

**A NOVEL APPROACH: RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY IN
MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S *GILEAD***

An Honors Fellows Thesis

by

JONATHAN DAVID MCGREGOR

Submitted to the Honors Programs Office
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as
HONORS UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH FELLOW

April 2010

Major: English

**A NOVEL APPROACH: RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY IN
MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S *GILEAD***

An Honors Fellows Thesis

by

JONATHAN DAVID MCGREGOR

Submitted to the Honors Programs Office
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as
HONORS UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH FELLOW

Approved by:

Research Advisor:
Associate Director of the Honors Programs Office:

Hugh J. McCann
Dave A. Louis

April 2010

Major: English

ABSTRACT

A Novel Approach: Religious Epistemology in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*.
(April 2010)

Jonathan David McGregor
Department of English
Texas A&M University

Research Advisor: Dr. Hugh J. McCann
Department of Philosophy

Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer prize-winning novel *Gilead* is preoccupied with religious epistemology. Protagonist John Ames, an aging and ill Congregationalist preacher in 1950s small town Iowa, maintains his Christian belief in spite of his father, brother, and godson all rejecting the faith. Ames' engagement with modern skeptical reasoning does not prompt a recourse to apologetics, however: Ames emphatically denies that argument is up to the task of authenticating belief in God. His epistemology grounds faith in religious experience, what Robinson calls "the shock of revelatory perception." Ames has a way of seeing the world as obviously alight with the grace and glory of God. The faculty for perceiving God in experience is not unique to Ames; it is a universal human endowment also universally suppressed because of original sin. Only divine grace can repair one's mind to perceive God rightly. Robinson and Ames inherit this epistemology from the Reformation theologian John Calvin, whose reputation in cultural history Robinson is trying to resurrect, beginning with her 1998 essay collection *The Death of Adam*. In my research, I uncover the way that this Calvinist epistemology is at work in *Gilead* under the aspects of perception, sin, and grace. I engage with Calvin, Robinson's non-fiction, and recent articulations of Calvinist epistemology in the field of analytic

philosophy by Alvin Plantinga. Robinson's conflict with the "New Atheists" provides a cultural context for *Gilead*: The way she understands Christian belief is not vulnerable to New Atheist arguments because of a deep disjunction at the level of metaphysics. *Gilead* embodies an experience-based religious epistemology "for the rest of us," the great bulk of humanity who are neither mystics nor rationalists.

DEDICATION

To Vincent David Robles, my brother. Like Boughton and Ames we grew up together in a place stark and unadorned, talking theology and grappling with the mysteries of life. I treasure the privilege of our communion. May we live to be as old and as dear to each other as them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I gratefully acknowledge Dr. Hugh McCann, my research advisor. It has been both an honor and a joy to hash out the issues surrounding my thesis under his direction. I am forever indebted to Damien Freeman, who first gave me a copy of *Gilead*. Thanks to Dr. Don Curtis for putting the idea of pursuing an undergraduate thesis in my head. My Mom and Dad read to me while I was still in the womb, and their unconditional love and support undergird all my academic endeavors. Dr. James T. Egan, my pastor, left an indelible imprint on my theological vision and taught me to love the truth. Thanks to Ben Arbour for giving me my first crash course in Reformed epistemology. The writings of John Piper, C.S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Abraham Kuyper, and Timothy Keller are instrumental to my thinking. Thanks to David Pattillo, Koby Kenney, Sean Hutzler, Matt Pyeatt, Nick Brown, Vince Robles, Jennifer Williams, and anyone else who helped me clarify my ideas in conversation. Thanks to all my roommates at the Portico and to Jennifer for putting up with me while I wrote this and for taking an interest in my interests. Finally, thanks to Dr. Louis and the Honors Undergraduate Research Fellows program. This has been the most challenging and rewarding academic endeavor I have yet undertaken.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
DEDICATION	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
Marilynne Robinson, Calvinist novelist.....	2
<i>Gilead</i> and religious epistemology.....	6
II <i>GILEAD'S</i> METAPHYSICS OF PERCEPTION	9
Beauty.....	14
Sorrow	16
Light	19
Water	22
The image of God in the self.....	23
The question of mysticism	25
III THE NOETIC EFFECTS OF SIN AND GRACE IN <i>GILEAD</i>	29
Sin.....	30
Grace	37
IV SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.....	43
WORKS CITED.....	48
CONTACT INFORMATION.....	51

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

We were a strange pair for secular Britain, an Australian Jew and an American Calvinist sharing drinks and stories in the Cambridge bar. Outside in the ancient darkness, rental punts bobbed and clacked in the river Cam. You could drop a few quid on one of those, push it upriver to Grantchester and take tea at The Orchard with the ghosts of Woolf and Wittgenstein. I had been there a couple of weeks before, but I took the hour walk through the grassy fens instead.

At the end of a Formal Hall in Pembroke College, the lecturer for my “Art, Emotion, and Morality” class had asked if he could buy me a drink. Flattered, I accepted, even though I had already had a couple of glasses of wine and did not hold my liquor too well. We had walked down Mill Street and found this modern place by the river with a wall of windows. I asked for a half of Guinness and sipped it carefully while he sucked down a cocktail. We talked about literature (his favorite novel, at least at the time, was Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*), and we talked about the final paper I had just turned in for his class. Somehow, maybe because my paper was on fiction and moral education and used C.S. Lewis’ *The Abolition of Man* as a starting point, we ended up on the subject of sin. We talked about the first few chapters of Genesis, that what he saw most

This thesis follows the style of *Contemporary Literature*.

clearly in those pages was the establishment of the rhythm of the Sabbath. The salient thing I saw there was the radically broken nature of rebellious humanity and our need for redemption. He said I sounded like John Calvin, and I grinned. He told me he knew of a book I might like, and before I left Cambridge, he put a copy of *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson in my hand.

Marilynne Robinson, Calvinist novelist

Robinson is as anomalous on the landscape of contemporary literature as my lecturer and I were in Cambridge. She told one interviewer, “I’ve written about Idaho, plutonium and Calvinism, and now a dying pastor in Iowa. If any writer has ever courted obscurity, surely I have” (Hoezee). The book about Idaho is her first novel *Housekeeping*, one of *TIME Magazine’s* top one hundred novels of all time (Grossman and Lacayo). It was published in 1980 to much critical acclaim and made into a well-regarded film. After *Housekeeping*, Robinson took a nearly 25-year hiatus from novel-writing, publishing two works of non-fiction in the interval. The first of these, the plutonium book, was *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution*, an exposé of Britain’s Sellafield nuclear plant. It was released in 1989, the same year she started teaching at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop (Appleyard).

Though Robinson grew up Presbyterian, and later shifted “the doctrinal and demographic inch” to Congregationalism, as she says in her essay “Psalm Eight” (*Death*

231), it was teaching a class on *Moby-Dick* at the Iowa Workshop that led her to study theology, and to Calvin in particular:

[*Moby-Dick*] is so filled with theology that I decided I should read the theology it would most likely be responding to. So I read Calvin's *Institutes*. Not only did this greatly illuminate my reading of Melville, and his contemporaries, it also made me understand much more about the religious culture I had very passively received.

(Hoezee)

This theological re-education issued in her book on Calvinism, a 1998 collection of essays entitled *The Death of Adam*. The essays range from an attack on the reductionist worldview of neo-Darwinists like Daniel Dennett, to celebrations of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and American Puritanism, to achingly beautiful autobiographical reflections. But it is the project of recovering and rehabilitating Calvin from "learned-looking books...[that] indicate in their allusions to him [no] better knowledge than what folklore can provide of what he thought and said" that unites the collection (12). Robinson's re-appropriation of Calvin also motivates her two latest novels, 2004's *Gilead* and 2008's *Home*.

Gilead and *Home* are companion pieces, centering on the same major events and passage of time from two different perspectives. *Gilead* is a letter from 76-year-old John Ames, a dying Congregationalist pastor, to his young son, intended to be read when the boy grows up. Ames takes account of his life to transmit an account of "what matters" (116). The project is complicated when Ames' namesake godson, John Ames "Jack" Boughton, a sort of prodigal with a haunted, lonely past, comes home. Ames struggles out loud in the letter with unforgiveness and jealousy as Jack befriends his young wife Lila. Ames eventually comes to a deeper understanding of grace in preparation for death and finds a

way to forgive Jack. *Home* tells the story of Jack's homecoming from inside the Boughton household (Jack's father, the Presbyterian minister in town, is Ames' best friend), taking the perspective of Glory, Jack's older sister.

The novels are beautiful. Bryan Appleyard in *The Sunday Times* has called Robinson "the world's best writer of prose," and with the rhythm and grace present on the pages of *Gilead* and *Home* it is not hard to understand why. But they are also weighty with grand concepts and an uncommon, joyful seriousness that I attribute to Robinson's theological vision. Mona Simpson in the *Atlantic* called *Gilead* "a beautiful book of ideas." It is Puritanical in the best of ways, like Jonathan Edwards' exultant description of creation as the product of the overflow of infinite love within the triune being of God, made for the very purpose of enjoying the perfections of its Creator. Robinson says in the introduction to *The Death of Adam*, "I want to overhear passionate arguments about what we are and what we are doing and what we ought to do. I want to feel that art is an utterance made in good faith by one human being to another" (4). *Gilead* is such an utterance, and it contains some of those passionate arguments. Race is one of its great themes: Abolitionists founded Gilead, Iowa in the days of bleeding Kansas, and Jack Boughton's deepest secret is that he has married and fathered a child with a black woman. More overtly religious ideas like grace, faith, forgiveness, predestination, sin, and the sacredness of the human being and of everyday experience compose *Gilead's* whole atmosphere.

Laura Tanner has written that “much remains to be said...about the significance of religion in *Gilead*,” and I hope to address the subject worthily in this project (231n3). When I read *Gilead* for the first time, holed up Christmas 2008 by a fireplace under record Colorado snowfall, Ames’ response to skepticism captured my imagination. Jack Boughton, Ames’ own inverted reflection—mean, hangdog, abashed, faithless—comes early to the sanctuary one Sunday morning, and the questions Jack puts to Ames forces him to defend his Christian belief. I was taught growing up that in such a situation, one was to reach for standard apologetic arguments for the existence of God, the reliability of the Scriptures, and so on, to make Christianity appear more reasonable to the skeptic. Not so Ames. The old preacher, moved to tears by a force he cannot quite name, launches into a poetic description of his little sanctuary “full of silence and prayer,” a beautifully rendered account of common religious experience (197). He then deconstructs in the next few pages the usual practice of apologetics, of responding to skepticism with “proofs” of God and of Christian affirmations. This reveals that a different *religious epistemology* is at work in *Gilead* than that assumed in the practice of traditional apologetics:¹ The epistemology at work in *Gilead* sees experience, not argument, as crucial for coming to and authenticating knowledge of the Christian God.²

¹ For a current, popular example of the epistemology that sees “natural theology,” the giving of proofs for God, as critical, see the article “God Is Not Dead Yet” by the philosopher William Lane Craig in *Christianity Today*, July 3, 2008.

² Robinson wrote me in an e-mail that her qualms with apologetics do in fact lay at the level of epistemology: “I do tend to believe there is a problem with apologetics, a category mistake. A false model of knowledge and belief as they have God as their subject.”

***Gilead* and religious epistemology**

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy dealing with knowledge. Epistemologists ask questions like: What is knowledge? How do we come to know things? Do we actually know anything at all? Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* stands out as one of the most famous and critical epistemological projects in Western philosophy. Descartes determined to doubt (in his view) everything that could be doubted, stripping away whole classes of beliefs by calling his faculties of sense perception and mathematical reasoning into question, arriving finally at one indubitable truth: "I think, therefore I am." From this foundation, Descartes attempted to reconstruct human knowledge. Criticisms of his dubiously successful rebuilding method, and criticisms of the criticisms, are the story of modern Western epistemology. In the last fifty years, the British and American analytic tradition of epistemology has paid particular attention to the problem of "justification": Under what circumstances is a person entitled to hold a particular belief? What makes a person justified, or rational, in believing something?

Religious epistemology concerns religious knowledge. The questions here are more specific: Is God knowable? How do we come to have knowledge of God? What entitles a person to religious beliefs? Is belief in God ever justified, and under what circumstances? In the Western tradition, these questions have often been aimed at Christian beliefs and the Christian God. Religious epistemology looms very large in *Gilead*, and takes up quite a bit of Ames' discourse in his letter to his son. "There are two insidious notions," he writes, "from the point of view of Christianity in the modern

world...One is that religion and religious experience are illusions of some sort (Feuerbach, Freud, etc.), and the other is that religion itself is real, but *your* belief that *you* participate in is an illusion” (165). These “two insidious notions” raise the questions of what makes belief rational and how one comes to knowledge of God. But Ames does not answer them the way one might expect, by reaching for apologetic arguments to display the reasonableness of Christianity. “And they want me to defend religion, and they want me to give them ‘proofs.’ I just won’t do it...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,” he says, emphatically denying that argument is up to the task of either justifying or invalidating religious belief (202-203). Rather, “it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion, for the purposes of the individual believer” (165-166).

Defusing modern skeptical reasoning is central to Ames’ project of transmitting the truths of life to his son. He writes, “Many of the attacks on belief that have had such prestige for the last century or two are in fact meaningless. I must tell *you* [his son] this, because everything else I have told you...loses almost all its meaning and its right to attention if this is not established” (164). But rather than reaching for argument, as might be expected, Ames grounds his defense of Christianity in religious experience. What can Robinson mean by this? How does religious epistemology work in *Gilead*? And why write about this in our current cultural moment? These questions drive the burden of my research. In this thesis, I explicate the religious epistemology of *Gilead* according to a

framework of perception, sin, and grace, the three concepts from Calvin's theology that Virginia Tech English Professor Thomas Gardner identifies as shaping Robinson's "literary vision" (1). As I do this, I situate *Gilead* in the tradition of Calvinist epistemology through engagement with Calvin, Robinson's non-fiction, and a recent articulation of Calvinist epistemology in the field of analytic philosophy by Alvin Plantinga. Finally, I draw my own conclusions about the success of Robinson's project and tease out some of *Gilead*'s implications, as well as offering some suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER II

GILEAD'S METAPHYSICS OF PERCEPTION

For Marilynne Robinson, epistemology is inextricably bound up with metaphysics. That is to say that the questions of what we know and how we know it (epistemological questions) can only be answered in the context of a conception of what exists or what the world is like (metaphysical conceptions). She writes in the introduction to *The Death of Adam*:

It all comes down to the mystery of the relationship between the mind and the cosmos. Those who would employ reductive definitions of...reality credit their own perceptions of truth with fundamentalist simple-heartedness.... Is it not in fact a very naive conception of reality, and of its accessibility to human understanding, that would exclude so much of what human beings have always found meaningful, as if by this means fallibility or error or delusion could be localized and rejected?

(3)

Robinson has in mind here neo-Darwinists like Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, who apply natural selection willy-nilly as a theory of everything from economics to cultural phenomena to morals and decry religion as the primary source of human misery and error.³ Dawkins, for example, proposes that religion is the unfortunate by-product of our otherwise helpful adaptations, like a tendency to obey and believe our elders or to fall in love (*Delusion* 200-217). Psychological facts about the similarity of religious belief to trusting our elders or falling in love cannot, of course, prove a causal relationship between the processes. Furthermore, explaining away religion with such

³ See, for example, Dawkins' neo-Darwinian explanation of morality in *The God Delusion* 245-254.

facts presupposes a metaphysic of stark naturalism—a conception of “the relationship between the mind and the cosmos” based on mere genetic survival that actually denies the mind any robust reality. It is important to note that naturalism is *presupposed* by Dawkins, not demonstrated or argued for. How could one hope to prove such a thing as naturalism, that nothing non-physical exists?⁴ But more on this in Chapter IV, where I will further consider the confrontation between Robinson and the New Atheists. Suffice it to say, for now, that an epistemology implies a metaphysic, and Robinson gets both from John Calvin.⁵

Robinson expresses her sense of Calvin’s metaphysics and its bearing on his epistemology in her preface to *John Calvin: Steward of God’s Covenant*. From Calvin’s *Institutes* she gathers a definite conception of the mind’s relation to the cosmos and, even more, its relationship to the Creator of the cosmos and of itself: “It is as if we were to find a tender solicitude toward us in the fact that the great energy that rips galaxies apart also animates our slightest thoughts...The first assertion of Calvin’s theology, both in order and in centrality, is the continuous, unmediated character of the relationship between God and any human soul” (xvi-xvii). This is Robinson’s Calvinist metaphysic; it is a conception of the way things are. The world is made for human beings to live and perceive and know in, however limited our knowledge may be, and the primary thing that we experience and know is the immediate presence of God.

⁴ Indeed, how could one *prove* any metaphysic?

⁵ “The religious epistemology in *Gilead* expresses my understanding of Calvin,” Robinson wrote me in an e-mail.

Calvin never pauses to dignify the question of the existence of God. To him God is simply manifest.... Calvin's implicit reply to those who denounced the subjectivism of the beliefs he defended is that God himself chooses to engage human consciousness thus intimately, that to do so is his being toward us, and that to feel the presence and the meaning of his attention is our being toward him. It is important to note that this is a metaphysics consistently explored and developed throughout Calvin's writing. And it is an epistemology.

(xx-xxi)

This metaphysic puts "the felt experiences of individual knowing and perceiving," what she deems "the basis of [Calvin's] theology and of his metaphysics," front and center for Robinson's own religious epistemology (xii). In an interview, Robinson argues from Calvin's relational metaphysics, in which "the omnipotence of God is understood by him as, so to speak, the dynamic of being, the continuous recreation that continuously expresses the being of God," to an understanding of "experience as encounter" (Hoezee). Because everything that exists expresses the being of God, we are continuously confronting Him, unavoidably encountering Him in every experience. Robinson says that this leads to asking of our experience, "What am I being given to see, to understand?" In other words, it leads us to perception. We might best organize it like this: Human beings primarily come to knowledge of God through the felt experience of perceiving His presence in themselves, in the world, and in other people.⁶

⁶ In the Hoezee interview, Robinson connects Calvin's metaphysics to the doctrine of the *imago Dei*: "Any person one encounters is an image of God...with all it implies about the astonishing privilege of being given the occasion to encounter such an image, and to honor and comfort. This...is central to Calvin's metaphysics of encounter." This shows how Calvin's theology holds together not only metaphysics and epistemology, but ethics, too, as inextricable. Encountering another human being and perceiving in them the image of God implies the responsibility to honor and to comfort. I think this ability to hold the three major branches of philosophical thought in an organic unity is something like what Robinson had in mind when she offered the explanatory power of "major theology" as a reason for her faith: "The scale of thinking and the power of integration that [major theologians] are capable of from thinking in that scale is something that is really unique to theology. Given the assumptions that theologians proceed from, they are so much more capable of making meaningful articulations about what things are, what it is to exist, the experience of moral life, and so on....Nothing else touches it" (Abernathy).

John Ames, the narrator of *Gilead*, has a keen sense of metaphysics about him, too. He quotes George Herbert's "For Preservation is a Creation, and more, it is a continued Creation, and a Creation every moment" with approval, which harkens back to Robinson's idea of a "continuous recreation that continuously expresses the being of God" (126). He is always going on about "existence" and "Being," as in this passage: "I have been thinking about existence lately. In fact, I have been so full of admiration for existence that I have hardly been able to enjoy it properly" (64). And again, later in the book:

We participate in Being without remainder. No breath, no thought, no wart or whisker, is not as sunk in Being as it could be. And yet no one can say what Being is. If you describe what a thought and a whisker have in common, and a typhoon and a rise in the stock market, excluding "existence," which merely restates the fact that they have a place on our list of known and nameable things (and which would yield as insight: being equals existence!), you would have accomplished a wonderful thing, still too partial in an infinite degree to have any meaning, however.

(203)

This is the literary expression of Robinson's Calvinist vision of a world shot through with the wonder of God. And as we might expect, given Robinson's notion of the intertwined-ness of metaphysics and epistemology, *Gilead*'s conception of the knowledge of God follows suit. The very passage just quoted is part of Ames' argument against "proofs" of God.

Laura Tanner, in her article "'Looking Back from the Grave': Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*," writes that "reviewers

who read *Gilead* as a celebration of the force of human consciousness in the face of death located the novel's power not just in its philosophical and religious vision but in its immersion in the sensory details of lived experience" (228). Tanner thinks that Ames renders sense experience so powerfully because of "how dying shapes the sensory and psychological dynamics of human perception," and she employs neuroscience research to illustrate her point. Unquestionably this kind of thing is going on in *Gilead*; impending death and the prospect of the next world sharpen Ames' experience of this one. "When you read this," he writes to his son, "I am imperishable...not waiting for you, though, because I want your dear perishable self to live long and to love this poor perishable world, which I somehow cannot imagine not missing bitterly" (60-61). But I think Tanner puts up a false dichotomy between *Gilead*'s "philosophical and religious vision" and its "immersion in the sensory details of lived experience." It is rather *Gilead*'s Calvinist epistemology, founded on its Calvinist metaphysics, that lends the novel its intense perceptive force, however heightened by Ames' approaching death. Robinson told *The Paris Review*, "One Calvinist notion deeply implanted in me is that there are two sides to your encounter with the world. You don't simply perceive something that is statically present, but in fact there is a visionary quality to all experience. It means something because it is addressed to *you*.... You can draw from perception the same way a mystic would draw from a vision" (Fay). The question remains, what is the other side of Ames' perception? What is it in his perceptual experience that marks the world as burdened with the presence of God?

Beauty

The beauty of the world deeply impresses Ames. He speaks rapturously of his son:

“Your hair is straight and dark, and your skin is very fair. I suppose you’re not prettier than most children. You’re just a nice-looking boy, a bit slight, well scrubbed and well mannered. All that is fine, but it’s your existence I love you for, mainly. Existence seems to me now the most remarkable thing that could ever be imagined” (60). The particulars of sense perception, his son’s features, move Ames to a sense of the goodness of Being in general, of all creation. Even a non-human collage of late-summer imagery receives a loving aesthetic treatment from Ames’ pen.

Oh, these late, strange riches of the summer, these slab-sided pumpkins and preposterous zucchinis. Every wind brings a hail of acorns against the roof. Still, it is mild. For a while the spiders were building webs everywhere, and now those webs are all blown to shreds and tatters, so I suppose we can imagine well-fed spiders tucked up in the detritus of old leaves, drowsing away the very thought of toil.

(218)

Andrew Brown writes in *The Guardian*, “The link between joy and beauty and the apprehension of God is one which is very vivid in Robinson.... ‘One of the things that has really struck me, reading Calvin,’ she said then, ‘is what a strong sense he has that the aesthetic is the signature of the divine.’”

Ames’ worldview is so infused with this idea that he apes Calvin in his description. Take a look at this passage from Calvin’s *Institutes*: “And, first, wherever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty; while it is impossible to contemplate the vast and beautiful fabric as it

extends around, without being overwhelmed by the immense weight of glory” (51). Now compare that with this passage from *Gilead*: “Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?” (280) Ames follows Calvin in his sense that it is the glory of God that addresses him in the beauty of creation, the aesthetic quality of all existence.

But how does this work? It could be a kind of sneaky teleological argument, running something like this: The beauty and complexity of Creation betrays intentionality. Intentionality must be the product of a willful Mind. A Mind great enough to conceive the order and beauty of galaxies must be very great indeed. This vastly intelligent, powerful, and creative Mind we call God.⁷ An argument like that, however, is not at all what Robinson intends. She writes, “To say that the order of nature reveals divine intent is one thing, and to say that the beauty that floods our senses has the meaning of vision and revelation is another.... The beauty of what we see is burdened with truth. It signifies the power of God and his constant grace toward the human creature. It signifies the address of God to the individual human consciousness” (*John Calvin: Steward* xx, xxii). God’s presence is manifest in the beauty of what exists; His presence is not something that must be argued for. The human mind directly perceives His existence because He reveals Himself in created things.

⁷ This argument inspired by Plantinga, “Religious” 425.

Sorrow

Ames' sense of the beauty of the world is no naiveté. Robinson reckons seriously with human misery, and that does nothing to diminish the world's beauty. Sorrow would not be so heavy with meaning if it were not among such lovely creations of God. Ames says toward the end of *Gilead*,

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. Augustine says the Lord loves each of us as an only child, and that has to be true. "He will wipe the tears from all faces." It takes nothing from the loveliness of the verse to say that is exactly what will be required.

(280)

Neither does sorrow work against the perception of God's presence. Rather, sorrow tends to turn the mind to God. This is most powerfully illustrated in *Gilead* by a story Ames recalls from his childhood.

At the end of a long drought, the Baptist church was struck by lightning, and Ames' father was helping tear it down in a heavy rain. He gave Ames, who had taken shelter under a wagon with the other children, a piece of ashy biscuit for his lunch, and then all the workers broke out in singing "Beneath the Cross of Jesus." Ames calls the biscuit "the bread of affliction" and associates it with the Eucharist. "The bitterness of that morsel has meant other things to me as the years passed.... Sorrow seems to me to be a great part of the substance of human life," he writes (pp.117-18). A few pages later, he brings up the ashy biscuit again:

These days there are so many people who think loyalty to religion is benighted, if it is not worse than benighted.... And I know, too, that my own experience of the

church has been, in many senses, sheltered and parochial. In every sense, unless it really is a universal and transcendent life, unless the bread is the bread and the cup is the cup everywhere, in all circumstances, and it is a time with the Lord in Gethsemane that comes for everyone, as I deeply believe. That biscuit ashy from my father's hand. It all means more than I can tell you. So you must not judge what I know by what I find words for. If I could only give you what my father gave me. No, what the Lord has given me and must also give you. But I hope you will put yourself in the way of the gift.

(130)

The bread of Communion is the bread of affliction, and the encounter with God in the sacrament, or in the rain with his father, is a time in Gethsemane, the place of Christ's agony. And this experience of sorrow becomes the occasion of the gift of faith⁸ that creates loyalty to the Christian religion.

Laura Tanner writes that this scene reveals "an emotional truth which emerges through the textured specificity of embodied experience: Ames's recollection of joy and sadness is immersed in the feel of rain, the sight of steam rising...and, most importantly, the touch of his father's body on his own preserved in the transfer of a biscuit blackened by his father's 'scorched hand'" (230). I am not sure what Tanner means by an "emotional truth." That phrase sounds like she wants to trap Ames within his own head. What Ames encounters in the particularity of his embodied experience is not merely his own emotions but reality, Being itself. Even more, Ames experiences how *ultimate* reality, God the author of Being, discloses Himself in the perception of joy and sorrow in created reality. One Sunday when his congregation takes Communion, Ames decides to preach on the institution of the sacrament. "I have been thinking a great deal about the

⁸ Robinson and Ames both, in line with Calvin, conceive of faith, not so much as a willful act of assent, but as a God-given ability to trust.

body these last weeks. Blessed and broken.... I wanted to talk about the gift of physical particularity and how blessing and sacrament are mediated through it. I have been thinking lately how I have loved my physical life” (79). At the end of the service, at his wife’s behest and against usual practice, he administers the sacrament to his young son, just as his father fed him the ashy biscuit. “Body of Christ, broken for you. Blood of Christ, shed for you.... They are the most wonderful mystery, body and blood.”

To those who would think that the experience of sorrow militates against, rather than for, the existence of God, Robinson writes,

Those of us who live our lives in relative security have difficulty understanding how overpowering assertions of faith will arise from precisely those extremes of trial and grief we might assume would instead raise questions about the goodness of God, or about his very existence. We must assume that our experience, fortunate as we are in it, nevertheless limits our understanding of most human experience.

(John Calvin: Steward xiv)

Indeed, Calvin thinks that our experience of misery gives us *knowledge* of God. “For as there exists in man something like a world of misery, and ever since we were stript of the divine attire our naked shame discloses an immense series of disgraceful properties, every man, being stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness, in this way necessarily obtains at least some knowledge of God” (*Institutes* 38). Ames’ encounter with sorrow in the world turns his mind reflexively to the source of blessedness, the author of the world’s beauty, the God who, in Christ at Gethsemane, entered into human sorrows to undo them. Andrew Brown writes, “The novel [*Gilead*], then, bringing the

glory and the sadness of the world into our eyes until they're full to overflowing also bring[s] God there.”

Light

One aspect of sense perception to which Ames pays particular attention is his apprehension of light, as he himself says.

I was struck by the way the light felt that afternoon. I have paid a good deal of attention to light, but no one could begin to do it justice. There was the feeling of a weight of light – pressing the damp out of the grass and pressing the smell of sour old sap out of the boards on the porch floor and burdening even the trees a little as a late snow would do. It was the kind of light that rests on your shoulders the way a cat lies on your lap. So familiar.

(59)

But whenever he considers the physical perception of light, Ames is led irresistibly to more metaphorical meditations. He writes on the next page, “There’s a shimmer on a child’s hair, in the sunlight.... The twinkling of an eye. That is the most wonderful expression. I’ve thought from time to time it was the best thing in life, that little incandescence you see in people when the charm of something strikes them, or the humor of it. ‘The light of the eyes rejoiceth the heart.’ That’s a fact” (60).

“Incandescence” is a favorite word of Ames’, especially for describing the human soul.

“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” (51). On the last page of the novel, Ames calls the Christian doctrine of the final re-creation of the world “the great and general incandescence,” which gives us a hint of what he means by applying the word to the soul (282). Incandescence for Ames connotes something glorious. It connotes the presence of God, which is the payoff of the new earth of Revelation 21: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.’” Ames sees God as present in all the world, but particularly in the human soul which is made in His image. “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” (136).

Robinson pulls this sense of “incandescence” from Calvin as well. “[Calvin] places this incandescent divinity—it is the glory of God that ‘shines forth’ from human nature—at the very center of individual experience and presence. And this sacredness is an attribute not of saints only, nor of Christians only, but is inherent and also manifest in all human beings as such” (*John Calvin: Steward* xv). Because the glory of God is like light, both in Calvin and in Scripture—“God is light” is a theme in the gospel and letters of John especially⁹—we can understand why perception is so critical to Robinson’s

⁹ David Anderson notes in his review of *Gilead*, “This ‘letter from John’ to his young son also calls to mind the pastoral letters near the end of the New Testament in which another John addresses ‘my little children’ and his ‘beloved,’ and which, like John Ames’s letter, are suffused with a sense of light.”

epistemology. Knowing God's presence and existence is something like seeing. "Two great poles of Calvin's thought, of his ethics and aesthetics, are a true perception of others, and a true perception of oneself. Perception is at the center of his theology...because it is the felt and active potential for experiencing the sacred."

Ames is also particularly attuned to the presence of light in his old church building, and here, too, light goes with the presence of God. "The light in the room was beautiful this morning, as it often is. It's a plain old church and it could use a coat of paint. But in the dark times I used to walk over before sunrise just to sit there and watch the light come into that room.... I felt much peace those mornings, praying over very dreadful things sometimes – the Depression, the wars" (80). One of those early prayerful mornings in the sanctuary finds Jack Boughton come to Ames in a last-ditch attempt to find some faith. His unsettling presence and half-serious questioning put Ames in the position of having to defend his faith, and Ames feels that Jack is getting the best of him:

But I was sitting there in my church, with the sweet and irrefragable daylight pouring in through the windows. And I felt, as I have often felt, that my failing the truth could have no bearing on the Truth itself, which could never conceivably be in any sense dependent on me or on anyone. And my heart rose up within me – that's exactly what it felt like – and I said..."When this old sanctuary is full of silence and prayer, every book Karl Barth ever will write would not be a feather in the scales against it from the point of view of profundity."

(197)

The presence of God is as sure to Ames as the "irrefragable daylight." Even more, the presence of God is perceived *in* the daylight itself because of Ames' Calvinist metaphysic that recognizes God revealed in all creation, light being because of its

metaphorical resonances an aspect of creation in which God is particularly sensible. This apprehension of God is the end of the argument, as far as Ames is concerned.

Water

Water commands from John Ames the same attention as light, and it is likewise possessed of a symbolic significance. He quotes approvingly a passage on baptism from the 19th-century atheist Feuerbach: “Water is the purest, clearest of liquids...[It] has a significance in itself, as water; it is on account of its natural quality that it is consecrated and selected as the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. So far there lies at the foundation of Baptism a beautiful, profound, natural significance” (27). Ames senses the presence of God in his administration of the sacrament, though, significantly, the divine presence is in the baptized human being. “There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn’t enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time” (26). But what Ames picks up from Feuerbach, without picking up his atheism, is the natural significance of water itself, such that Ames perceives divinity in human interaction with water regardless of whether it takes place in his church building or not.

Ames’ meditations on Feuerbach lead him to recount one striking instance of human interaction with water. “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” (32). He writes that “it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing.” Reflecting on his own re-telling of the event, he realizes he is straining to convey a beauty, a presence there that tests the limits of language. “People talk that way when they want to call attention to a thing 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.” There are other water scenes in the book both in and out of church—Ames’ brother Edward pouring a glass of water on his head during a hot summer game of catch, Ames’ grandfather splashing a young Ames and young Robert Boughton down at the river, Ames baptizing his future wife Lila—and Ames’ attention to water in them is always related to his perception of the divine in humanity, just as incandescence is always related to the image of God in the soul. Water marks humanity as sacred—ordinary in kind, so ubiquitous, but exceptional, even divine, in degree.

The image of God in the self

So far, I have made much of Ames’ perception of God’s presence in other human beings. His perceptions of beauty, sorrow, light, and water recognize God’s self-revelation in all of reality, but particularly in the human soul. But it is not only *what* Ames perceives that makes him aware of the presence and existence of God. The faculty of perception is

itself a sign of divinity. Robinson writes in her preface to *John Calvin: Steward of God's Covenant*, "Perception is at the center of [Calvin's] theology both because it is the felt and active potential for experiencing the sacred, and also because it is the image, the great gift, 'a remarkable instance of the Divine goodness which can never be sufficiently proclaimed'" (xv). For Calvin, this is the prime avenue to knowledge of God. He treats it on the first proper page of the *Institutes* long before he treats the knowledge of God that we have from nature. "No man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone" (37).

Ames needs only to look inside himself to find God. One experience in particular leads him to contemplate his faculties, an instance which births in him a kind of faith. Ames and his father go to Kansas on foot to look for the grave of his grandfather, a pistol-toting mystic abolitionist preacher in the days of bleeding Kansas. They march through dusty and drought-ridden towns, hungry and thirsty, and eventually arrive at the barely-marked grave. They repair the shabby graveyard, and his father prays. During the prayer (Ames is peeking), they are blessed with a kind of everyday miracle, a beautiful sunset with sun and moon aligned that sets the scenery alight.

What a sweet strength I felt, in him, and in myself, and all around us.... I have rarely felt joy like that, and assurance. It was like one of those dreams where you're filled with some extravagant feeling you might never have in life, it doesn't matter what it is, even guilt or dread, and you learn from it what an amazing instrument you are, so to speak, what a power you have to experience beyond anything you might ever actually need.

(55-56)

The assurance, the faith,¹⁰ that this experience occasions in Ames arises in the context of powerful feelings of strength and joy, as well as his sensory perception of the sunset, that lead Ames to consider, “in myself” as he says, his own faculties. Ames finds in himself, as well as in his father and all around in creation, the marks of divinity.

The question of mysticism

In this chapter, we have explored John Ames’ perception of God through experiencing beauty, sorrow, light, water, and wonder at the faculties of his own soul in *Gilead*. He is alive to the revelation of God in all reality, but particularly in human beings who bear the image of God. He does not argue for God as the best explanation of the perceived phenomena; he simply perceives God’s presence as one perceives light or feels it as one feels joy. More than this, he perceives God revealed *in* light and *in* joy. But this raises a question about the nature of Ames’ experiences: Are they mystical? It is not always clear what is intended by the word “mystical,” so I had better lay down a definition before we move any further on this point. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* offers two definitions of mystical experience, one wide and one narrow. A mystical experience in the wide sense is “a (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard

¹⁰ To substantiate that this is faith Ames is talking about here, consider that his description of his feelings matches almost exactly Calvin’s phenomenological description of faith: “Very different is that feeling of full assurance which the Scriptures uniformly attribute to faith—an assurance which leaves no doubt that the goodness of God is clearly offered to us. This assurance we cannot have without truly perceiving its sweetness, and experiencing it in ourselves” (*Institutes* 483).

introspection” (Gellman). I suppose, by this definition, Ames’ experiences are indeed mystical. His encounters with God, though tied very closely to his sensory experience, are not identical to it. The *SEP*’s narrow definition of mystical experience includes the aspect of union, the sense that the person having the experience is becoming one with God or some other reality. Ames says nothing to make us think his experiences are mystical given this narrow definition.

But the reason we would want to know if Ames’ experiences are mystical or not has nothing to do with simply applying the label of “mysticism”; there would be little point in that. The relevant aspect of mysticism to our discussion is, I take it, its exclusivity. To say certain experiences are mystical is to say that there are some people, mystics, who possess special abilities that allow them to have such experiences. The rest of us non-mystical types are out of luck. If Ames were a mystic, possessing a special mystical faculty, that might explain why Ames perceives God in his experience while so many others—Jack Boughton, his father, and his brother Edward, for example—do not. This is exactly the opposite, however, of what Robinson wants to say about religious experience in *Gilead* and elsewhere, and this accounts for her ambivalence on the subject.

Robinson writes of her own childhood religious experiences, which are very like Ames’, in her autobiographical essay “Psalm Eight”:

I felt God as a presence before I had a name for him, and long before I knew words like “faith” or “belief”.... I thought everyone else must be aware of it.... All the old writers on the subject remark that in every age and nation people have had the idea of a god of some sort.... It might have been that I was a mystic by

vocation and, despite Presbyterianism, suffered atrophy of my gift in a life where I found little use for it. For all I know I am a mystic now, and simply too close to the phenomenon to have a clear view of it.

(*Death* 228-229).

She seems ready to concede mysticism only in a certain sense, only if the perception of God necessarily renders the perception mystical. She stresses universality: “I thought *everyone*...*All* the old writers...*every* age and nation.” She is picking up on Calvin’s idea of the *sensus divinitatus*, a faculty for perceiving God universally endowed to humanity. “That there exists in the human mind,” he writes, “and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself...has endowed all men with some sense of his Godhead” (*Institutes* 43). Robinson is not looking *beyond* the world, she says later in “Psalm Eight,” as a mystic might; rather, she is looking *at* the world. She told one interviewer, “Everything is intrinsically mysterious as a physical object, say, or as a phenomenon of culture.... I’ve always been almost offended by the idea of mysticism, because it seems as if it diminishes what we know by every means that gives us access to it – it diminishes the simple spectacle of what we are and where we are, the complex spectacle I should probably have said” (Abernethy).

John Ames’ grandfather is a mystic of a certain kind in *Gilead*. While he is a young man in Maine, he has a vision in the night of Jesus in chains and leaves for Kansas for the abolitionist cause. “When I spoke to my father about the vision he had described to me,” Ames says, “my father just nodded and said, ‘It was the times.’ He himself never claimed any such experience” (56). *Gilead* never comes down hard on whether this vision is authentic or not; it certainly never asks us to doubt the vision. *Gilead* rather

tells us that though such experience may be possible, it is unnecessary for faith or even a calling to religious service. Ames recounts the story of his grandfather's vision right after telling about the sunset/moonrise he and his father witnessed over his grandfather's Kansas grave. This is the closest thing to a mystical vision Ames has, but it is really just an intense experience of everyday beauty on the vast horizons of the Great Plains, based on something that happened to Robinson herself (Bendis). Calvin thinks the import of such everyday miracles is usually missed, as he writes in the *Institutes*: "And then in regard to supernatural events, though these are occurring every day, how few are there who ascribe them to the ruling providence of God—how many who imagine that they are casual results produced by the blind evolutions of the wheel of chance?" (59)

On the whole, Robinson seems to want very little to do with mysticism as a special kind of experience for an elite class of mystics. "The kind of consciousness that I was sort of instructed in... borders on mysticism so closely that it's hard to know whether you qualify or not, or whether mysticism is artificially isolated when it is treated as a separate thing from experience," she told Missy Daniel in *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*. Provocatively, she continued, "Obviously, mysticism can be a form of madness, but then consciousness can be a form of madness". And plain old human consciousness is the particular madness that interests her.

CHAPTER III

THE NOETIC EFFECTS OF SIN AND GRACE IN *GILEAD*

Gilead's epistemology grounds knowledge of God in religious experience. God is present in all the world, and the world expresses His Being, particularly that part of humanity that we call mind or soul or consciousness and the theologians call the image of God. The world is aflame and awash with His glory, painted in vivid colors of beauty and sorrow. The book burns with life because John Ames constantly encounters God in “the shock of revelatory perception” (*John Calvin: Steward* xxvi). Well, then, what about everyone else? Robinson insists that this is not an experience reserved for the elite, that Ames is not a mystic. But for people who seem to have had the same experiences—heard the same sermons, read the same books, grown up with the same family, seen the same prairie—how does one account for different beliefs formed by those experiences? Jack, Edward, and Ames’ father all have similar experiences to Ames himself, yet they abandon the Christian faith. There is a great gulf fixed between the interpretation of experience Ames reaches and the interpretation they reach.

But *Gilead* and the Reformed tradition do not leave us floundering about for a solution to this problem of interpretation. They provide rich resources for illuminating an answer in the noetic operations of sin and grace (“noetic” from the Greek word *nous* for “mind”). It may sound strange or off-putting to employ such an archaic-sounding and freighted concept as sin in a serious modern discussion about knowledge. *Gilead* is, after

all, not a fictional parallel universe; it is a statement about the actual world. Analytic philosopher Alvin Plantinga defends the use of theology in contemporary discourse: “Some may find it scandalous that theological ideas should be taken seriously in a book on philosophy; I find it no more scandalous than the ingression into philosophy of scientific ideas from (for example) quantum mechanics, cosmology, and evolutionary biology” (*Warranted* 167). Plantinga will be of particular assistance to us as we explore the effects of sin and grace on perception in this chapter.¹¹

Sin

The sense of the divine, or *sensus divinitatis*, that allows John Ames to perceive God in his everyday experience is understood by both Calvin and Robinson as a universal human endowment, as I have discussed above. But Calvin maintains that the *sensus* is just as universally suppressed. “But though experience testifies that a seed of religion is divinely sown in all, scarcely one in a hundred is found who cherishes it in his heart, and not one in whom it grows to maturity, so far is it from yielding fruit in its season” (*Institutes* 46). This doctrine of universal or “total depravity,” Robinson writes, is “a counterweight to [Calvin’s] rapturous humanism,” so ready to see the image of God in every person (*John Calvin: Steward* xvii). But why would people suppress their sense of God? Robinson appeals to Calvin’s emphasis on the doctrine of original sin, the idea that

¹¹ Though Robinson is not personally acquainted with Plantinga’s writing, she wrote me in an e-mail that she was “happy to find [her] reading [of Calvin’s epistemology] aligned with the account made of it by these distinguished writers [including Plantinga], who know much more about the tradition than [she does].” Plantinga, a leading figure in current analytic epistemology, led the charge over the last 40 years or so for articulating a Calvin-inspired theory of Christian belief known as “Reformed epistemology.” His fullest expression of the theory is *Warranted Christian Belief*.

we are all born into a state of rebellion before God. Our rebellion does serious damage to our noetic faculties: “In earlier theology the idea was that baptism removed the effects of original sin from the higher functions, and it was basically the body that continued to bear the consequences of it.¹² But Calvin said no. Original sin is what makes it so that we can never see clearly or understand entirely” (Abernethy). If this noetic damage is a result of our disposition of disobedience towards God, it makes sense that our sense of God would be its worst casualty. We do not *want* to perceive God.

The concept of sin clarified

Because these are not the kinds of terms we are used to in literary criticism and philosophy, it might be helpful to clarify just what Christian theology, and the Reformed tradition in particular, is talking about concerning sin and its noetic effects. Alvin Plantinga helpfully distinguishes between two phenomena in *Warranted Christian Belief*. The first is *sinning*, actually “doing what is wrong, what is contrary to God’s will” (172). The second is *being in sin*, or, as Robinson termed it above, “original sin,” the state of rebellion and brokenness into which we are born. Original sin has both cognitive and affective consequences:

On the one hand, it carries with it a sort of *blindness*, a sort of imperceptiveness.... This is a cognitive limitation that first of all prevents its victim from proper knowledge of God and his beauty, glory, and love; it also prevents him from seeing what is worth loving and what worth hating...knowledge of fact and knowledge of value.... Our affections are [also] skewed, directed to the wrong objects; we love and hate the wrong things.

¹² Robinson may be minimizing medieval theology’s emphasis on the noetic effects of sin. Plantinga goes to great lengths to illustrate agreements between Aquinas and Calvin.

Instead of seeking first the kingdom of God, I am inclined to seek my own personal glorification and aggrandizement.

(172-173)

The noetic effects of sin lead to “ambiguity and self-deception.... We are prone to hate God but, confusingly, in some way also inclined to love and seek him; we are prone to hate our neighbor, to see her as a competitor for scarce goods, but also, paradoxically, to prize her and love her” (174-175). They may even lead to the horrors of Humean skepticism or Richard Dawkins’ naturalism (181-198). In any case, “the noetic effects of sin are concentrated with respect to our knowledge of other people, of ourselves, and of God” (177).

This should help us get a handle on the way the concept of sin is in play in *Gilead*.

While the sinfulness of certain actions is certainly recognized in the novel, the condition of original sin is more strongly felt and more epistemologically pertinent. John Ames writes, “Transgression. That is legalism. There is never one transgression. There is a wound in the flesh of human life that scars when it heals and often enough seems never to heal at all” (139). Ames recognizes the affective component of the noetic effects of sin, too; he thinks Feuerbach is dangerous reading only for those who are affectively corrupted. They “just go around looking to get their faith unsettled. That has been the fashion for the last hundred years or so” (27). And when his father began to lose his faith, reading his brother Edward’s atheistical books, Ames notes, “It was almost as if he wanted to be persuaded by them, and as if any criticism I made of them was nothing more than recalcitrance” (202). Ames almost opens the novel with a Scriptural

meditation on his relationship with his father that reveals the noetic effects of sin leading to self-deception and misperception of other people:

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. A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension.

(8)

A closer examination of the noetic effects of sin on Feuerbach, Jack Boughton, and John Ames himself sheds more light on *Gilead's* epistemology.

Feuerbach

Ludwig Feuerbach, the 19th-century atheist philosopher, is John Ames' favorite intellectual sparring partner. Ames picked up Feuerbach's book *The Essence of Christianity* from his brother Edward after graduate study in Germany helped Edward to leave the faith. Ames never gets over a certain regard for Feuerbach. "Feuerbach is a famous atheist, but he is about as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anybody, and he loves the world. Of course he thinks religion could just stand out of the way and let joy exist pure and undisguised. That is his one error" (27). Feuerbach seems to be one atheist whose argument could hold sway against Ames. He holds lofty ideas about human feeling and experience, which is what Ames appreciates about him. His claim in *The Essence of Christianity* that "the imagination...confusing the abstract with the concrete...has taken the species characteristics of human consciousness—thought, will,

and feeling—and unified them in a single, perfect, divine being”—essentially that man has made God in his own image—leaves Ames unconvinced, however (Harvey).

Where Feuerbach goes wrong in Ames’ eyes gives us an idea of the relationship between sin and perception in *Gilead*. Ames, inspired by Romans 1, argues that “right worship is right perception” (154). To see God for who He is just to worship Him. And if one will not worship God, one will not perceive Him aright. Ames continues, “The right worship of God is essential because it forms the mind to a right understanding of God. 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)” (158). It is the sin of idolatry, the determined insistence not to worship God as God, that leads Feuerbach to his humanistic conclusions.

Jack Boughton

In speaking of the effects of sin on Jack Boughton, we are treading, so to speak, on holy ground. Jack, with all of his faults, is a lovingly crafted character; he is the expression of Marilynne Robinson’s apprehension of Calvin’s “rapturous humanism.” It would be only too easy to lower a boom of condemnation on him and draw crass conclusions that would do no justice to Robinson’s work. But nevertheless Jack is covered with original sin. You can feel it in Ames’ description of him. “If I had to choose one word to describe him as he is now, it might be ‘lonely,’ though ‘weary’ and ‘angry’ certainly come to mind also” (210). Jack has done his share of actual sinning, too. He came home from

college, got a poor young girl pregnant, and skipped town, leaving mother and child in squalor.

Jack's affections bear the marks of the noetic effects of sin. He tells Glory in *Home*, "It is possible to know the great truths without feeling the truth of them. That's where the problem lies. In my case" (104). One gets the feeling from *Home* that Jack's efforts to find faith are motivated only by a desire to put his dying father at ease—not a poor motive, by any means, but not a God-ward one, either. When he comes to visit Ames late in *Gilead*, Ames asks, "Do you want to be persuaded of the truth of the Christian religion?" (195) Jack can only muster irony. "He laughed. 'I'm sure if I were persuaded of it, I would be grateful in retrospect. People generally are, I understand.'"

Jack is always making a gesture of covering his face, sometimes his eyes, with his hand. "He gave me a look, then covered his eyes with his hand," Ames says (193). "There were elements of grief and frustration in the gesture, and of weariness as well. And I knew what it meant." Ames notes the gesture again: "Then he put his hand to his face, his eyes. It was dark, but I could recognize that gesture. He has made it his whole life, I believe" (222). Indeed, the movement is recounted so often in *Home* that it almost becomes tedious. That indicates to me that it means something. Covering his face, it is a gesture of hiding. I think of Adam hiding in the Garden of Eden after the Fall: "And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of

the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ And he said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself’” (Gen. 3:8-10, *English Standard Version*). Shielding his eyes, it is also a gesture of not wanting to see. He does not want to perceive the glory of God all about him as Ames does. Taking Jack in light of original sin, perhaps we can better grasp why he struggles so mightily with perceiving God.

John Ames

I include this section on John Ames because of Calvin’s insistence that the noetic effects of original sin are a universal plight; even believers are not free from them (although in the next subheading I will address the noetic effects of grace upon them). Alvin Plantinga notes, “Sin affects my knowledge of others in many ways.... Because of hostility and resentment, I may misestimate or entirely misunderstand someone else’s attitude toward me, suspecting them of trying to do me in, when in fact there is nothing to the suggestion” (*Warranted*: 177). Ames battles throughout *Gilead* with ill-will toward Jack Boughton, suspecting that Jack wants to do harm to his wife and child after he dies, perhaps taking sexual advantage of Lila’s grief and loneliness. Now, there *is* something to *this* suggestion—Ames knows Jack has done something similar to a girl in the past—but Jack gives no indication of harboring illicit intentions toward Lila. Ames cannot forgive Jack for his “meanness,” for a string of petty thefts, and for doing what he did to that young girl, “squander[ing] his fatherhood” while Ames’ first wife died in childbirth (*Gilead* 187). Mixed in with what sounds like righteous indignation is Ames’

jealousy, which not only warps his perception of Jack's intentions, but also keeps him from seeing Jack, like he sees other human beings, as an incandescently beautiful soul. That is, until grace intervenes.

Grace

Plantinga summarizes the noetic effects of sin this way: “The *sensus divinitatus* has been damaged and deformed; because of the fall we no longer know God in the same natural and un-problematic way in which we know each other and the world around us. Still further, sin induces in us a *resistance* to the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatus*, muted as they are by the first factor; we don't *want* to pay attention to its deliverances” (*Warranted* 170-171). If it is true, as Calvin says, that we are universally afflicted with such a condition, we might wonder how anyone comes to perceive God at all. We might find ourselves asking, with Jack Boughton, “How can capital-T Truth not be communicable? That makes no sense to me” (*Gilead* 194). John Ames responds, “I would speak of grace in that context.” By “grace” Ames intends the unmerited extension of God's favor that brings blessing to sinful humanity: “The worthiness of its object is never really what matters” (238).

Epistemologically, grace is what renders the incommunicable communicable, God's loving repair of our sin-ravaged noetic equipment that allows us to perceive Him. It is grace that finally overcomes Ames' jealousy and unforgiveness and allows him to see the image of God in Jack Boughton: “The idea of grace had been so much on my mind,

grace as a sort of ecstatic fire that takes things down to essentials. There in the dark and the quiet I felt I could forget all the tedious particulars and just feel the presence of [Jack's] mortal and immortal being. And a sensation came over me, a sort of lovely fear, that made me think of Boughton's fear of angels" (224).

The result of God's repair of the *sensus divinitatus* is faith. Ames conceives of faith as a gracious gift, "what the Lord has given me and must also give you," as he tells his son (130). "I hope you will put yourself in the way of the gift." Plantinga also speaks of "the gift of *faith*" (*Warranted* 171). Robinson, in interviews, deliberately avoids using any formulation that suggests faith is something a person can just decide upon. Faith is rather something you find yourself with. "I do not not believe in God," she explained to Robert Abernethy, indulging in a double negative to make the point.

The epistemological significance of predestination

If it is only God's gracious action upon our noetic faculties that allows us to perceive Him and come to faith, then presumably it is up to God to decide who receives that grace. This makes predestination, that most Calvinist of doctrines, an epistemological issue. Robinson writes, "The crucial role of perception in Calvin, who bases so much of his definition of the divine in humanity on the brilliance of the human capacity for perception, is evident in the consistency with which he associates 'election' [another word for predestination] with the radical understanding of the presence of God, and of

his nature as manifest in Christ” (*John Calvin: Steward* xxv).¹³ She quotes from a sermon of Calvin’s on Isaiah 53: “Faith is not given to all.... None of us gains faith by his own effort, but God has enlightened us and given us eyes by his Holy Spirit” (xxvi). Faith is given to those whom God chooses by giving them “eyes,” by repairing the faculty that perceives God.

Predestination is, in a way, the secret heart of both *Gilead* and *Home*. The tensest moments in *Gilead* occur during a conversation on the subject between all the novel’s major characters—Old Boughton, Ames, Lila, Jack, and Glory, though Glory is present only to state her disapproval of the topic. The conversation plays an even more central role in *Home*, where it is elaborated at great length. Jack instigates it, and we get the sense that he is asking Ames with discomfiting seriousness if he might not be one of those to whom God has not chosen to extend grace—a reprobate. Ames wants to leave room for mystery, but Jack presses on until the conversation nearly implodes.

Peter Leithart, a Cambridge-trained Calvinist theologian, reads Jack as a humanly-rendered reprobate in his review of *Home*: “Jack is a reprobate, a gentle and sad but not a lovable reprobate...but Robinson never takes cheap shots, never dehumanizes him.” I do not believe Robinson ever asks *us* to make a decision on the ultimate state of Jack’s soul; to do so would be very unlike her and, indeed, very un-Calvinist. “Because

¹³ Robinson makes no apology for invoking this infamously contentious doctrine, though she makes sure the reader knows Calvin did not invent it. It is found throughout “classical theology,” she tells us, and even on the lips of Jesus in the Scriptures. Presumably, if predestination is about the dispensation of grace, what cannot be earned anyway, the usual objection of injustice on God’s part does not land.

predestination implies God's untrammelled [*sic*] freedom, he can choose to save those whom the world and its rules – even the church with its rules – might condemn,” writes Andrew Brown, commenting on his interview with Robinson. He quotes her: “I wanted very much, when I wrote the character of Jack, [to create] a character whom it would be very painful for people to be able to dismiss, with the assumption being that if one could not dismiss him, there would be no reason to believe that God would want to dismiss him, either.” In *Gilead*'s crucial conversation, it is Lila Ames who gets the last word: “A person can change. Everything can change” (174). For Marilynne Robinson, predestination means that no one, not even the scoundrel Jack Boughton, is by their sheer undeserving excluded from the gracious gift of restored perception of God. Predestination is the source of epistemological hope.

The action of grace

Grace in *Gilead* and *Home* has a definite Calvinist flavor; it is a kind of steady, irrepressible internal reparation. It has the same simplicity and grandeur about it that marks Ames' perception of nature. In Ames' last good-bye to Jack, he says, “The Greek word *sozo*, which is usually translated ‘saved,’ can also mean healed, restored, that sort of thing. So the conventional translation narrows the meaning of the word in a way that can create false expectations. I thought [Jack] should be aware that grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways” (*Gilead* 273). The immediate foil here is the dramatic conversion experience of people “getting saved” at camp

meetings, but I think a literary comparison with another writer deeply preoccupied with “the action of grace,” Flannery O’Connor, will be instructive.¹⁴

Compare, for instance, the action of grace upon Glory in *Home* with the action of grace on Mrs. Turpin in O’Connor’s story “Revelation.” Both are epistemologically significant. Glory begins *Home* with a faith that is mostly “a performance meant to please their father” (101). But through her time spent with Jack, “she begins to perceive in [his] inexplicability a live soul” (Gardner 3). Jack coaxes out of her an equally live faith, until she is able to utter the novel’s last line: “The Lord is wonderful” (325). Grace is a gentle but strong and relentless process for Glory.

Grace in “Revelation” is terrifying and immediate. Mrs. Turpin, sitting in a doctor’s office waiting room, waxes genteel Pharisaic on how glad she is that the Lord has not made her like other people. An angry, pimple-pocked teenager, slyly named Mary Grace, gets so fed up with it that she beans Mrs. Turpin in the head with a textbook, tackles her to the floor, and tries to choke her. Doctors come in to restrain and sedate Mary Grace. The teenager then tells Mrs. Turpin that she is a warthog from hell. Back at her farm, Mrs. Turpin has a vision of all kinds of people marching into heaven. She notices a crowd of respectable people like herself: “Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away” (O’Connor 508). Mrs.

¹⁴ O’Connor remarks somewhere that her fictional subject is “the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil.”

Turpin is acquainted by the experience with knowledge of her own sinfulness, which she had hidden under prejudices of class and race, and her need of divine grace.

What accounts for these two widely divergent conceptions of the noetic effects of grace? I think the answer goes back to metaphysics, which we can explore most easily in the way the sacrament¹⁵ of the Eucharist is understood in the authors' respective Christian traditions. O'Connor is a traditional Catholic, and her tradition emphasizes the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Grace comes in her story with all the inexplicable fury of body and blood. Robinson connects Calvin's "understanding of communion," or the Eucharist, to his relational metaphysics (Hoezee). Calvin understands the sacrament as communion with God, emphasizing the believer's encounter with spiritual presence of Christ. So we see the Calvinist action of grace in *Home as Glory*'s communion with Jack, perceiving the image of God in his soul and coming to see God as "wonderful."

¹⁵ This is not a red herring; the sacraments are understood in Christian theology as "means of grace."

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Understanding *Gilead*'s religious epistemology begins with Robinson's Calvinist metaphysics, her conception of the "relationship between the mind and the cosmos" (*Death* 9). The presence of God is revealed in all reality, and especially in the wonders of the human soul. Human beings were made to perceive God in their experience, equipped with the *sensus divinitatus*. This metaphysic grounds John Ames' intense perceptive experience that sees the sunstruck Iowa prairie "shine like transfiguration" with the glory of God (*Gilead* 280). But why do some perceive God while others do not? The answer lies in the noetic operations of sin and grace. Original sin universally distorts the *sensus* and makes us unwilling to accept its stuttering deliverances. Jack Boughton, lonely and broken, embodies the noetic effects of original sin, always hiding his face so as not to perceive the glory. Grace, God's unmerited bestowal of favor that repairs the *sensus*, is what allows anyone to believe at all. Grace is what makes Ames to see, and grace is what tells us not to give up on Jack.

Robinson succeeds in articulating a coherent, experience-grounded religious epistemology "for the rest of us," the great bulk of humanity who are neither mystics nor rationalists. She does not balance faith precariously atop a pile of arguments from natural theology or history. Neither does she make religious experience the property of an elite blessed with special powers of perception. Following Calvin, she sees the human

capacity for perceiving God as universally endowed, universally damaged, and universally in need of grace.

But does *Gilead*'s religious epistemology render most attacks against Christian belief “meaningless,” as Reverend Ames says (164)? It is hard to say what Robinson might mean by such a claim. She obviously does not take atheistic arguments to be unintelligible; Ames responds, in his way, to several in the text. I think she means to say that many, perhaps most, atheistic arguments are irrelevant because they assume a naturalistic metaphysics that does not agree with the believer's experience of the world. Ames says that “Feuerbach doesn't imagine the possibility of an existence beyond this one, by which I mean a reality embracing this one but exceeding it” (162-163). To use Alvin Plantinga's terminology, on this model of belief there is no *de jure* argument against Christianity that is independent of a *de facto* argument (*Warranted* 159-160). You cannot show Christian belief to be unreasonable, on Robinson's conception, unless you can demonstrate her metaphysics or her theology to be probably contrary to fact. To do that you would need a very strong argument indeed, something like overwhelming positive evidence against God's existence.¹⁶

One of the reasons *Gilead* is so focused on religious epistemology, I believe, is Marilynne Robinson's engagement with the so-called “New Atheists”—Richard

¹⁶ Indeed, this evidence would have to be strong enough to defeat a purported experience of God that is very like sense perception. It would have to be as strong as an argument telling you this footnote, which you currently seem to perceive, does not exist!

Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and company. Robinson wrote a blistering review of Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* for *Harper's Magazine* a couple of years after penning *Gilead*, but her battle history reaches back to before *Gilead*'s publication. The essay that opens *The Death of Adam* is entitled "Darwinism," by which term she intends not the theory of evolution by natural selection as science, but as a theory of everything from morals to love to cultural phenomena, the way Dawkins treats it. She writes, "It is true of Darwinism in general that the human mind, and those of its creatures which are not compatible with the Darwinist worldview [like religion and moral obligation], are discounted as anomaly or delusion" (*Death* 35). Robinson's metaphysics, in which the human mind is the central and defining reality of the world, could not be further from this viewpoint. That renders any argument based on "the Darwinist worldview" implausible for her, because it discounts the most fundamental reality of her experience. Atheistic arguments that work on the principle of offering evolutionary explanations for religiously meaningful human mental phenomena (see *The God Delusion*) fall flat for Robinson because they get off on the wrong metaphysical foot.

While "proving" one person's metaphysics more objectively plausible than another seems a near-impossible task, especially for a novel, Robinson does offer some good reasons to accept hers. "As *Gilead* represents and thematizes the perceptual processes through which its protagonist struggles to create meaning," Laura Tanner writes, "the novel allows the reader not just to comprehend Ames's vision but to inhabit his experience of seeing, to occupy not only the porch, the prairie, and the pulpit but the

psychic space of displacement” (250). Not only the psychic space of displacement, as death approaches for Ames, but we also get to see along the contours of his theology: Its exalted view of humanity, moral seriousness, and its simple beauty, as well as its power to meaningfully integrate these aspects of human experience militate in its favor.

Much more deserves to be said about the relationship between argument and experience on the question of belief in God than *Gilead* says. Sin and grace, rather than evidence and argument, may be the most crucial epistemological issues. But surely this does not mean that argument should be disallowed. The role of argument in coming to believe or not believe in God should be explored in integration with experience of perceiving God. Ames is altogether too dismissive of argument *in toto*.

Theologically, there are at least two critical aspects missing from *Gilead*'s account of Christian belief. The first is a robust Trinitarianism. The distinguishing creedal mark of Christians is the belief that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Gilead* is long on references to God the Father, but short on references to the other two Persons in the Godhead. Christ is mentioned obliquely in the episode with Ames' father and the ashy biscuit and directly when Ames gives the sacrament to his boy: “Body of Christ, broken for you. Blood of Christ shed for you” (79). And when in a bit of gallows humor Ames considers what book he might like to die with in his hands, he chooses Volume II of Calvin's *Institutes* (“Of the knowledge of God the Redeemer, in Christ”) over Volume I. But the Holy Spirit is mentioned only once—in a quote from Feuerbach! In any case,

what is primarily missing is an account of the significance of Christ's death and resurrection and of the work of the Holy Spirit for coming to know God. The second theological aspect missing is the role of the Scriptures in coming to knowledge of God. Ames is always quoting the Bible as authoritative, but we are offered no account of the epistemological significance of the Scriptures. It is strange that these two elements, so vital to Christianity, are not considered.

Much critical territory is left to be explored in *Gilead*, and I have a few suggestions for further research. Scholars in narratology will find a gold mine in comparing the two very different accounts of the predestination conversation in *Gilead* and *Home*. Why does Robinson tell what she chooses to tell from each viewpoint? An in-depth exploration of *Gilead*'s theological aesthetics may appeal to philosophical critics. And finally, for those interested in cultural studies, the meaning of *Gilead* for the "New Calvinism" is an interesting topic. A March 2009 *TIME Magazine* article slated the "New Calvinism" as number three on their list of "ten ideas changing the world right now" (Van Biema). *Between Two Worlds*, a New Calvinist blog named in the article, has featured multiple posts on Robinson, and John Piper, one of the movement's leading figures, devoted a blog post and a few days worth of "tweets" from social networking site Twitter to *Gilead*. *Gilead* is a deep and rich work, and I am certain that it will reward study from any perspective.

WORKS CITED

- Abernethy, Robert. "Marilynne Robinson Extended Interview." *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*. September 18, 2009. Accessed March 16, 2010.
 <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/september-18-2009/marilynne-robinson-extended-interview/4245/>>
- Anderson, David. "In Praise of Ordinary Time." *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*. March 18, 2005. Accessed March 19, 2010.
 <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/march-18-2005/book-review-gilead-by-marilynne-robinson/4232/>>
- Appleyard, Bryan. "Marilynne Robinson: World's best writer of prose." *The Sunday Times*. September 21, 2008. Accessed March 11, 2010.
 <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article4774827.ece>
- Bendis, Debra. "An Interview with Marilynne Robinson." *The Christian Century*. April 4, 2006. pp. 32-36. Accessed March 19, 2010. <<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3390>>
- Brown, Andrew. "Marilynne Robinson, God, and Calvin." *The Guardian*. Accessed March 17, 2010.
 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2009/jun/04/religion-marilynne-robinson>>
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989.
- . *John Calvin: Steward of God's Covenant*. With a preface by Marilynne Robinson. New York: Vintage, 2006.
- Craig, William Lane. "God Is Not Dead Yet." *Christianity Today*. July 3, 2008. Accessed March 15, 2010.
 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/july/13.22.html?start=1>>
- Daniel, Missy. "Interview: Marilynne Robinson." *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*. March 18, 2005. Accessed March 19, 2010.
 <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/march-18-2005/interview-marilynne-robinson/4226/>>
- Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Paperback edition. New York: Mariner, 2008.

Fay, Sarah. "The Art of Fiction No. 198: Marilynne Robinson." *The Paris Review*. Fall 2008. Accessed March 17, 2010.
<<http://www.theparisreview.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5863>>

Gardner, Thomas. "Marilynne Robinson, Narrative Calvinist." *Christianity Today*. February 25, 2010. Accessed March 16, 2010.
<<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/february/29.32.html?start=1>>

Gellman, Jerome. "Mysticism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2010. Accessed March 19, 2010. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism/>>

Grossman, Lev, and Richard Lacayo. "All-Time 100 Novels." *TIME Magazine*. 2005. Accessed March 11, 2010.
<http://www.time.com/time/2005/100books/the_complete_list.html>

Harvey, Van A. "Ludwig Andres Feuerbach." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2007. Accessed March 20, 2010. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ludwig-feuerbach/>>

Hoezee, Scott. "A World of Beautiful Souls: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson." *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*. May 2005. Accessed March 11, 2010. <<http://www.rca.org/Page.aspx?pid=3584>>

The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001.

Leithart, Peter. "The Literary Calvinism of Marilynne Robinson." *Credenda/Agenda*. Accessed March 21, 2010.
<http://www.credenda.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=66:the-literary-calvinism-of-marilynne-robinson&catid=101:reviews&Itemid=122>

O'Connor, Flannery. "Revelation." *The Complete Stories*. New York: Noonday, 1995.

Plantinga, Alvin. "Religious Belief Without Evidence." *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 4th edition, edited by Louis P. Pojman. pp. 414-428. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2003.

———. *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. PDF download from *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*. Accessed March 20, 2010.
<<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/plantinga/warrant3.html>>

Robinson, Marilynne. *The Death of Adam*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

———. *Gilead*. London: Virago, 2005.

———. *Home*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008.

———. “RE: Religious Epistemology in Gilead.” Message to the author. February 27, 2010. E-mail.

Simpson, Mona. “The Minister’s Tale.” *The Atlantic*. December 2004. Accessed March 11, 2010.

<<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/12/the-minister-apos-s-tale/3613/>>

Tanner, Laura E. “‘Looking Back from the Grave’: Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*.” *Contemporary Literature* XLVIII, 2 (2007): 227-252.

Van Biema, David. “3. The New Calvinism.” *TIME Magazine*. March 12, 2009. Accessed March 23, 2010.

<http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779_1884782_1884760,00.html>

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Jonathan David McGregor

Professional Address: c/o Dr. Hugh J. McCann
Department of Philosophy
314 Bolton Hall
4237 TAMU
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77843-4237

Email Address: jonnymac8029@gmail.com

Education: B.A., English, Texas A&M University, May 2010
Summa Cum Laude
Honors Undergraduate Research Fellow
University Scholar
Phi Kappa Phi