed to be justified in every case. Christian charity demanded no less, after all. Among the denominations of Gilead, charity on this point was not granted by all and to all in principle, but in practice good manners were usually adhered to, and in general the right to complacency was conceded on every side. Even her father’s sermons treated salvation as a thing for which they could be grateful as a body, as if, for their purposes at least, that problem had been sorted out between the Druids and the centurions at about the time of Hadrian. He did mention sin, but it was rarefied in his understanding of it, a matter of acts and omissions so commonplace that no one could be wholly innocent of them or especially alarmed by them, either—the uncharitable thought, the neglected courtesy. While on the one hand this excused him from the mention of those aspects of life that seemed remotest from Sabbath and sunlight, on the other hand it made the point that the very nicest among them, even the most virtuous, were in no position to pass judgment on anyone else. . . . The doctrine of total depravity had served him well. Who, after all, could cast that first stone? He could not, he least of all. But it was hard to get a clear view of something so pervasive as to be total, especially if, as her father insisted, it was epitomized in his own estimable person. (111–12)

This description of the Protestant denominations of Gilead, divided theologically yet united in good manners, echoes Bottum’s description of the days when mainline Protestantism set the tone for American life, creating a genuine sense of civic community even as it encouraged a possibly too complacent belief in American exceptionalism. All well and good, Glory seems to imply—such a regime indeed makes Gilead a fine place to live, at least for white Americans—but what about those whose sins place them so far beyond the pale that they may be incapable of repentance? Why emphasize only the salvation and not also the damnation that belief in predestina-
tion entails? Glory herself has been guilty of fornication with a man whom she intended to marry but who concealed his marriage from her, and she has never informed her family of the truth—they continue to believe that her marriage failed. Perhaps this experience makes her more skeptical of her father’s complacency—and yet even she remains a believer who prays on her knees and reads her Bible every day. How to account for someone like Jack without seeing at least the likelihood of double predestination? Rowan Williams’s claim that in Jack, “we see something absolutely vital to human integrity, the knowledge that I do not coincide with myself, that who and what I am is significantly out of my control,” resonates with such a question and implies that Jack might find the doctrine of predestination “liberating” could come to accept it, because it declares that “our future is radically unknowable to us” (“Native Speakers”).

Indeed, when Jack first approaches Ames, he wishes to discuss the claim that “some people are intentionally and irretrievably consigned to perdition” (Gilead 150). The subject, which Ames has discussed with many troubled souls, exasperates him, in part because “[n]ine-tenths of the time when some smart aleck starts in on theological questions he’s only trying to put me in a false position” (152). More fundamentally, however, he is impatient with argument because of its inadequacy to match the reality of religious experience: “[M]y advice is this—don’t look for proofs. Don’t bother with them at all. They are never sufficient to the question, and they’re always a little impertinent, I think, because they claim for God a place within our conceptual grasp” (179). Honest doubts, which come from one’s own experience and observation, can be respected, as Ames shows through his appreciation for Ludwig Feuerbach, who recognizes “the joyful aspects of religion” and “loves the world” (24). More often, though, doubts about religion are not really one’s own but rather “the mustache and walking stick that happen to be the fashion of any particular moment” (179).

Ames’s reflections here resonate with an entire tradition that holds Christianity to be not merely a set of beliefs, but a whole way of life, which cannot be “questioned” in the same way that one might question the logic of an argument. As Hungerford points out, Ames “does not say that arguments [against belief] are wrong, or mistaken, but that they do not participate in the religious practice of making experience open upon mean-

18. Indeed, in Absence of Mind, Robinson writes: “If I were not myself a religious person, but wished to make an account of religion, I believe I would tend toward the Feuerbachian view that religion is a projection of humanity’s conceptions of beauty, goodness, power, and other valued things, a humanizing of experience by understanding it as structured around and mirroring back these values. Then it would resemble art, with which it is strongly associated” (127).
ing. . . . Belief here is imagined as a religiously understood reality that is simply other to arguments against it” (116). For Ames, this is so true that he even speaks of “[t]he oddness of the phrase ‘believe in God’” (143)—presumably, because to use the word “belief” as a potential wedge between the reality of God and an individual experience of him (after all, a belief can be true or false) is already to falsify, or at least to cheapen, the experience. Jack suggests that the same imperviousness to argument is true of his own unbelief: “I don’t even believe God doesn’t exist, if you see what I mean” (220). Hungerford is to this extent justified in reading *Gilead*, despite its preoccupation with the content of Calvinist doctrine, as another illustration of the “postmodern belief” that she sees as central to American literature after 1960. The emphasis here, Hungerford proposes, is on belief as experience, as what Wittgenstein might call a “form of life,” not on belief as meaning: “While scholars of lived religion have sidelined belief as a way of understanding religion, Robinson insists that belief is in fact something one experiences, just as thought is something that one experiences, and that the content of belief includes claims about the dignity of persons just as surely as it contains claims about God and God’s relation to humanity” (116).

But what about the possibility of sincere inquiry about belief, coming from genuinely troubled, even desperate people who do not intend to be (even if in effect they often are) “smart alecks”? In *Home*, Jack’s motive for the discussion is suggested when he tells Glory that of all the Christian doctrines, “perdition is the one thing that always made sense to me. I mean, it has always seemed plausible. On the basis of my experience” (119)—a statement that might call into question Williams’s suggestion that belief in predestination is necessarily “liberating.” Ames, to be sure, cannot discern Jack’s motives in asking about predestination, and in the absence of further information—and in light of Jack’s history—his suspicion that Jack is simply baiting him seems a plausible guess. But this does not relieve Ames of the responsibility of answering, and Jack’s appeal to his personal experience here resonates with Robinson’s own affirmation of the experiential—perhaps double predestination is precisely the means through which Jack might come to believe, if not necessarily (if readers take him at his word when he characterizes his own unbelief) to be persuaded of Christianity’s truth. Intellectually, the upshot of Ames’s response is that predestination is a great mystery, and that it is presumptuous to judge the authenticity of anyone’s religion. Both statements may be true, but rhetorically, they have the effect of irritably brushing away the question—which is, as Jack himself points out, not “a mere word, a mere abstraction” (*Gilead* 150). As a minister’s son, Jack is familiar with the theology that Ames professes; the
pain of his apostasy is also the pain of discord within the family, and Hungerford is quite right to see that the “force of longing in *Gilead* is for Jack’s return to the Boughton family, his reconciliation with those people, and that place, that formed his coherent moral context” (171). But how is such reconciliation to be achieved, if acquaintance with theology and the example of his own family—Jack does not seem particularly ironic when he declares to Ames, “We all love you, you know . . . You’re all saints” (242)—have not sufficed? Jack’s revelations about himself do serve to chasten Ames for his lapses in charity. However, they do not, it would seem, make any room for the efficacy of actual discourse that inquires into the truth of predestination—or, indeed, of any religious matters. If readers take Robinson and Ames at their word when they emphasize the irrefragability of religious experience, then this would include non-Christian religious experience as well and thereby frame her entire project within the discourse of the “spiritual.”

A sort of reconciliation between Ames and Jack—though not between Jack and his father—is achieved in *Gilead* when Jack reveals that he has, in his long absence from home, married Della, an African American woman from Memphis, and become a father, despite fierce opposition from Della’s family. In *Home*, Glory meets Della and her son when she comes searching for Jack, who has recently left, perhaps never to see his father and sister again, and the revelation of Jack’s family and of their love for him moves Glory to an apparent conviction that Jack has found his redemption: the novel’s final sentence is “The Lord is wonderful” (325). It is, perhaps, fitting that Robinson might choose interracial love and marriage as the index of whatever goodness Jack might possess, for in both novels, racial justice for African Americans is presented as the moral necessity that even the most upright of white Americans often fail to see. In *Gilead*, Ames reflects on his grandfather, an associate of John Brown, who was militantly against slavery and who thought his own son’s pacifism to be a moral failing; this familial history is juxtaposed against a fire that destroys the only African American church in the town and the eventual departure of African Americans from Gilead—all despite Iowa’s reputation as “the shining star of radicalism” (176). In *Home*, Jack makes his sympathy toward the civil rights protests in Montgomery clear, even though his father considers them provocations to violence (204); and when he tells his father that “colored people” in St. Louis have been “kind” to him, his father reminds him that “people judge you by your associations” and that he “could help [him]self by finding a better class of friends” (156, 157). While it would be inaccurate to state that Jack marries Della because he believes in racial justice, the marriage is symbolically appropriate because it suggests how far he is willing to offend
conventional ideas in pursuit of a moral ideal. (Indeed, Della’s family is, if anything, more opposed to the marriage than Jack’s—not only because of the racial difference but also because Della’s father believes that “all white men are atheists, the only difference is that some of them are aware of it” [Gilead 220]).

Jack’s attitude toward race goes a long way to redeem him in the eyes of a twenty-first century audience, but it is noteworthy that the degree of risk he undergoes in marrying Della is, like the portrayal of Ames and Gilead itself, rendered credible primarily through the mere fact of its being set in 1956. Hungerford has suggested that “the work of both novels is to translate racial reconciliation into another mode of familial reconciliation” (119), so that “home” comes to serve as a metaphor for the nation’s racial history. Yet this sense of the necessity for racial reconciliation seems difficult to reconcile with the atmosphere of nostalgia for home that permeates the two novels, with their almost defiant celebration of the provincial and their conviction that even so obscure a place as Gilead has, as Ames says, been the scene of unsung “heroes . . . saints and martyrs” (173). The year 1956 marks, on the one hand, a significant moment in a progressive historical narrative, when the evil of institutional racism is challenged and its end now glimpsed as a real possibility. On the other hand, it also marks the impending collapse of the world that has sustained such men as Ames—the world shaped by American mainline Protestantism, in which cultural homogeneity and shared values have produced much good, despite their tendency to produce complacency as well. In the essay “Puritans and Prigs,” Robinson states that Puritanism “appears to me to have died early in this [that is, the twentieth] century” (150), and that she shares a “general sense that we are suffering a radical moral decline which is destroying the fabric of society, seriously threatening our sense of safety as well as of mutual respect and shared interest” (157). Like the Updike of The Poorhouse Fair, Robinson entertains the possibility that an older, more homogeneous America may have been preferable to the contemporary United States, despite its evident failures. Affirming powerfully Calvin’s call “to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love” (qtd. in “Puritans” 172), and translating this call into the political commitments of liberalism, Robinson nonetheless fails to give a convincing answer to just how it is that a period that has seen the decisive triumph of many liberal ideals has also been a period of moral decline and social fragmentation. As a result, she runs the risk that some readers will discern in Gilead and Home little more than nostalgia, while others will view her religious commitments as subordinate to their usefulness in promoting equality—and to this extent, optional, private, and largely therapeutic in nature.
In *Absence of Mind*, Robinson mounts a powerful argument against Freud’s conviction that “the mind is not to be trusted” (105) in terms that echo Ames’s defense of the authenticity of religious experience in *Gilead*. She attributes Freud’s errors to an understandable desire to reject not only the anti-Semitism that Jews suffered in early twentieth-century Vienna but all theories of civilization and culture that focused on racial and ethnic difference: “Rereading Freud, I have come to the conclusion that . . . very central features of his thought, most notably the murder of the primal father with all its consequences, were meant to confute theories of race and nation that were becoming increasingly predominant as he wrote. This is not to say that he was not persuaded of their truth, only that his deep concern that they be maintained as a bulwark against ‘black mud,’ that they should have seemed to Jung to have had something like a religious significance for him, is entirely understandable” (84). If my argument about Robinson is correct, then her own relationship to orthodox Christian doctrine and practice has a similar character. I do not doubt that Robinson is persuaded of the truth of Christian doctrine. I do, however, hold that the use she makes of this orthodoxy—the affirmation of human equality, of the power and reality of the human mind, and of the irreducibly individual nature of authentic religious experience—is far more important in her essays and her fiction than the question of whether Christian orthodoxy is true. For this reason, I see an essential continuity between *Housekeeping* and her overtly Christian novels—all are concerned with the authenticity of religious experience, whether that experience can be described as “Christian” or not. I also believe that this helps to account for her dismissive attitude toward Flannery O’Connor, whose orthodoxy is more evident than Robinson’s but who shares little of Robinson’s political liberalism.19

19. In “A World of Beautiful Souls,” an interview with the Reformed journal *Perspectives*, Robinson casts doubt on whether O’Connor is a Christian writer in any meaningful sense: “For some reason it is not conventional for serious fiction to treat religious thought respectfully—the influence of Flannery O’Connor has been particularly destructive, I think, though she is considered a religious writer and she considered herself one.” Robinson is not arguing here that people have misread O’Connor, seeing religious mockery where none is evident; she is instead insinuating that it is all too likely that O’Connor, whatever her intentions may have been, did not in fact treat religious thought with respect. I see in this statement evidence that Robinson is more complacent than O’Connor about religious matters, and that “respectful treatment” of religion for her means an unwillingness to call into question any religious experience by asking whether it is true. Because Robinson sees as her primary antagonist the thought that descends from Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, all of whom call the existence of the human mind into question, I am sympathetic to her position—but I do not believe that “experience” is the primary criterion of religious truth, and I believe that holding this belief leads Robinson into the error of disregarding a writer such as O’Connor, who is very much concerned with truth but just as opposed as Robinson to this kind of positivism.
In their respective uses of Christian orthodoxy, both Gordon and Robinson are characteristic novelists of their time. Shaped by religious cultures that from the current historical moment seem uniform and dogmatic—the pre–Vatican II, working-class milieu of American Catholicism and the civic-minded and small-town world of mainline American Protestantism—Gordon and Robinson seek to find ways to valorize what they consider to be the best of these cultures, whether aesthetic, ethical, or political, while holding at arm’s length (or, in Gordon’s case, actually dissenting from) many of the specific dogmas that these religious cultures affirm. Both seem haunted by the consciousness that the world has not turned out as they would have liked: as Gordon’s feminist conception of sexual liberation and Robinson’s deep commitment to political (and especially racial) equality recede as matters of felt historical conflict, the possibility that certain of their commitments, cut loose from a commitment to the primacy of Christian truth, may have actually led to social decline seems to be only grudgingly considered. Yet their work is valuable precisely because it attests to the deep attractions of Christian orthodoxy, its staying power even in a world uncomfortable with the proclamation of truth. It may be that until more people are willing to embrace truth as truth, the work of such writers will be useful as a rhetorical model akin to what Pascal described long ago—to make people see that Christianity is desirable, good, and not contrary to reason before they can come to be persuaded of its truth.