

Visionary Imagination: Seeing Beyond in Gilead

Madeline Medensky

Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, said, “Imagination is a blind but indispensable function of the soul without which we should have no knowledge whatever but of which we are scarcely even conscious” (In Our Time: Science, 1:30-1:45). Two things stand out from such a statement: number one being that imagination, one’s ability to imagine, is somewhat bound to and brought forth by the soul, and second that this capability, tool, quality, function, characteristic (whatever you wish to call imagination) is a “blind” yet productive and generative quality of the soul. Such an account disposes imagination to the idea of vision and “seeing”, both literally and figuratively. Not only is vision the physical act of seeing/sight, but vision is also integrated in “visionary imagination,” which can be best described as the ability to see figuratively beyond the scope of something else to a new reality that forecloses new possibilities, and that produces a vision which is simultaneously a function of imaginative energy that leads to a kind of vision or in/sight. To see anew in such a way is to access what Northrop Frye calls a mode of “double vision”, or in another sense it is the process and dimension of seeing something that goes “beyond itself and its sensory limitations” (Gibson 17). In other words, visionary imagination is an enabler, a necessary component, of not only physical existence in terms of the ways we participate in our daily realities with others, but also a facet of spiritual Being that helps us ask questions about what lies beyond us and our perceptions of it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson uses the notion of the “transparent eyeball” to describe this dual sense of visionary imagination, but with a special regard to the way the “eye” and “I” (self) is figured. Emerson says, when encountering the natural world, “I am nothing; I see all, the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me” (Tindol 8). This sense precludes a notion of the visionary imagination, provoking a new way to see beyond the sensory and physical existence of something or someone. This idea is not only just a concept but also predicated in the way fiction enables a realm of new realities and new possibilities to exist by way of a writer’s and reader’s sense of imagination. One such writer of “visionary feeling”

(Wiman 55) is Marilynne Robinson and in this thinking, the visionary imagination becomes fundamental to how Robinson creates a new mode of perception through imaginative energy. Even more, to see beyond becomes a proponent of and a concern in the fiction itself, such as in *Gilead*.

Early on in *Gilead*, a novel told from the perspective of the Reverend John Ames who is recounting his life in a series of letters he writes to his young son, Ames himself realizes a sense of vision that perceives more than just the material objects around oneself. There is a sort of “silent and invisible life” (Robinson 20) that Ames is enveloped within, but it is only accessible to his consciousness through visionary imagination. In scripture, as Ames recognizes, this inability to perceive through physical sight alone is disclosed through Ames’ commentary on Jesus’ human insights about the nature of Being: “See and see but do not perceive, hear and hear but also do not understand, says the Lord” (7). There is a sense of the beyondness of reality that is not accessible through regular sensory experiences, and Ames, in his meditations about the full meaning of human perception, is in the continual process of realizing this. Ames “imagines the possibility of an existence beyond this one, by which I mean a reality not embracing this one but exceeding it” (Stout 572). In Ames’ detailing of physical sights, there is always the development of in/sight which means seeing beyond the thing in question to acquire a deeper and truer understanding of the complexity of reality, a reality that can be both known even as it remains unknown. In/sight then is the very potentiality of a visionary imagination put into motion.

Ames is explicit in this regard - the first glance of a beautiful something is always brought into a higher level of recognition that goes against just the experience of the ‘eye’ and ‘I’, ‘I’ meaning a person’s inner subjectivity. Ames describes the feeling as sensory perception, akin to a “child [opening] its eyes on the world once and seeing amazing things it will never know any names for and then [closing] its eyes again” (57). The physical sight activates an order of seeing beyond to other realities. Take the sight of the mechanics greased in oil; it is represented as a physical image first in Ames’ perception but then imbued beyond its physical manifestation. Instead, the men could “catch fire” and this leads to a greater sense of fellowship and the order of God felt in Ames, regardless of his self. Or, take for instance the witnessing of the sight of the sun against the moon when Ames and his father go to visit his

grandfather's grave in Kansas: "I wanted my father to see it" (14). Or the way that Ames regards water as not only a liquid substance inseparable from life on earth, but also as a form of sacred Divinity, "the image of the spotless nature of the Divine Spirit" (23). All of these aspects of the "seeing" that Ames experiences and then describes must take into account the fact that he is putting into effect the visionary imagination. Imagining something beyond the scope of its physical image is the way that he acknowledges the men as wicks emanating God's love, the sun and the moon as a totality greater than itself, and water in its mundane form as the expression of Divine purity instead. The transformation of literal sight to figurative seeing produces in/sight: the acknowledgement of the thing beyond itself and the absolving of the 'I' in order to "see," all ultimately seems to go back to Emerson. Yet, there has to be more said to this point; Ames' revelations of images beyond their static and physical manifestation are helpful in showing how vision transforms to in/sight (greater truth of the beauty of the world leads to an ultimate connection with God), but the visionary imagination also has more to do with the fundamentals of one's Being, or sense of personhood. Along these lines, visionary imagination is embodied in characters in the very ways they show up, act, and exist.

Ames' abolitionist grandfather is a good example to convey how the visionary imagination is embodied in personhood. He is missing one eye due to an injury he sustained during his time in the Civil War, so his sight, and capacity to perceive externally, is limited. However, Robinson does something interesting with the necessary inclusion of his missing eye. In Ames' grandfather, we are able to see a man whose ability to see physically is reduced due to the loss of an eye, yet we also are able to see his conviction towards life involving the visionary imagination, his ability to "be nothing and yet see all" (the dropping of the "I") for a total integration of in/sight. Two points about Ames' grandfather are important in order to encapsulate the sense of embodied visionary imagination: first, he has a characteristic "stare" that speaks to something peculiar in his character and approach to others, and he also has "visions" in which he converses with God.

First, Ames' grandfather's lack of one eye makes it seem as though the "one eye he [has] [is] somehow ten times an eye" (31). The ability of perception not only comes from being able to see beyond

(which shows up in how he believes so strongly in the abolitionist cause) but also from his ability to enact a “stare”. Though he can “see through anyone or anything” (33), there is also a sense of something going on beyond the stare that requires further consideration. He is not just seeing through anyone or anything, he is developing an in/sight *beyond* and communicating an expectation back to them. Ames remembers that “He could make me feel as though he had poked me with a stick, just by looking at me ... He was just afire with old certainties, and he couldn’t bear all the patience that was required of him” (37). There is something to be said for the way Ames’ grandfather views others with an expectation to trust in vision. His stare is at once a strange and powerful manifestation of the vision in his mind, now enacted on others, but also a way of perceiving further into the receiver of the stare itself. Ames always feels like his stare means something more than just a look, as if something can be communicated through the eyes of those we come into contact with, something like how “the twinkling of an eye” might reveal light of the soul. The eye is certainly part of the ‘I’, but it is also important to remember just how much vision, our physical eyesight, builds the world around us and is relied on to convey a truth of reality. The something behind Ames’ grandfather’s stare is, I believe, evidence of another reality he has access to.

As mentioned before, Ames’ grandfather also experiences visions which are sustained through imagination, though not purely imagined to him. There is a sense that the imagination produces real feeling, which Ames’ grandfather experiences when he “talks” to God. Coincidentally enough, the visions also occur on the right side of him where his eye is missing, causing one to speculate that there is another sense of reality that Ames’ grandfather has access to. Ultimately, his radicalism is fueled by these encounters and he does not understand why the truth of and faith in such visions should be discounted. This leads to a number of intergenerational conflicts within the family. Ames’ father makes a point of noting the shame he feels towards his own father’s visions. “I remember when you walked to the pulpit in that shot-up, bloody shirt with that pistol in your belt. And I had a thought as powerful and clear as any revelation. And it was, This has nothing to do with Jesus ... I am as certain of that as anyone could ever be of any so-called vision” (85), he says to him. It is as though the physical sight of Ames’ grandfather’s weapons provoked an image of violence for Ames’ father instead of seeing what the ultimate cause of

such violence was all about. Ames' father does not see beyond; he is passive compared to Ames' grandfather. It is not a matter of right and wrong or truth and deception more than their disagreement is about seeing and not seeing. Ames' grandfather sees beyond the act of war and bloodshed to the vision of a freed people which God communicated to him, where Ames' father only sees the physical (and to him disgusting) evidence of violence. Ames' grandfather spends his courage lighted by the hope and command such beyond-visions reveal.

The faith in those visions costs Ames' grandfather and his congregation a lot and even Ames admits that he believes the "old man did indeed have far too narrow an idea of what a vision might be" (91). Ames' grandfather sees the imagined vision as faith, faith being the "substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Merriam-Webster). This faith and trust in the visionary seeing-beyond is what fuels his fire and unrest to extreme ends. Yet, Ames sees the visionary imagination as a way to *recognize* what that visionary aspect allows one to feel. Seeing beyond something else is not a process of epiphany leading to quest as it is for Ames' grandfather, but rather a process of divine revelation leading to in/sight and full recognition of not only the sacredness of the thing being perceived, but also sacredness that such visionary imagination is possible at all, possible even through memory as Ames believes (91). We know that Ames' whole introspection of vision is determined by this. In the writing down of memories through the letter, he comes to new revelations himself. Take the moment of the ashy biscuit for example. "I remember it as communion" (96), he says, and in the remembering of the moment, he is able to see beyond what the physical reality of the moment was at that time (the taking of the biscuit); he sees the sacredness and fellowship in the act instead. We are able to conclude that different beliefs of the visionary imagination come from both Ames and his grandfather. Where there is command of action and hope in Ames' grandfather's case, there is the importance of recognition for Ames. But it is also important to understand how they are similar; they acknowledge the sacredness of such visions and thus the "relationship this present reality bears to an ultimate reality" (103). Ames is imbued with a sense of the ordinary as revealing its own beyondness and its own sanctity with God where Ames' grandfather is convinced such visions are the place for the 'I' to be transcended through a direct command from God.

The importance of recognition is how the visionary imagination can relate to Ames' relationship with Jack, another person with in/sight who struggles to be understood in Gilead. At first, Ames makes all sorts of assumptions about Jack, inhabiting a very different voice than one we've come to associate with him in the novel thus far. He assumes that when Jack looks him in the face, he is showing a "performance [in it], amused" and somehow is "seeing right through [Ames]" (123), but the action might be similar to Ames' grandfather – the ability to "see right through" is not really a "seeing" but rather a searching for something else. As we come to learn, Jack Boughton is looking for someone to confide in, and he feels Ames out at first to be able to trust him further.

We know too that sometimes the visionary imagination can yield an untruthful account of a particular sight. The eye perceives an image, say like the one Ames is attuned to when he notices Jack and his wife sitting next to each other in church, and the seeing-beyond aspect does not go beyond the 'I' which blocks the visionary imagination entirely. The self is still acknowledged; Ames brings the image into his own self-perception. In Emerson, this would not be an act of "being nothing"; Ames' own identity is perhaps too interwoven with the image itself so it passes through the imagination contextualized by 'I', making it faulty. Instead, he perceives Jack as potentially moving in on his wife.

These faulty perceptions spill over into Ames' letter until he is able to fully understand Jack. "Right worship is right perception ... and here the Scripture commands right perception of people you have a real and deep knowledge of" (135-136). Correct perception of a person only comes when one has a deep understanding of them. When Ames acquires this real and deep knowledge of Jack and his family's situation, he is able to see the sacredness in him. This moment of 'being seen' beyond what just the eye relays is ultimately the greatest act that the visionary imagination can influence. Seeing beyond the 'I' leads to the seeing all, a truth revealed. "Real honour is always the sense of the sacredness of the person who is its object ... of Being itself" (139). Again, in Ames, the visionary imagination will employ recognition to be able to come to Jack as Being - the essence of him recognized truly as brother, father, son, God's breath, God's own light and life.

Sometimes though, the very act of recognition is avoided due to one's need deflect being 'seen' (both physically and figuratively). There is an embarrassment to meet someone's eyes. One recognizes it in subtle moments throughout the text (the Negro man "[avoiding] their eyes" (610), Ames "embarrassed to meet [Boughton's] eyes" (147)), but especially in Jack who is always "covering his eyes" (66) when trying to confide in the Reverend. When Jack says, "I wish I could have been like my father", Ames says, "Your father has been an example to us all" which only leads Jack to respond by "covering his eyes with his hand" (169). There is a weariness of hope in the expression, multiplied by the fact that Ames is doing exactly what his grandfather did to others with that stare of his, that look of "expectation and disappointment" (174); the viewer is viewing the object with an intense need to understand, to "see" through them, but somehow that expectation always comes up short because of its reliance on the physical realm of sight. Ames cannot detach the image of Jack, the being of Jack, from Old Boughton and the past. Jack is not being recognized beyond context towards all his singular sacredness, so a perceptive error occurs which leads to Jack covering his eyes; he does not want to be 'seen' erroneously. Instead, he wants to be 'seen' past what others know about him, past the knowledge that exists in the physical realm of him. The recognition of Being requires the visionary imagination to get beyond physical sight and the contextual world of the 'I'.

Jack is very similar to Ames' grandfather in the fact that his radicalism of vision is propelled by an insular type of hope. He needs to verify the idea that Gilead would be a good place for him to bring his family, but from the surface level appearance of the town, any claim to make is hard to come by. It is difficult to "tell much from an appearance of a place" (173), simply because the eye cannot perceive the interaction of the future, and the possibility that exists (that is the imagination's job). It can only perceive what is there in front of Jack, in the expressions and interactions of the people he comes into contact with, and in the inquiring of a history that Ames' grandfather was very much a part of. People rely too much sometimes on a truth that comes from seeing something in the now, yet the Truth that Jack seeks is bound in the visionary imagination. "How can capital-T Truth be communicable? That makes no sense to me" (172). Capital-T Truth goes beyond sense; the sacredness of all life surrounding, and the acknowledgment

of Being, anyone's Being, as a direct connection and incandescence of that sacredness, is Truth. Jack reaches beyond for a vision of the future, but he needs to be brought into Truth first. One has to wonder, when Jack leaves Gilead, if he has let go of the vision which compelled him to seek Gilead. Where will he spend his courage? Even more, when will Truth, the seeing beyond past physical nature, be felt in him?

Being brought into Truth, we come to find out, depends on John Ames since Old Boughton will not be the father we understand the father of the Prodigal Son to be. Ames needs the "courage to embrace the truth" (178) of Jack which can only be done through the visionary imagination when he lets go of the personal relationship and grievances he might share with Jack and instead acknowledges what goes beyond this context to develop in/sight of Jack. It is ironic how Ames considers the problem of finding truth from proofs; he knows it cannot be done as he says, "Creating proofs from experience of any sort is like building a ladder to the moon" (179), so when he comes to regard Jack, why can't he see past his being to his Being? If we do not need proofs to acknowledge the fact and truth of something, why can't the visionary imagination be enough to acknowledge the sacredness and Being of someone? Coleridge says that "the imagination is the human power that permits us to see and to make. It is a perceptive and therefore a visionary faculty" (Edmundson 166), an act that cannot work from logic or physical proofs at all. The total enactment of the visionary imagination comes when Ames puts into effect what Coleridge says and makes, imagines, and sees Jack as God intends.

Leading up to this, Ames is in great contemplation over Jack: "I close my eyes and I see Jack Boughton... and I think, Why must I always defend myself against this sad old youth?" (180). It might not be a question of Ames' defensiveness against Jack, but rather a condition of the 'I' that still lingers in Ames' perception of Jack. Even as Ames goes on to describe the injustices that Jack led against him growing up, including the theft of personal items, it was not because Jack was an inherently "bad apple". It was because he wanted to be *seen*, actually seen apart from the labels put on him.

As mentioned before, the acknowledgment of Jack comes when Ames can see beyond Jack's physical manifestation. Though the physical photo of Jack's family confirms an unknown and troubled part of Jack's life, it also allows Ames to see past Jack and recognize Being. "I had not thought to see thy

face and, lo, God hath let me see thy seed also!’” (243-244). Part of this is a revelation, an unveiling of Jack’s Being as opposed to his physical being. It requires Ames to see beyond the concrete substance of him and to acknowledge essence. When Ames is able to get past the ‘I’ of experience, he is able to comprehend the commonality of Being they share: “Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like a 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?” (245). This voice sounds very much like Emerson’s metaphor of the transparent eyeball - letting go of the ‘I’, the “nothing” warrants a bringing nothing to the thing in question, and thus the transfiguration of literal sight to figurative and sacred vision occurs. When Jack remains with his eyes closed during Ames’ blessing, he rests in that vision too, at least for a moment.

“‘We shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye’” (142). I end with this quote because I think it is important to acknowledge the “twinkling of an eye” as a useful act in perceiving essence. The twinkling of an eye can be the moment when seeing beyond is fully realized, when we come to another with the recognition of all their Being instead of all their physical difference. It is important to recognize too that Robinson’s take here on vision not only includes the fault physical sight might lead to, but also the hope that the visionary imagination holds in our figuration of the in-possibility of in/sight. First, I think Robinson speaks of racism and non-acceptance in the context of seeing physical skin colour as a way to justify difference. Racism is predicated by sight and justified by difference, instead of recognizing the similarity in Being of anyone. The physicality of Jack and Della’s coupledness is an aspect that people are opposed to. It takes the turning of a blind eye to allow them to live as a couple, as the hotel clerk turned “a blind eye” (225) by allowing them to stay in a residential hotel in St. Louis. Even more, Jack gets fired because he is seen physically with Della and their son at a park. What one sees in the physical world is an acknowledgment of the differences in skin colour between Jack and Della, and perception of this fuels racism and prejudice against them.

It is only in the eyes of God, as Jack says, that there is a confirmation of their Being, together and alone. The eyes of God would include a notion of beyond-sight. What Robinson is asking then is, can this confirmation also be shared in the physical reality? Can Ames see “the beauty there is in him” (232) past

Jack's physical transgressions and differences? I think the answer is yes. When Ames says to a dying Boughton, "I love him as much as you meant me to" (244), I think he is really saying it to God. By seeing beyond Jack and in perceiving his very essence as the beauty, wonder and love of all life in him, Ames has in/sight, the ability to understand Jack as a soul, and it gives us hope that more of us can come to others with the possibility of developing in/sight too. So much of what one sees in the world is through what the physical eye and 'I' tells us is so yet there is always another way to see. What Ames, Robinson, all the beloved characters in this novel, are asking us to do is to have this kind of courage. It does not have to be the radicalism of vision that sends Ames' grandfather on a quest, nor does it have to be the skepticism associated with Ames' father who questions the merit of such in/sight, but rather it is *recognition* of what the visionary imagination allows us to do, as Ames feels. Recognition moves towards in/sight when we can look on a person and acknowledge their sacredness. Others might be secrets to us in every sense of the word, but seeing that "an impressive sun shines on us all" (91) is what brings us closer to the sense of Love shared.

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