"Right Perception, Right Worship": Beauty and Life-Affirmation in Marilynne Robinson's Phenomenological Fiction

Steven DeLay
Old Member, Christ Church, Oxford

I had the good fortune of seeing Marilynne Robinson speak in Oxford in 2014, after the publication of *Lila*. During the Q&A, I asked her why she had chosen, of all the many atheistic philosophers whom she could have made the foil for the Congregationalist Reverend John Ames, Ludwig Feuerbach? *Gilead's* Ames's own answer is that it is Feuerbach who, despite his atheism, is "about as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anyone."[1] Thus, it is the nineteenth-century German philosopher's magnum opus, *The Essence of Christianity*, that presents the strongest challenge to the religious life. It thus falls to the Christian, like Ames, to account for what exactly, if anything, Feuerbach's vision of life gets wrong—what it misses or distorts—by rejecting Christianity.

In the back of my mind was another question: why not chose Nietzsche, the self-professed enemy of all that is Christian? In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche famously announces the "death of God" and—more than anyone, Feuerbach included—offers an atheistic vision of *life-affirmation*.

Fortunately, Ryan S. Kemp and Jordan Rodgers's *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel* answers these very questions, thereby illuminating why Robinson's literary vision is nearly universally admired. Like the novels it analyzes, *Worldly Gospel* is a wonderful book, a joy to read. In what follows, I offer some thoughts, especially about the book's perceptive analysis of *Gilead* and its claim that Robinson's fiction is distinctively philosophical.

In my view, speaking of Robinson's *phenomenology* is fully justified. No doubt, phenomenology can contribute to understanding Robinson's work. Even more, Robinson contributes to phenomenology itself in a manner only literature can. Robinson's four Gilead novels, *Gilead*, *Home*, *Lila*, and *Jack*, and her first novel *Housekeeping* return us to the things themselves, by showing and describing, above all, the beauty of Creation.

The strongest Christian answer to Feuerbach or Nietzsche, I will contend, doesn't consist in offering traditional theological proofs for God's mere existence. Through creative attention to her *Gilead* characters, Robinson describes the everyday life of being-before-God, making God's presence manifest to those who reflect carefully on what she shows.

Beauty's Profusions and Right Worship

For Ames, and for Robinson herself, the mystery of beauty reveals God's presence in human affairs and his providential hand over human lives. In the eyes of Ames, the mystery of God is visible everywhere, even in

the little, old "backwater" of Gilead, Iowa. We consequently encounter descriptions of beauty's myriad forms throughout Ames's reflections. There is the beauty of "watching people laugh," of "[eating] standing there at the stoop in the chill and the dark," of Ames's grandfather's Kansas sun-scorched gravesite with the moon "standing on its edge," and of "luminous water" pouring down on a young couple out for a walk. There is the beauty of the "way the light felt" on the porch while Robby plays in the yard with the family cat Soapy, of the good childhood years shared by the siblings at his friend Boughton's home, and of Robby's "solemn" face lifted up to receive communion at Ames's hand. There is the beauty of the way Ames' mother rubbed the laundry white on the washboard, of his wife Lila's face the first time he saw her that afternoon she came to his church to escape the rain, of the flowers and flames on needlework hanging on the wall of the church's communion table, and of Jack Boughton and Robby playing catch "in the flickering shade." There is the beauty of the women's voices singing at the ashen site of a burned-down black church, of the memory of Boughton's late wife and children playing in the "gardens with their cats and kites and bubbles," of the fifth commandment to honor thy parents, and of the "other lives" of those in Gilead during Ames's own years of loneliness after the death of his first wife and child. There is the beauty of the "images in his mind" of Lila, of "the sun shining" with "the cicadas chanting" and "the willows straggling their tresses in the water," of someone else's "virtue or happiness," of the love poems from the Song of Songs, and of Robby's "very bright" friend Tobias. There is the beauty "in" the listless and troubled Jack Boughton. There is the beauty of the words from Numbers with which Ames blesses Jack, of Robby's bright eyes and pink and cold fingers, of the joy there would have been had Boughton known that Ames had blessed Jack; and finally, more generally, the beauty of Creation, which, as Ames says, "is more than our eyes can bear."[2]

From beginning to end, Ames's letters scarcely go a page without invoking the beauty of some person, place, or thing. And this list of beauty's profusions could be multiplied if we also note all the other beautiful phenomena to which he draws our attention by other names, such as what is said to be "radiant," "wonderful," "lovely," "amazing," "happy," "remarkable," "miraculous," or simply "good."

This phrase—"more than our eyes can bear"—calls to mind Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of givenness and its associated concept of "saturated phenomenon." In Ames's descriptions of the revelation of beautiful things, he frequently expresses astonishment in response to their excess, surplus, or indeed saturation. As Ames observes, when people use the term "just" so as to underscore the splendor of something's sheer existence, they call attention to its "existing in excess of itself, so to speak, a sort of purity or lavishness, at any rate something ordinary in kind but exceptional in degree."[3] As he says elsewhere, such revelation, this "excess" or "lavishness"—Marion would say "bedazzlement"—strikes us as "blindingly beautiful."[4]

Notably, Ames does not restrict his reflections on beauty's mysterious excess to the individual things of the world, but instead articulates a

vision of beauty that encompasses the world as a whole. This ecstatic vision of Creation culminates in the most memorable passage from *Gilead*, the "Troy passage," which Kemp and Rodgers quote in its entirety thrice (and in part many times). In his most definitive statement of how this present world's beauty is suffused with the presence of God and points to what lies in store in the eschaton, Ames writes,

> I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once 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. There is a human beauty in it. 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 bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole 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, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try.[5]

While the passage's biblical language—in particular, its talk of how we all will have "been changed" and "put on incorruptibility"—is drawn directly from chapter fifteen of St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians on the resurrection, the deeper biblical locus classicus for Ames's vision surely resides elsewhere, namely, in chapter one of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans. Significantly, in what is the only explicit reference to Romans in *Gilead*, Ames says, "right perception is right worship (see especially Romans 1)."[6]

This observation about the relation between perception and worship underlies the spiritual vision at work in the earlier "Troy passage." Although the glorified state Ames imagines in his saturated vision of this present world's beauty derives its theological support from First Corinthians, the very basis of that eschatological hope, insofar as it is a hope ultimately grounded in what he *sees*, lies unmistakably in Romans. For it is there, in chapter one, that St. Paul states that God is known through the visible things that are seen.[7] In fact, St. Paul's declaration is more so an observation or a report, as the entire thrust of his contention is that such a statement is itself based on what anyone, not just the apostle, can *see* for oneself. Indeed, this is precisely why he punctuates the point by remarking that those who don't see (or claim not to see) are "without excuse."[8]

Ames himself, when explaining the heart of his disagreement with Feuerbach, highlights the reason some are blind to the fact the world *is* God's creation. The problem is idolatry: "God is set apart—He is One, He is not to be imagined as a thing among things (idolatry—this is what Feuerbach failed to grasp)."[9] According to Ames, right perception entails right worship, because seeing things aright first demands a willingness to

acknowledge the Creator through creation. (As St. Paul expresses the matter, those who don't see have blinded themselves, having failed to worship properly by neither "glorifying God" nor being "thankful."[10])

In other places, Ames opines to Robby on the futility of engaging in debates over God's existence. "Nothing true," he writes, "can be said about God from a posture of defense."[11] Or again, "In the matter of belief, I have always found that defenses have the same irrelevance about them as the criticisms they are meant to answer. I think the attempt to defend belief can unsettle it, in fact, because there is always an inadequacy in argument about ultimate things."[12] Or finally, "So my 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."[13] At bottom, Ames views (as, presumably, does Robinson) rationalistic arguments over God's existence as ineffectual and empty, because they neglect the fact that Christianity ultimately is not a mere doctrine, but a way of life. Responding to such atheism with theistic counterarguments, as he learned from witnessing his elder brother Edward's own intellectual embrace of atheism, would be neither here nor there. "It seems to me," so he observes, "some people just go around looking to get their faith unsettled. That has been the fashion for the last hundred years or so. My brother Edward [who had come home from his German university with a walking stick, a mustache, and an important title: "Herr Doktor"] gave his book to me, *The Essence of Christianity*, thinking to shock me out of my uncritical piety."[14]

Ames's rejection of traditional proofs exhibits his interpretation of Romans 1. Whereas many theologians have interpreted it as an exercise in natural theology, as proffering a cosmological or causal argument for God's existence, Ames correctly reads the passage in its self-intended *phenomenological* register: St. Paul is not offering us any *argument*, but drawing our *attention* to the experiential fact that we can *perceive* God for ourselves through creation, assuming we are willing.

Nihilism, Christianity, and the Need for Art

As *Worldly Gospel* says, it is Nietzsche's early philosophical hero, Schopenhauer, who was "consumed by the thought that existence was a torment, and needed a vision, however imaginary, of a life worth living."[15] As Schopenhauer's puts it, "[e]xistence is finite, fundamentally unpleasant to us, and has no purpose."[16] In reply, he judge that life's suffering is rendered tolerable only in virtue of beauty, chiefly in aesthetic experience.

Initially, Nietzsche rejected Schopenhauer's judgment. Early Nietzsche's impulse was to follow the truth wherever it happens to lead. But he came around. As his thought developed, Nietzsche himself abandoned "the will to truth," and contended that there are only competing interpretations of reality, in which case the best world image to affirm is whatever one enhances the will-to-power. For this reason, as Kemp and Rodgers observe, "Nietzsche tended to place his hopes for cultural renewal in art. Art, insofar

as it develops fictions and illusions, has a more complicated but less ascetic relationship to the search for truth."[17] Since the Nietzschean "love of fate" cannot be willed straightforwardly—for we "cannot simply decide on a whim to say 'Yes' to life"—we "need first to render it 'beautiful'," which implies that an *aesthetic* effort, art, is necessary.[18]

Nietzsche's objection to Christianity is therefore twofold. It is mistaken and averse to beauty: "'Here the ways of men divide: if you wish to strive for peace of soul and happiness, then believe; if you wish to be a disciple of truth, then inquire."[19] Christian belief, in short, is said to be false, founded on an illusion, a particularly pernicious one at that. It is a fantasy that involves denigrating the beauty of this life and this world, in favor of the empty compensation of a hope for a better life to come in a supersensible world. Thus, it is Ames's reverence for this world, this life—and his joy *in* them—by which Robinson answers, in the very least, the second Nietzschean objection to faith. Consequently, as Kemp and Rodgers say, if Robinson's fiction proves successful on its own terms, the result would be not "just that Nietzsche wouldn't object very strenuously to Ames but might actually respect him."[20] Moreover, if Ames does indeed *live up* to his words, then insofar as his faith "draws [him] back into life" rather than "facilitating flight from it,"[21] he thereby represents a Christian character "deserving of Nietzschean respect."[22]

Such is the strategy of Robinson's literary hymn to Creation.

Truth Through Aesthetic Experience

The key to Robinson's producing a portrait of Christian existence that compellingly answers Feuerbach and Nietzsche consists in its conveying not only a vision worthy of our esteem, but one that is convincing. The matter of truth cannot be discounted, however important considerations of beauty may be. At work in Robinson's fiction, so it seems to me, is a kind of truth that Anthony Rudd, in the context of painting, has identified as being non-discursive and non-paraphrasable. Aesthetic truthfulness involves a "presence"—a kind of knowledge by acquaintance that discloses more than what can be summarized discursively.

An acknowledgment of such truth in painting naturally raises a question: is literature incapable of disclosing such truth, insofar as its very medium is the written word? Rudd's response illuminates how Robinson's own literary vision can convey the kind of truth essential to answering Feuerbach's and Nietzsche's critique of the religious life. He says,

> It should, however, be noted that, although the knowledge that literature may give us is obviously presented verbally, there is good reason to think that the wisdom conveyed by a great novel is itself not paraphrasable—not reducible to a philosophical summary of ethical truths, say. You cannot adequately represent what *Middlemarch* or *The Brothers Karamazov* has to say in a list of general propositions.[23]

What is true of *Middlemarch* or *The Brothers Karamazov* is also surely true of Robinson's novels. That her literary vision brings to presence such truth is precisely why, in order to understand what her fiction gives us to see, we must read her novels, not merely a ChatGPT summary. Not even listening to an excellent podcast will do. There is no substitute for a direct acquaintance with what the work itself discloses.[24]

Kemp and Rodgers are themselves on to this connection. For an example, they turn to Karl Ove Knausgaard's book *So Much Longing in So Little Space*. In this book on the life and work of painter Edvard Munch, Knausgaard reflects on Munch's *Cabbage Field* (1915). The painting, which gives immediate, visual form to nothing but cabbages, grain, trees, and sky, is charged with a profound sense of "emptiness" and "death." As Knausgaard notes, "Sometimes it is impossible to say why and how a work of art achieves its effect."[25] What Knausgaard witnesses, in effect, is what Rudd has termed the painting's "presence," which involves more than the sum of the painting's visible properties. The painting *doesn't* just present colors and forms. It reveals a non-discursive, non-paraphrasable truth, knowledge of which comes only by having a direct acquaintance with it.

Kemp and Rodgers extend this analysis to the mystery of a person. As they put it, "Knausgaard puts his finger on an attribute of paintings that human beings seem to share. If asked to say what *Cabbage Field* is 'about', it would be missing the point to merely rattle off a list of its properties: cabbages and wheat, mountains and trees, yellow and green. These details may begin to give sense of what the painting is like, but they no more capture its essence than hair color does a person's soul."[26] In other words, the aesthetic experience in which a painting's presence makes manifest a deep truth is analogous to a form of "aesthetic insight" by which the depth of the world's things—and, above all, the depth of another human being's personality, or "soul"—becomes perceptible. This is what Kemp and Rodgers suggest is true of Della Miles's perception of her husband in *Jack*. "Della perhaps," they write, "has something like this relationship in mind when she imagines what it means to come into contact with a person's soul. On this analogy, Christian vision is tantamount to aesthetic insight."[27]

This crucial insight runs throughout all of Robinson's fiction. As they note, "While nowhere in Robinson's fiction is a person's soul likened to the subject of a painting, in *Gilead* Ames offers a comparison that makes the point that "appreciating the earthly qualities of a person's life is a necessary part of loving a soul."[28] Indeed, in Robinson's view, perceiving the neighbor in his particularity unveils a "new indescribable beauty," what Della herself calls, just as Rudd himself has, "a glorious presence."[29]

Robinson's Unfortunate Calvinism

If beauty makes available a presence, including the presence of mystery, that is revealable by painting and manifest in our perception of the world and others, how might literature reveal it also? The answer lies, so I shall suggest, in how certain works of literature can *be* phenomenological.

As mentioned, it's not that the work in question is merely inspired, influenced, or informed by the ideas and the thoughts of phenomenological figures, but that the work itself *is* a phenomenological work. Robinson's fiction is a case in point.

Robinson's Christian vision of existence is epitomized by her treatment of Jack's struggle for redemption. Jack is "an enigma to himself,"[30] that is, "a stranger to himself."[31] Jack is incapable of receiving kindness and gratitude from others, particularly from women. (Jack's relationship to Della, and to a lesser extent to Glory, proves to be the important exception or two.) Jack is a social pariah in St. Louis and Gilead. Jack lives a life of alcoholism and debauchery, trapped in a cycle of self-destructive self-degradation, a fatalistic "cycle of repetition" by which he perversely confirms his own sense of being predestined to perdition.

It is worth noting that, although there is no suggestion in any of the four Gilead novels that Jack was the victim of abuse in the Boughton home or at church, his guilt complex, coupled with his sense of being lonely, isolated, and fundamentally unworthy of God's forgiveness, is entirely consistent with what psychiatrists say is of those who have experienced childhood trauma, particularly sexual or spiritual abuse. This impression is only furthered strengthened by the nature of his alcoholism, the spiritual roots of which seem to lie in his pathological need for control: in a "desire for mastery over reality."[32] Again, this could be a form of spiritual masochism expressive of an underlying sense of being abandoned by a God who refuses to forgive the sins for which he must thus punish himself.

Kemp and Rodgers notice this about Jack, as well: "Jack feels a kind of freeing sensation in the committing of a serious wrong—it confirms for him that everything is his fault, just as he suspected."[33] As they note, this "destructive dynamic" reflects that Jack "has felt all his life as if he has been headed inexorably for perdition."[34] He has felt that there is "something wrong with him."[35] In *Gilead*, this makes Jack a "mystery" to Ames. Others, too, feel they never truly know or understand Jack; and Jack, it turns out, is as much a mystery to himself. Kemp and Rodgers go on to claim that the central problem of Jack's life is that he wants to be, or believes himself to be, "responsible for the pain and difficulty of his life." This prompts them to ask, "But is he?"[36]

Unlike Kemp and Rodgers—who in effect answer "no"—I shall answer "yes." Yes, Jack is responsible for what has come of his life. To get clear about why I differ with Kemp and Rodgers on this point, it's important to notice the Calvinistic theological underpinnings of Robinson's literary vision. In my view, these underpinnings threaten to undermine what is best about Robinson's phenomenological vision and its life-affirming outlook, though—to be clear—I do not want to trade Robinson's Calvinism for a Universalistic viewpoint, either. A middle way between these two theological viewpoints, I will suggest, would be better.

Importantly, both Ames and Boughton ascribe to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Indeed, Ames often speaks admiringly of Calvin. And Robinson herself is known to think highly of Calvin's theology. For

Robinson, then, "the problem of Jack" is of central theological importance: in a world in which some are ostensibly predestined to perdition, God's justice or goodness might be called into question. This is why, for example, Ames himself admits that the topic of predestination is his least favorite. The question of predestination haunts Jack deeply, and it is why he puts the question—to Ames and Boughton towards the end of *Gilead*—whether those who *are* damned can *know* they are. As Kemp and Rodgers observe, Ames's handling of this particular conversation leaves much to be desired. Robinson clearly intends for us to feel that Ames has bungled the encounter: Lila herself later gently rebukes Ames by telling him that Jack was being sincere and didn't mean to perturb him. As Lila sees, Jack is sincerely anguished by what he takes to be the real possibility he is forsaken by God, destined for damnation.

I should like to register three points in response to the Calvinist theological framing of Robinson's treatment of Jack. First, the easiest way to resolve Jack's existential predicament would be simply to abandon Ames's own Calvinism. For what it's worth, I happen to think the Calvinistic conception of predestination is untrue. We might therefore conclude that the true tragedy of Jack is that he's unnecessarily laboring under the fear of a false theological doctrine. This leads to the second point. Rodgers and Kemp, for their part, attempt to resolve the problem posed by predestination to God's justice by opting for Universalism. Here I should note that I don't believe the doctrine of hell does call into question God's justice or goodness in the way Rodgers and Kemp seem to believe it does. The doctrine of hell needn't lead its adherents to be callous to unbelievers. (As if they were merely predestined to damnation; only a Calvinist must think this.) Nor must it lead to despair. On the contrary, it should be cause for sober self-reflection and self-examination. Rather than pointing the finger at others whom we believe to be lost, we should examine ourselves with fear and trembling to make sure we ourselves are living a life of faithfulness God will find pleasing. This, in turn, leads to sympathy and concern for our neighbor, not hypocritical judgment of him. The thought that some of those we love may die lost to God's kingdom is a truly terrible one. Rather, however, than denying this truth for that reason, the acknowledgment of the seriousness of sin and the need for salvation in Christ should lead us to do all we can in this life to leave a testimony that might inspire others to convert. (Think of Monica's years of prayer for her son Augustine's repentance.) It makes our time, and how we live, all the more precious and serious.

This leads to the third and final remark concerning Jack. If we reject both Calvinism and Universalism, it is possible to see Jack as his own worst enemy—not in the sense that he is irrevocably lost and so beyond hope, but that he is pitiable precisely because he is genuinely free to receive God's grace, if only he should finally prove willing to do so. Rather than reconciling ourselves to the hard truth that Jack may well be destined for perdition, or coddling him as if he were merely the victim of circumstances, we can view him as a complicated moral agent who, despite his life's trials and tribulations, remains capable of finding reconciliation with God and the peace

that eludes him. What makes Jack a tragic figure, in my view, is not that he is predestined to perdition, nor that he suffers under the false illusion he won't be saved in his current condition, but that he has the power to change that condition through a repentance that would transform his life and redeem him, but he hasn't yet, and may never will. In the end, Jack is responsible for much of his suffering because of his own sins. This doesn't mean he deserves to be ostracized, or shamed, or written off as a lost cause. But we do a prodigal son no favors by pretending that he needn't come to his senses and get out of the pig pen.

Although this isn't the place to press an argument against Universalism, I should like simply to point to a third theological position—neither Calvinism nor Universalism—that accommodates what's best about the Universalist urge (namely, that God's love is such that he desires all men to be saved), without denying life's greatest exigency: we will all in the end be answerable to God on the Day of Judgment.

Ames's Religious Vision and Seeing Jack

We come again to the matter of Ames. In his study of William Faulkner's fiction, Claude Romano notes that for the author, "Writing is a preparation for dying."[37] This, of course, is the situation in which we first meet Ames. He's writing letters to his young son in preparation for his own looming death. Yet well into the letters, Ames admits he's perhaps lost sight of his original goal, having strayed into recounting memories of, among other things, his father and grandfather. "Sometimes I almost forget my purpose in writing this," he says, "which is to tell you things I would have told you if you had grown up with me, things I believe it becomes me as a father to teach you."[38] At times, in writing these letters, it is as if Ames has already left the world and become a specter. As Kemp and Rodgers rightly observe, "Ames's ability to confront the failings of his past, culminating in his forgiveness of Jack, is the fulfillment of his 'argument' with Feuerbach. A truly religious life is always and inevitably 'drawn back into the world'."[39] Ames's religious vision of life is justified through his ethical fulfillment of it. It all turns on his eventual response to the fact that his idyllic "days of happiness" with Lila and Robby have been interrupted by the sudden arrival of Jack Boughton.

"There has been a telephone call from Jack Boughton, that is, from John Ames Boughton, my namesake," Ames writes. As he explains, "[Jack] is still in St. Louis, and still planning to come home. He is not the eldest or the youngest or the best or the bravest, only the most beloved."[40] We quickly see for ourselves before (Ames apparently sees for himself) the jealousy and resentment he feels towards Jack. (Ames himself will eventually confess to his "covetousness.") First, Ames resents the fact that Jack's return to Gilead interrupts the calm and cozy domestic routine he's established. Second, Jack's relative youth is a stark reminder to Ames of his own old age. Ames can see that Jack can do things with Robby, such as play catch, that he can't, fatherly things he wishes he were young enough to do. This leads Ames to a

more general lament that he couldn't have had his family sooner in life, and that he will not be able to enjoy his family for much longer. And finally, to add apparent insult to injury, there is the fact that Jack once threw away his own chance to be a young husband and father. With Jack's return, Ames worries that when he passes, Jack may—like a "jackal"—swoop in and take his role.

What breaks Ames out of this myopic and self-centered view is the injunction to love thy neighbor. He comes to see that he must extend to Jack the grace and the mercy God commands. After praying, Ames finally encounters Jack as another human soul, not merely as a projection of his own fears, worries, and preoccupations. In a passage that could be torn straight from a page of Levinas, Ames reports a "epiphany":

> I realize there is nothing more astonishing than a human face. Boughton and I have talked about that, too. It has something to do with incarnation. You feel your obligation to a child when you have seen it and held it. Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it.[41]

The commandment to love one's neighbor, aided by seeing Jack's face, prompts in Ames the form of "aesthetic insight" that Kemp and Rodgers have elucidated. Seeing a face can help us see someone's "soul."[42]

Ames discovers his fears and suspicions of Jack were ultimately ungrounded. It so happens that Jack has a wife and son of his own. He has not come back to Gilead looking for trouble, eyeing Ames's own family like a jackal. He has come to see whether he might find a place there to make a home for Della and their child. Thus, Jack's sister's Glory's resolution to stay in Gilead and look after the Boughton family house after their father's passing is the fulfillment of Jack's prayer. By imagining that Jack's son Robby might one day come to visit the house and see that he has a home there—that his father has a place that will always welcome him—Robinson reveals a gesture that "is not an expression of hope *for* some kind of redemption; it is itself redemptive."[43]

Creation as Prefiguration

We now can see how Ames's response to Jack, culminating in his blessing him, answers Feuerbach and Nietzsche's objection that Christianity is an ascetic form of life-denial. To begin with, Robinson does not contradict Ames's originally stated advice that one never discuss God from a posture of defense, nor attempt rational proofs for God's existence. That would be, as Ames had said earlier, to engage in irrelevancies.

Avoiding what would otherwise have been a glaring self-refutation, Robinson "answers" the atheist by offering a literary vision that affirms the Christion vision of Creation, with particular focus on the world's beauty and the ethical imperative to demonstrate love of neighbor. This is why we may

speak of *Robinson's phenomenology*—she has not provided an "argument" for Christianity, but rather unveiled the world through a description that *shows* the goodness and beauty of God's Creation.

Robinson's fiction is not a commentary on philosophical concepts. It is itself a phenomenological explication of them. This is why Ames is drawn to write, and yet is forced to confront the inadequacy of his words. "If only I had the words to tell you,"[44] he writes of an experience to whose beauty he cannot do justice. Contrary to Wittgenstein's famous claim that the limits of our language are the limits of our world, in Robinson's view, we experience the limits of our language precisely in seeing a world whose powerfully disclosed beauty outstrips it. Nearing the end of his letters, Ames thus writes, "There are two occasions when the sacred beauty of Creation becomes dazzlingly apparent, and they occur together. One is when we feel our mortal insufficiency to the world, and the other is when we feel the world's mortal insufficiency to us."[45] What these words express is: *Life is short*. Ames, his father, and his grandfather: all have come and gone. Ames's beloved Lila and Robby will too. Even if Ames had had the family he wanted sooner, it would not last forever. Nothing in this life does.

For all Ames's exultation over this present world's beauty, the fact remains that a pall of death would hang over everything were there only this world. That would be enough to be cause for despair, as it is for Faulkner whose literary vision knows no God. This despair, which life's impermanence would occasion, is captured most beautifully by a passage from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. Ames never explicitly mentions him, but it'd be surprising if hasn't read Kierkegaard, especially given his reflections on the passage of time. The passing generations of Ames's family lead him inexorably to thoughts of eternity. Kierkegaard says,

> [I]f there were no sacred bond that knit humankind together, if one generation emerged after another like forest foliage, if one generation succeeded another like the singing of birds in the forest, if a generation passed through the world as a ship through the sea, as wind through the desert, an unthinking and unproductive performance, if an eternal oblivion, perpetually hungry lurked for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrench that away from it—how empty and devoid of consolation life would be![46]

As Robinson's phenomenology shows, this present world is affirmable, not merely for the sake of its beauty unveiled here and now, but for its prefiguration, revealed to those with the eyes to see, of an even more beautiful one to come. It is to Kemp and Rodgers's great credit to have shown why that aesthetic, religious vision is not at all life-denying, but on the contrary, life-affirming. The generations come and go, but God abides. And for that reason, life-affirmation means living in light of beauty's full promise.

---

[1] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: 2004), 24.

[2] Robinson, *Gilead*, the quotations are from, respectively, pages 5, 12, 14, 27, 51, 65, 72, 80, 93, 99, 101, 103, 116, 135, 141, 162, 164, 188, 207, 229, 232, 241, 243, 244, 245, and 246.
[3] Robinson, *Gilead*, 28.
[4] Ibid., 65.
[5] Ibid., 57.
[6] Ibid., 135.
[7] Romans 1:20-21.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Robinson, *Gilead*, 138.
[10] Romans 1:21.
[11] Robinson, *Gilead*, 177.
[12] Ibid., 178.
[13] Ibid., 179.
[14] Ibid., 24.
[15] Ryan S. Kemp and Jordan Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel: A Philosophical Account of Her Christian Vision* (London: Bloomsbury Academic: 2023), 32.
[16] Ibid., 27.
[17] Ibid., 42.
[18] Ibid., 43.
[19] Ibid., 27.
[20] Ibid., 2.
[21] Ibid., 6.
[22] Ibid., 7.
[23] Anthony Rudd, *Painting and Presence: Why Paintings Matter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 46–47.
[24] For a discussion of how what can be said in this regard of a good painting or novel can be said for a good film also, see Steven DeLay, *Life Above the Clouds: Philosophy in the Films of Terrence Malick* (New York: SUNY, 2023), 3–8.
[25] Rudd, *Painting and Presence*, 156.
[26] Ibid., 157.
[27] Ibid., 157.
[28] Ibid., 158.
[29] Ibid., 179.
[30] Claude Romano, *Le chant de la vie: Phénoménologie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 97. Romano uses these phrases to describe the character Jack Christmas in William Faulkner's *Light in August*. Christmas shares many important features in common with Jack Boughton. Translations from *La chant de vie* are mine.
[31] Romano, *Le chant de la vie*, 101.
[32] See Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Ten Meditations for Catching and Losing One's Breath*, trans. Steven DeLay (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024), 85.
[33] Kemp and Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel*, 129.
[34] Ibid., 115.
[35] Ibid., 121.
[36] Ibid., 126.

[37] Romano, *Le chant de la vie*, 28.
[38] Robinson, *Gilead*, 133–34.
[39] Ibid., 9.
[40] Ibid., 72.
[41] Ibid., 66.
[42] For a study that explores this connection between aesthetic insight and the way in which the face of the other reveals the other's soul, see Zechariah Mickel, *The Unthinkable Sacrifice: A Phenomenological Essay on Parenthood* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, forthcoming).
[43] Kemp and Rodgers, Marilynne *Robinson's Worldly Gospel*, 141.
[44] Robinson, *Gilead*, 52.
[45] Ibid., 245.
[46] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 15. The passage's author technically is Johannes de Silentio, but because it's a thought in this case with which Kierkegaard himself would agree, the distinction between Kierkegaard and the pseudonymous author is neither here nor there.