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“In the Way of the Gift”: The Postsecular Conditions of Grace in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*

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Abstract: In Robinson’s *Gilead*, one of Ames’ greatest hopes is for his son to place himself “in the way of the gift.” What is this gift, and what does it mean to place oneself in its way? The gift, I will argue, is what Charles Taylor has described as a moral source that is mediated by interpretive frameworks, and empowers us toward ideals otherwise difficult or impossible to sustain. *Gilead* enacts the necessary condition of having narratives of the gift, of having been in its way, in order to mediate its reception again. But if restoration is the great potential of the gift’s reception for Ames, it also points to the condition of impossibility for Jack, who is never given such a gift, despite having always been in its way. Although there is no guarantee the gift will be given, what *Gilead* explores are the postsecular conditions necessary for the gift to be received.

Keywords: gift; grace; phenomenology; Charles Taylor; postsecularism; hermeneutics

“That biscuit ashy from my father’s charred 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.” (Robinson 2004, p. 114)

1. Introduction

These lines from Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* come at the end of an entry about how the weathervane on the church steeple came to have a bullet hole in the rooster’s tail. Having first brought it from Maine to symbolize Peter’s betrayal and repentance, Ames’ grandfather gave it to his son on the day of his ordination to place it on the church steeple. But after three generations, Ames wants to remind his people of its presence, to re-present the gift so it will not be lost. This memory of the weathervane leads him to reflect on other gifts he has received, including the gift of his faith, which he hopes to pass onto his son. If the latter were to receive it, Ames suggests, he will need to put himself “in the way of the gift.”

What is the gift in *Gilead*, and what does it mean to place oneself in its way? In the religious framework of the novel, gifts encompass more than just physical objects. They also include spiritual gifts such as faith and hope that can emerge from somewhere between history and memory, between fact and interpretation, between the ashy biscuit given for a meal and received as communion. Without retelling stories about how gifts are given and received, objects like the weathervane or the ashy biscuit can lose their giftedness. Such a loss can have profound implications for Ames, who must extend the gift he has received, and for Jack Boughton, who may never receive the gift that is offered to him.

Scholars have examined the gift in two ways in *Gilead*. On the one hand, spiritual gifts such as faith and charity condition what characters are able to see. Some have argued that this religious framework becomes a pragmatic or phenomenological condition, within which characters see the mundane details of life in new ways (Browne 2016; Horton 2017). Ames’ faith enables what Horton calls an “aesthetic revitalization,” one that allows subjects to perceive the world anew without being

“fully tethered to doctrinal objects of belief” (p. 121). While Horton distances his phenomenological account from readings that emphasize more “subjective, self-reflexive performances of belief,” he does not take into account how the novel’s religious phenomenology conditions not just an aesthetic vision, but also the reception of a theological gift that Ames must extend to Jack by the end of the novel.¹ On the other hand, more theologically sophisticated readers have turned to Robinson’s novel to emphasize how the gift of grace is tied to Ames’ ability to forgive Jack (Vander Weele 2010; Williams 2011). In this reading, theology is constitutive of an ethical act and, therefore, must remain theological rather than be translated into other secondary or epiphenomenal categories like aesthetics. But *Gilead* also does more than simply dramatize how the gift of grace enables individuals to forgive. It explores the conditions that make the gift’s reception possible for some, but not for others.

This article draws on the insights of both phenomenology and theology to examine the conditions that make one’s reception of a gift possible in *Gilead*. These conditions are postsecular, as I define the term, insofar as the novel depicts different forms of beliefs, without relying on a simplistic narrative that religion must be either secularized or recovered. Without reducing the gift to only a theological or aesthetic category, Ames recognizes two distinct modes of the same gift. “Grace is the great gift,” Ames writes, and it results in “the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves” (Robinson 2004, p. 161). The restoration must be understood theologically, unlike secular forms of gift-exchange. This theological understanding blurs the line between subject and object, so that givers and receivers are bound together and restored rather than remain under obligation through the process of reciprocal exchange. This restoration is the gift that Ames has received and hopes his son will as well. But this first mode of the gift is precisely what Jack never receives, despite having always been in the way of the gift. After wrestling with what Jack calls “the absence of grace” (p. 170), Ames concludes, “Grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways” (p. 240). This conclusion opens the possibility for a second mode of the gift that produces a different result. If one mode is restoration, another is, what Ames calls, a “prevenient courage”, that can enable Jack to be generous, even if he is not restored. However, it is not simply that one mode is religious and the other is secular. Instead, both restorative grace and prevenient courage are gifts that require a hermeneutic posture of openness and reception. Such gifts are what Charles Taylor has described as moral sources that empower individuals toward ideals that are otherwise difficult or impossible to sustain. They are conditioned by interpretive frameworks, or what Taylor calls social imaginaries, that mediate the possibility of their reception. To be in the way of the gift, then, is to have stories of how different modes of the gift might appear. Like the stories about the weathervane and ashy biscuit, without which the gift may be unrecognized, or misunderstood, and discarded, *Gilead* enacts the postsecular condition of having been in the way of the gift, of having narratives that mediate its reception.

2. The Gift as Moral Source

In order to demonstrate how interpretive frameworks condition the possibility of the gift’s reception in the novel, this section will examine the key concept of grace in Charles Taylor’s work. Among postsecular critics, Taylor is often criticized as being too invested in a secularization narrative that has led to what he calls our secular age.² But there is another way to read Taylor’s work that

¹ Unlike Horton’s more narrow use of postsecularism, I am not referring to a particular recontextualization of religious faith such as McClure’s (2007) partial faith or Hungerford’s (2010) postmodern belief, which Fessenden (2014) has persuasively critiqued as still being beholden to the secularization thesis. See also Pecora (2011), who makes a similar argument about Habermas. Instead, as I will use the term, postsecularism refers more broadly to rethinking the conditions of possibility for all forms of belief, without relying on teleologies of recovery or loss. See, for example, Branch and Knight (2018).

² For example, see Coviello and Hickman (2014), who identify three different approaches to postsecularism, which they suggest depart more or less from Taylor’s historical narrative of secularity. Of course, Taylor invites such criticism when his first chapter opens with a question that assumes a secularization narrative: “why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?” (Taylor 2007, p. 25). This certainly is an important aspect of Taylor’s work, but it also misleads readers from seeing the more complex moves he makes to show, like Fessenden (2014), how entrenched and entwined our religious and secular sources

emphasizes a historical narrative of secularity less than the hermeneutic conditions of belief. Focusing on the latter—on the conditions of belief—makes it possible to see him engaged in a postsecularism that goes beyond a project of recovering religion or translating it into other categories. For Taylor (1989), as it is for Robinson, grace is a moral source of agency that empowers and sustains the drive to reach for ideals such as universal benevolence and justice. Without this gift of grace, “there is something morally corrupting, even dangerous, in sustaining the demand simply on the feeling of undischarged obligation, on guilt, or its obverse, self-satisfaction” (Taylor 1989, p. 516). Taylor calls this the “dilemma of mutilation,” one in which “the highest spiritual ideals and aspirations also threaten to lay the most crushing burdens on humankind” (Taylor 1989, p. 519). Understanding how moral sources overcome such burdens will help us to see the importance of the gift in *Gilead*.

In *A Secular Age* (2007), Taylor calls attention to the urgency of locating moral sources that will enable us to overcome these ethical dilemmas: “Our age makes higher demands of solidarity and benevolence on people today than ever before. Never before have people been asked to stretch out so far, and so consistently, so systematically, so as a matter of course, to the stranger outside the gates” (p. 695). To meet these higher demands, those living in a secular age have generated a great proliferation of options between belief and unbelief, but not all provide the same degree of moral sources. For example, modern secularists oscillate between upholding a high regard for human dignity and lowering of human expectations and potential. On the one hand, they discard the notion of “original sin” to raise the view of human dignity, but they fail to offer anything other than dignity as a moral source. That failure ironically can go “from a flaming desire to help the oppressed to an incandescent hatred for all those who stand in the way” (p. 699). On the other hand, those who want to avoid this moral irony suggest, “Perhaps after all, it’s safer to have small goals, not too great expectations, be somewhat cynical about human potentiality from the start” (ibid.). But such a flattening of moral vision can also result in a profound sense of meaninglessness, which is one of the more persuasive diagnoses Taylor gives of this secular age.

Two alternatives to this secular vision provide more compelling moral sources. One comes from an affirmation of human happiness and philanthropic action that can be found in the writings of Camus and Derrida. Taylor describes their position as a kind of ethical atheism, one that finds a literary representation in Ames’ brother Edward, whose loss of faith provides an alternative to the religious traditionalism in the novel. It provides a source of moral action that empowers people to choose philanthropy despite “the perceived meaninglessness and worthlessness of life” (Taylor 2007, p. 702). According to Taylor, such an ethical atheism can seem “even more heroic than, say, Christian martyrdom, because the gift of self, in living for others, even more in dying for them, is bereft even of the hope of return which the martyr still has, in the restored life of the Resurrection” (ibid.). This unilateral gift is “the absolute heroism [which] partly accounts for the great prestige of this position in our day” (ibid.). Rather than demand all others to be raised to a level worthy of benevolence and justice, this gift becomes a dynamic moral source that empowers unconditioned giving.

The other moral source comes from a very different conception of the gift, not as unilateral sacrifice, but as “communion, mutual giving and receiving, as in the paradigm of the eschatological banquet” (Taylor 2007, p. 702). The difference is that the “heroism of gratuitous giving has no place for reciprocity,” a give-and-take that annuls the unilateral gift in what Derrida has called “an economy of

are. This is where reading Taylor alongside Robinson is helpful because *Gilead* resists any simple narrative of religion’s loss or recovery. By focusing more on the hermeneutic dimensions of his work, I’m hoping to demonstrate how Taylor offers useful resources for postsecular criticism. But there is another way to read Taylor’s work that emphasizes a historical narrative of secularity less than the hermeneutic conditions of belief. Focusing on the latter—on the conditions of belief—makes it possible to see him engaged in a postsecularism that goes beyond a project of recovering religion or translating it into other categories. For Taylor (1989),

exchange.”³ In contrast, the communal gift is “a bond where each is a gift to the other; where each gives and receives, and where the line between giving and receiving is blurred” (ibid.). When such a dynamic gift is received, it is no longer about giving despite others, but about being “somehow given to each other” that can stretch our sense of solidarity with people, whom we may never know or meet (ibid.). I want to return to this idea more carefully in the next section, but point out for now that this is the theological well that Ames draws upon when he says that the gift of grace is the “great restoration of ourselves to ourselves” (Robinson 2004, p. 161). In being given to each other, the gift blurs the line between giving and receiving, so that instead of heroic sacrifices, greater communal bonds result from its reception.

In Taylor’s estimation, these are two of the most compelling moral sources available today. One is a unilateral gift of sacrifice. The other is a communal gift of mutuality. Both can empower people to reach for their highest ideals without succumbing to mutilation and violence. It would be a mistake, however, to consider one simply secular and the other religious. Because secularity for Taylor is defined not merely as the privatization or loss of religious belief, but as changes in the conditions that can open or close moral sources, both unilateral and communal gifts require a similar leap of faith. Neither is guaranteed. Both are at risk of being closed off by conditions of secularity, what Taylor calls, an “immanent frame.”⁴ Both theological grace and ethical atheism are means of breaking out of a buffered self and of recovering some degree of porousness to the incursions of moral sources of agency.⁵

The key condition to porousness is the role of interpretive frameworks that mediate what is experienced in a collective social imaginary. Like maps that provide spatial and temporal orientation, interpretive frameworks include the stories told to help make sense of an individual’s place within a larger imaginary.⁶ While people can never fully articulate their social imaginary, narratives can serve a hermeneutic function that helps them to interpret whether the glass is half empty or full, whether an event is mere coincidence or divine intervention, whether the vane on the church steeple is ornament or gift. Interpretive frameworks provide a phenomenological openness to the possibility that a gift might be given and received. Otherwise, gifts might come and go unnoticed, resulting in the loss of their moral source.

How gifts are defined and imagined have a profound impact on the way they are received. Without the interpretive frameworks that place people in a phenomenological openness to their incursions, the reception of gifts may no longer be a possibility. Because these frameworks mediate and condition all experiences, certain modes of language, that is, certain vocabularies, definitions, and narratives of the gift can close or disclose their possibility. A postsecular reading of *Gilead* examines the crucial role interpretive frameworks play in mediating the reception of different modes of the gift, modes that enable Ames and Jack to overcome their moral dilemmas.

3. The (Im)possibility of the Gift in *Gilead*

To be in the way of the gift is to have an interpretive framework that is open to moral sources. In the religious (specifically Calvinist) framework of the novel, this openness requires a narrative of how the gift functions: it cannot be generated by the self; it can only be anticipated. By telling stories

³ For Derrida (1994), the circle of economic exchange annuls the free gift. As soon as it appears, it becomes difficult to distinguish from investment or repayment. But this is not to say that there is no gift as such. A phenomenology of the pure gift is impossible, for Derrida, but that impossibility is precisely the very condition of thinking about, and hoping for, the gift.

⁴ An immanent frame is defined as an increasing sense of the fragility of meaning, the felt flatness of crucial passages of time, and an utter emptiness to the ordinary. These characteristics are part of what Taylor calls “the malaises of immanence” (Taylor 2007, p. 309).

⁵ For Taylor (2007), the key distinction between a buffered and porous self is whether one is vulnerable to spirits, moral forces, and causal powers. In later sections, Taylor complicates the “inner mind” and “outer world” distinction, especially when writing about the “cross-pressures” that emerge with the Romantics and others like Camus, who develop an “inner depth,” from which moral sources can incur (see chapter 18).

⁶ Taylor defines a social imaginary as “the way that we collectively imagine, even pretheoretically, our social life in the contemporary Western world” (Taylor 2007, p. 146). For interpretive frameworks, see (Taylor 1989, *Sources*, chapters 1–2).

about how he has received grace, Ames hopes to reveal to his son the phenomenological conditions, within which one can receive the kind of theological gift that has sustained his belief and enables him to forgive Jack. Each of the categories—phenomenology, theology, and ethics—can, of course, be detached from one another and examined separately in the novel. While careful readers of Robinson like Neil Browne and Ray Horton have called attention to the way religious belief conditions ordinary experiences, they detach what interpretive frameworks enable Ames to see in the quotidian from the moral sources that come through the reception of a gift. Others, like Michael Vander Weele and Rowan Williams, have argued how central grace is in enabling Ames to forgive Jack. However, they are unable to account for Jack's inability to receive the same gift of restoration. By examining how Ames uses the language of gifts, this section will analyze the conditions that can make the gift possible for Ames, and eventually for Jack.

In the novel, the gift usually serves one of two important functions. The first is that Ames often has to remind people that an object was once given as a gift. Like the weathervane on the church steeple, Ames wants his congregation to remember that the lilies around the front steps were given by the pastor of the black church just before it relocated to Chicago: "I should tell the deacons where they came from, so they'll know they have some significance and they'll save them when the building comes down" (Robinson 2004, p. 36).⁷ Without such reminders, objects lose their giftedness and become easily dispensable, much like the book of humorous sermon anecdotes given to Ames, who can no longer remember whence the gift came or where it has gone (p. 144). Stories about where objects come from, and how they were given, determine whether one can recognize objects as gifts.

The second important point is that almost all the gifts in the novel serve as a medium to something else. The simplest example is the television, which the congregation gave as a gift, so that Ames could watch baseball games (Robinson 2004, p. 126). Another is what Ames calls "the gift of physical particularity and how blessing and sacrament are mediated through" body and blood (p. 69). But the most significant example comes from the passage mentioned already, when Ames writes, "grace is the great gift. So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that *we* also can forgive, restore, and liberate" (p. 161; italics in original). More will be said about this key passage in just a moment. But once the word gift is extended in this way to grace as the means of forgiveness, then it opens wide the possibility of seeing every reference to grace and forgiveness in the novel as a gift that must be given and received. Then, even his son, who, Ames says, has been "God's grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle", can be interpreted as a gift that points to a divine transcendence (p. 52).⁸

The significance of these two points about gifts in *Gilead* is related to what I have been calling interpretive frameworks that make theological receptions possible. For Browne, these frameworks have a pragmatist function in *Gilead* that "redirects the power of grace from the cosmic to the everyday" (Browne 2016, p. 225). Horton expands on this pragmatist reading by providing a compelling account of how religious vision or theopoetics becomes "a pervasive component of the subject's phenomenological interpretive context and an occasion for aesthetic revitalization, persistently inviting us to look again at whatever appears most immediately in front of us, to look again and to see it differently" (Horton 2017, p. 121).⁹ For Horton, this aesthetic revitalization "is not fully tethered to doctrinal objects of belief, nor is it entirely a subjective, self-reflexive performance of belief" (ibid.) Instead, it renews "attention to

⁷ Pak (2015) and Andujo (2019) both draw on Douglas' (2011) argument that race in *Gilead* is a "serviceable presence." For Pak, what is missing in the narrative, namely, Christian complicity in slavery, serves to reinforce white genealogies. For Andujo, this "serviceable presence" calls attention to the Christian failure to respond adequately to racial injustice. Such compelling readings confirm just how much interpretive frameworks can limit or direct the gift's possibilities. Ames' limitations cannot take him any further than seeing the gift as something that ought to be preserved.

⁸ See Stevens (2015), for a discussion of how Ames' notion of writing as prayer points both to the contingency of language and its source of generation.

⁹ Both Browne and Horton point to Ames' statement that "it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion, for the purposes of the individual believer" (Robinson 2004, p. 145), as evidence of Robinson's pragmatist roots. I think that is correct, but I do not think Robinson follows Dewey's distinction between religion and the religious, as Browne suggests. Instead, Robinson's pragmatism is more Emersonian and Jamesian, which is not merely the attempt to reinterpret religion

surfaces and ephemera,” from beautiful bubbles to barren landscapes (p. 122). Such a reading of how theopoetics mediates the mundane offers a powerful tool. It allows us to see how “religious experience shifts from being a category of experience—something intrinsically enchanted or supernatural—to being a way of experiencing” (p. 124). For Horton, the religious conditions the phenomenological. However, it is equally important to see the inverse of this position. It is not just that religious vision helps us to see the world differently. That difference conditions the possibility of receiving the gift of grace, which is crucial to Ames’ ability to forgive Jack.

One key passage where this distinction makes an important difference is the scene at the grave of Ames’ grandfather, a scene to which Ames repeatedly returns. Horton interprets this scene as witnessing “an unordinary vision in an ordinary worldly event” (Horton 2017, p. 125), and offers the following interpretation:

Instead of providing Ames with an otherworldly experience of spiritual revelation, the exercise of belief gives him the eyes to see what is already there. Religious vision exhibits its aesthetic efficacy by gathering the minutiae of a barren landscape and a desolate moment, transfixing the father and son by momentarily imbuing what they witness with a defamiliarizing radiance. (Ibid.)

This passage emphasizes how Ames’ religious vision shapes what he sees. But I would argue that what he sees also mediates his reception of grace, which Ames calls in the passage his “assurance” (Robinson 2004, p. 48). This assurance comes by way of gift, “a power you have to experience beyond anything you might ever actually need” (ibid.). The reception of that power is the moral source that sustains Ames’ belief and hope.

The reception of this gift of assurance, however, is also only half the grace: Ames will need to complete the gift by extending it to Jack. The gift not only sustains his belief or helps him to see beauty in the world, but it also enables him to overcome his inability to forgive Jack. Ames’ entry on the death of Jack’s first child, whom Jack never acknowledges as his own, exemplifies the kind of guilt and violence that hovers throughout the novel. In writing about the incident, Ames is also trying to decide whether to warn Lila about Jack. But the warning, too, risks opening a wider wound. Ames confesses to his son, “it offends my conscience to bear witness against him” (Robinson 2004, p. 155). Bearing witness against Jack is like bearing witness against his own son, since Jack was named and given as a substitution for the loss of Ames’ first wife and child.

In the entry immediately following the death of Jack’s first child, Ames writes about one of his old sermons on forgiveness, which establishes more clearly how the reception of grace is tied to his ability to forgive. There is no mention of Jack, but there is of the Prodigal Son and “his restoration to his place in his father’s house, though he neither asks to be restored as son nor even repents of the grief he has caused his father” (Robinson 2004, p. 161). This kind of restoration is possible, according to Ames’ sermon, because forgiveness is not necessarily dependent on the debtor. Instead, restoration is initiated by the forgiver, who has already been forgiven: “So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that *we* also can forgive, restore, and liberate, and therefore we can feel the will of God enacted through us, which is the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves” (ibid.). The parallel between this sermon and Jack’s story is there for readers to make the connection that Ames has yet to make for himself. But the more he recalls Jack’s story, the more he finds himself unable to forgive Jack: “remembering and forgiving can be contrary things [...] I don’t forgive him. I wouldn’t know where to begin” (p. 164). The significance of this unforgiveness is its potential to undermine the grace that Ames has received. Unforgiveness can close off the moral sources that both Ames and Jack will need in order to overcome their ethical dilemmas. The question that arises at this point in the narrative is how Ames will be able to make the ethical turn and complete the work of grace by extending the gift he has received.

into more secular terms, but the way interpretive frameworks mediate religious experiences, including traditional ones. See Sung (2016) for a more detailed discussion of how interpretive frameworks work in James’ pragmatism.

The answer is to return to the interpretive frameworks that made the reception of the gift possible in the first place. If the language of the gift—its tropes, arguments, and narratives—prepares Ames and his son for the reception of grace, then it is the application of this language that can make the ethical turn possible. In other words, religious hermeneutics mediates both a theological reception and an ethical turn. It is precisely Ames' act of writing, which is the work of applying interpretive frameworks to everyday experiences, that prepares him "to see where the grace is for [him] in all this" (Robinson 2004, p. 201). Recalling the gift he has received prepares him to extend the gift to others. Later, when he reflects on what he has written, Ames recognizes that his writing must seem like "an old man struggling with the difficulty of understanding what it is he's struggling with" (p. 202). That struggle leads him to make the connection between the problem Jack presents to Ames and a lifetime of seeing the gift of grace in his life.

But the key moment of grace that helps him to make this connection and to forgive Jack comes from recalling the gift of falling in love with Lila. When she begins to visit his house to tend to his garden, Ames asks his future wife one evening, "'How can I repay you for all this?' And she said, 'You ought to marry me'" (Robinson 2004, p. 209). The language of repayment is ironic because it is juxtaposed in the same passage with, what Ames calls, "an unfathomable grace": He reflects, "That there should be such a voice [as Lila's] in the whole world, and that I should be the one to hear it" (ibid.). By recalling this story, Ames begins to see that he must extend the same gift to Jack:

I would hope just such an experience for her as that one of mine. Oh, I know she is fond of me, and very loyal. But I could hope that sometime the Song of Songs would startle her, as if it spoke from her own heart. I cannot really make myself believe that her feelings could have been at all like mine. And why do I worry so much over this Jack Boughton? Love is holy because it is like grace—the worthiness of its object is never really what matters. I might well be leaving her to a greater happiness than I have given her, even granting every difficulty. Sometimes I think I have seen the beginnings of it in her. If the Lord is letting me momentarily be witness to a grace He intends for her, I should find in this a great kindness toward myself. (Ibid.)

Ames' inability to forgive Jack is rooted in his refusal to give. As he reflects on the gift of love he has received from Lila, Ames recognizes that grace must be given to others for it to remain a gift. This recognition enables Ames to overcome his anxiety and guilt. While Ames does not bless Jack until the final section of the novel, he is now prepared to complete the other half of the gift by forgiving Jack.¹⁰

Making the connection between grace already received and yet to be given is the key to understanding the gift in *Gilead*. A religious vision does not just re-enchant the world aesthetically. Such a vision prepares one for a theological engagement that becomes, in Taylor's term, the moral source for ethical possibilities that are otherwise difficult or impossible. As Vander Weele has argued, the novel depicts what he calls "the difficult gift of human exchange," an exchange that "becomes not only a personal and aesthetic, but also a social and ethical act"; it is an act that requires readers "to rejoin delight and persuasion, aesthetics and rhetoric" (Vander Weele 2010, p. 237). Central to that connection for Vander Weele is a gift that opens up the possibility for personal transformation through the recognition of shared flaw or need for forgiveness (p. 225). Interpretive frameworks (phenomenology) condition the reception of dynamic gifts (theology) that enable forgiveness and restoration (ethics). But while this formula applies to Ames' moral dilemma, how does it work for Jack, who, despite having been raised in the way of the gift, is never restored?

Despite his compelling argument about how the gift moves Ames to forgiveness and restoration, Vander Weele does not explore why Jack fails to receive the same gift. The underlying presumption in his article seems to be that grace is available to all, but individuals are responsible for its recognition

¹⁰ Vander Weele argues that Ames is ready to forgive Jack, only after he learns of Jack's second wife and child. This reading places the crucial decision to forgive earlier in the novel, even before Ames learns about Jack's family.

(Ames) or refusal (Jack). Vander Weele's reliance on John Milbank's theory of gifts departs from the Calvinist roots of Ames' theology, and thereby poses an interpretive problem within the novel. For Vander Weele, Milbank's "gift of exchange depends upon a prior recognition of the gift of existence" (Vander Weele 2010, p. 228). That gift of existence is not just social or historical, but is rooted in an ontological gift of creation. According to Vander Weele, "Robinson's novel seems to be built on the same hypothesis that creation is a gift and, far from static or passive, a gift with exchange built into it. Milbank could be describing Robinson's characters and their growing recognition that the givens in their lives are gifts" (ibid.). The limitation of reading *Gilead* through Milbank's ontology is that if the gift has already been given to all, then the responsibility of its recognition, as well as its failure in Jack's case, falls on the individual.¹¹ Within the novel's Calvinist framework, however, there is something absurd about "suggesting that grace is a fusion of divine and human initiative, as if the divine and the human were agencies operating on the same level, potentially in competition, potentially in harmony" (Williams 2011, p. 12).¹² Thus, the responsibility of recognizing the gift applies not to all of Robinson's characters, as Vander Weele suggests, but only to Ames. It is the question of "the absence of grace," as Jack calls it, that Ames has no answer for (p. 170). There is no answer, because neither Ames nor Jack can generate the gift themselves. That is the Calvinist distinction that Vander Weele misses. Not all are guaranteed to receive the gift, even if one were to be in its way. This distinction is significant because it complicates the measure and burden of responsibility that result in the kind of mutilation and violence that Taylor describes. If Jack is responsible for recognizing an ontological gift that is available to all, then he must be able to generate the will to believe. But no one, including Ames, suggests Jack alone is to blame. Jack is no more responsible for the absence of grace in his life, than Ames is for its inescapable presence in his own life.¹³

However, this idea that the gift cannot be generated by the self is not simply a closed doctrine in the novel. It is not a way to exclude people from belief, but an opportunity to explore how different modes of the gift might appear and empower us differently. Though there can never be a guarantee that the gift will be given, it is possible to remove hermeneutic barriers that prevent its reception. Before his departure, Ames wants Jack to know that "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" (Robinson 2004, p. 239). By extending the meaning of salvation, Ames wants to broaden Jack's interpretive framework, to give him a wider net so that he knows, "Grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways" (p. 240). One of those ways is "a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it" (p. 246). Another, Ames speculates, "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," a courage that

¹¹ Milbank's entry into the philosophical discourse on the gift is more complex than Vander Weele or I can understandably do justice to here. Milbank (2003, 2006) would agree that creation is only one among other manifestations of the gift. But because his principle targets are Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, who in different ways are trying to reach a pure and free gift, Milbank insists on holding onto exchange as inextricably tied to the gift. There is no gift without exchange, so long as the return is nonidentical and delayed. So, Milbank has often critiqued Calvin's emphasis on the sovereignty of grace because it fails to leave any room for human participation (*methexis*). For Calvinist responses to Milbank, see Smith (2004) and Billings (2008).

¹² While Williams acknowledges this important Calvinist framework for the novel, it is not entirely clear in his argument that Jack is not responsible for his own alienation: "He cannot but be an ironist. And being an ironist means, in this context, never having a native tongue" (Williams 2011, p. 7). However, it seems to me that irony is possible only because of a certain familiarity with the language, rather than not having a native tongue. In that sense, the contrast Williams establishes between Lila's "reconciled irony" and Jack's "unreconciled irony" becomes problematic. Jack is not foreign to the language in the same way that Lila may have been. The significance of these distinctions is that Williams seems to place the responsibility of recognizing "the alien action of grace in the background" onto the individual (p. 12). But in a more recent response to Robinson's novel *Lila*, Williams emphasizes how everyone is implicated in the work of grace, so that one's responsibility is always "tangled and embedded in relations we have not chosen" (Williams 2019, p. 158).

¹³ Griffs (2015) argues that Robinson revisits this Calvinist doctrine of grace in a way that reverses nineteenth-century anti-Calvinist sentimental novels, which critiqued predestinarian theologies as detrimental to human participation and agency. In the remainder of this article, however, I attempt to show how *Gilead* offers an account of the role of interpretive frameworks in conditioning the reception of grace.

“allows us to be generous” (ibid.). This kind of courage, too, must be received as a gift. Ames asks, “Only, who could have the courage to see it?” (p. 245). The answer is, presumably, no one who has not received it as a gift.

It is important to note, however, that not all these varieties of gifts from a Calvinist perspective have the same effects. Prevenient grace is not the same as the grace it precedes. Milbank’s ontology of the gift is closer to what some Calvinists call a common grace that is available to all, but does not result in salvation, at least in the way Jack perceives its absence in his life. But common grace does enable one to live morally and to recognize what Horton (2017) calls a “defamiliarized radiance” in the quotidian, what Ames calls “the sacred beauty of Creation.” Such a perception of beauty requires a prevenient courage to see how “the world can shine like transfiguration” (Robinson 2004, p. 245). This prevenient courage is also a gift that is subject to the same conditions that Taylor argues constrain all moral sources. Like Camus’ and Derrida’s ethical atheism, it too requires a leap of faith in order to open up its moral sources. As Ames lists in the final paragraphs of the novel, such a gift can enable one “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, as the old men said, to make ourselves useful. It allows us to be generous” (p. 246). Even if Jack is never fully restored in a theological sense, he can still receive half the gift, the way “he kept twenty and gave twenty back” to Ames when he is offered forty dollars at his departure (p. 241). Even if he is unable to follow in the faith of his fathers, he can still rely on a different moral source that will enable him to live courageously and generously.

What is necessary for any of these gifts to become even a possibility is an interpretive framework that allows for a radical openness within the self. If Jack is no less responsible than Ames is for the gift, then Lila is right: “A person can change. Everything can change” (Robinson 2004, p. 153). This hermeneutic openness is precisely the condition of the gift’s possibility and impossibility. Rather than leading to despair, this openness is the source of Ames’ great hope for both his son and Jack. We cannot generate the gift, so there is yet hope. But we must have interpretive frameworks broad enough to anticipate any number of ways the gift can appear. Only then can we be in the way of moral sources that can empower us to do what is otherwise difficult or impossible: that is, to extend benevolence, forgiveness, and restoration.

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