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DEMOCRACY, AND OTHER FICTIONS: ON THE POLITICS OF ROBINSON'S NON-FICTION

TIM JELFS

Since the publication of her first novel, *Housekeeping* (1980), Marilynne Robinson has built up a large body of non-fiction that sits beside, and in dialogue with, her fiction. Even before her environmentalist polemic *Mother Country* (1988), Robinson was publishing literary criticism in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, and her subsequent non-fiction, some of which started out as lectures or church sermons, has been collected in *The Death of Adam* (1998), *Absence of Mind* (2010), *When I Was A Child I Read Books* (2012), and most recently, *The Givenness of Things* (2015). While hardly absent from the critical discourse on Robinson, this body of work has rarely provided the focus of critical commentary. Many Robinson scholars have instead tended to use the non-fiction as a frame for interpretations of the novels, which to this day remain the primary object of their exegetical endeavors. For this reason, the recent publication of *A Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson* (2016), the editors of which style their collection as an inquiry into Robinson's "political theory," represents a doubly significant development for scholars interested in Robinson's work. For it confirms how Robinson's role in contemporary life is now that of both an esteemed novelist and a public intellectual, as well as how her political vision, as political scientists Shannon L. Mariotti and Joseph H. Lane, Jr. attest in their introduction to the *Political Companion*, is conveyed "through the themes of [Robinson's] essays" as much as "through the experiences of her characters" (2).

That Robinson might be said to espouse a "political theory" is an interesting enough claim in its own right; the implications for the scholarly treatment of her work are more interesting still. "[W]e are poised at a moment where interest in Robinson's work is spreading beyond literary criticism," write Mariotti and Lane, explaining how their volume is "positioned to both capture and cultivate the work that political theorists in particular are beginning to do on Robinson" (8). If Mariotti and Lane are right, Robinson's work stands in both its fictional and non-fictional iterations on the cusp of a meeting of the disciplines, as political theorists engaged in a "literary turn" meet literary scholars who have, as Mariotti and Lane acknowledge, been heavily invested in thinking through the politics of culture for decades now (9). It is, then, not only with a view to redressing the longstanding imbalance in the critical attention paid to Robinson's fiction and non-fiction respectively, but also with the aim of expediting the interdisciplinary dialogue that the *Political Companion* has initiated, that the paragraphs that follow treat of Robinson's non-fiction as a corpus worthy of study in and of itself. For that corpus, I hope to show, is a particularly fertile site for the necessarily interdisciplinary task of assessing the significance of Robinson as simultaneously one of the pre-eminent writers of the contemporary era and a public intellectual engaged with what is proving, perhaps surprisingly, one of that era's signature political problems.

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The problem in question is democracy, an idea that many had (until relatively recently, perhaps) ceased thinking of as particularly problematic. Yet that “problem,” even if it is not always acknowledged as such, is also one that has animated Robinson’s non-fiction from an early appreciation of Raymond Carver to some of her most recent interventions into the public and intellectual life of her nation, including the conversation President Obama recorded with her in Iowa in September 2015. That democracy itself should be a pre-occupation of the non-fiction, a body of work that circles repeatedly back to democracy as an idea and that idea’s relationship to literary styles, theological beliefs, and Robinson’s own sense of the United States as a nation, is on one level consonant with a reading of *all* her writing as an exercise in the exploration and aestheticization of the very notion of the democratic that remains vital in what some commentators have already taken to describing as a “post-democratic” age.¹ Just such an engagement with the democratic is, after all, why Mariotti and Lane claim that Robinson, like Emmanuel Levinas, “takes seriously the idea that every other human being makes a legitimate claim on us and demands our consideration and respect” (Mariotti and Lane 2). Where I will part company with such interpretations is in their largely unspoken acceptance of the conviction repeatedly communicated in Robinson’s non-fiction that democracy is, in fact, central to whatever it is the United States is, has been, or ought to be as a “nation.” Indeed, I want to suggest (and this is a point that goes conspicuously under-emphasized in the *Political Companion*) that Robinson’s engagement with the idea of democracy needs always to be read alongside her engagement with the idea of the nation, a concept that has itself long performed an ideological function in Robinson’s writing, promoting as it has a mild chauvinism, if not full-blown American exceptionalism, that while arguably vital to her fictional aesthetic, renders her non-fiction in particular ill-equipped to reckon with the inter-continental exercise of power that has been carried out for centuries now under the sign of democracy.

This in turn is significant, I argue, because it illustrates the problems facing democracy and its invocation in the contemporary United States, chief among which are the facts not only that there has long been something “fictitious” about democracy, but also that democracy sits in a more intimate and complex relation to one of its supposed opposites—empire—than we often acknowledge. Robinson’s non-fiction, in other words, provide us not just with a series of entry points into her fiction, but with her somewhat problematic contribution to a wider conversation about (the ethics, aesthetics, and limitations of) democracy that has been steadily growing in intensity in the early twenty-first century.

Democracy is notoriously difficult to define. Two scholars of international political economy recently described it as “recognizable but not monolithic,” a phenomenon that “manifests itself differently, both in form and function, across countries and periods of time” (Jones and Matthijs 188). It should come as no surprise, then, that when Marilynne Robinson writes about democracy in her non-fiction, she evidently conceives herself to be doing so from within a specifically national literary and cultural tradition. Here, for example, is how she describes the problem of defining “America” itself in the preface to *When I Was A Child I Read Books*:

We are blessed with the impossibility of arriving at a definition of America that is either exhaustive or final not only because of our continuously changing and self-transforming population but also, as Whitman says, because we have never fully achieved democracy.
(xii)

As Robinson reminds her readers, for Whitman, democracy and America were much the same thing—and a thing still unachieved both in Whitman’s time and Robinson’s. But what sort of a thing is the specifically American form of democracy that neither Whitman nor Robinson see as having been “fully achieved”? One rather unexpected answer that historians have provided us with is a “fiction,” a term that need not necessarily be understood quite so pejoratively as Robinson herself intended when she wrote, in *The Death of Adam*, of the “collective fiction” of the “present model of the world” (77). For the idea of democracy-as-fiction may well have had its virtues. After all, in *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in Europe and America* (1988), the historian Edmund S. Morgan argued that the idea of popular sovereignty was a fiction invented by British parliamentarians in the 1640s and subsequently exported to what would become the United States. So much the better, Morgan proposed, because “the fictional qualities of popular sovereignty sustain rather than threaten the human values associated with it,” since that fiction “has continually challenged the governing few to reform the facts of political and social existence to fit the aspirations it fosters” (15, 306).

On this view, and it is a view presumably implicit in Robinson’s sense of democracy as a desideratum not yet fully achieved, we can hope that the idea of political power residing in “the people,” that mysterious entity invoked in the preamble to the Constitution, might, however unevenly, be in the process of becoming if not a reality then at least ever more real than it was when first invoked in pre-democratic England: a gradual enfranchisement that has over the *longue duree* seen more and more kinds of political and social capital passed from “the governing few” to “the people.” And perhaps this gradual process of enfranchisement, this levelling, and its logical institutional consequence, democracy as a form of government, is what we mean when we talk about such things as democracy and democratization. A no less influential historian than Morgan, J.G.A. Pocock, has certainly written in a similar vein, encouraging us to think of the pre-independence, not-yet-United, not-yet-States as part of an expansive, Greater British pattern of settlement united by a sense of entitlement to “certain kinds of equality,” including that of democratic sovereignty: itself a fiction—or a “myth,” as Pocock has it, that would be exposed when the claims of American colonists to that equality came up against the more powerful fiction of the sovereignty of the British crown in parliament (*Discovery* 20). The consequences of that exposure have, of course, been momentous in world-historical terms, starting with the founding of the United States itself, an example of what one commentator, writing on Pocock, has called “the fractious potential unleashed by the modern commitment to equality” (Bourke 770).

To view democracy in such terms—that is, as a levelling, equalizing force moving fractiously towards what Tocqueville called “equality of conditions”—is to view it as a way of being together as well as, or even before, it is a form of government. In “The Ethics of Democracy” (1888), John Dewey put the latter point succinctly, and in terms with which both Whitman and Robinson might agree: “Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association” (59). The two are related, but not the same, and the form of government in some sense depends on the form of association. Compare how Robinson, again in the preface to *When I Was A Child I Read Books*, frames democracy as “an ideal”:

To identify sacred mystery with every individual experience, every life, giving the word its largest sense, is to arrive at *democracy as an ideal*, and to accept the difficult obligation to honor others and oneself with something approaching due reverence. It is a vision that is wholly religious though by no means sectarian, wholly realist in acknowledging the great truth of the centrality of human consciousness, wholly open in that it anticipates and

welcomes the disruption of present values in the course of finding truer ones. And it is fully as well attested as America's old-time religion as is any exclusivist or backward-looking tradition. (xiv, my emphasis)

In her characteristically well-measured sentences, Robinson is here asserting the essential contiguity between her religious and political beliefs. That she is a Christian is well-known, and this passage illustrates one of the ways in which what Ralph C. Hancock has called her "brave democratic liberalism" (223) relates to her liberal Calvinist faith. For as Hancock puts it, Calvinism's radical "horizontal expression of grace contributes to and supports the central role of the idea of equality in modern ethical and political ideals" and thereby provides the spiritual grounds for forms of moral association we might recognize as democratic (226). It is entirely apt, therefore, to think of Robinson as having faith in what she calls "political democracy," and as being, as she puts it in "Memory," loyal to it: "These loyalties are either implied by my Christianity or are highly compatible with it" (*Givenness* 159).

Such faith, such loyal adherence to "America's old-time religion," has had important implications both for Robinson's literary aesthetic and her judgements of other writers. It is easy to forget now, for example, the significance of the fact that Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*, emerged onto an American literary scene where the so-called "minimalism" of Raymond Carver and others was very much in vogue. Robinson herself rejected such an austere approach to the management of linguistic resources for reasons that stemmed from nothing less than her faith in democracy. She claimed in a 1994 interview that "the genius of democracy was always respect for people in general [...] the culture supported a very humane imagination of the content of other people's souls [...] There was] a feeling that very much permeates the literature of the period [the age of Whitman and Lincoln], that people are mysterious and profoundly worthy of respect" (Schaub 235). In the same interview, Robinson criticized what she called "an almost puritanical assumption abroad" at the time that *Housekeeping* was published "that anything but a kind of plain speech or almost reduced speech, reduced language, was somehow dishonest or mannered or artificial" (235), before explaining:

extraordinary efforts have to be made to articulate feelings that are very deep and also very general. Those are the things that become the literatures of cultures. The vernacular, the idiom, the shorthand that people use drops away, it's lost. That's what we're supposed to be doing, I think, is saying what people can't say for themselves. Trying to repeat what they do in *fact* say becomes ridicule because it implies that this is really all they have in their heads. And the point is, that is exactly not true. (237)

Robinson writes how she writes, in other words, both with a view to posterity and out of the deep respect for one another and one another's experience that lies at the heart of her conception of Democracy. What is in people's heads, and what is in people's "souls," is of value, for Robinson, precisely because it can so often elude articulation. It is a species of what she calls in "Freedom of Thought," the "apophatic," "the vast terrain of what cannot be said" that she nonetheless attempts to say because to fail to say it "enlarge[s] the field of [her] intuition" (*Child* 19-20).

No wonder, then, that in 1987, in an essay published in the *New York Times*, she complained of the new "minimalist" writing that "[w]hole fictions are now being made of stringing together brand names, media phrases and minor expletives" ("Language"); the vernacular for her is hardly the same as the democratic. But no wonder, either, that she would very shortly thereafter publish a review of Carver's stories that begins with the baldly stated desire "to abduct Raymond Carver from the camp of the minimalists" ("Marriage"). For Robinson's point about Carver, I think, is how powerfully, albeit how differently, he too was able

to tell us things by not telling them, his terse literary aesthetic gesturing towards the oceans of emotion that dwell within his characters but will always elude linguistic articulation not because they are not there but because they are in some way too deep for words, a kind of internal sublime. This is what Robinson is getting at in her appreciation of Carver when she describes what she calls a sense of “bafflement” that is “justified in the best [of Carver’s stories] by the fact that their burdens are truly mysterious” (Marriage”). Note that her language here echoes that she will later use to describe democracy: that same rhetoric of mystery that will shape her definition of democracy as the identification of “sacred mystery with every individual experience, every life.”

The foregoing merely illustrates that very often, for Robinson, to speak of democracy is to speak also of the nation, and of its history and traditions. I have argued elsewhere that Robinson’s reliance on the rhetorical figure of the nation undercut the efficacy of her environmentalist critique, *Mother Country*, precisely because the true object of that critique, the dumping at sea of toxic nuclear waste, is not so much a national as an international problem. Moreover, to frame the case against such polluting practices in terms of apparently “essential” national characteristics such as those she attributes to Britain, the “mother country” of that book’s title, had turned out to entail a peculiarly one-eyed approach to the environmental history of the United States (Jelfs). “In America, we consider it a crime to contaminate the environment for profit. In Britain, profit is considered a public benefit that justifies any means by which it may be realized,” Robinson wrote, a claim that needlessly erased not only the United States’ own history of ocean dumping of nuclear waste and other acts of environmental despoliation, but also important internal distinctions of class and ideological perspective within both nations (*Mother* 23-24).²

The appropriate term for Robinson’s use of and attitude toward the nation in her non-fiction is difficult to discern. Is it chauvinistic, partial, or simply patriotic? When she writes in her essay “Fear,” “I defer to no one in my love for America” (*Givenness* 133), one might recall George Orwell’s definition of patriotism as “devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force on other people” (qtd. in Gitlin 128). Yet if this is mere patriotism, that is not to suggest her non-fiction does not critique the nation and the changes she has witnessed in it in her lifetime. “Decline” and “Fear” are outspoken in their criticism of neoliberalism (or the “economics of the moment,” as Robinson has called it); and of the reactionary conservatism of many of those who identify as Christians today; and even, at times, of her nation’s recent foreign policy. Indeed, reading the non-fiction chronologically, one senses an anxiety on Robinson’s part about how sustainable such sympathies have proved over the course of her now decades-long writing career. In “Austerity as Ideology,” for example, she writes

I have always identified the United States with its best institutions and traditions, its best thought, believing, and having seen, that they could act as a corrective to the less admirable aspects of the culture [...] Yet it seems to me, on the darkest nights, and sometimes in the clear light of day, that we are now losing the ethos that has sustained what is most to be valued in our civilization. (*Child* 44)

If this seems like a change in mood from her earlier writing, as well as indicative of her freely acknowledged impulse to focus on the better angels of her nation’s supposed nature, it is instructive again to consider how she writes when looking not at the present but back to the history of the United States. See, for example, the title essay of *When I Was A Child, I Read Books*,

in which she considers Westward expansion: “In terms of the time,” she writes, “as things go in this world, the policies that opened the West were sophisticated, considered, and benign” (*Child* 91). A longer quote from the same essay amplifies the point:

[The frontier] amounted to no more than the movement of European-origin people into a part of the world where they had no business being. By the mid-nineteenth century, this was very old news. The same thing had happened on every continent, save Antarctica.

In this context, it is best that I repeat my governing assumption, that history is a dialectic of bad and worse. The history of European civilization vis-à-vis the world from the fifteenth century to the present day is astounding and terrible. The worst aspects of settlement were by no means peculiar to the American West, but some of its better aspects may well have been. On the one hand, the settlement was largely done by self-selecting populations who envisaged permanent settlement on land that, as individuals or communally, they would own outright. The penal colonies and pauper colonies and slash-and-burn raids on the wealth of the land which made the history of the most colonized places so unbelievably desolate were less significant here. On the other, there was a Utopian impulse, the hope to create a model of a good human order, that seems to have arrived on the *Mayflower*, and which flourished through the whole of the nineteenth century. By the standards that apply to events of its kind, the Western settlement had considerable positive content. (90-91)

Earlier in this essay, Robinson had explained, “When I praise anything, I proceed from the assumption that the distinctions available to us in this world are not arrayed between good and bad but between bad and worse” (89-90). There speaks a Calvinist, of course, with a sense of the far-reaching imperfections of this world. But it is significant in other ways that she repeatedly prefaces her assessment of “the Western settlement” with such first cosmic and then historical framings. For in a fallen world, nothing is good; but by the standards of human history, the United States is better than most, Robinson’s analysis appears to suggest. This was not an indulgence, it should be noted, that she afforded the United Kingdom in *Mother Country*, although defenders of the British Empire have repeatedly made the case for the object of their patriotism in all-too-similar terms.

Here, what looks at other times like a palpable desire to give the “United States” as the national embodiment of American democracy the benefit of the doubt wherever possible, becomes practically indistinguishable from a secular (rather than narrowly Puritan) ideology of American exceptionalism, Robinson’s careful framings notwithstanding.³ After all, if we strip out the legal fiction of the nation from our conception of the European settlement of the American hemisphere, we might perceive it less as a story of mere migration, and more, as Robinson half-acknowledges, as one of wave after wave of settler (and, for a time, slave-owning) colonialism exerting dominion over peoples and land insufficiently powerful to resist. Forget about the nation, and we might see settlement, expansion, and even the present-day extension of a military and political hegemony over large parts of the globe as all part of the same process: a materialization of what Robert Kagan has called the “ever-widening arcs” of a power that its detractors (and even many of its supporters, such as Kagan) have characterized as imperial. Or, to put it another way, is the distinction between a genocide performed within the contexts of settlement and some “Utopian impulse” one that really makes any difference in moral or ethical terms? Have not other varieties of Robinson’s “model of a good human order” been complicit in other genocides, elsewhere? At some point, the insistence on a significant distinction between the American West and other hearts of Euro-imperial darkness begins to look like little more

than motivated reasoning, a narcissism of small differences. This in turn throws into some degree of doubt, it seems to me, the otherwise sound observation made by Christie L. Maloyed that “Robinson is more concerned with a reverence for human exceptionalism than for American exceptionalism” (195); at the very least, it problematizes Robinson’s own critique in *The Death of Adam* of what she condemns as “parochial” history (5).

At issue in all of this is in fact the complex relationship between democracy and empire, the latter of which surely has equal claim to being the “old-time religion” of the United States as the former. It is decidedly not the case now, as Amy Kaplan claimed it was back in the early 1990s, that empire is a “salient absence” from our understanding of American history and culture (Kaplan 11). Far from the belief “that there is no American Empire” forming, as William Appleman Williams had observed in the 1950s, one of the “central themes of American historiography” (qtd. in Kaplan 11), even a twenty-first century neoconservative like Kagan has argued that what we now know as the United States has never really not been (part of) an empire. Indeed, the expansive exercise of power has long gone hand-in-hand with the idea of democracy; they are both equally in the American grain, with notions of democracy often, in fact, fuelling the ever-arcing powers of empire. Consider how the young Walt Whitman penned columns in the *Brooklyn Eagle* cheerleading the Mexican-American War, or how the somewhat older Whitman hungrily eyed both Canada and Cuba in *Democratic Vistas*. Or think about all that was done under the sign of what Robinson calls in one of her essays the “defensive imperialism” of the Cold War, or else the more recent project to democratize the Middle East through force of arms with which Kagan is so intimately associated (*Givenness* 120). In this light, democracy and empire might begin to appear as mutual progenitors of one another rather than opposites.

Pocock’s work is again relevant here, precisely because it suggests there may not, in fact, be anything all that exceptional about this after all. His 1987 essay, “States, Republics, and Empires,” demonstrated that the political and moral valences attached to terms like “democracy” and “empire” were much different at the nation’s founding than they are today. In the late eighteenth century, a republic could incorporate elements of democracy while also “approach[ing] interchangeability” with “empire,” a term the founders of the republic used liberally to describe that which they had founded (710, 715). Moreover, Pocock’s analysis of Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, noted the difficulties faced attempting to stop (even only partly) democratic forms of political organization expanding to the point where they “lose themselves” in the empires they are inclined to create (300). Setting aside the sense of democracy as an ideal to be achieved in America rather than as something that many of the constitutional arrangements of the United States were explicitly intended to limit or contain, it is surely not too radical an interpretation of the nation’s Westward and global expansion to claim that it has followed a well-traveled path in the history of political power, or at least to state, as David Runciman recently has, that the United States is simultaneously a democracy *and* an empire (xviii). Yet one would not necessarily glean as much from Robinson’s non-fiction, in which it is always democracy that is placed in an intimate, normative relation to the nation, a feature that to my mind recalls nothing so much as the observation Ta-Nehisi Coates makes at the beginning of *Between the World and Me* (2015), that “democracy is a forgiving God and America’s heresies—torture, theft, enslavement—are so common among individuals and nations that none can declare themselves immune” (6). To be sure, one way to read Robinson’s reading of Westward expansion is as framed by just such a fair-minded refusal to deem what she calls “the dear old United States” immune from the heresies of Western imperialism, but another is to view it as a more problematic refusal—or a peculiarly missed opportunity, perhaps—to dwell on the moral and conceptual consequences of democracy’s

relationship to expansion, especially in terms of the impact of that relationship on the interests of a global justice that might aspire to reach further than the confines of a discourse on the relative merits or otherwise of this or that nation allows.

This is all the more significant precisely because the United States can no longer be mistaken for the young republic of the nineteenth century but is as close to a political and military hegemon as the contemporary era has. There seems something deeply unsatisfactory, in this connection, with the tête-à-tête that Robinson enjoyed with President Obama, which treats of the United States as if it were indeed no more than a democracy. Well may Robinson lambast some of her supposed co-religionists for their conservatism, their attachment to the Second Amendment, their lack of generosity as she complains that “we are now losing the ethos that has sustained what is most to be valued in our civilization.” Still, I have significant sympathy for the online commentator who confessed, after *The American Conservative* had run an interview with her in 2013, “[F]rankly, if she really believes that Christian principles should inform public policy, her admiration for the Lord of the Predator Drones is inexplicable to me” (Long). The point is not, despite the epithet, an ad hominem attack on Obama so much as a comment on the imperial power structure at the apex of which the Executive Office rests and Robinson’s relative lack of interest in questioning that structure’s relation to democracy. It is not merely a question of what Robinson calls international “competition,” which she acknowledges “is a questionable value, especially when it pits the very great power we are against countries that are small and fragile” (*Givenness* 113-114). The American democratic republic is, quite simply, not merely a democracy. David Bromwich called it, a year before the election of Donald Trump as Obama’s successor, “a broken democracy at the heart of an empire, not yet tempted by tyranny or overwhelmed by anarchy” (58). Even at its most critical, such as when she writes of a vanishing regard for “the responsibilities of power. . . consistent with maintaining our good name,” Robinson in her non-fiction has tended to shy away from acknowledging such facts quite as openly as a fellow partisan of the idea of democracy like Bromwich (*Givenness* 135).⁴

In a December 2016 essay praising the person and the presidency of Obama, Robinson does refer to the “unacknowledged empire our country has become,” but even there, American imperialism and American global power are presented not as the result of any longer-running historical processes, but as lingering Cold War legacies more or less co-achieved with the connivance of the Soviet Union, an “adversary” the United States “took to be the equivalent of itself” and against which it “created its modern posture” (*Proof* 16). Indeed, with a use of the passive voice remarkable for how much of the recent history of international relations it aspires to obscure, Robinson even intimates that that adversary in some sense continues to bear responsibility for present-day geostrategic realities: “That opponent has fallen away, more or less, and America *is left* with an overhanging capability to do harm” (16, my emphasis). That “is left” makes all U.S. policymakers’ post-Cold War statecraft, all their strategic decision-making, sound like no more than the result of an unwanted divorce settlement. In the same essay, when it comes to the Obama administration’s use of drone warfare, Robinson simply deplores “certain of his friends, who think it is becoming in them to express disillusionment, to condemn drone warfare or the encroachments of national security, never proposing better options than these painful choices, which, by comparison with others on offer, clearly spare lives” (20). The better options, some might argue, start by rejecting as false the pinched premise on which such a defense rests, namely that the only options on offer are and must remain killing people, one way or another.

The way Robinson's non-fiction thus engages with some aspects of democracy while simultaneously failing to engage with others ought to be of interest not only for Robinson scholars but also for a broader audience of cultural and political historians of the present era, especially if we are to consider her a political writer. For even before the 2016 elections, there was an Aristotelian register to much political discourse in the United States, with terms like "empire," "oligarchy," and "plutocracy" filling the air as thickly as they ever had before. This was before the 2016 elections, of course, and it is fair to say that the unforeseen electoral success of Donald Trump has hardly withered the debate about democracy in America. Some on the center-right reminded readers that for Plato, tyranny, such as that they envisaged emerging under Trump, was always the likely outcome of democracy (Sullivan). Others invoked terms like "idiocracy," after Mike Judge's 2006 dystopian comedy, or else what Jason Brennan calls "epistocracy," in which "political power is to some degree apportioned according to knowledge," to name where they fear American democracy is now headed and where it ought to be headed, respectively (Brennan). "Donald Trump is acting like a Roman emperor," ran one post-election, pre-inauguration headline, invoking empire as the dread terminus of the American exercise in self-government, just as it had once been its origin and imagined departure point.

For some, the answer to the present political impasse faced not only by the United States but across the West is and can only be more democracy; for others, the solution is hardly so simple. It is not just that we already live under the "post-democratic" regime of a hyper-globalized, hyper-mobile capital liberated from democratic restraint. Indeed, the radical political philosopher Jodi Dean bemoans contemporary assertions of "the primacy of democracy" themselves, as well as the belief that democracy is "the solution to contemporary political problems rather than symptomatic of them, rather than the name of the impasse in which we find ourselves" (17, 76). For Dean, democracy is just a "neoliberal fantasy," and the time has come to start dreaming of alternative modes of being together that are not so prone to capture by the forces of a digitized and networked "communicative capitalism" to whom "democracy" in the form of the endless production of online content represents no real threat at all (2).

In this context, Robinson's faith in the virtues of democracy offers a radicalism of its own, I suppose, albeit a radicalism founded on problematic ground. She believes the ethos of democracy is somehow essentially American and, in her novels, has made very great art, in part out of that conviction. And yet, writing before the results of the 2016 election became known, Robinson offered a brief and timely meditation on what she called the "fragile" and "arbitrary" nature of the "origins" of the United States' "electoral arrangements." "As resilient as they have proved to be through the trials of centuries, when their value and authority are not generally granted they can be overturned and dismissed, suddenly and almost casually," she observed. "Let the idea take hold that elections are rigged, and popular government begins to seem no more than an illusionary empty exercise" ("Politics"). With this emphasis on fragility, contingency, and illusion, we are back not only at a sense of the evanescence of all things and the moral and ontological back stop of Robinson's view of history as "a dialectic of bad and worse," but also at the revelation of democracy as a fiction—and a national fiction, at that. It is by no means clear to me (nor, I think, to Robinson) where that fiction might go from here. For when she intimates, for example, of President Obama that he has more faith in "the goodness and wisdom of the American people" than she, whilst acknowledging that only confidence in such wisdom "makes democracy sustainable through crises," one might be forgiven for wondering just how deeply shaken the faith of one of the national fiction's more loyal adherents has become.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Crouch.
2. Robinson's fullest treatment of environmental despoliation in the United States comes in the essay "Wilderness" (Robinson, *Death of Adam* 245-254), an earlier version of which had appeared in *The Wilson Quarterly* in 1998.
3. On the ways in which Robinson steers clear of religious exceptionalism, see Maloyed (201 ff.).
4. See, for example, Bromwich's essay on Lincoln and Whitman.

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