

**ADVENT SERIES ON MARYLINNE ROBINSON' GILEAD (4)**  
**CAN WE BE HONEST IN THE WAY WE TELL OUR MEMORIES?**

Fr Luigi Gioia  
*Theologian in Residence*

1. Whenever we are asked “Who are you?” or we try to find out who other people are, we start by data: name, nationality, education, work. When this is all we reveal about ourselves or we know about others we still cannot say that we know who someone really is.
2. Knowledge of people only comes with acquaintance, familiarity – because who someone really is cannot easily be communicated – it needs to be experienced.
3. Even what is experienced of another person though needs to undergo a process of evaluation, interpretation, selection.
  - 3.1. Behaviours that seem to mean one thing turn up to mean another.
  - 3.2. Our language is revealing: we talk about the ability to ‘read a person’ in the same way as we read a book – and some people are better at this than others.
4. How good are we at ‘reading ourselves’? If we think that it is difficult to read other people we have to acknowledge that it is even more difficult to read myself
5. This is famously acknowledged<sup>1</sup> by Saint Augustine in his *Confessions* when he says that  
“I had become to myself a vast question”.<sup>2</sup>  
“I have become for myself a soil which is a cause of difficulty”  
“This is mind, this is I myself. What then am I, my God? What is my nature?”<sup>3</sup>
6. Saint Augustine makes this discovery with regards to three experiences:
  - 6.1. Grief: the loss of his dearest friend in his youth throws into question everything he thought he knew about himself, his expectations, his desires, his approach to life.
  - 6.2. Will: like Paul, Augustine experiences the gap between his desire to be good, do what is good and the fact that he chooses what is wrong.
  - 6.3. Memory: Augustine is baffled by the idiosyncrasies of memory.
7. This last aspect can help us to approach the place of memory in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*
  - 7.1. How often in life we erase memories

a. \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1</sup> Marion, J.-L., "Mihi magna quaestio factus sum: The Privilege of Unknowing", *The Journal of Religion* 85/1 (2005), 1-24.

<sup>2</sup> *Confessiones* 4.4.9: "Factus eram ipse mihi magna quaestio"

<sup>3</sup> "Factus sum mihi terra difficultatis" and "Hoc animus est, et hoc ego ipse sum. Quid ergo sum, Deus meus? Quae natura sum?", *Confessiones* 10.25.36; 10.16.25 and 10.17.26. 1

## SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

- 7.2. We realize the significance of past events only when something triggers them later in life
  - 7.3. We are inaccurate in the way we remember events of our life.
  - 7.4. Or, positively, we have gained a viewpoint that make memories much more meaningful.
8. We might think that this is not a big issue until we realize the deep connection that exists between memory and identity:
- 8.1. When I ask myself who I am, I tell myself a story: what has happened to me, what I achieved, what I learnt from my past failures.
9. Rowan Williams<sup>4</sup> observes that there is no such thing as a “timeless true self”.
- 9.1. We come to a perception of who we are by “sifting through remembered narratives” (79)
  - 9.2. “The self is the action that here and now gathers events narrated from the past and possible courses of action in the future into one story that is unceasingly being revised from one utterance to the next” (81)
  - 9.3. In this way we build a story that “I hope may be worth recognizing and answering” (82)
  - 9.4. Hence our fascination with narrative and ritual
  - 9.5. Ritual: “my story is located against the backdrop of another and supposedly broader narrative” (85)
10. “By “self-awareness” I do not mean merely consciousness of one’s identity, or of the complex flow of thought, perception, memory, and desire, important as these are. I mean primarily the self that stands apart from itself, that questions, reconsiders, appraises”.<sup>5</sup>
11. All this should help us to appreciate what John Ames does in his letter to his son:
- 11.1. The way in which he explains who he is to his son in his letter constantly recurs to memories of his life, his family, the impact that the history of the country and of his town has had on him.
  - 11.2. He has a particular way to remember – which gives an altogether special meaning even to the apparently more prosaic events of his life
  - 11.3. And the reader starts to understand who John Ames is not only through what he says about himself, but especially through *how* he talks about his life.

### Quotations from *Gilead*

12. As I write I am aware that my memory has made much of very little. (54)
13. I could have married again while I was still young. A congregation likes to have a married minister, and I was introduced to every niece and sister-in-law in a hundred miles. In retrospect, I’m very grateful for whatever reluctance it was that kept me alone until your mother came. Now that I look back, it seems to me that in all that deep darkness a miracle

a. \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words*.

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, Marilynne. *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (The Terry Lectures Series) (p. 118).

## SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

was preparing. So I am right to remember it as a blessed time, and myself as waiting in confidence, even if I had no idea what I was waiting for. (63)

14. We had some very pleasant evenings here in my kitchen. Boughton is a staunch Presbyterian—as if there were another kind. So we have had our disagreements, though never grave enough to do any harm. I don't think it was resentment I felt then. It was some sort of loyalty to my own life, as if I wanted to say, I have a wife, too, I have a child, too. It was as if the price of having them was losing them, and I couldn't bear the implication that even that price could be too high. They say an infant can't see when it is as young as your sister was, but she opened her eyes, and she looked at me. She was such a little bit of a thing. But while I was holding her, she opened her eyes. I know she didn't really study my face. Memory can make a thing seem to have been much more than it was. But I know she did look right into my eyes. That is something. And I'm glad I knew it at the time, because now, in my present situation, now that I am about to leave this world, I realize there is nothing more astonishing than a human face. Boughton and I have talked about that, too. It has something to do with incarnation. You feel your obligation to a child when you have seen it and held it. Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it. But this is truest of the face of an infant. I consider that to be one kind of vision, as mystical as any. Boughton agrees. (74f)
15. I believe that the old man did indeed have far too narrow an idea of what a vision might be. He may, so to speak, have been too dazzled by the great light of his experience to realize that an impressive sun shines on us all. Perhaps that is the one thing I wish to tell you. Sometimes the visionary aspect of any particular day comes to you in the memory of it, or it opens to you over time. For example, whenever I take a child into my arms to be baptized, I am, so to speak, comprehended in the experience more fully, having seen more of life, knowing better what it means to affirm the sacredness of the human creature. I believe there are visions that come to us only in memory, in retrospect. That's the pulpit speaking, but it's telling the truth. (103)
16. I remember my father down on his heels in the rain, water dripping from his hat, feeding me biscuit from his scorched hand, with that old blackened wreck of a church behind him and steam rising where the rain fell on embers, the rain falling in gusts and the women singing "The Old Rugged Cross" while they saw to things, moving so gently, as if they were dancing to the hymn, almost. In those days no grown woman ever let herself be seen with her hair undone, but that day even the grand old women had their hair falling down their backs like schoolgirls. It was so joyful and sad. I mention it again because it seems to me much of my life was comprehended in that moment. Grief itself has often returned me to that morning, when I took communion from my father's hand. I remember it as communion, and I believe that's what it was. (109)
17. It is not surprising that I remember that day as if my father had given me communion, taking that bread from his side and breaking it for me with his ashy hands. But it is strange that I remember receiving it the way I do, since it has never been our custom for the minister to place the bread in the communicant's mouth, as they do in some churches. I think of this because, on the morning of communion when your mother brought you forward and said, "You ought to give him some of that," I broke the bread and fed a bit of it to you from my hand, just the way my father would not have done except in my memory. And I know what I wanted in that moment was to give you some version of that same

## SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

memory, which has been very dear to me, though only now do I realize how often it has been in my mind. (117)

18. Remembering my youth makes me aware that I never really had enough of it, it was over before I was done with it. (131)
19. I do enjoy remembering that morning. I was sixty-seven, to be exact, which did not seem old to me. I wish I could give you the memory I have of your mother that day. I wish I could leave you certain of the images in my mind, because they are so beautiful that I hate to think they will be extinguished when I am. Well, but again, this life has its own mortal loveliness. And memory is not strictly mortal in its nature, either. It is a strange thing, after all, to be able to return to a moment, when it can hardly be said to have any reality at all, even in its passing. A moment is such a slight thing, I mean, that its abiding is a most gracious reprieve. (184)

Ames goes through a process of “sober sacralization” through the writing of his letter to his son in order to provide a context and means for conversation and instruction concerning the places that he has experienced as significant.

[...] By the term “**sacralization**,” I mean the designation of something as worthy of remembrance, reverence, and thoughtful analysis.

By the term “**sober**,” I mean that the sacralization merits a solemnity and gravity, as well as a realistic understanding that things apart from God are fallible, but through understanding faults and failures comes greater wisdom and empathy.<sup>6</sup>

20. I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time. I don't wish to be urging the ministry on you, but there are some advantages to it you might not know to take account of if I did not point them out. Not that you have to be a minister to confer blessing. You are simply much more likely to find yourself in that position. It's a thing people expect of you. I don't know why there is so little about this aspect of the calling in the literature. (26)
21. Whenever I have held a Bible in my hands, I have remembered the day they buried those ruined Bibles under the tree in the rain, and it is somehow sanctified by that memory. And I think of the old reverend himself preaching in the ruins of his church, with all the windows open so the few that were there could hear “The Old Rugged Cross” drifting up the hill from the Methodist meeting. And my own church is sanctified by the story that was told to me. I remember my father said when the two of them first came home, they found the roof of the church in such disrepair that there were buckets and pans set in the aisle and on the benches. He said the women had planted climbing roses against the

a.

<sup>6</sup> Faith Danielson, *Remember and Retell: The Transformation of Place and Identity through Memory in Marilynne Robinson's Gilead, Home, and Lila*, <https://baylor-ir.tdl.org/items/7767137a-0f0f-47a9-af5b-a10289943673>, 21.

building and along the fence, so it looked prettier than it had ever looked before. Prairie had come into the fields and the orchards again, and there were sunflowers growing in the roads between the ruts. The women had their prayer meetings and their Bible studies even though the church was falling into ruin around them. I think about that, and it is strong and lovely in my mind. I truly believe it is waste and ingratitude not to honor such things as visions, whether you yourself happen to have seen them or not. (110)

22. I remember once as a child dreaming that my mother came into my bedroom and sat down in a chair in the corner and folded her hands in her lap and stayed there, very calm and still. It made me feel wonderfully safe, wonderfully happy. When I woke up, there she was, sitting in that chair. She smiled at me and said, “I was just enjoying the quiet.” I have that same feeling in the church, that I am dreaming what is true. (151)

### Shameful memories

Through the thoughtful remembrance of his past in Gilead, Ames has allowed himself to step back from his intimate love for Gilead and see the town and himself with full recognition that both shameful and beautiful moments have to be accepted as part of his identity. Yet the shameful things, because they have been named, have the potential to be redeemed.<sup>7</sup>

23. Let me say, too, that there are bonds which oblige me to special tolerance and kindness toward this young man, John Ames Boughton [Jack]. He is the beloved child of my oldest and dearest friend, who gave him to me, so to speak, to compensate for my own childlessness. I baptized him in Boughton’s congregation. I remember the moment very clearly, Boughton and Mrs. Boughton and all the little ones there at the font, watching to see my joyful surprise, which I hope they did see, because my feelings at the time were a little more complex than I’d have wished. I had not been warned. (176)
24. This came to my mind because remembering and forgiving can be contrary things. No doubt they usually are. It is not for me to forgive Jack Boughton. Any harm he did to me personally was indirect, and really very minor. Or say at least that harm to me was probably never a primary object in any of the things he got up to. That one man should lose his child and the next man should just squander his fatherhood as if it were nothing—well, that does not mean that the second man has transgressed against the first. I don’t forgive him. I wouldn’t know where to begin. (187)

### God and our memory

25. There’s a mystery in the thought of the re-creation of an old man as an old man, with all the defects and injuries of what is called long life faithfully preserved in him, and all their claims and all their tendencies honored, too, as in the steady progress of arthritis in my left knee. I have thought sometimes that the Lord must hold the whole of our lives in memory, so to speak. Of course He does. And “memory” is the wrong word, no doubt. But the finger I broke sliding into second base when I was twenty-two years old is crookeder than ever, and I can interpret that fact as an intimate attention, taking Herbert’s view.(131)

a. \_\_\_\_\_