

Sharing Wisdom as an Act of Love

BY DAVID LYLE JEFFREY

Marilynne Robinson's beautiful novel GILEAD is a powerful realization of the integral relationship of wisdom to love. It illuminates the qualities of character which, unless they are acquired, can render the wisest of words vacuous, or inaccessible to their hearer's understanding.

For many of us, a novel might not seem to be the right place to look for a deeper comprehension of biblical wisdom. Yet in the case of Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* (2004), we would be wrong to think so.¹ Robinson's tale is a powerful realization of the integral relationship of wisdom to love. It thus most helpfully illuminates qualities of character which, unless they are acquired, can render the wisest of words vacuous, or inaccessible to their hearer's understanding:

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. (p. 7)

These words of disclaimer, coming near the very beginning of the Reverend John Ames's memoir to his son, signal in their tone and tenor the deepest insight he will endeavor to pass on. In his apology there is little or no presumption of obligation, only a natural hope of communion. Ames, who knows he is dying, wants to bequeath to his seven year-old son whose

arrival at manhood he will never see a kind of intergenerational sense of identity. As it happens, this quite naturally includes advice born of experience, yet each such element is delivered without taint of self-righteousness or condescension. The form of this novel is a memoir, but it reads more like an extended love-letter.

These same biblical words are, of course, addressed to the contemporary readers of Robinson's Pulitzer prizewinning novel, and to a reader who still inhabits some part of the Christian culture to which Ames is a witness, they may seem to imply as much a prophetic judgment about stereotypical preacherly certitude as an admission of limited perspective in this speaker, Reverend Ames. This is in fact a tension that Robinson brilliantly exploits. Such a fruitful acknowledgement of limit is, paradoxically, one of the potential advantages of first person discourse over omniscient third person narration. For the potential to be realized, however, the author must first create compelling character in the speaker.

The sub-genre of wisdom literature which Robinson evokes, even recreates in this novel, is distinctively biblical: "My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother" (Proverbs 1:8, KJV) is its watchword, a call to attention and recollection of family identity parallel to a larger invitation to instruction, "*Shema, Ysrael*" (cf. Deuteronomy 5:1; 6:4; 9:1, etc.). Reiterations of this motif are not simply a rhetorical gambit in biblical wisdom books, but a framing device which puts biblical wisdom squarely in the context of Torah, of the obligation of parents to instruct their offspring concerning the relation of God's loving providence to the vagaries of family history. All the *davarim* (words and deeds) of the faithful are to be kept in perpetual memory:

And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.
(Deuteronomy 6:7, KJV)

A disposition to obedience to this commandment has been the way of John Ames's life (we learn this gradually), and his memory of the text, encouraged by his own father (p. 7) has appropriately been preserved in King James idiom. The task he has set himself in his memoir is thus doubly reflexive of the text in which he is steeped: "Your mother told you I'm writing your begats," he writes to his progeny on the page before him; history and wisdom, as in Scripture, are here also in the novel inseparable one from the other.

There is a certain audacity in writing against the grain of the modern/postmodern novel in the way that Robinson does. It connects her, as a storyteller, with venerable predecessors in a near vanished heyday of the novel, when, as Walter Benjamin has memorably observed, the storyteller was one

with “counsel for his readers.” Benjamin, one of the greatest of European literary critics before World War II, steeped in Jewish learning, went on to say that “...if today ‘having counsel’ is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence,” he says, “we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others.”² If Robinson, in a kind of ‘sign of contradiction,’ has counsel, it is doubtless because she connects so naturally to the sources of communicable wisdom Benjamin’s insight draws upon.

The book of Proverbs, perhaps more than any other biblical text, has for Protestant Christians been the model for this particular vein of aphoristic discourse as a means of parent-child instruction. There have been deliberate secular imitations before. One thinks of Lord Chesterfield’s *Letters to his Son, Philip Stanhope* (1774), exceptionably candid written epistolary advice to his own son and his godson, born twenty-five years apart, each named Philip Stanhope after himself. (It is evident that Robinson has read from this volume.) Proverbs is itself, of course, far more aphoristic than Chesterfield’s *Letters* or indeed than Robinson’s novel, which is nonetheless richly aphoristic, with more quotations from Proverbs than any other text, including the Sermon on the Mount and the Epistle of James. Such richness of biblical citation might well have laden the novel with an entirely off-putting preachiness, had not Robinson’s narrator and protagonist, despite his vocation, been so compellingly developed in terms of his own keenly reflective, yet surprisingly (especially for a postmodern novel) self-deprecating consciousness. One effect of such a winsome narrative voice is that the personal stories Ames tells *embody* the wisdom he wishes to convey in a fashion resistant to any reduction to aphorism merely: authentic personal transparency is the quintessence of the wisdom to be gathered.

It is because of his thoughtful self-criticism, in fact (not in spite of it), that the narrator thus acquires an authority altogether uncommon in contemporary fiction. This is a feature of the novel which steals in upon one almost imperceptibly in the reading, or, as it may seem, the overhearing of it. The father’s authority is never asserted, as such, to his son, nor even to his wayward and deeply unsettled godson. Circumspection is his manner; deferral to the opinion of others, including his own father and grandfather and extending even to theologians with whom in the end he does not agree, or to the sturdier Calvinism of his fellow minister and closest friend, is Ames’s habitual discipline. It is not at all that he is without opinions; in fact he holds deeply considered and well-formed opinions. Rather, it is that he respects the views of others and, in the fashion suggested by the opening quotation, reckons it to be impossible for any individual to judge of a matter accountably without the aid of divergent as well as complementary perspectives.

The art of conversation is thus an integral part of the pursuit of wisdom.

Just as one can read a bad book and find something to affirm in “its haplessness or pomposity or gall,” Ames says, so with people: “There are pleasures to be found where you would never look for them” (p. 39). The cultivation of deeper friendships, rooted in shared mutual affections, is nevertheless for Ames a still less dispensable anchor to reflection. In his fellow clergyman and neighbor Robert Boughton, shepherd to another flock, he finds “a friend that sticketh closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24, KJV). This, too, has a correlative in the timbre of narrative voice; the words on Robinson’s pages appear far less like prose monologue than like a conversation overheard; it might be better to say that they capture a symphony of conversations with persons in all types and categories of relationship, past and present, and with several types of books, past and present in Ames’s reading, all of which still remain present to his consciousness as voices in an ongoing colloquy.

A further aspect of this remarkable dialogic effect of the narrative (it is given, after all, as a monologue), is the role of prayer as an undertone in the settled wisdom one “hears” in the father’s voice. But an aura of prayer is also a means by which the relationship between father as teacher and any who will have eyes to see and ears to hear is established. “For me, writing has always felt like praying,” Ames confesses, “even when I wasn’t writing prayers, as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone,” he continues; “I feel I am with you now, whatever that can mean... That is to say, I pray for you. And there’s an intimacy in it. That’s the truth” (p. 19). Analogously, at least for the reader, Ames further admits that he does not write the way he speaks, but rather tries to write the way he thinks (pp. 28-29).

Thoughts can be prayers; his narrative gives the impression of being saturated with both indistinguishably. Prayer in adversity, he says at another point, brings peace, and prayer for others, often uttered through the night for his own and his friend’s parishioners, each in their several needs as he understands them, brings him to identify closely with them—bringing unity in the bonds of peace (pp. 70-71). This too, Robinson implies, is a measure of his wisdom.

Part of what makes Ames’s character as well as his voice so appealing, then, is his candor and self-effacement. Unlike Boughton, he has always written out his sermons carefully, word for word; the attic is filled with

The art of conversation is an integral part of the pursuit of wisdom . . . The cultivation of deeper friendships, rooted in shared mutual affections, is nevertheless for Reverend Ames a still less dispensable anchor to reflection.

them, he says whimsically, putting him “right up there with Augustine and Calvin for quantity. That’s amazing,” he continues, “I wrote almost all of it in the deepest hope and conviction. Sifting my thoughts and choosing my words. Trying to say what was true. And I’ll tell you frankly, that was wonderful” (p. 19). It is this last sentence, in its candid admission of the joy he has taken in his work, which convinces us of the authenticity of what precedes it. We are pleasantly surprised to learn later on that he is still examining his conscience regarding sermons preached long ago – as his own understanding has deepened, thinking “That’s what he meant!” (p. 41) and wishing he had put a point differently. This process, too, he interweaves with conversations long past.

It turns out that only one of his sermons has not been preserved. It was written in a time of plague (the 1918 epidemic of Spanish influenza) as he was attempting to comfort the bereaved who would ask him “how the Lord could allow such a thing” (p. 41). Though he still believes this sermon to have offered a persuasive biblical answer to the problem of undeserved suffering (“the only sermon I wouldn’t mind answering for in the next world”), when he considered the faces of those to whom he would preach, he burned it before rising to the pulpit. Instead, he preached on the parable of the lost sheep. Here too is an act of wisdom, exemplified in a fashion the author of Job might approve.

Ames’s consciousness of the gap between intention and utterance is acute; his sense that truth abides beyond our judgment of it is pervasive in all he writes. Accordingly, the inner debates with self as well as those with external interlocutors – with his father, grandfather, Boughton, (the German philosopher) Ludwig Feuerbach, his elder brother Edward, a seminarian who lost his faith, his wayward godson Jack Ames Boughton – all of these give careful respect to opposing as well as confirming positions, even on occasions when it is evidently painful for Ames to do so. In a most poignant example, he greatly fears a corrosive influence of Jack on his wife and the young natural son for whom his memoir is being written, and he admits as much. Yet he nonetheless respects Jack’s skepticism and the candor of it even when he cannot but deplore some of its apparent consequences, in particular Jack’s insouciant immorality (pp. 143-154). This attitude reflects a much stronger virtue than tolerance. Rather, it arises from a wellspring of genuine affection that, in its application, is not dis severed from his love for truth, especially for truth about God and his love for the world. “Nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense,” he says in a remarkable passage. “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.... There is always an inadequacy in argument about ultimate things” (pp. 177-178). Ames goes on to say to his son that it is

possible to “assert the existence of something – Being – having not the slightest notion of what it is,” an evident echo of the passage with which we began. The echo reinforces, in effect, the culminating theological wisdom Ames wishes to impart to his son, namely that in matters of faith it is seldom fruitful to look for “proofs” but always fruitful, in effect, to try to live in obedience to Christ (cf. p. 139). Proofs are “never sufficient to the question, and they are always a little impertinent...because they claim to find for God a place within our conceptual grasp” (p. 179).

Here we get a confirming insight into Ames’s lifelong conversation with his Calvinist preacher friend Boughton. We see that his quiet fideism resists the reformed rationalism and strong doctrine preferred by the Presbyterian. In the course of his conversation with Boughton the character and direction of his own thinking has been sharpened (cf. Proverbs 27:17). Accordingly, Ames’s caution is not a reflex of anti-intellectualism, or careless pietism either, but reflects rather a deeply thoughtful recognition of our human incapacity fully to understand the wisdom of God. Such circumspection is itself, of course, a hallmark of biblical wisdom.

One of the most compelling aspects of Robinson’s novel, and, it seems to me, an indispensable part of its wisdom for the contemporary Christian reader, is its acknowledgment of our own typical failure to transmit the wisdom of the generations even to those we most love. This is to cede a point, perhaps, to the Calvinist. The “wisdom” Jack wants to grasp is to know why grace does not reach him (pp. 170-171). The relationship of Ames to his namesake godson and to his seven-year-old son here echoes aspects of the Abraham-Hagar-Ishmael narrative, a passage on which Ames has preached (pp. 128-130). To some extent the failure of his own father and of Ames as godfather to correct Jack, or to find a way in love to understand his evident need for particular attention, is inescapably a failure of wisdom on the part of both “fathers.” Ames knows it – or has come reflectively over time to know it in regret. It is evident to the reader that Jack wanted to be confronted, even as a youthful rebel (p. 184), and the final conversation he has with Ames, sitting quietly in Ames’s dilapidated old church, provides an irrefragable culmination to this insight.

Ames’s caution is not a reflex of anti-intellectualism or careless pietism, but reflects rather a deeply thoughtful recognition of our human incapacity fully to understand the wisdom of God. Such circumspection is a hallmark of biblical wisdom.

It turns out that Jack has also always wanted to be loved in such a way that, as the medieval spiritual writer William of St. Thierry puts it, *amor ipse intellectus est* – love itself embodies understanding.

Marilynne Robinson shows that wisdom comes to us in many ways; it may well be conveyed in a remembered hymn (p. 103), in the memorization of Scripture which then later reveals its truths in the crucible of experience, or even in a clichéd cultural commonplace (p. 60). Thus Reverend Ames is pleased at the progress of his little boy, who, with his mother's help, is memorizing portions of the Scripture, including at this point the Beatitudes (p. 185). But he knows that the lad's present pleasure in "the magnitude of the accomplishment" will pale in comparison to the value of such wisdom later, when the meaning of these remembered words comes inwardly to life in a richer way.

The boy remains as nameless as the implied son in Proverbs, that Robinson's readers might more easily become themselves the actual recipients of the wisdom taught, for the lad is yet far from the age of experience in which he can appropriate it all. Like the Christian reader of *Gilead*, he may well be able to locate or even memorize the wisdom aphorisms of the Proverbs, for example, much more readily than properly understand them: "Who among men knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of a man, which is in him?" (p. 197; 1 Corinthians 2:11, KJV); "Hope deferred makes the heart sick" (p. 221; Proverbs 13:12, KJV). Perhaps he may come to concede that "hope deferred is still hope" (p. 247); "There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth more" (p. 198; Proverbs 11:24, KJV); "Children's children are the crown of old men" (p. 230; Proverbs 17:6, KJV). Yet not all these elements of wisdom will come to be fully comprehended, or confirmed as one might wish in personal experience, even for Ames himself.

What then may we hope for from our efforts to pass on the wisdom of the ages – and ageless wisdom likewise – to a generation whose understanding of it we ourselves shall not live to see? Like Robinson's fading narrator, we cast our bread upon the waters in the hope that "by God's grace, of course" (p. 138), whatever bread returns to us will bear about it some token of our love, and of that which, as to Him, we have committed against that Day which shall come to us all. The parable of the prodigal son, tacit in Robinson's beautiful novel, is nonetheless explicit in her conclusion: the transmission of wisdom is all about a father's love. Before he dies, and his script concludes abruptly with a prayer and "sleep," Ames confers upon the renegade surrogate Jack, hand upon his head, a father's biblical blessing: "The Lord make his face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace" (Numbers 6:25-26, KJV). The moment is sacramental; for Ames and his godson it is in just this way intimately personal. This near final act of the old pastor and father is the fruit of the wisdom which he has received,

and for those who will come to have “eyes to see and ear to hear,” it “simply states a deeply mysterious fact” (p. 7). Perhaps that allusive old spiritual song hints at the good of this fact in its soothing refrain: “There is a balm in Gilead / to heal the wounded soul.”

NOTES

1 Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) presents itself as a memoir of seventy-six year-old Reverend John Ames written to be preserved for his seven year-old son until he is of an age to read it. Robinson’s sequel, *Home* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), is the second of a diptych, focusing on the parallel life and family of Ames’ closest friend, Reverend Robert Boughton, Boughton’s daughter Glory, and his son Jack (who, as Ames’ godson and first namesake, also plays a central role in *Gilead*). In *Home* many of these characters are seen now from a different but complementary point of view. For Robinson’s personal views on Calvinism, family, and religion in America, the reader should turn to her book of essays, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York, NY: Picador, 1998; 2005).

2 Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in an anthology of his essays, *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: NY: Schocken Books, 1969), 86.



DAVID LYLE JEFFREY

is Distinguished Professor of Literature and Humanities in the Honors College of Baylor University in Waco, Texas.