

Heroism and Suffering

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel. (2 Tim 1:8)

Therefore, when we feel pain, when we suffer, when we die, let us turn to this, firmly believing and certain that it is not we alone, but Christ and the church who are in pain and are suffering and dying with us. . . . We set out upon the road of suffering and death accompanied by the entire church.
(Martin Luther, *Fourteen Consolations*)¹

A remarkable turn has occurred during the last half century in the Christian attitude toward religious heroes. For centuries veneration of martyrs was a fundamental part of the worship experience; while one might assume this is a predominantly Roman Catholic reality, the story of Thomas Becket has been important for both Anglicans and Catholics, and in the radical Reformation tradition of the Mennonites, the book *The Martyrs Mirror* is acknowledged traditionally as having a place second in importance only to the Bible. Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* is similarly a product of the Reformation. Yet in my lifetime the place of martyrdom in the worship experience has become questionable, if not objectionable. In Robertson Davies's 1970 novel *Fifth Business*, Dunstable Ramsay begins a career as historian and mythographer in part because of his early exposure to Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. The action is set in the early twentieth century; this late twentieth-century reader found the protagonist's

1. Luther, *Fourteen Consolations*, 163.

tolerance, and even fondness, for martyrs' tales bizarre, although Davies's magnificent storytelling skills carried the day.

The subject of martyrdom makes me uncomfortable, I freely admit, and I suspect, based on a lifetime of observing other Christians at worship (admittedly mostly Protestants), my feelings are widely shared. Two men who could be considered the most important Christian martyrs of the past century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr., are more usually termed political martyrs, killed for their determined stances against Nazism and racism, respectively. Only a few generations ago they would have more definitely been designated Christian heroes—people who suffered pain, disgrace, torture, and death, following the example of Christ. While there were certainly other ways of being entered in either Alban Butler's Catholic *Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs and Other Principal Saints* (1756–1759) or Sabine Baring-Gould's Anglican *Lives of the Saints* (1872–1877), for the majority of Christian history the customary way of distinguishing oneself as a hero in the church has been to die for love of God and God's church. As James Doyle says in the Preface to the 1895 edition of Butler's authoritative collection of tales, "here the doctrines of the Catholic Church are presented to us passing through the *ordeal* of time."²

I will say little here about the way in which the current avoidance of stories of suffering and death marks the cowardice and comfortableness of our era. There is truth in that. But in our century the transformation of notions of Christian heroism has been, in many ways, a necessary and valuable one. For one thing, the unrelenting violence of most martyrologies has done little enough to "guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79). Additionally, as Gerard Manley Hopkins tells us in his poem "Pied Beauty," God is also in the "dappled things," in "skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow," and for many (if not most) Christians such lovely but homely particulars suggest the numinous more commendably than any tale of flaying or beheading. This chapter, then, details some of the fictional representations of martyrology in recent times, but takes note of a lessening emphasis on violent suffering, until we arrive at Marilynne Robinson's astonishing work *Gilead*, a novel which proposes a gentle new ideal of Christian hero, one who dies slowly, lovingly, peacefully.

2. Doyle, preface to *Lives of the Martyrs*, 8 (my emphasis).

The Willing Sacrifice

I would like to make an appeal in a special way to the men of the army. . . . Brothers, you are part of our own people. You kill your own campesino brothers and sisters. And before an order to kill that a man may give, the law of God must prevail that says: Thou shalt not kill. No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. . . . In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuous, I beg you, I ask you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!³

Oscar Romero, Roman Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador, delivered these words during a long Lenten homily one day before he was assassinated on March 24, 1980. Romero's words are used nearly verbatim in John Duigan's film *Romero*, released in 1989 and starring Raul Julia. The highlight of Romero's March 23 sermon is when he moves from request to order, attempting to use his authority to compel the soldiers to his point of view. Neither request nor order succeeds for the historical Archbishop, but in the years since 1980, in artistic and inspirational terms, his words and example have been notable.

Part of the appeal of Romero's dramatic life and death is the distance he traveled in the three years he was Archbishop. As a priest, Oscar Romero had been a conservative, with little patience for the liberation theology so prevalent in the Latin American church. However, during his term as Archbishop, six priests were murdered and Romero became increasingly outspoken about government corruption and his nation's neglect of the poor and vulnerable. Increasingly he allied himself with the poor; the collection of his writings called *The Violence of Love* is replete with statements like this one: "A church that does not join the poor, in order to speak out from the side of the poor against the injustices committed against them, is not the true church of Jesus Christ."⁴

In some respects John Duigan's film does not stray far from documentary, but it has little need to. Such a recent martyr in the church is well documented. What distinguishes this film is Raul Julia's fine and subtle performance as Romero, a man not known for his passionate nature and one who had little personal charisma. Julia, without histrionics,

3. Quoted in Brockman, *The Word Remains*, 217.

4. Romero, *The Violence of Love*, 202.

demonstrates how remarkable was Romero's transformation from dull and careful conservative to someone who preached radical openness, as evidenced in these words from 1978:

Everyone who struggles for justice, everyone who makes just claims in unjust surroundings is working for God's reign, even though not a Christian. The church does not comprise all of God's reign; God's reign goes beyond the church's boundaries. The church values everything that is in tune with its struggle to set up God's reign. A church that tries only to keep itself pure and uncontaminated would not be a church of God's service to people.⁵

It must have been tempting in the film *Romero* to make this personality shift overly melodramatic, but Duigan and Julia resist the temptation. It is precisely the passionate martyrdoms of the past that they counter with their film. Their Romero is dogged, grim, almost plodding. He does little that is more remarkable than refusing stubbornly to be untrue to his principles, demonstrating to the audience the potential that anyone has to be heroic. It is Romero's environment that is unusual, rather than the man; given another era or another place Oscar Romero might have been ordinary. But his response to circumstances that were vicious and inhumane moves him out of the category of the ordinary. Still, the message is there: he did not have a particularly startling or eloquent message, nor did he have supernatural powers or strength. He was, however, obstinately committed to the ideal that the church must represent the downtrodden.

Romero's martyrdom in this film does resemble prevailing notions of religious martyrdom: he is calm in the face of death; he appears prophetically to see his end coming; he dies in the act of serving others. Like other martyrs over the centuries he is marked by loneliness and isolation. But the novelty in Romero's martyrdom is his insistence that God's reign is not only about or for Christians. Before his death Romero came to a wide and all-embracing view of God's love that appears to dissolve boundaries between the secular world and the church. Although responsibility for Romero's death has been variously attributed to military forces protected by the government of El Salvador, to U.S.-trained opposition death squads, and to the rebel forces who did not welcome his pacifist

5. Ibid., 115.

approach, Romero's statement that the "church does not comprise all of God's reign" must have also unsettled Romero's superiors in the church.

Romero at first seems different in its politics than the other great nineteen eighties film about religious leaders making the ultimate sacrifice, Roland Joffe's *The Mission*. While *Romero* ultimately promotes a radically open view of the church's responsibility and membership, *The Mission* looks very old-school in its allegiance. Father Gabriel, played by Jeremy Irons, is a devoted servant of the church, sent to convert the forest-dwelling Guarani nation in South America. Father Gabriel's remote mission is presented in idealized terms as a place of education and tranquility. (Although Robert Bolt's screenplay purports to be based on actual events in the eighteenth century, this is a European vision of the events, and somewhat patronizing to the aboriginal peoples in the story.)

The twist in *The Mission* occurs when Spanish missionaries, of which Father Gabriel is one, are ordered to abandon the missions they have painstakingly created because these colonized territories in Paraguay are being reassigned to Portugal. In refusing to leave the mission, Father Gabriel is, on the one hand, standing up for the institution of the church as he understands it. But on the other hand, Father Gabriel's stance can be interpreted as his transfer of allegiance to the Guarani people, who are presented in Joffe's film as the true people of God, sincere in their worship and unwavering in their principles (unlike the Europeans, who are seen to have no firm principles). It is arguable that Father Gabriel dies, with his parishioners, for a very ancient church. But it could also be said that Father Gabriel dies in the act of becoming a new kind of priest, or even the priest of a new vision of Christianity.

In key scenes in this film we watch Jeremy Irons in the act of translation, both literal and figurative. So much of ministry is about translation, taking biblical stories and unpacking them for a congregation, explaining the history and theology, making scripture appropriate for the times. What we see Father Gabriel ultimately performing, however, is translation that goes the other way. Looking out to the secular world, he reads the actions of the Europeans and recognizes that the orders he has received are not part of God's plan for a healthy creation—far from it. So he becomes a spokesman for the Guarani against the church, carrying in the final battle scene a cross that has become the cross of the Guarani, not the cross of the Holy Mother Church that Father Gabriel once served.

Transformation of Character

In analyzing *Romero* and *The Mission* I have been emphasizing elements of Christian martyrdom that seem under revision, but one can begin to see this shift in early- and mid- twentieth century's fictional representations of the twelfth-century martyr, Thomas Becket. Of the many depictions of Becket I have chosen two famous ones: T. S. Eliot's 1935 verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral* and Jean Anouilh's 1959 play *Becket* (*Becket, ou L'Honneur de Dieu*), which was the basis for the 1964 film with Richard Burton as the Archbishop and Peter O'Toole as Henry II. Archbishop Becket's story is not unlike Archbishop Romero's in that it involves a tremendous change in sensibility. Becket's shift, however, was ethical, moving as he did from thoroughgoing man of the world to ascetic, in opposition to Romero's political conversion. But in some aspects, Becket's death is the template for the sacrificial deaths of Father Gabriel and Archbishop Romero. Once the friend of a king who gave him supreme power in the church and expected the appointee to obey the royal will, Becket suddenly becomes loyal only to God, and is murdered at the king's command. Becket stands against political and secular authorities who challenge his view of what the church should be—and all of these martyrs also stand against collaborationist factions within the church itself.

Both Anouilh and Eliot emphasize aspects of Becket's ordinariness; it is perhaps that quality in Becket that has prompted over the centuries such loyalty among the lower classes (most noticeable in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*). In Anouilh's play Becket's last words, for example, are not majestic and stirring but plaintive, even peevish. In Edward Anhalt's English screenplay Becket's penultimate lines are weary: "It is here now, the supreme folly. This is its hour. O Lord, how heavy thy honour is to bear"; his last words express understated pity for his persecutor ("Poor Henry").⁶ *Murder in the Cathedral* has Becket say at one point, rather wonderfully, one of my favorite Eliot lines (used again in the poem *Burnt Norton*): "Human kind cannot bear very much reality."⁷ But the difference between the two plays is in the degree of faith: Anouilh is not overly interested in the religious aspect of the story and Eliot most certainly is.

6. Anouilh, *Becket*, directed by Peter Glenville, English adaptation by Edward Anhalt (this and all subsequent quotation is my own transcription from the film).

7. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, 69.

A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of man's will to become a Saint, as a man by willing and contriving may become a ruler of men. A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of becoming a martyr.⁸

This is Eliot's Becket: predicting his own end and the upheaval that that end will cause. The priest as the instrument of God who has made his will over to God—this is the pattern we expect. Anouilh's Becket, on the other hand, stands more simply as refusal to compromise with the worldly authority that he once represented. "One can always manage the church. We must come to a sensible little arrangement with God" is a typical line for the early Becket. An hour later in the viewing experience he has cleanly switched sides: "The kingdom of God must be defended like any other kingdom. Gentlemen, it is a supreme irony that the worldly Becket, the profligate and libertine, should find himself standing here at this moment. But here he is, in spite of himself."⁹

Both Eliot's and Anouilh's Becketts are seen as strong-willed men learning to submit to God's stronger will, but the principles involved in Anouilh's play are more straightforward. Anouilh's Becket is an individual, and the playwright is interested in the ways in which individualism threatens the powers that be. Becket has been wholly the king's man, but when he removes that loyalty the king will do almost anything to halt this assertion of independence. In Eliot's version of the story, the king does not even appear. For Eliot, the drama involves Becket and God, and (to a lesser extent) the People, represented not only by the Chorus but also by the Tempters, Priests, and Knights. But without the king in view, the situation is no less dangerous; indeed it is more dangerous. The demands put upon Becket by the People to live, to die, to protect and shield are frightening and extreme. In the Gospel of John and several other places in the Gospels, Christ insists on the hatred that is the prerequisite of his service and sacrifice: "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love

8. *Ibid.*, 49.

9. Anouilh, *Becket*.

you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18–19). In *Murder in the Cathedral* this unreasoning animosity is palpable. Currents of hatred swirl around Becket for no good reason, and even the love of the People can be destructive. At the end of the play the Chorus, having the last word, admits they “fear the blessing of God, the loneliness of the night of God, the surrender required, the deprivation inflicted”¹⁰ and yet they know they too have played their awful part in compelling Becket toward his violent end, forcing him to undergo the sacrifice that they cannot bear.

For the most part, the deaths of Archbishop Romero and Father Gabriel in *Romero* and *The Mission* are unaccompanied by hagiographical élan. In the films, the directors are clear that no miracles are attributable to these men before or after their deaths; the stories are resolutely grounded in realism; the action ends in each case with their deaths. The stories about Thomas Becket in the past were different, in that Becket’s death was immediately seen, by way of miracles, to make a difference. But these twentieth-century versions of Becket’s story, by Eliot and Anouilh, stop short of potential miracles. We are grounded in death, selflessness, in strength of will.

What purpose do tales of martyrdom have for readers and viewers of our time? Our world continues to be a violent one, and there is no doubt that clerics and ordinary believers right now are dying for their faith under one oppressive regime or another. Those suffering under such circumstances must find strength and inspiration from stories of previous martyrs. But for the average comfortable Christian in the West today, different lessons arise from works like *The Mission*, *Romero*, *Becket*, and *Murder in the Cathedral*. One lesson is best summarized in the repeated phrase of the Chorus in Eliot’s play about “living and partly living.” The average Christian is like this, “living and partly living,” simultaneously conscious and unconscious of God’s presence and the Christian’s duty to do God’s will.

We do not wish anything to happen.
 Seven years we have lived quietly,
 Succeeded in avoiding notice,
 Living and partly living.¹¹

10. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, 87.

11. *Ibid.*, 18.

Heroic Christian leaders like Oscar Romero and Thomas Becket demonstrate the possibility of going beyond this halfway stage, becoming fully alive in relationship with God. It feels odd to think of someone who dies for love of Christ as fully alive but, when we think about this, it should not be odd at all. Another lesson arising from these tales of martyrdom is the value of single-mindedness. Words like *submission*, *instrument*, and *surrender* in Eliot's drama do not play well for us in our time, but think instead of a determined sense of purpose, or complete and utter attention. This aspect of the martyrs' stories is needed in our era, when nearly all people, pastors included, experience so many distracting voices, clamoring bits of information, and cries for help spinning around and enveloping us at all times. Martyrdom, in other words, is not about death, although dying may well happen. For a Christian, death can hardly be the point. The heroic Christian act is rather identifying oneself as being a Christian to the detriment of all other claims. Nothing could be simpler, or more challenging.

Stripped to Essentials

In 1938 English novelist Graham Greene, a convert to Roman Catholicism since 1926, visited Mexico, which had endured at that point several years of anti-clerical purges by ostensibly leftist governments hostile to the church. Greene, both a leftist and a Catholic, was fascinated by this situation and wrote a fiction and a non-fiction book about the Mexican situation. The novel is one of Greene's most famous books, *The Power and the Glory*, published in 1940. At the center of the novel is an unnamed priest on the run, a weak, alcoholic, and despairing man whose sins are many and who (in his own eyes and in the eyes of others) is almost impossible to imagine as a hero. He summarizes his own life in this way: "a caricature of service: a few communions, a few confessions, and an endless bad example."¹² Yet by the end of the book, when he is captured and executed, it does appear that Greene asks us to entertain the notion that the whisky priest, as he is named, is a martyr for the Christian church.

Greene's Catholic novels are difficult for Protestants to negotiate, or at least difficult for this Protestant to negotiate. Suffering and sin are foremost in novels like *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, and

12. Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, 208. References to subsequent passages are given parenthetically.

The End of the Affair, and the insistence that human beings are powerless to save themselves by their own efforts is relentless. There is an intense sense of Catholic separateness in Greene's stories; the characters are isolated not just from humanists, but from other Christians, and although there is pride involved in this separation, there is also misery. In *The Power and the Glory* the priest desperately needs to confess his sins, but for this he needs another priest; he desperately guards the elements of the Eucharist because, as one of the last priests in Mexico, he is the gateway to communion with God. Saying a Mass in a remote village, the priest believes that "God was here in the body for the first time in six years" (71). Greene's focus on sin and the mysterious movements of God's grace are certainly applicable and interesting for any Christian reader, although some references to Catholic dogma may be puzzling for Protestants.

In *The Power and the Glory* we should put aside doctrinal matters and concentrate on the priest. Although the reader may disagree with the priest's belief that the Christian's first duty is to save his own soul (65), the emphasis in the novel on the importance of duty is salutary. Horton Davies sees Greene's novel as "a modern version of the book of Jonah, as man's attempt to evade God and God's pursuit of him"¹³ but I do not see the whisky priest as evading God. Whatever else is wrong with the priest—and there is much that is wrong—his sense of duty, however often he betrays it, is strong. Greene cannot be easily described as a modernist—his style is too straightforward and accessible—but in his portrayal of self-haunted, alienated humanity he can be aligned with other literary modernists like Faulkner and Joyce. One of the many valuable elements of personality that twentieth-century souls have lost, according to Greene, is that sense of duty that can propel an individual through arduous situations. In *The Power and the Glory* we observe the priest failing in his responsibilities time and again, but as his life is pared down to its most primitive qualities, his sense of duty resurrects itself and allows him to retain some dignity at the end. He truly believes that "when he was gone it would be as if God in all this space between the sea and the mountains ceased to exist" (65); this is a real sorrow for him as he prepares for execution.

Duty is a difficult word for us these days, and has been for many decades. But it is a concept still worth our attention. Perhaps it needs another name, as so many abused concepts do, but duty can make all the

13. Davies, *A Mirror of the Ministry*, 103.

difference in a challenging situation. To use a commonplace example, it is necessary to offer condolence and support when a neighbor faces the death of a loved one. We may not want to; it may not be convenient; we may not even like the person to whom we are offering sympathy nor have respect for the person who has died. But duty, especially Christian duty, demands in a time of mourning or crisis that we act. In this novel, the price of duty for the priest is costly; several times he is on the verge of escaping this oppressive region and saving himself but he is called back to hear a dying man's confession. Each time he turns back automatically, wearily and unhappily, but dutifully.

In *The Power and the Glory* the strangeness of the religious concepts can have the happy effect of forcing us to think about the qualities of Christian leadership or the strictures of doctrine that we claim adherence to and those we actually enact. It is thought-provoking, to say the least, when the whisky priest tells a woman in the confessional that loving God means "wanting to protect Him from yourself" (173). This, to me, is such a strange idea that I am forced anew to consider what relationship to God I actually ascribe to. (Just how honest and open can the relations between follower and deity be?) And when the priest experiences bouts of inappropriate giggling, the reader cannot help but be reminded, in a useful way, of the comic ironies involved in God's condescension to become part of humankind. There are not a lot of moments of humor or grace in Graham Greene's rather grim Catholic novels, but when these moments arrive they are significant, and the delight (or potential delight) in laughter marks the giftedness of creation, creating communion and community, almost despite the actions of the individuals involved.

Now they were both tired out and the mule simply sat down. The priest scrambled off and began to laugh. He was feeling happy. It is one of the strange discoveries a man can make that life, however you lead it, contains moments of exhilaration; there are always comparisons which can be made with worse times: even in danger and misery the pendulum swings. (59)

The Power and the Glory is a novel that prompts questions about whether we should be reading allegorically. Does the priest represent Christ and the *mestizo* who betrays him Judas? Do the priest's journeys point toward the stations of the cross? Is the priest's relatively happy and safe time with the upright Lutherans, the Lehrs, some sort of "take this cup from me" time of temptation? I think useful analysis can be done

along these lines, but ultimately the priest as priest is more interesting. In relatively prosperous times he has been a fallen priest; in terrible times, he is challenged to become a redeemed and redeeming priest. He is stripped of much that we consider the trappings of humanity, but when we see what is left that is intrinsic to his vocation, we are moved and enlightened, even if we do not share Greene's doctrinal beliefs. (Although we may admire the priest for protecting the elements of the Eucharist so assiduously, and pouring himself into his duty as a confessor and baptizer, it may be less easy for us to accept the deaths attributable to him in his journey toward martyrdom: the lieutenant pursuing him shoots, unwillingly, three hostages in an attempt to force the people of the region to give up the priest.) Despite his many sins and weaknesses, the priest stripped down to essentials becomes a profound blessing; there should be argument about whether the essentials that Greene demonstrates are in fact the essentials at all, but the exercise is a good one.

The Serene Hero

An emphasis on heroism in Christian leadership has led me into lengthy consideration of martyrdom, and the direction was not absolutely necessary. One could find portrayals of clergy being heroic in less violent films and novels: I do find Reverend Farebrother in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* an exemplary cleric in many respects, and the recent BBC television comedy *Rev.* shows us a good priest who does not undergo torture or death but nevertheless suffers daily a million tiny humiliations as he patiently tries to serve God. But it is undeniable that we expect a truly impressive priest in literature to die for the faith rather than live for the faith.

As an example of an important work of fiction that explores the possibility of holy service that is serene and gentle, Marilynne Robinson's much-loved 2004 novel *Gilead* is unsurpassed in its beauty and depth. While not everyone would agree that John Ames, the pastor at the center of *Gilead*, fulfills the definition of a hero, nearly everyone could agree about his goodness. When *Gilead* was published, there was a sense in North American literary circles of relief and joy. I can recall thinking how wondrous it was to meet a protagonist so trustworthy, moving, and humble, and yet absolutely human, fallible, and recognizable. Here was hope for contemporary literature, for ethics, and for religion. *Gilead* is that rare thing: a lovely and profoundly wise book about faith, about

the tremendous gift that is existence, about human love and sorrow and loneliness.

The plot is both simple and urgent: an aging pastor with a heart condition wants to leave a record of his life to his son; in a parallel plot the pastor awkwardly attempts to minister to his troubled godson, the wayward son of his best friend, also a pastor. There is much to treasure in *Gilead*. It is a version of (and a complication of) the prodigal son parable that does not end easily. Is the novel also a portrait of America, its frayed edges, its small hopes? Yes, and most certainly *Gilead* is a celebration of the tiny mysteries that allow everyday living to be so miraculous; for example, the friendship and rivalry of the two ministers, Ames and Boughton, is both a source of frustration and sustenance to them. Daily, Ames is simultaneously enthralled by the world around him and saddened that so few people see the glory he does: “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?”¹⁴ And then there is the enigma of the understated but passionate love of this sixty-seven-year-old cleric for a woman in her thirties and for their young son, a character who remains shadowy but unforgettable on the edge of the story.

As a minister, Ames in some respects would appear to be colorless, diminished. He is aging and sick, able to do less and less. He suffers in imagination the weight of his hundreds of sermons in the attic of his home. He serves a small congregation in the middle of nowhere. At one point he says to his diary, in quiet exasperation, “This afternoon I came back from a fairly discouraging meeting at the church—just a few people came, and absolutely nothing was accomplished. That is the kind of thing that wears me out.”¹⁵ But his shy enactments of forgiveness and service, his tiny offerings of good counsel are lovely. In his humility he has opened himself up completely to the experience of God’s creation. Significantly, Robinson removes nearly all direct references to Ames’s denomination so that this can be a pure portrait of the ministry, of faith as opposed to institution; an American reader attuned to denominational distinctions can construe that Ames is Congregationalist, but the type of church Ames serves is less important than comprehending Christian service in its essence.

14. Robinson, *Gilead*, 245.

15. *Ibid.*, 195.

Gilead is constructed along similar lines to the novel *Diary of a Country Priest* by Georges Bernanos, and John Ames explicitly has that book, which he admires, in mind as he narrates his own story. In each book there is the same diary format, the same last days, the same almost ludicrous clarity of vision (at times), the same fierce commitment to vocation, the same overpowering and often unexpected love for people, the same sleeplessness. But the experience of reading these two novels about country priests could not be more different. Bernanos emphasizes the frustration and isolation of his unnamed priest. Robinson provides her priest not only with a solid name, but a definite community, one that is flawed but marked by real tenderness. No matter how resolute is the priest's love of God in Bernanos, my question persists: is he doing more harm than good? Robinson's minister lives through similar situations, but there is no need to ask this question. John Ames is doing good. To watch the daily unfolding of small acts of goodness is a pleasure.

Particularly important is the novel's investigation of forgiveness: how hard it is not only to forgive but to be forgiven. If Graham Greene asks us to reconsider the neglected concept of duty, Marilynne Robinson urges us to contemplate forgiveness: a concept not so abased, but nevertheless bandied about with too much ease. Above I noted that *Gilead* (and its sequel *Home*) is an investigation of the story of the prodigal son. Over the space of these two novels, Robinson's slow and careful unraveling of the story of black sheep Jack Boughton, the godson of John Ames, is masterful. One element that is sometimes lost in our reading of this ancient parable is the complex nature, the multiple signification of prodigality. Who is prodigal in the biblical story, and in Robinson's novel? Is the emphasis properly on the prodigious amount of sin that needs to be forgiven, or is it on the prodigality of the father's (or godfather's, or God's) gifts? Do we need to think more about squandered inheritance or about extravagant grace? Is it the bitterness of the dutiful brother that is prodigal? And is it any less difficult to be on the side of "good" prodigality, to be the one doing the forgiving and blessing, than to be the one on the "sinning" side? John Ames agonizes over the life of young Jack Boughton, and his evidently loftier moral position does not give him the comfort one might expect. Reviewing this novel, James Wood described it as "fiercely calm" and also "demanding, grave and lucid."¹⁶ This assessment is accurate, but it misses some of the ache and loneliness of John Ames's meditation.

16. Wood, "Acts of Devotion," *New York Times*.



The inducement is understandable that artists in search of high drama should want to portray the ideal church leader as someone in dire circumstances, as one who endures death for God's glory. For many people during the past century (and longer) the church has come to seem less and less relevant, and so the extreme portrait of heroic cleric as martyr might seem once again necessary, as a jolt to the sensibilities of a bored and alienated audience. Just before T. S. Eliot wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* he wrote his Choruses for *The Rock* (1934), which are not terribly well known. *The Rock* mingles the dour atmosphere of *The Waste Land* (produced before Eliot's conversion) with his newer Christian emphasis on the church as a light for a world immersed in darkness and fear. But even that church, whose light Eliot repeatedly describes as *little*, is tainted, the view of it sour or tired; most people consider it useful only for weddings.

In the face of this modern (and postmodern) estrangement from Christian life, it might look as if the only way to awaken interest in Christian leadership is to court extremity, to play variations on the theme of martyrdom and sacrifice. But this is to comply too easily with the dubious expectations of secular culture. Martyrdom's stress on violence fits in all too well with the violence inherent in the rest of contemporary life. Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* shows beautifully how another way is possible, a way of peace and small revelations. Nearly every page of John Ames's book contains a small but breathtaking word of advice: "There are a thousand thousand reasons to live this life, every one of them sufficient" or "I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its eyes again."¹⁷ To have such delicate and beautiful principles is heroic enough.

17. Robinson, *Gilead*, 243, 57.