

Aesthetics of Forgiveness: Representing Forgiveness Artistically

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ABSTRACT

Although one major form of theological aesthetics today is aesthetics of divine revelation, there is an important role for a theological aesthetics focused more on art and culture, with attention to ethics as well. This paper explores the potentially transformative power of the art of fiction, in its ethical and theological dimension, partly through an analysis of the novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. The discussion attends to the novel's ways of showing the limitations of human judgment, the difficulty of forgiveness, and yet the way in which even imperfect forms of forgiveness can be graced, becoming a blessing.

KEYWORDS

Theological Aesthetics, Marilynne Robinson, Gilead, Forgiveness, John de Gruchy

TREFWOORDE

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is a privilege to be invited to participate in this conference honouring John de Gruchy. I first met John in the year 2000, at a conference on Theology Through the Arts in Cambridge, England, directed by Jeremy Begbie. I have repeatedly consulted John's invaluable book-length study *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice*.¹ John was later generous enough to contribute a crucial chapter on Art, Morality, and Justice to the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, which I edited and which was just published by Oxford University Press this past January.²

The topic of the present session is theological aesthetics, which has emerged in recent decades as an increasingly important area of exploration for theology. While aesthetics overall has to do with beauty, art, expression, and imagination, a major component of theological aesthetics can be described as the aesthetics of divine revelation. That aspect of theological aesthetics is represented pre-eminently by Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Balthasar specialist Aidan Nichols, as well as by such theologians as Patrick Sherry, Edward Farley, David Bentley Hart, Richard Viladesau, Oleg Bychkov, and the late Alejandro García-Rivera. Much of this recent resurgence of interest in aesthetics in a theological mode has roots in retrieving and reshaping ancient and medieval ideas of beauty, including spiritual, moral, or intellectual beauty – but transformative of ugliness as well.

Many Protestant writers in religious or theological aesthetics, going back to the remarkable Dutch historian of religions and theologian Gerardus van der Leeuw, have focused more closely on the arts as such, and on cultural embodiment or imaginative expression, as central to the flourishing of life and the praise of God, and as revelatory of human existence, with all its questions, and of glimpses of divine reality and blessing. Representatives of variations on the latter approach to Christian aesthetics include, for instance, Nick Wolterstorff, Jeremy Begbie, Gesa Thiessen, David Brown, and Graham Ward. As for ethically grounded reflection in theological aesthetics that treats the arts in a central way, I can think of no one more important to exploring that edge or frontier of theology than John de Gruchy himself.

Given the character of de Gruchy's work in aesthetics, it will come as no surprise that art, and the connections between art and ethics, will occupy a significant part of

1 John W de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001).

2 John W de Gruchy, Art, Morality, and Justice, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. Frank Burch Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

what I have to say today. In the latter part of my presentation, I will be reflecting on one example from literature of our day – the novel *Gilead* by the American novelist Marilynne Robinson. I will want to suggest how the strategies of that novel relate to what we might call the aesthetics of forgiveness. But first I want to comment on some of the issues and questions that I believe take theology today into the territory of aesthetics, as it engages both art and ethics.

2. RECONSIDERING THE POWERS AND LIMITATIONS OF ART

It has become something of a truism, but one easily forgotten, that art that has vitality is never merely illustrational of ideas and truths available in some other form. And even in its ways of working that have ethical import and impact, art's creativity is rarely if ever applied simply in service of rules and principles and external norms. As John de Gruchy writes, "Good art is more about the shaping of consciousness and the formation of perception rather than didactic prescription."³

Another way of making this point is to say, also, that art can lead us into mystery. In his book *Led into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death*, De Gruchy writes: "Mystery finds expression above all in art which imaginatively points to or even carries us beyond ourselves towards that which is ultimate."

This is not to deny that works of art differ greatly in *how* they work and in their effects – something easily disguised when thinkers too-freely categorize all art as beautiful, and all beauty as religious, or when they treat all art as somehow inevitably good and life enhancing. Still, we're left with the question, in view of aesthetic theories that have drawn attention to the distinctive and even unique features of aesthetic creativity and artistic expression: How can we give art its due, theologically and ethically, without making it into something it is not – something simply superior to theology and morality, for instance – or without falsely assuming that theology and ethics can simply raid or rephrase the good parts of art for their own purposes, as though art were, after all, nothing but another tool in the box of theological and ethical resources?

Instead of diving into the thicket of modern and postmodern aesthetics, I want in the present context to reintroduce some ideas found in the little book *The Use and Abuse of Art* by the late and highly regarded cultural historian Jacques Barzun. To begin with, I recall a relative simple assertion he makes in that book, based on his A. W. Mellon Lectures in the fine arts, delivered in 1973. There he asserts: "It is clear that if art has importance, it is because it can shape [our] minds and emotions. ...

3 De Gruchy, *Art, Morality, and Justice*, 418.

[Art] can enlarge or trivialize the imagination. If it can do so much, it affects the social fabric as well as individual lives for good or evil.”⁴

Although most of us might be inclined to agree with that assertion, Barzun seems to undercut or take it back, elsewhere. And it is worthwhile, both theologically and ethically, to pursue this matter in terms Barzun himself sets forth, which exhibit exceptional insights even while sharing some of the difficulties and inconsistencies that are common in modern theories of art. Those difficulties are hard to avoid, as it turns out, and likewise merit our attention.

In *The Uses and Abuses of Art*, Barzun goes to great lengths to caution against the Romantic tendency to view art itself as inherently religious or to turn art into religion. Barzun says that this tendency, which in many circles continues as a legacy even today, is misguided because art can't really provide a way of life in itself [p 90]. In Barzun's words, art in its richness and variety “cannot do the simplest things that religion, philosophy, and the state can do by *their* nature.” Art “lacks a theology or even a popular mythology of its own; it has no bible, no ritual, and no sanctions for behaviour. We are called to enjoy but we are not enjoined” [p 90]. So Barzun rejects art as a religion and is disdainful of those who, for example, call art their religion and attend church only for the music. Moreover, when it comes to morality and ethics, Barzun goes so far as to say that, in good art, rules of conduct are not even implied; indeed, in such art, he declares, “the esthetic emotion is cut off from the moral” [p 90].

What is so striking is not this rejection of art as a new religion or as a new morality, which seems sane and sound so far as it goes – even though it fails to acknowledge how much of the best art has legitimate and powerful ways of being religiously and morally engaging. What is striking is that, even without acknowledging explicitly what he's doing, Barzun goes on to write almost in awe of the powers of art, and in terms that seem to suggest or even to endorse the very proximity to religion and morality that he seems to resist at other points. Great art, Barzun can be found saying “has the power of transfiguring the aspect of the world, while also mysteriously recasting in new shapes the substance of the self” [p 74]. Again, in his words: “The experience of great art . . . is a massive blow from which one recovers slowly and which leaves one changed in ways that only gradually come to light.” It is like a “near-escape from death” [p74]. Barzun testifies: “After undergoing a masterpiece, we believe we know more about ourselves and others, about this world or the next” [p 75].

I don't believe one needs to think only of artworks that are widely regarded as great to know that one can be greatly affected by a wide variety of art, and that such aesthetic

4 Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974). 90.

powers can be transformative of spirit and bodily feeling, and can provide a sense of life in and beyond the ordinary. But this means that, while we can join Barzun in resisting the temptation to make art per se into a kind of religion unto itself, we have no reason to follow him when he tries to deny art's often intimate connection with human conduct or ethics, with what he calls "moral emotion," or with religion itself. It is hard to see how Barzun can say, on the one hand, that art can affect lives for good and, possibly, for evil and yet deny, on the other, that art can sometimes have moral and religious implications as part of its own nature, and not simply as a *faux* religion or as a servant of religion. Perhaps there is a part of Barzun that, despite his worries about an inflated view of art, shares the fear of many modern thinkers since the Enlightenment that to link art too closely with morality and religion would be to make art somehow less aesthetic and would compromise the freedom necessary for creative imagination.

Whatever the explanation, I propose that, in response to Barzun's eloquent inconsistencies, we continue to take seriously the question of how art can sometimes have religious and moral modes of imagination *as art* – for reasons at once ethical and aesthetic – without simply becoming some sort of alternative to religion or substitute for morality. To that end, in the latter part of this presentation I'm embarking on an exploration of what we might call the aesthetics of forgiveness. I'll do that here by examining certain features of Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* and its way of suggesting or evoking the conditions of forgiveness and the obstacles to forgiveness, and the relation of forgiveness both to judgment and to grace, and to what she calls blessing. Robinson's work, in its openness to Christian ways of thinking and questioning, cannot be taken to typify modern fiction. But what one can see as representative of fiction are the novel's ways of unsettling anything doctrinaire about doctrines and of imagining life experience germane to moral reflection but not contained or absorbed in moral formulas, even if a kind of wisdom seems to emerge.

3. FICTION AND THE AESTHETICS OF FORGIVENESS

Set in the 1950s, Robinson's novel *Gilead* has a companion but independent work called *Home*,⁵ and just recently acquired a prequel called *Lila*.⁶ *Gilead* has as its geographical centre the fictional town of Gilead, Iowa. That's in the middle of the Midwest United States (roughly 8 000 miles from Cape Town). I've tried to make it so that my discussion does not assume familiarity with this fiction, nor with that place,

5 Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008).

6 Marilynne Robinson, *Lila* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014).

although I'm aware a number of you attending this conference have read *Gilead*. And I know some would appreciate that Marilynne Robinson is an ardent admirer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, not to mention John Calvin. She is very much of our own time, however, having been born in 1943 and is presently living and teaching in Iowa. Her fiction has won various awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2005 for the novel *Gilead* and the 2012 National Humanities Medal. It's worth noting that the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has praised Marilynne Robinson as "one of the world's most compelling English-speaking novelists."⁷ No one at the conference would miss the fact that her *Gilead* includes many allusions and references both to the Bible and to church, and even to Calvin and Feuerbach.

The fictional character said to be writing the pages of *Gilead* is a preacher we can guess is Congregationalist, though that's never said directly. He is nearing the end of his life – a descendent of a long line of preachers, one of whom was an abolitionist during the era of the Civil War but, but also prone to being both rather violent and harshly judgmental of others, including his son, Ames's father. Now Ames himself is 76 (turning 77 in the course of the novel). Rapidly failing in his health, he knows he hasn't long to live. With this in mind, Ames is writing down thoughts, memories, and advice to his 6-year-old son, whom he expects to leave in the care of Ames's much younger wife – the boy's mother, only 41 years old. Ames had married her when he was 67.

Without making any attempt to summarize the novel as a whole, I want to call attention to several features of the story and its characteristic or key moments. First, I would note that there is a tremendous amount in the novel about perceiving, appreciating, judging, and forgiving, often humorous or whimsical, sometimes quietly beautiful, but also sometimes poignant or disturbing.

Early in the novel, the conventional ways of seeing and judging are already set before us as readers, and then shifted. Ames writes to his son about overhearing his young wife sing the little boy to sleep, lulling him in a low voice. Ames notes that it sounds beautiful to him, although he remarks that his wife laughs when he says that. Ames adds that he can't really tell what's beautiful anymore – which we as readers see is a way of saying that things that are not usually thought to be beautiful *can* be. Ames follows this by recalling how he saw some rascally but harmless boys in their teens, joking together while propped against a garage wall. He watched them light up cigarettes, laughing "wickedly," but then it seemed somehow beautiful to him. "It is an amazing thing to watch people laugh, the way it sort of takes them over." It seems he's using an unconventional category for the beautiful: rascally beauty.

7 Rowan Williams, "Mighty Please for Reasonableness," *Church Times*, 12 August 2012.

Another scene very early in the novel sets up the theme of perception and aesthetic feeling, and of judgment, but allied with compassion. Inclined to describe baptism as primarily a kind of blessing, Ames takes evident delight in recounting to his young boy how, when he was little himself, he and some other children raised in pious households decided that they would do well to baptize a litter of cats. Luckily for the kittens, he says, the baptism was by sprinkling rather than by immersion. But there was a problem. The mother cat started taking away her kittens even before the baptisms were done. Consequently, the children couldn't be entirely sure, Ames says, which kittens were baptized and which were borne away, as he puts it: "still in the darkness of paganism" (p 22). While Ames, as an adult pastor doesn't condone those baptisms, he emphasizes that the children weren't being disrespectful of the Sacraments. It's just that they thought the whole world of those cats (p 22).

The fact that religious doubts had lodged in the playful but pious hearts of the children regarding the eternal destiny of some of those cats makes it even more poignant that the cats were beloved even in their allegedly pagan state. With a very light touch, the novel thus introduces us to problems with condemnation and judgment – and how that is to be carried out – while giving greater emphasis on the need to bless and to forgive. Those issues had come up in Ames's own family of origin, since his late brother Edward was an atheist who was marginalized by his preacher father for that very reason. And it comes up again in the younger generation, with the sceptical and prodigal son of Ames's best friend and fellow pastor, a Presbyterian minister by the name of Robert Boughton. We'll come back to that son, Jack. He was named after Ames, having been christened John Ames Boughton – much to the distress of his namesake.

It can't be accidental that the question of forgiveness comes up again in the context of another baptism. Ames's first wife had died in childbirth, as did the baby daughter, almost at the same time. When the Reverend John Ames baptizes his future second wife, Lila, whom he has already met and grown to love, he experiences a strangeness about that, and some distance from the mystery of the act even as her eyes are filled with tears (p 21). He isn't sure he has done something that really did mean something. Is it that, somewhere in his heart, he doubts his future wife's motives and her genuine Christian conviction, because he's aware of her feelings for him, and his feelings for her? As we learn later, it's true that doubtful feelings were in his mind, much taken, as he was, about how wonderful she looked to him as he baptized her. In his eyes, she was beyond beautiful. Whatever Ames's own doubts, the author presents them so tenderly, so aesthetically, that the reader cannot throw stones of condemnation – not even a pebble.

The pivotal element of the story, when it comes to judgment and forgiveness, circles around Jack Boughton, son of the Rev. Robert Boughton. With Jack, and not least with Ames's discomfort with him, the question of one's capacity to discern and judge, to bless or forgive, and how to know when to do so, comes to focus. As does the question of whether it is within the power of some people to avail them of forgiveness in the fullest sense, which often also means confession and repentance. This child of Ames's dearest friend and fellow pastor cannot find it within himself to believe or to live responsibly, even though he claims he wishes it might be possible. The parallels with the Prodigal Son are explicit in the novel.

In his youth, Jack had gotten a young girl pregnant, had abandoned her and her little child in poverty. In that condition, and badly neglected, the child had died after a few years. Jack, as he later struggled with alcohol and a sense of almost total incapacity to receive the love his family insists on giving him, wandered into deep troubles. Yet, living mostly at a distance from his father, sister, and other family members, he had kept himself hidden from the family's view.

Ironically, what he also hides, however, are experiences that indicate a kind of integrity about Jack. Late in the novel, that aspect of Jack's life surfaces when Ames learns of Jack's attempt to care for his common law wife, an African American woman, a common law wife with whom Jack has had a son. Faithful to one another, they would have been married if laws in the South had not prevented it where she lived, in the state of Tennessee, and if her own minister father hadn't rejected Jack – and if Jack's family in Iowa, where the marriage would have been legal, had not also been likely to take offense. Whatever Jack's weaknesses, those are compounded by injustice in society and in existing moral codes, and religious biases. And his strengths go largely unknown. If we're looking for a clear map to sin and forgiveness, the novel isn't much help but clarity of that sort can be confusing, one might feel.

Ames, like almost everyone else in novel, is unaware of all this until Jack discloses it to him late in the story. Ames has always been suspicious of Jack, and seemingly for good reason. Ames had worried in particular that Jack might have been all too aware that Ames would not live much longer and had his eye on Ames's wife, and, for all Ames could tell, was much too friendly with their boy.

Even though Jack attempts briefly to return home, he is like an abortive version of the Prodigal Son, as Ames sees him, who would have been received with gladness, if the father had only known the story. Meanwhile, Ames sees himself as like the elder son, begrudging signs of uncritical welcome that he believes Jack's father might be thought to offer, if given a chance.

Near the end of the novel, Jack decides he cannot stay at home even after receiving a sincere if confused and imperfect sort of welcome. Forgiveness is never offered to Jack by anyone in a way that to him is quite acceptable, since it is of course attached to guilt, as forgiveness is bound to be. And Jack can neither fully acknowledge his guilt nor the good of his ways of living beyond the narrow morality of his society. He cannot fully accept his acceptance, however sincere though never just right.

As Jack prepares to leave home yet again, at the end of the novel, Ames tells him: “The thing I would like, actually, is to bless you.” And with Jack’s consent, he does. “Jack took his hat off and set it on his knee and closed his eyes and lowered his head, almost rested it again my hand, and I did bless him to the limit of my powers, whatever they are, repeated the benediction from Numbers, of course – ‘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.’” (p 241).

For Ames himself, nothing could be more beautiful than that, or more sufficient. But Jack doesn’t move or say anything; so Ames keeps going: “Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father.” Ames realizes at once that his words have the opposite effect of what he’d desired. Jack doesn’t believe any of those things about himself. Although Jack says, “Thank you, Reverend,” Ames hears something different: “His tone made me think that to him it might have seemed I had named everything I thought he no longer was, when that was absolutely the furthest thing from my meaning, the exact opposite of my meaning.” That same day Ames goes on to write, even so: “I do wish Boughton [Jack’s father] could have seen how his boy received his benediction, how he bowed his head.” But since Jack’s father Boughton has passed away by now, Ames composes an alternative image, “I can imagine him beyond the world, looking back at me with an amazement of realization – ‘This is why we have lived this life!’ Ames adds: There are a thousand reasons to live this life, every one of them sufficient.”

We might start to wonder: Could it be that it is more blessed to forgive than to be forgiven? But which is harder? Ames tells us he preached a sermon his wife must have heard back in June 1947, which was on forgiveness and the Prodigal Son. He notes that the grace encountered in the parable of Jesus comes despite how the son neither asks to be restored as son, nor necessarily repents of the grief he has caused his father (p 161). In preaching that parable years ago, Ames had stressed: “Jesus puts His hearer in the role of the father, of the one who forgives. Because if we are, so to speak, the debtor (and of course we are that, too), that suggests no graciousness in us. And 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, and therefore we can feel the will of

God enacted through us, which is the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves.” So he had preached, long in the past.

Ames says that the words of that sermon still seem right to him, and we as readers have no doubt that he speaks partly for the author of this novel as well. We could rest there, as at the end of many a sermon. But the novel is more than sermon. It is fiction and imagination. We see acted out in the fiction of the novel, in intricate and otherwise indescribable ways, how both forgiving and being forgiven are difficult for flawed human beings, and ever in need of grace. The most earnest attempts to discern and judge – without which forgiveness doesn’t even come up as a question – are often accompanied by confusion and mixed feelings. And situations that might call for forgiveness are often accompanied by disagreements over what went wrong, exactly, or by mismatched perceptions of how serious the problem is, and who is more responsible, if anyone. Sometimes that’s true even in situations of undeniable wrongdoing and terrible social injustice – times when, the more obvious and terrible the crime, the stronger and more insistent the denial, as we can witness even today in the atrocities of war.

Gilead is not a story with a moral. But neither is it simply beyond morality, since it requires moral engagement even to be an interesting story. It is neither theology nor simply beyond theology. Theologically, one is continually aware of what Ames points to when he informs his son that doctrine is not belief, and that salvation can mean healing (p 239) – something that goes beyond charges and counter-charges. One does not come away from reading *Gilead* with one’s mind focused on doctrine or on moral laws, but with a sense of processes of slow and imperfect healing. Insofar as forgiveness is a recurrent and fundamental theme, it is linked with blessing: a sense of life as graced and beautiful in its very imperfection. This sense of the beauty of forgiveness is both aesthetic and ethical: the sense of the right timing and rhythm and meaning of forgiveness is wrapped up in the mystery of how the duty of forgiveness, so to speak, is also an art of grace: requiring judgment and a sense of justice and accountability, but never exhausted by that alone.

Our brief study in the aesthetics of forgiveness suggests an alternative to either merging art with morality or isolating them in separate spheres. While never capable of being reduced to moral codes or religious doctrines as such, art can be one of the major ways in which both theology and ethics discover new life, and enter into life, and potentially return to theological reflection itself. Ethically considered, this is not theology replaced by art, but newly awakened to aesthetic perception, judgment, feeling, and imagination whereby forgiveness itself participates not only in judging and then reconciling, but also in blessing.