NEWS

"A beautiful subject can be the object of rueful feelings."
ON PHOTOGRAPHY SUSAN SONTAG

Pulitzer winner decries federal acts at lecture hosted by McInnis

BY ARIA LYNN-SKOV AND CYRUS TURNER
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CYRUS TURNER / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Marilynne Robinson, the author of "Gilead," spoke as part of Yale President Maurie McInnis' Presidential Lecture Series on Wednesday, discussing governmental corruption, foreign aid and the wars in Ukraine and Iran at the Yale University Art Gallery.

Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Marilynne Robinson reflected on the Democrats' sweeping success in the midterm elections in a Wednesday lecture, situating the electoral results in the broader context of the United States and international politics.

Robinson, who was hosted by Yale President Maurie McInnis as part of the Presidential Lecture Series, gave a lecture titled "What Now? Finding an American Future," to a nearly-full Yale University Art Gallery auditorium. The event drew a range of attendees, including students, faculty and staff. The writer said she wrote her lecture last week, but that the Democratic Party's overwhelming success in the midterm elections on Tuesday had since augmented her optimism about the country.

"It is a tribute to, and great proof of, the power of democracy that what I wrote for this occasion before Tuesday, should seem so dubious on Wednesday," she said. "It is a wonderful thing to have to renounce one's pessimism. I suspect much of the world is enjoying this same disburden."

In her lecture, Robinson spoke about religion and a range of political topics, including foreign aid and the wars in Ukraine and Iran.

"Huge consolidations of wealth and power are not simply graft or malfeasance. They are reconfigurations of world civilization that overwhelm law, custom and, of course, ethics," she said. "America has shown an extreme vulnerability to these forces, allowing itself to be stripped of its very formidable scientific culture, while its military power is crudely and bluntly applied to seizing another country's oil fields."

Robinson said the United States' current lack of support for those in need was not always the case.

"When our country was, by many measures, much less wealthy than we are now, we would take up the burden of responding to great urgent need," she said. "It was expected of us."

As of late, aid has been "catastrophically" cut for "people in countries like Sudan, where there is famine and war," Robinson said.

The Trump administration's recent pressure campaign on universities is another disappointment, Robinson said. She praised the value of higher education in America and criticized universities that have "capitulated" to the federal government.

"I was shocked to see the universities fold the way they did," Robinson said in an interview after the event. "At the same time, I know that they are responsible for sustaining all kinds of scientific research, and so on, so they're stuck in a bad place."

Robinson also said current discourse around universities "grossly misstates their purpose" and neglects their community value.

The value of a college education should not be about a "specifiable economic value," she said, adding that it is this type of assumption that "funnels students through business school and computer science and into unemployment."

A proposal announced by the U.S. Department of Education earlier this year would bar certain degree programs, including Yale's graduate programs in music and arts, from enrolling students using federal loans because their alumni fail a post-graduate earnings test.

Lauren Maxwell DIV '25 '27, a Divinity School student who attended the event, said Robinson's religious writing is pertinent to her theology studies.

"I'm really interested in places where faith, spirituality, art and literature merge, and she is one of these iconic thinkers who makes that happen," Maxwell said.

Maxwell, who said she is currently reading Robinson's 1980 book "Housekeeping," said the book is "gorgeous beyond words."

"The sentences are just so mesmerizing that you want to swim in them," Maxwell said. "You just want to read them over and bask in their beauty."

The "mixture of joy and lament," in Robinson's talk stood out to her most, Megan Ruppel DIV '27, another Divinity School student who attended the event, said.

"I feel like half my class was here and a great number of distinguished faculty as well. The whole row filled out with some of our senior figures and deans," Ruppel said. "It was nice to see a strong showing."

When introducing Robinson, McInnis emphasized Yale's roots in Calvinism and historical vision for a liberal arts education. In an October interview, McInnis said she invited Robinson because she is "a remarkable novelist, and I liked the conjunction of the fact that she also thinks a lot about John Calvin."

After Robinson's lecture, McInnis led a question and answer section. She asked Robinson several questions about her writing practices and posed queries submitted by audience members through a QR code displayed on a screen.

Robinson won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her second novel, "Gilead."

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Yalies urge divestment from AI-driven arms at annual meeting

BY SARA AGRAWAL AND NICOLE HUANG
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Student groups called on Yale to divest from artificial intelligence-enabled weapons, Immigration and Customs Enforcement contractors and Israeli companies in an annual open meeting of the Advisory Committee on Investor Responsibility on Wednesday.

According to its website, the group advises the Corporation Committee on Investor Responsibility, a subgroup of the Yale Board of Trustees, and considers Yale investors' ethical responsibility. Representatives from the Endowment Justice Collective, Yale Jews for Collective Liberation in Palestine, Students Unite Now and the Mass Atrocities in the Digital Era fellowship in Yale's Genocide Studies Program gave presentations to its eight members.

"I'm really hopeful that they will be thoroughly discussed and that something will come out of them," Sonja Aibel '28, a member of EJC and JCLIP who presented at the meeting, said about the student proposals. "But I'm not confident that that's the case based on past presentations by EJC and how those have been responded to."

The committee's two faculty members, two staff members, two alumni, one undergraduate student and one graduate student report the investments it believes should not be eligible for the endowment to the Corporation subgroup. The advisory committee adheres to standards set by the 1972 book "The Ethical Investor," according to its website.

"Divestment is a last resort reserved for exceptional circumstances, when a company's direct activities cause 'social injury'" and when "all other attempts to stop the injurious activity have failed," a webpage on the group's site reads.

School of the Environment professor Kenneth Gillingham, who is the committee chair, wrote in a Monday email to the News that "the open meeting is off-the-record to allow committee members to be able to ask thoughtful questions of the presenters without feeling constrained."

"Members of the ACIR do not consider whether Yale has a holding or not in their inquiries and recommendations, and in general, do not know what the Yale endowment is invested in beyond what is already public," Gillingham wrote in a Wednesday email to the News. "The committee is really focused on following the guidelines in the Ethical Investor regardless of what the endowment is currently invested in."

Aibel and Kaitlyn Smith '29 presented on AI-enabled weapons, specifically "AI decision support systems for targeting and lethal deployment" and "autonomous weapon systems," Aibel said in a phone interview after the meeting.

Aibel said AI decision support systems are used by ICE to "find targets to deport" and by the Israeli Defense Force to "figure out which targets to bomb in Gaza." She said those systems violate international law, which requires discrimination between civilians and combatants.

Aibel said she and Smith did research for the Wednesday presentation as a part of the Genocide Studies Program's Mass Atrocities in the Digital Era fellowship.

The committee's website notes that "when the university adopts a divestment policy, it means that such investments are no longer eligible for investment by Yale" but that adopting divestment policy does not necessarily mean that Yale held assets in that area.

Aibel said that it is a "tricky question" whether Yale has invested in AI-enabled weapons.

"They're incredibly secretive about what's in the endowment," Aibel said.

According to the Internal Revenue Service, an income tax-exempt organization like Yale "must report information regarding unrelated partnerships through which it conducts activities constituting at least 5 percent of its total activities, measured by gross revenue or total assets, whichever is greater."

Aibel said that by looking at Yale's tax filings, one can see what some of the "shell companies or hedge funds that they use are, and then who those companies are invested in."

The Yale Jews for Collective Liberation in Palestine presented on divesting from Israeli companies, according to a press release on behalf of the student groups. Among the list of companies named in the presentation were companies on the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions list, which includes both Israeli and American companies.

Zoe Kanter '27 represented JCLIP at the meeting. She said Yale's investments in companies that armed or supported the Israeli military and financed the Israeli government are facilitating serious social injury.

"These companies have facilitated apartheid and genocide, which are grave violations of international law and have prompted divestment in other contexts," Kanter wrote in an email to the News.

The press release noted that in spring 2024, Yale arrested students who were calling on the University to divest from Israeli companies arming the military campaign in Gaza. Later that year, the student body passed a referendum urging the University to "divest from military weapons manufacturers and suppliers, including those arming Israel."

The Endowment Justice Collective presented multiple times at the meeting, including on divestment from ICE contractors, data centers and the fossil fuel industry.

According to the press release, the group's presentation on ICE contractors followed presentations over the past two years regarding divestment from Palantir, a major AI surveillance company active in both America and the Middle East. This year's presentation also included defense, security and hospitality service companies such as Skydio, Anduril, Target Hospitality and Flock Safety.

The EJC's presentation on divesting from fossil fuels focused on Yale Corporation's Fossil Fuel Investment Principles, which outlines which fossil fuel companies Yale can or cannot invest in. Students said that BP, a company currently approved by those principles, should no longer qualify since it rolled back its climate goals earlier this year. It also touched on other companies such as Pioneer Natural Resources and Hess which the EJC said were acquired by companies like Exxon Mobil and Chevron that are banned based on the Principles.

The EJC also called for divestment from hyperscale data centers, citing pollution caused by the industry. The presentation also mentioned that data centers were already unpopular, citing that "61% of Americans oppose new data centers in their area," according to the press release.

Yale's endowment grew to $54.5 billion last fiscal year.

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