

## Participatory Grace: Calvinism, Pragmatism, and the Ethics of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*\*

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The centre of gravity of philosophy must therefore alter its place. The earth of things, long thrown into shadow by the glories of the upper ether, must resume its rights. To shift the emphasis in this way means that philosophic questions will fall to be treated by minds of a less abstractionist type than heretofore, minds more scientific and individualistic in their tone yet not irreligious either. It will be an alteration in "the seat of authority" that reminds one almost of the protestant reformation. And as, to papal minds, protestantism has often seemed a mere mess of anarchy and confusion, such no doubt, will pragmatism often seem to ultrarationalist minds in philosophy. It will seem so much sheer trash, philosophically. But life wags on, all the same, and compasses its ends, in protestant countries. I venture to think that philosophic protestantism will compass a not dissimilar prosperity.

William James, *Pragmatism* (47-48)

Grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways.

Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (240)

William James insists that everyday things, long eclipsed by philosophical engagement with the ether, be awarded precedence in philosophy. He likens this pragmatist turn in philosophy to the Protestant Reformation. Following along this linkage, we approach an intersection of Pragmatism, Religion, and Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, in which (as in James's argument for philosophy) Robinson redirects the power of grace from the cosmic to the everyday. The figurative language in *Gilead*, grounded in memory and the moments of its recovery through writing, reveals the extraordinary presence of grace in the ordinary. In the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, "In

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbrowne0252.htm>>.

him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (NRSV 1:7). John Ames, the protagonist of the novel and an aged Congregationalist preacher, would certainly be familiar with the Biblical warrant to align forgiveness with grace; Robinson, through shifting the emphasis of grace from the ether to the everyday, implies that forgiveness, and even perhaps redemption, can be perceived in the ordinary events of an ordinary life. Throughout the novel, Ames struggles with both his inability to forgive and his urge to judge the trespasses of his godson Jack Boughton. Through the perception of grace rooted in quotidian experience, Ames approaches redemption as he becomes able to defer judgment, thereby suppressing the call for justice and eliciting instead forgiveness.

We yearn for satisfaction—demand justice. In *Gilead*, however, the immediate urge toward justice—to judge—shades *via* grace into the enduring need to forgive. The call for justice often implies a resort to a higher entity, either secular or religious. The *OED* defines justice as the "maintenance of what is just or right by the exercise of authority or power; assignment of deserved reward or punishment" ("justice, *n.*" 1.) and poetic justice is the idealized version of this justice expressed through fiction, poetry and drama—ideal because its judgment is beyond appeal, is certain. In *Gilead*, we find an "alteration" in this "seat of authority" (James 48). According to Thomas Rymer, poetic justice takes up where justice leaves off, leaving little room for forgiveness—even God's. Rymer, who coined the phrase "poetical justice," writes: "For though historical Justice might rest there; yet poetical Justice could not be so content. It would require that the satisfaction be compleat and full, e're the Malefactor goes off the Stage and nothing left to God Almighty and another world" (Rymer 27). On the other hand, the concept of grace, especially when rerouted from the divine to everyday places and people, opens a door to forgiveness. Robinson largely refuses to allow the novel to pass judgment, just as in Calvinist theology judgment is reserved for God. Of course, Ames's role as a Calvinist divine has led to an extraordinary amount of

sermon writing, through which Ames has internalized the practice of pondering concepts such as grace and forgiveness: "My father always preached from notes, and I wrote my sermons out word for word. There are boxes of them in the attic, a few recent years of them in stacks in the closet. [...] Pretty nearly my whole life's work is in those boxes, which is an amazing thing to reflect on" (18). The typical Protestant sermon structure is based on a laying open of the text, doctrine, reason, and application. In other words, the preacher begins with a text, breaks it down into its constituent parts, derives meaning from this process, supports that meaning, relates it to the public and suggests its use in everyday application. Through long habit, this process of interpretation has become second nature to Ames, who often draws on Calvin's *Institutes* for guidance, "where it says the image of the Lord in anyone is much more than reason enough to love him, and that the Lord stands waiting to take our enemies' sins upon Himself" (189). Like a sermon, the novel often moves between Ames' statement of a religious tenet and his individual interpretation of it, and his exposition of the above passage reads, "it is a rejection of the reality of grace to hold your enemy at fault" (189). However, in the case of the secular audience, we seem to yearn for satisfaction—to demand poetic justice.

## 1

A profoundly fallible and honorable parson in a profoundly ordinary town in Iowa, John Ames in 1956 is at death's door. The son and grandson of preachers, Ames has married late in life and has a seven-year-old son. *Gilead* unfolds as a testimony, in the form of a series of letters, written by the father to the son to explain the father's life, to be read when the son is an adult and the father long dead. The aesthetic challenge Robinson has set for herself is formidable—she is writing as an old, male preacher, who himself is writing to an adult male, whom he can never know, and whom he knew only as a child. Perceiving

and teasing out this relation is part of the pleasure of reading this novel. The essay that follows, while acknowledging that pleasure, will first establish the precedence of religious experience over religion in both pragmatist thought and Robinson's work. Recently, Joan Richardson has expanded the pragmatist genealogy to include Jonathan Edwards, and the essay wishes to illuminate the connection between Robinson's novel and Edwards, especially how images of light lead to the perception of grace. Finally, it examines the idea of prevenient grace in *Gilead*.

Theologically, prevenient grace is a much debated concept, understood primarily as "the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible" (Olson 35). While prevenient grace comes from God, it restores to human beings the free will they supposedly lost through Adam's sin, and in this sense leaves human beings with the agency needed to pursue belief in the Gospel or not. God draws the potential believer toward Him and "on our part there must be positive reciprocation if this secret drawing of God is to eventuate in identifiable experience of the Divine" (Tozer 12). While the extent of free will and its relation to grace is a contested point among Calvinists, Calvin himself writes, "grace, as Augustine teaches, precedes every good work, the will following grace, not leading it, being its companion, not its guide" (*Instit.* 2.3.7). In *Gilead*, prevenient grace, wherever it ultimately comes from, is perceived in the everyday world and in the memory of ordinary events, shifting the location of grace from the ether to the earth of things. Grace and will are companionable, and prevenient grace is understood to signify the presence of the grace that allows one, if one so wills, to perceive, accept, and attain to a posture of grace—of forgiveness and redemption. Throughout the novel, John Ames struggles to grant precedence to grace over judgment and justice, poetic or otherwise.

Robinson's rerouting of grace in *Gilead* can be illuminated through John Dewey's ideas about religious experience. Dewey was deeply influenced by his Congregationalist upbringing, and there remains a

Calvinist resonance in his work. In his autobiographical essay, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," Dewey, usually reticent about his personal life, reveals: "I was brought up in a conventionally evangelical atmosphere of the more 'liberal' sort; and the struggles that later arose between acceptance of that faith and the discarding of traditional and institutional creeds came from personal experience and not from the effects of philosophical teaching" (*Later Works* 5: 150). Dewey completed his undergraduate education in philosophy at the University of Vermont, and that institution in the late nineteenth century "retained pride in its pioneer work, and its atmosphere was for those days theologically 'liberal'—of the Congregationalist type" (LW 5: 149). His thought eventually moved away from its early tethering in New England Congregationalism and toward a fervid belief in social progress—especially in democracy. When Dewey left his post at the University of Michigan for the University of Chicago in 1894, he left his direct connection with the Congregationalist Church behind.

That said, because he eschewed religion does not mean that he renounced the religious. In "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," Dewey asserts the difference between the two, and in *A Common Faith* he explores the distinction more fully: "it seems to me that the great solicitude of many persons, professing belief in the universality of the need for religion, about the present and future of religion proves that in fact they are moved more by partisan interest in a particular religion than by interest in religious experience" (LW 9: 154). As Dewey's thought evolved from the practice of religion to religious experience, he came to understand that "The sense of the dignity of human nature is as religious as is the sense of awe and reverence when it rests upon a sense of human nature as a cooperating part of a larger whole" (*A Common Faith*, LW 9: 18). Just as James insists, awe and reverence, traditionally reserved for God in his heaven, is rerouted to "human nature." (*Pragmatism* 42) It is easy to make an argument that Dewey's early religious commitments simply migrated from the practice of institutional religion to the worship of democracy

or social progress, but this is an oversimplification of Dewey's position. One root meaning of *religion* is "that which ties believers to God" (*OED etym.*); Dewey shifts the emphasis from God and belief to the idea of the ties themselves. For Dewey did not sense that democracy or progress itself warranted religious feeling, but the coming together of human beings in specific environments to make meaning in a participatory way resonates with him as religious, and is in fact prevenient, a precondition of democracy conceived as a way of life, not merely as a form of government.<sup>1</sup>

This gathering together to make meaning holds much in common with religious feeling in Robinson's *Gilead* as well. While the thematic creation of collective meaning is obviously not unique to *Gilead*, the relation between religious feeling and democracy is a powerful strain in Robinson's work. She says as much in a conversation with President Obama published in the *New York Review of Books*. They speak of their understanding of a historical American rejection of exclusive structures of religion and government in favor of a more expansive community, and Robinson comments:

Well, I believe that people are images of God. There's no alternative that is theologically respectable to treating people in terms of that understanding. What can I say? It seems to me as if democracy is the logical, the inevitable consequence of this kind of religious humanism at its highest level. And it [applies] to everyone. It's the human image. It is not any loyalty or tradition or anything else; it's being human that enlists the respect, the love of God being implied in it. (4)

In *Gilead*, John Ames insists, "the root of real honor is always the sense of the sacredness of the person who is its object" (139), and as Robinson claims above, the sacrality of the human being grounds both religious and democratic communities. Dewey in his turn claims that "democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself" (*The Public and Its Problems*, LW 2: 328), just as Ames declares that "Christianity is a life, not a doctrine" (179). As the pastor of a religious community, he perceives a great dignity inherent in its members:

When people come to speak to me, whatever they say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them, the "I" whose predicate can be "love" or "fear" or "want," and whose object can be "someone" or "nothing" and it won't really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around "I" like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else. (*Gilead* 44-45)

The grammar of light permeates *Gilead*. The parallel structure of the passage, its elevated diction, "incandescence," and the image of lighted candles together induce a weighty religious feeling, which, like democracy, is rooted in the everyday individual human being—in "the dignity of human nature," as Dewey claims above. As is well known, Robinson is a Calvinist believer; however, the religious feeling created in her work is less about religion and more about what Dewey understands as religious experience. Robinson is quite clear on this: "it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion" (*Gilead* 145), and "doctrine is not belief, it is only one way of talking about belief" (*Gilead* 239). This uncoupling of the religious experience from religion then frees up ideas such as grace—grace can wander around among human beings, arriving in a myriad of ways.

## 2

Joan Richardson's study *A Natural History of Pragmatism* extends the line of writers in the generally accepted genealogy of American pragmatism (Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Henry James, Wallace Stevens, and Gertrude Stein) backwards in time to include the protestant divine Jonathan Edwards. Her lodging of pragmatist philosophy in a Congregationalist theologian and preacher's words is provocative, convincing, and very productive when considering the force of Congregationalist thought in American culture in general and in *Gilead* in particular.<sup>2</sup> On one level, Ames is clearly and easily aligned with Jonathan Edwards. Ames is a Congregationalist minister in a tradition put in motion by Edwards, who, as Robinson points out in a 2007 essay "Onward, Christian Liberals," led a movement that

“departed in the mid-eighteenth century from the Calvinism its forbears had brought from England” (211). Edwards and his followers preached a belief in a conversion experience, sometimes manifest in visions of God that left one with an unambiguous conviction of one’s election. Robinson traces a split in American Protestantism rooted in the partial rejection of his version of Calvinism, especially “the idea that one could be securely persuaded of one’s own salvation and could even apply a fairly objective standard to the state of others’ souls.” This rejection “was in fact a return to Calvinism and its insistence on the utter freedom of God” (212)—to a theology in which one can never be certain of one’s own election. To claim certainty of God’s intent demonstrates arrogance of the highest degree, is an affront to God. John Ames is lodged in this return: “Well, see and see but do not perceive, hear and hear but do not understand, as the Lord says. I can’t claim to understand that saying, as many times as I’ve heard it, and even preached on it. It simply states a deeply mysterious fact. You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it” (7). Robinson lives in the same strain: “There is something about certainty that makes Christianity un-Christian. Instances of this are only too numerous and familiar. Therefore, because I would be a good Christian, I have cultivated uncertainty, which I consider a form of reverence” (“Credo” 22). If one cultivates uncertainty, then it follows that human judgment is best deferred, “if,” as Ames says, “I am any judge. Which I am not, or ought not to be, according to Scripture” (122). Mystery and uncertainty temper the urge to judgment.

Richardson also makes a very convincing case for the influence of Newton’s *Opticks* on Edwards. The relation between light and grace is an essential element for both Edwards and Robinson. Manifestations of light were to be “understood as the most immensely complex relation of degrees of interactivity on a spectrum extending to the infinite, scintillant degree of God, light, as described by Newton, actualized each and every element of God’s creation” (Richardson 45). Richardson claims that Edwards understood God’s grace “as actual



light" (44). Again, images of light permeate *Gilead*, and Ames's perception of them often prefigures his conscious participation in religious experience, a key component of which is the reality of grace. The images are markers for prevenient grace. For Ames, the realization of grace evoked by images of light consistently transitions from the abstract to the concrete, everyday object—a lawn sprinkler, for instance, which can bring the grace inherent in light into contact with water, the substance of baptism: "The sprinkler is a magnificent invention because it exposes raindrops to sunshine. That does occur in nature, but it is rare" (63). Ordinary encounters with other people, nature, and things hence provide "the chance to show that I do in some small degree participate in the grace that saved me" (124).

For John Dewey, "to *perceive* is to acknowledge unattained possibilities; it is to refer the present to consequences, apparition to issue, and thereby to behave in deference to the *connections* of events" (*Experience and Nature*, LW 1: 143; Dewey's emphasis). To perceive, to acknowledge, to refer, to behave, to defer are degrees of participation in the world. For the Calvinist, one's eye must also be raised to God, perhaps an apparition, but to function in this world, one must pay close attention to it and to the connections that abound in it. Even Calvin himself seems to suggest a like connection:

As the perfection of a happy life consists in the knowledge of God, that no man might be precluded from attaining felicity, God hath not only sown in the minds of men the seed of religion, already mentioned, but hath manifested himself in the formation of every part of the world, and daily presents himself to public view, in such a manner, that they cannot open their eyes without being constrained to behold him" (*Instit.* 1.5.1).

Grace is a relation between the human and the deity, but perception of that grace is made possible by the immanence of God's beauty in the physical environment and in other human beings—in other words, by prevenient grace. In *Gilead*, this process is often surrounded by images of light. In her "Preface" to a recent collection of John Calvin's writings, Robinson writes that Calvin insists "on the aesthetic character of perception. The beauty of what we see is burdened with truth. It

signifies the power of God and his constant grace toward the human creature” (Preface xxii-xxiii).

## 3

The crux of Robinson’s narrative is John Ames’s troubled relation to his godson, John Ames Boughton, known as Jack, the son of his closest friend. Ames as a young man lost his first wife and child in childbirth. Jack Boughton fathered a child with a young local girl and abandoned them. The child later died. While Ames knows that Jack in this instance did not harm him directly, Ames harbors a deep, rather un-Christian, resentment toward Jack for his cavalier disavowal of his fatherhood. Jack Boughton has returned to Gilead, and Ames feels further threatened when his wife and son take an obvious liking to him. As it turns out, Jack Boughton has come home to ask John Ames’s help, which Ames feels difficult offering—even though he realizes that his resentments run counter to everything he professes to believe. Toward the end of the narrative Robinson acknowledges the idea of prevenient grace, which Ames understands as a form of grace that “precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it” (246). In his typical way, Ames then elaborates on the theological point:

I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave—that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm. And therefore, this courage allows us [...] to make ourselves useful. (246)

In the course of the novel Robinson constructs scenes that function in this sense of prevenient grace—in effect preparing Ames to accept the grace needed for him to forgive Jack Boughton—to make himself useful. They prepare the reader as well. At this point it is important to reiterate that the novel is a series of letters, so the scenes reveal not necessarily what happened, but how Ames remembers and reinterprets what occurred as he writes them down to explain his life to his

son. So the reworking of these scenes, even though they appear relatively chronologically in the narrative, is concurrent with Ames's struggle to make sense of his life and his struggle with Jack Boughton through writing.<sup>3</sup> Not only light, but also the act of writing signals prevenient grace.

As do Calvin and Dewey, John Ames perceives grace in the everyday—again contemplating water and light:

There was a young couple strolling along half a block ahead of me. 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 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 as if she were a little bit disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. I don't know why I thought of that now, except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash. (27-28)

Just as the image of the lawn sprinkler joined rain and sunlight, in this scene rain and sun create "luminous water," an image of grace and of blessing—"grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways" (240). The exuberance of the young becomes a baptism on the streets of town, and the everyday is transformed into myth and blessedness, shot through with grace in Ames's perception and in his writing. Ames revisits these scenes in his mind, rewrites them figuratively, and thereby perceives grace in the world, not in the upper ether, as he prepares the ground, perhaps unwittingly, for an act of forgiveness. The scenes embody prevenient grace.

In one of the most beautiful passages in a beautiful book, the young John Ames and his father have searched out the grandfather's grave in an isolated, weed-infested plot on the Kansas prairie. In this passage, the whole world seems a sacrament. As his father prays, Ames looks about himself:

Every prayer seemed long to me at that age, and I was truly bone tired. I tried to keep my eyes closed, but after a while I had to look around a little. And this is something I remember very well. At first I thought I saw the sun

setting in the east; I knew where east was, because the sun was just over the horizon when we got there that morning. Then I realized that what I saw was a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it, as if there were palpable currents of light passing back and forth, or as if there were great taut skeins of light suspended between them. I wanted my father to see it, but I knew I'd have to startle him out of his prayer, and I wanted to do it the best way, so I took his hand and kissed it. And then I said, "Look at the moon." And he did. We just stood there until the sun was down and the moon was up. They seemed to float on the horizon for quite a long time, I suppose because they were both so bright you couldn't get a clear look at them. And that grave, and my father and I, were exactly between them, which seemed amazing to me at the time, since I hadn't given much thought to the nature of the horizon.

My father said, "I would never have thought this place could be beautiful. I'm glad to know that. (14-15)

Here arises in Ames's memory a stunning relation between the physical world, atmosphere, light, prayer, and love among three generations of sons and fathers all embraced by the beauty of the prairie. The repetition of "light" and its cognate metaphors infuses the passage with the sense of grace. That the most unlikely place can be beautiful is a source of joy for Ames's father, and the implication is that any place can be full of grace. In a later passage Ames raises his eyes to the sky:

The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of morning. Light within light. [...] It seems to me to be a metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within the great general light of existence. Or it seems like poetry within language. Perhaps wisdom within experience. Or marriage within friendship and love (119).

Light is metaphorically linked to love, love for both the human community and the individual human being, and "Love is holy because it is like grace—the worthiness of its object is never really what matters" (209). The scene in the Kansas graveyard is permeated by light, the love between father and son is palpable, and grace is realized through the conjoined metaphors of light and love. Ames's recollection and rewriting of the scene serves as a form of prevenient

grace. Of course, moon and sun inhabiting the horizon is literally a function of optics and perception, and the physical reality of the act of perception lends weight to the beauty of the relation between father and son, a benediction by kiss in the strange and beautiful light of a prairie sunset. Ames takes the images of his past, and in the act of rewriting them employs figurative language that leads him to the perception of grace, preparing him for his most gracious act, the blessing of Jack Boughton, his godson.

These moments of perceived grace all involve the beauty inherent in everyday human relation and connection, the same kind of connection that Dewey felt prevenient to a democratic way of life. "Democracy," writes Dewey, "must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (*The Public and Its Problems*, LW 2: 368). But Ames still struggles mightily with his relation to Jack Boughton:

It is not for me to forgive Jack Boughton. Any harm he did to me personally was indirect, and really very minor. Or say at least that harm to me was probably never a primary object in any of the things he got up to. That one man should lose his child and the next man should just squander his fatherhood as if it were nothing—well, that does not mean that the second man has transgressed against the first.

I don't forgive him. I wouldn't know where to begin. (164)

As a child, Jack played malicious pranks on Ames, and Ames struggles to forgive him, his struggle marked by the word "probably." However, the larger injury is one to which Ames has no direct relation—Jack's squandering of his fatherhood. Ames looks up from the page and out the window at his own son playing with a cat, and then, as usual, looking around at the world, he writes, again invoking the light that signifies grace: "I was trying to remember what birds did before there were telephone wires. It would have been much harder for them to roost in the sunlight, which is a thing they clearly enjoy doing" (165). God's grace is manifest in light and love, in the birds' love of light, in the telephone wires. It is found in the most mundane of sights, birds perched on a wire, but this is the precise

reason for its power to transform—it inheres right outside our windows.

Ames then notes his difficulty baptizing Jack Boughton as a child. Upon christening the infant, Ames asks his friend Boughton how the child is to be called, and Boughton takes him unawares with his reply: “John Ames.” The congregation weeps with deep feeling, yet Ames recalls: “If I had had even an hour to reflect, I believe my feelings would have been quite different. As it was, my heart froze in me and I thought, This [*sic*] is *not* my child—which I had truly never thought of any child before” (188; Robinson’s emphasis). But in the moment of recasting this memory in writing, he concludes: “And I do feel a burden of guilt toward the child, that man, my namesake. I have never been able to warm to him, never. I am glad I said that. I am glad to see it in my own words, in my own hand. Because now I realize it isn’t true. And that is a great relief to me” (188-89). His greatest revelation has been prepared for him by his own evocation of grace in the remembered and rewritten interactions between fathers and sons, the touching of the father’s hand during his prayer in Kansas, the very act of the father seeking out the grandfather’s grave, and at least four images of a father offering communion to a son. Ames finally acknowledges that “John Ames Boughton is my son. If there is any truth at all in anything I believe, that is true also. By ‘my son’ I mean another self, a more cherished self. That language isn’t sufficient, but for the moment it is the best I can do” (189). Written images of grace in the common interactions of the world, among people, among the living and the dead, among the light, the rain, the trees, the lawn sprinkler, and the wires overhead, allow Ames to forgive and finally offer a blessing to the one he once felt was unforgivable, the one he judged. In the novel following *Gilead*, *Home*, told from Jack’s sister Glory’s point of view, Robinson writes: “If you forgive [...] you may indeed still not understand, but you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace” (45). After Ames recalls blessing Jack on the train siding, he writes: “In fact, I’d have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment”

(242)—the graceful moment in which he turns from judgment to forgiveness. Ames knows that “the grace of God is sufficient to any transgression, and that to judge is wrong, the origin and essence of much error and cruelty” (155). Grace inheres in the physical and spiritual relation between people, and, finally, it has nothing at all to do with justice, but with the dignity inherent in human coexistence. It has everything to do with forgiveness.

## 4

Robinson explicitly places herself in the pragmatist tradition when she writes in a recent collection of essays: “I take the Jamesian view, that what we know about anything is determined by the way we encounter it, and therefore we should never assume that our knowledge of anything is more than partial” (*The Givenness of Things* 229). We can include Robinson in the line of American pragmatist artists and thinkers, and we can also extend Richardson's line back beyond the thinking of Jonathan Edwards. In fact, maybe we should stop thinking of this genealogy as a line and think of it as a circle that includes a twenty-first century novelist and a sixteenth century theologian. John Dewey's aesthetics seems as essential to this enterprise as the prairie is to John Ames's turn toward grace and to the aesthetic of *Gilead*. At the close of the book, Ames says:

I love the prairie! 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. There may have been a more wonderful first moment “when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy,” but for all I know to the contrary, they still do sing and shout, and they certainly might well. 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. Mountains would seem an impertinence from that point of view. (246)

The image is again shot through with light. Ames, at the end of his life, would fully comprehend Dewey's insistence on the continuity of experience, "the process of living is continuous; it possesses continuity because it is an everlastingly renewed process of acting upon the environment and being acted upon by it" (*Art as Experience*, LW 10: 109). The perception of this process initiates an aesthetic experience in which "[t]he moments when the creature is most alive and most composed and concentrated are those of fullest intercourse with the environment" (*Art as Experience*, LW 10: 109)—an environment that encompasses the physical and the cultural and the religious. This intercourse is where Robinson locates grace. The aesthetic experience has its Calvinist valance as well; John Ames writes, "Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. The 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" (124). Perhaps once relieved of the burden of impending judgment, human beings could enjoy performing the dignity of their own nature in conjoint activity, upon which both Dewey and Robinson stake awe and reverence, not upon a meting out of rewards and punishments, poetic or otherwise. Perhaps we will possess the prevenient courage to perceive grace in the people who surround us and in the places we inhabit. Perhaps we will realize that our lives in a community of others could be carefully tended to as the highest of arts. Perhaps, perhaps we will learn to be graceful.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Giles Gunn, in his essay "Religion and the Recent Revival of Pragmatism," points out that Pragmatism is best understood "not only as a philosophical theory in need of defense but also as an intellectual method capable of keeping open departments of the intellectual life" (405). This includes, of course, the religious life. This notion of "keeping open" lines up in my mind with the pragmatist effort to focus on transitions themselves as not only connections between thoughts but also as essential elements of thought—they keep thought open. John E. Smith in *The Spirit of American Philosophy* concludes that Dewey replaced religious feeling with aesthetic feeling, and while this seems at first evident in a book like *Art as Experience*, Dewey insists that aesthetic experience when cultivated permeates, or can permeate, every aspect of our lives, from the spectator at a baseball game to politics, religion, culture, and even business. Aesthetic experience, then, is not substituted for religion; it is what drives religious feeling, again, as distinct from religion. Inflected a bit differently, Gordon D. Kaufman in *An Essay on Theological Method* integrates pragmatist principles into his theological argument; sounding much like Dewey, he writes: "The finished product of the theologian's constructive work is not, like many works of art, essentially something external to the artist, an optional object available in the public arena to be viewed or heard. Rather this work of art is to be lived in: it is the very form and meaning of human life which is here being constructed and reconstructed" (33). What is being kept open here is the connection between lived experience and religious thought. Kaufman writes that theological categories and concepts "have been created in the efforts of men and women to grasp and comprehend their developing experience, and they have meaning in so far as they succeed in forming and interpreting experience. Their ability to deal with experience—including especially experience of the new, the unexpected, the startling—is thus the ultimate test of their viability and significance" (7-8). Again, in a very pragmatist way, the test of theology is in lived experience. As early as 1892, Dewey writes: "An organization may loudly proclaim its loyalty to Christianity and to Christ; but if, in asserting its loyalty, it assumes a certain guardianship of Christian truth, a certain prerogative in laying down what is this truth, a certain exclusiveness in the administration of religious conduct, if in short the organization attempts to preach a fixity in a moving world and to claim a monopoly in a common world—all this is a sign that the real Christianity is now working outside of and beyond the organization, that the revelation is going on in wider and freer channels" ("Christianity and Democracy" 5). Again, channels must be kept free and open. There must exist in all thought, religious or otherwise, a relation to a common world. On Dewey and religion, see also Steven C. Rockefeller and Bruce Kuklick. Alan Ryan's *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* is essential. On Charles Sanders Peirce and William James see M. Gail Hammer.

<sup>2</sup>Dawn Coleman in her book *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel* makes a compelling case for the wide influence of Protestant preaching on American letters.

<sup>3</sup>John Ames is a prolific writer, though quite a harsh critic of his own oeuvre: “I think every day about going through those old sermons of mine to see if there are one or two I might want you to read sometime, but there are so many, and I’m afraid, first of all, that most of them might seem foolish or dull to me. [...] It’s humiliating to have written as much as Augustine, and then to have to find a way to dispose of it” (40).

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