

THE CRESSSET

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Between Memory and History Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*

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Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer-winning novel *Gilead* (2003) comes to us twenty-three years after the publication of her first work, *Housekeeping* (1980). *Gilead* is a long-awaited masterpiece. From the first pages, Robinson draws the reader into the world of her protagonist, Reverend John Ames, who at the age of seventy-six remembers the past as he confronts the approach of death. Faced with a debilitating heart condition, Ames grapples with the reality that he must soon leave his family and begins to convey the memories that have shaped his life in a series of reflective letters, which he hopes his young son will read as a grown man. Set in a small Iowan town of Gilead in 1956, the novel is saturated with both personal and historical memory. The language, like that of the poet Robert Frost, is simple and direct, but, as in Frost's poetry, the simplicity and directness belie the complexity of emotion, the rich poetic imagination, and the startling metaphysical revelations.

Gilead is intensely preoccupied with how one should live fully in the present, with all of its obligations and joys, in the face of death. Beneath the serene beauty of the prose remains a question that recurs both explicitly and implicitly throughout the novel: "what relationship this present reality bears to an ultimate reality" (103).^{*} Ames attempts to answer this question, to locate the meaning of his life, as he faces the possibility of death. Robinson, however, never separates Ames's philosophical quest from his aesthetic vision, the apprehension of life's beauty revealed almost always in the concrete: in the face of his son, the image of his grandfather's grave, the brilliance of the sunlight, the memory of his stillborn daughter, the tender voice of his second wife. The possibility of death leads Ames not only to question the nature of reality, but it also makes him acutely aware of his existence and being, to recognize that "existence is the essential thing, and the holy thing" (189). The novel examines the ways in which our life is intricately and inextricably linked with death, showing us that only when we confront the fact of our mortality can we best struggle with the deepest and most puzzling questions about our existence.

Death propels Ames to distill his life—his past, present, and future—leading him toward a concentrated look at existence. Ames knows that his failing health soon will take him away from the life he has led with his wife of ten years and the son who was born to him so late in life, at the age of seventy. This recognition becomes all the more poignant as we learn that when Ames was a young man, he had lost his first wife, Louisa, and their only child, Rebecca, during childbirth. For over forty years, he has led a quiet existence that seemed as settled as the succession of days and weeks marked by a pot of coffee and fried egg sandwiches, staticky reports of baseball games on a radio, and in between, baptizing infants, repairing leaky faucets, reading Karl Barth, admiring and, at times, envying the "blindingly beautiful" fortune of his best friend and fellow preacher, Robert Boughton, the father of eight children.

Thus, his second marriage, which comes to him in his late sixties, takes him by complete sur-

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prise. He marries a poor, uneducated woman in her thirties, who perhaps has felt life's loneliness more acutely than he has himself. Despite their shared suffering, or perhaps because of it, their courtship becomes as intense, tender, and, at times, humorous as youth's first love. Ames attempts to convey the shock of human love he experiences in meeting his second wife: "That was the first time I felt I could be snatched out of my character, my call, my reputation, as if they could just fall away like a dry husk"; "If we can be divinely blessed with a touch, then the terrible pleasure we find in a particular face can certainly instruct us in the nature of the very grandest love" (205, 204). This passionate love threatens and delights him simultaneously, and he seizes upon the language of Song of Solomon to express the intensity of his emotion in seeing the face of his beloved. "'I am sick with love.' It makes me laugh to remember this—As it was, the beauty of the poem just hurt my feelings" (207). If the depth of one's joy can be measured by the immensity of one's suffering, Ames's forty years in the desert of barrenness and loss prepare him for the fruitful joys of the promised land that would follow in his later life. But we also learn how tenuous his hope had remained throughout those forty years: "I've shepherded a good many people through their lives," he tells his son, "I've baptized babies by the hundred, and all that time I felt as though a great part of life was closed to me. Your mother says I was like Abraham. But I had no old wife and no promise of a child. I was just getting by on books and baseball and fried-egg sandwiches" (54). It is a life of longing, but one without the conviction and hope of fulfillment.

When fulfillment does finally arrive, however, Ames, like the great biblical patriarch, Abraham, sees the birth of his son in his old age as a kind of miracle, one that redeems his long, desolate years of lonely existence. He shares with his son the utter surprise and joy of fatherhood: "I'd never have believed I'd see a wife of mine doting on a child of mine. It still amazes me every time I think of it"; "Your *existence* is a delight to us. I hope you never have to long for a child as I did, but oh, what a splendid thing it had been that you came finally, and what a blessing to enjoy you for almost seven years" (52, 156). If the ending of Dante's *Divine Comedy* can be understood only in relation to the narrator's journey through the depths of hell, so Ames's unspeakable joy in becoming a father in his old age makes sense only in light of his years of waiting and longing without hope, his experience of loss and anguish. His second marriage and the birth of his son, in essence, become revelatory moments within which all of his past, his suffering and pain, and even his death are comprehended and given a new, redemptive meaning. He writes,

I can tell you this, that if I'd married some rosy dame and she had given me ten children and they had each given me ten grandchildren, I'd still leave them all, on Christmas Eve, on the coldest night of the world, and walk a thousand miles just for the sight of your face, and your mother's face. And if I never found you, my comfort would be in that hope, my lonely and singular hope, which could not exist in the whole of Creation except in my heart and in the heart of the Lord. That is just a way of saying I could never thank God sufficiently for the splendor He has... revealed to me in your sweetly ordinary face. (237)

Gilead offers us Ames's beatific vision, attained through his experience of dark, lonely days that make up most of his life. The approach of death intensifies this vision, his recognition of both the fragility and beauty of human life.

Robinson intricately weaves both pain and joy into the fabric of Ames's life. As Ames watches his son laughing in the sunlight, blowing bubbles at Soapy the cat, we, the audience, recognize that the father's experience of joy in this moment remains intimately connected to his earlier encounter with grief in losing his infant daughter, Rebecca, only minutes after her birth forty years ago, and we remember his failing heart that eventually will prevent him from seeing his son grow up to be a man. Ames himself recognizes that it is the experience of pain and awareness of death that propel him to embrace life's joys more fully.

Here I am trying to be wise, the way a father should be, the way an old pastor certainly should

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be. I don't know what to say except that the worst misfortune isn't only misfortune—and even as I write those words, I have that infant Rebecca in my mind, the way she looked while I held her, which I seem to remember, because every single time I have christened a baby I have thought of her again. That feeling of a baby's brow against the palm of your hand—how I have loved this life. (56)

It is this intense love of life we repeatedly see in Ames, and his letters express a passionate eagerness for all that life has to offer him.

Ames does not fear death. He imagines at one point that when he dies he would be reunited with his first wife, Louisa, and their daughter Rebecca after forty years of separation, and the famous words of John Donne—"One short sleep past, we wake eternally, / And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die"—he remembers calmly and assuredly as he sips his morning coffee or as he shelves his books. Ames even thinks of death with a bit of humor. He imagines writing his own funeral sermon to save his best friend and the Presbyterian minister, Boughton, the trouble: "I can do a pretty good imitation of his style. He'll get a laugh out of that" (122). But even this lack of fear of death, or the hope of reunion with loved ones in the next life, does not diminish Ames's immense desire for *this* world. Robinson shows us the brutal honesty of her character's emotion. "I don't want to be old," Ames admits to his son candidly, "And I certainly don't want to be dead. I don't want to be the tremulous coot you barely remember. I bitterly wish you could know me as a young man... I was very strong, very sound" (141). Death reveals to Ames the infinite potential that life holds, but it also exposes him to the limitations of human existence—that, despite our best efforts and ardent protest, we cannot avoid the fact of our mortality.

When we see through the eyes of Ames's poetic vision, however, we come to understand more clearly why he does not want to give up this life, why he desires to hold on to it so passionately. The loveliness of this world, of persons as well as things, dazzles and captivates Ames.

I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its eyes again. I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that... And I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great big dream of procreating and perishing that meant the world to us. In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe. (57)

Within Ames's purview, eternity is never afar, and yet, he is wholly present in and aware of the things of this world. It is the recognition of life's impermanence—the approach of death—that sharpens and illuminates Ames's vision of earth's loveliness.

At times Ames feels as if the present world is enough for him. He remembers the pagan heroes of old who confronted life head on, bravely, beautifully, without the hope of the next world, who embraced life passionately with a profound awareness of its impermanence: "I wish I can be one of the old Vikings. I'd have the deacons carry me in and lay me down... and then torch the old ship, and it and I would sail into eternity together" (133). Like the eponymous hero of the Old English poem, *Beowulf*, who minutes before his death from a fatal wound asks to see the treasures he has won for his people, and takes intense, almost childish delight in the bright, glittering cups and gold, so Ames takes delight in things of this world. "I have been so full of admiration for existence that I have hardly been able to enjoy it properly," he admits at one point (56). But enjoy he does, in the most ordinary moments, like the time he sees a young couple strolling along on a Sunday afternoon.

The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold

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of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair and her dress... It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. (27–28)

The elements—light and water—and the sound of human laughter transfigure themselves into a sacred image within the landscape of Ames's imagination. Existence, for Ames, is the essential thing, but it is also the *holy* thing, and the closeness of death opens up for him, in more intense ways than before, the sacramental possibilities of life. If Ames apprehends the astonishing beauty and mystery of human existence, he also possesses the capacity to receive it as a gift, one that finally apprehends and astonishes him.

In William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, the melancholic and philosophic character, Jacques, sees the world as a stage upon which people perform: "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players." Ames does as well, but he presumes a divine audience. He reflects,

John Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense. How well do we understand our role? With how much assurance do we perform it? I suppose Calvin's God was a Frenchman, just as mine is a Middle Westerner of New England extraction. Well, we all bring such light to bear on these great matters as we can. I do like Calvin's image, though, because it suggests how God might actually enjoy us. I believe we think about that far too little. (124)

Ames, through Calvin, offers us a vision of God who, even as the radical other, remains deeply invested and involved in the beauty of human existence. For Shakespeare's Jacques, the end of human life is "second childishness and mere oblivion," and the world is an enclosed stage upon which individuals merely strut and perform without an audience to apprehend the final meaning and telos of this performance. For Ames, however, the drama, the epic of the earth, would continue in the next world, but he would understand the succeeding saga *only* in relation to the resplendent narrative that will have been unfolded in this world.

As Ames distills his vision of life, he engages in a dialogue—not only with his future son but with his God. It is, in many ways, the face of the other that allows Ames to understand the meaning of his life most clearly. He comes to recognize that he cannot know himself as a finished being without the other, that he needs the face of another to show him who he is. "I read somewhere," he reflects, "that a thing that does not exist in relation to anything else cannot itself be said to exist" (47). Through this simple and intricate sentence, the novel leads us to recognize that, ultimately, meaning is revealed within a dialectic: between past and present, between self and other, between human beings and God, between time and eternity, between life and death.

If Ames is pushed to contend with the visage of death, he is also compelled to confront the face of history. *Gilead*, while it is immersed in the particular story of Ames, is also embedded in the larger history of the United States, connecting one man's life with those of his forebears through a series of narratives that unfold the dramatic sweep of American history: the Second Great Awakening, the abolitionist movement, the bloody battle over Kansas foreshadowing the conflict between the North and the South, the Civil War itself, the Reconstruction and its bitter failures, the depression years of the 1890s, and the two world wars of the twentieth century. Ames acknowledges that human beings are ultimately mysterious creatures, but he also believes that they are essentially historical beings, that "we all do live in the ruins of the lives of other generations" (197). Robinson insists on pushing her character into the very centers of history, forcing him, in particular, to grapple with the legacy of the failed Reconstruction, the betrayals that followed the election of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876, who

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pulled the Union troops out of the South and left the nation to struggle with the horrendous moral inconsistencies of the “separate but equal” dictum—the Jim Crow laws, the anti-miscegenation acts—what historian David Blight has described as the tragic costs of ignoring the imperatives of justice to meet the demands of reunion. These events inexorably confront Ames as he is forced to contend with the painful dilemma of his namesake and the son of his best friend, Jack Boughton, who cannot marry the woman he loves because she is black. The issue of race is not explicitly articulated in the novel, but its imprint is clear, visible, and inescapable.

Ames, like his father, is a believer in peace, but near the end of the novel, he is left to confront the cost of putting the demands of peace above those of justice. The novel’s culminating moment occurs when Ames hears the anguished story of his namesake Jack who cannot marry Della, an African American woman, and care for their child because of the bitter legacy of Jim Crow. Ames, in fact, is surprised when he finds out that Della is “colored,” and reflects, “I don’t know how his father would take all this. It surprised me to realize that. I think it is an issue we never discussed in all our years of discussing everything. It just didn’t come up” (221). The repressed memory of race, the racial injustice that both Ames and his father had failed to address in the name of peace, finally comes to haunt him at this moment. If Robinson’s protagonist affirms the profound beauty of human existence throughout the novel, he is, in hearing Jack’s narrative, also impelled to recognize, as did Karl Barth and John Calvin, the theologians Ames greatly admires, the “Gethsemane” of human history (244), the profound fallenness of the human condition. In many respects, Ames is forced to grapple with the tragic web of history in which individuals remain caught.

Robinson ultimately leaves us with hope, despite her character’s recognition that he remains implicated in the historical tragedy that confronts his namesake. But it is a measured hope, one that is expressed through the love he feels for the land, one that holds both splendid and tragic memories of the past. Despite his older brother Edward’s many attempts to persuade Ames to leave Gilead, he remains. The memory of the place, the beauty of the landscape, Ames cannot imagine leaving because they are part of him. “I love the prairie!” he tells his son.

So often I have seen the dawn come and the light flood over the land and everything turn radiant at once, that word “good” so profoundly affirmed in my soul that I am amazed I should be allowed to witness such a thing... Here on the prairie there is nothing to distract attention from the evening and the morning, nothing on the horizon to abbreviate or to delay. To me it seems rather Christlike to be as unadorned as this place is. (246)

It is a landscape shot through with memories of the past, memories that reveal Ames’s fidelity to place. As he looks over the prairie, he hears the heroic and tragic narratives of both his father and grandfather, the ordinary suffering and joys of his parishioners, the voice of his wife, the laughter of his son, the anguished words of his namesake. And the landscape listens as Ames himself tells his own story. It is this beloved land, for which he feels a physical longing and craving so strong that he writes, “I think sometimes of going into the ground here as a last wild gesture of love” (247). This landscape brings forth memories of the past, helping him to piece together the meaning of his life.

It is not only memory but also history that confronts Ames in Gilead, the brutal realities of the Civil War that divided his family, the legacies of the Reconstruction, the betrayals that have come down to haunt Jack Boughton in the year 1957. Ames’s historical consciousness in many respects is linked inextricably to the healing that emerges near the end of the novel. Before Jack leaves for the unknown future, Ames blesses him, affirming his life even while acknowledging the depth of his namesake’s pain, the anguish of longing for the family he cherishes but cannot have: “Lord bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved brother and son and husband and father” (241). Love and grief and hope are tenderly woven into these words, a blessing for which Ames admits he “would have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment” (242), a blessing uttered out of the depth of his own experience of pain, of longing for wife and child for which he had no hope most of his life.

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In the end, Ames searches for hope in the midst of life's profound tragedies, as did the prophet Jeremiah before him many years ago, who cried out in an anguished voice before the ruins of Israel:

Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?
O that my head were a spring of water
and my eyes a fountain of tears
so that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my poor people.
(Jeremiah 8:22–9:1)

These words convey Jeremiah's sorrow and loss. It is, however, through the experience of mutual suffering with his people that Jeremiah can envision a possibility of hope and healing for Israel. Reverend Ames, like the prophet Jeremiah, recognizes the ruins of a divided nation in the year 1957, the tragic historical circumstance that divides Jack from his wife and son. But Robinson, through her character, leaves us with hope in spite of the tragic repercussions of history. It is this testament of hope that Ames bequeaths to his son, hope that is inscribed in the life he has lived and captured in the final words of his letters: "I'll pray that you grow up a brave man in a brave country. I will pray you find a way to be useful. I'll pray and then I'll sleep" (247). †

*All quotations from Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*
(New York: Picador, 2006).

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