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OCH ANTIKVITETS AKADEMIEN

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MARILYNNE ROBINSON AND THEOLOGY

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Marilynne Robinson and theology

Håkan Möller & Ola Sigurdson (eds)

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ABSTRACT

The American author Marilynne Robinson is, in her five novels as much as in her half a dozen collection of essays, not only an accomplished novelist but also a theologian. With a rare depth, she energetically treats central theological, ethical, and philosophical questions, in sharp and challenging essays and in aesthetically advanced and kaleidoscopic novels. The essays in the present volume study, from various perspectives, the intersection between theology and the entire corpus (except for the most recent novel published in 2020) of Robinson's writings. The first section, "On Theology", analyzes her theology from the more general perspectives of poetics, science, and history, whereas the second, "On the Novels", collects contributions that have one of Robinson's three novels *Gilead*, *Home*, or *Lila* as their particular focus. Common to all these essays is the attempt to understand why and how Robinson is one of our age's most celebrated authors on home and homelessness, and on faith, grace and hope in the midst of despair.

KEYWORDS

Marilynne Robinson, theology, theopoetics, history, Calvinism, faith, homelessness

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HÅKAN MÖLLER & OLA SIGURDSON

Introduction

Obama: "You're a novelist but you're also – can I call you a theologian?
Does that sound, like, too stuffy? You care a lot about Christian thought."

Robinson: "I do, indeed."[1]

This verbal exchange between the former president of the United States and the American author Marilynne Robinson – both members of the same church – reveals a great deal about the popularity that Robinson currently enjoys, but also says something about her profile as an author. Her as-of-today five novels (the latest of which is *Jack*, 2020) and her half a dozen collection of essays has rendered her much appreciation far outside the United States, she has been translated into many languages, and her authorship has already generated a body of scholarly articles and studies so large it is difficult to survey. Prizes and awards have rained down on her: the PEN/Hemingway Award for best debut novel with *Housekeeping* (published 1980), The Pulitzer Prize for *Gilead* (published 2004), the Orange Prize for *Home* (published 2008), and the (American) National Humanities Medal in 2012 for her achievements as an author. In 2016, she was awarded an honorary doctorate in theology at the Faculty of Theology, Lund University. All of her novels – except, so far, her recently published *Jack* – are translated into Swedish, as well as her latest collection of essays, *What are we doing here?* (2018).

Obama's cautious question whether Robinson would call herself a theologian is answered emphatically with a "yes". She is a theologically thoughtful, Christianly orientated author in most of the things she writes. The titles of the essays in *What are*

1 'President Obama and Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation in Iowa', *The New York Review of Books*, November 5, 2015.

we doing here? say a lot of her penchant for central theological themes: 'Theology for this moment', 'The sacred, the human', 'The divine', 'Grace and beauty', and so on. As a novelist she has also, in a remarkably successful way, converted her theoretical reflection into a prose that at one and the same time makes the religious and moral aspect of existence accessible, broader, and more complex. She writes in a tradition that, from the perspective of world literature, among others includes Fyodor Dostoevsky, Graham Greene, and Flannery O'Connor, and from a Swedish perspective, Lars Ahlin, Birgitta Trotzig, and Torgny Lindgren.

The rare depth in her treatment of central theological, ethical, and philosophical questions, energetically treated in sharp and challenging essays and developed in aesthetically advanced and kaleidoscopic novels, has consolidated Marilynne Robinson's authorship as one of the most prominent of our times. Thus, it was soon identified as a suitable object for study by the interdisciplinary milieu of the "Network for Literature and Religion" at the Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion at the University of Gothenburg. The essays in the present volume are the result of a long-standing collaboration between scholars in the network where the entire corpus (except for the most recent novel) of Robinson's authorship was studied in seminars over the years. This collaboration eventually found its final form in the 2018 conference at the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, from where these essays derive. We also have the pleasure to include two colleagues from the Literature, Theology and the Arts study and research centre at Glasgow University in the anthology, a confirmation of the lively collaboration between our two circles that started almost ten years ago.

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In May 2016 Marilynne Robinson was appointed as an honorary doctor at Lund University. One of the initiators was our colleague Jayne Svenungsson who also, in her inaugural lecture as professor of Systematic Theology at the same university in the autumn of 2015, discoursed on the theological aspects of Robinson's authorship. We are happy to include her lecture, never before been published in English, in our anthology as its first chapter, as it offers an elegant introduction to the intersection of theology, aesthetics, and literature in Robinson's writings. With examples from Robinson's essays as well as her novels, Svenungsson presents her as a sharp critic of our contemporary age as well as an apologist for the place of religion in it; the author that is made visible in Svenungsson's contribution is the one who can suggest that, with all respect for heaven, the miracle takes place here and now, before our own eyes.

In the section titled 'Theology' we have chosen also to collect those other contri-

butions that treat Robinson's theological profile as it is expressed in both her novels and her essays. Robinson's success is not only due to her five novels; her essays are also responsible for her fame. And the close connections between the novels and the essays are obvious. As an essayist she is subdued but sharp – in just one sentence she can turn her edge towards the weakest point in a conception or an opinion that she finds exceptionable. She turns a blowtorch towards those who shamelessly bring forward hypotheses as if they were indubitable facts. She has become a voice to count on in the resistance against contemporary pseudoscience, fake news, and knowledge resistance. With the authority of one who has fully immersed herself in a topic she can refute simplifications and distortions of real connections and circumstances. It can be anything from resilient delusions about Calvin and what Calvinism actually has meant for the cultural, religious, and political development of the West, especially the evolution of a particular North American identity, to the reductionism of Social Darwinism, as in the rich collection of essays *The death of Adam* (1998).

One of the topics that is treated in this first part of the anthology is the intricate relation between Robinson's essays, prose, and theology, and her use of certain metaphors to create connections between the material and the spiritual world that opens up horizons. Robinson's sharp-witted dispute with the reductive explanations of human nature as well as human action and consciousness in Neo-Darwinism is the subject of one of the contributions here. Robinson is also very much a politically engaged theologian. The often-hidden associations between Christian communities and political radicalism form a theme that cuts across both her prose and her essays and which undergoes thorough scrutiny here. Robinson's meticulous and inspiring inquiry into Calvin and reformed theology as a challenge to the Scottish reception of this ecclesiastical and theological tradition also becomes a subject for this introductory part of the anthology.

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In Marilynne Robinson's debut novel *Housekeeping* (1980) the house and the home become the central vehicle of her story about two sisters. The place, however, is literally transformed into something other than what we usually associate with a homely environment. The borders between inside and outside increasingly become thinner, nature invades the house, the order of the household follows in the tracks of the erratic habits of the eccentric aunt, and finally the house burns down, the home is abandoned and replaced by intermittent travelling. This is an exploration of existence that has homelessness as its condition. But it is as if Robinson, after the creation of her antihero aunt Sylvie in *Housekeeping* and the questioning of vital parts of the American

dream and its civilizational ideals, in her four following novels returns to the home and the house through the backdoor.

"We have no home in this world" – says the ageing Reverend John Ames, in the novel *Gilead* (2004), who then walks into the house where he has lived for the most part of his life, puts on a pot of coffee, makes himself an egg sandwich, and turns on the radio. If someone is at home in this world and his presbytery it is him. "Ah, this life, this world" – exclaims the same man some further pages on in the story, words he wishes to leave as a testament to his then seven-year-old son. He is himself on his way to his 77th year of life when he writes his long, winding, and digressive letter to his son. Like Abraham he has become a father very late in his life. It is a blessing – and a sorrow. "Ah, this life, this world" – is the exclamation only of someone who has learnt to love life both as miracle and as evanescent.

For the main protagonists in Robinson's third novel *Home* (2008), forgiveness is a daily effort. The novel is a chamber drama. Most of it takes place in the Boughton family's house in Gilead. The Reverend Ames' lifelong friendship with his ageing clergy colleague John Boughton enters its final act. The house is also populated by a couple of returning children, two each in their own way wounded middle-age human beings, the daughter Glory and the lost son, Jack Boughton, already spoken of as a continuing worry by Ames in *Gilead*. The sister Glory is a key figure in the choreography of forgiveness – every movement, tone of voice, pause, and word seems to be poised to make forgiveness happen, to experience grace. With an almost absolute psychological and moral ear, Robinson draws the intricate pattern of guilt and forgiveness.

With her fourth novel *Lila* (2014) we also get to see the town of Gilead and its people through the eyes of the wife of Reverend Ames, the shy and exceedingly silent Lila. Or rather, through her constantly ruminating consciousness. The transitions between memory, reflection, and presence are almost indiscernible. Another character and another form. Lila is a protagonist who comes home in a way like no other of Robinson's characters. From namelessness and poverty, she learns how to experience the createdness of existence in the form of gift and love. She learns to read the world and the Bible, and regards the world as born anew each day. She is astonishment incarnated. With her laconic directness she asks questions that go straight to the centre of John Ames' life. No answers are simple when the questions come from an existential point zero. She compels a different, more straight and concrete speech from the elderly man whom she chooses to marry and whose child she carries.

This trilogy of Gilead novels depicts a social microcosm. Undoubtedly, Robinson's most recent novel *Jack* (2020), which is the fourth in the Gilead series and which narrates the story of the enigmatic Jack Boughton, adds yet another layer of complexity to this microcosm, but it was published just as we were about to finish the production of

this anthology. In any case, these four novels do not tell the story of the development of a countryside and some families by putting one part after another in a chronologically structured epic work, and each part has its own beauty and form. In the light of her essays, her novels can be seen both as hope-inspiring counter-images and as impressions of a world that is about to vanish.

The remaining three parts of the anthology collects contributions that have one of Robinson's three novels *Gilead*, *Home*, or *Lila* as their particular focus. The approaches vary between theory of genre, biblical hermeneutics – not least her problematizing inquiry into the parable of the prodigal son from the Gospel of Luke is discussed from several perspectives – and thematic: home, homelessness and prophetism, forgiveness, grace and subjectivity, as well as the psychodynamic dimension of faith.

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The philosopher and social commentator Richard Rorty predicted at the end of the 1990s a development that would lead to a growing discontent with what could be seen as the power of the élite over society and citizens.[2] Politicians, public servants, academics, and intellectuals in the big cities would, by disappointed parts of the people, be pointed out as the establishment that ruled according to their own wishes and whims without listening to the people. Hope would be invested in a leader coming from outside the power élite, a leader that in no unsure terms would present a simple message about a new direction of society. Today we know how right he was. Robinson writes with the same worry as Rorty against the embezzlement of the common educational heritage and the banalization of political culture. No wonder that Robinson is the favourite author of the reformistic and educated Obama.

2 See Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country. Leftish Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1998).

LIST OF EDITIONS CITED IN THIS VOLUME

FICTION

Housekeeping
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1980
New York: Picador 1981
London: Faber and Faber 1981

Gilead
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2004
London: Virago 2004, 2005

Home
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2008
London: Virago 2008, 2009

Lila
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2014
London: Virago 2014, 2015

Jack
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2020

NON-FICTION:

Mother Country: Britain, the welfare state, and nuclear pollution
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1989

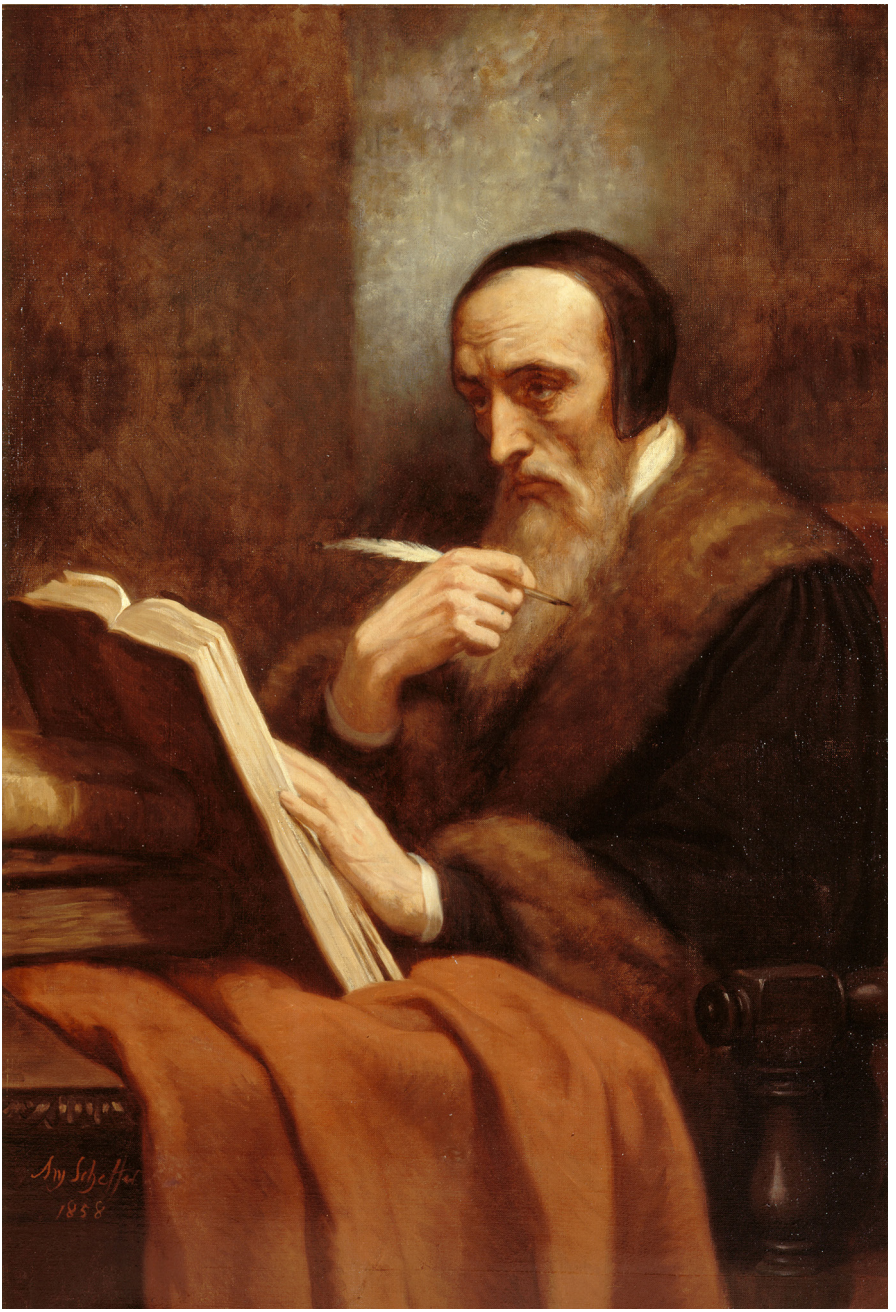
The death of Adam: Essays on modern thought
New York: Picador 1998, 2005

Absence of mind: The dispelling of inwardness from the modern myth of the self
New Haven: Yale University Press 2010

When I was a child I read books
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2012
Toronto: HarperCollins 2012
London: Virago 2012

The givenness of things: Essays
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2015
New York: Picador 2015
London: Virago 2015
London: Little, Brown Book Group (Kindle edition) 2016.

What are we doing here? Essays
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2018
London: Little, Brown Book Group (Kindle edition) 2018



John Calvin, oil painting by Ary Scheffer (1858), Paris Musées/Musée de la Vie romantique, Paris.

ON THEOLOGY

JAYNE SVENUNGSSON

Sensibility and taste for the infinite: The romantic theopoetics of Marilynne Robinson

"An *art*-religion – almost a religion like that of the artist, who worships beauty and the ideal".[1] These enthusiastic words were jotted down by Novalis in autumn 1799 with regard to a newly published book that he had ordered by courier while studying at the University of Jena. The work that so delighted the Romantic poet had been authored by the young theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher and bore the slightly prolix title *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* ('On religion: Speeches to its cultured despisers').

What was it that sparked Novalis's enthusiasm? There is no question that Schleiermacher had achieved something of a tour de force with his volume – a veritable dislocation within contemporary debates over religion, education, and enlightenment. In stirring prose and with philosophical subtlety, he had declared that what human beings believed themselves to be referring to when they spoke of religion had in actual fact precious little to do with what religion was really about. This was Romanticism's most febrile period, barely a decade after the French Revolution. The young Romantics were deeply affected by the revolutionary era and followed the ideals of the French Enlightenment in many respects. But one issue set them apart. While the Enlightenment in its French incarnation was palpably anticlerical, German enthusiasts of Enlightenment – though not a whit less radical – took a considerably less jaundiced view of religion.

The best expression of this radical, indeed, openly revolutionary, view of religion is to be found precisely in Schleiermacher's *On religion*. As its subtitle indicates, this was a work intended as both an apology for religion and a scathing indictment of the sometimes banal critique of religion that had taken root in contemporary polite society. But those readers expecting to find confirmation of their inherited convictions had been

1 Novalis 1983, 562. English translation by the author.

grievously disappointed. Like several other of Romanticism's central figures, Schleiermacher cherished the idea of a higher religion for the spiritually mature individual, a faith that did not anxiously cling fast to dogma and literalism. Thus Schleiermacher, not without a sense of provocation, could exclaim "It is not the person who believes in a holy writing who has a religion, but the one who needs none and probably could make one for himself."[2] What I wish to focus on here, however, is not Schleiermacher's Romantic idea of a higher religion for free spirits. The real stroke of genius in *On religion* is that it restores religion to its proper place, to paraphrase the title of an article by Irish novelist Colm Tóibín to which I will shortly have reason to return – "Putting religion in its place".[3]

What, then, is the "wrong place" for religion? For Schleiermacher, the wrong place is, to begin with, the domain of philosophical systems. Religion, he writes, is "by its whole nature [...] just as far removed from all that is systematic as philosophy is by its nature inclined toward it".[4] What Schleiermacher has in mind here are the countless apologetic attempts to show that religion does indeed live up to the rational demands of its time, for example, in the form of so-called natural theology, a theology stripped of everything that risks falling foul of modern reason. According to Schleiermacher, however, religion is not meant to compete with philosophy within the domain of rational knowledge. On this point he entirely shared Kant's critique of religion, which was directed *inter alia* at religion's claim to deal in systematic knowledge about the nature of existence. This premise similarly enabled Schleiermacher to dismiss those critics who treated theological doctrines as truth propositions that they could then effortlessly rebut. Such critics were quite simply missing the target.

What Schleiermacher did not share, by contrast, was Kant's willingness to preserve religion by carving out a place for it in the realm of morality. Such a trick, he writes, aims only to further increase contempt for religion. No, religion had no business with the domain of morality: "it must not use the universe in order to derive duties and is not permitted to contain any code of laws".[5] Those who criticize religion for its faulty moral acumen have thus also failed to understand that, when all is said and done, they are criticizing not religion but merely a shadow of religion's true essence.

What, then, is the true essence of religion? Schleiermacher's famous answer is that religion is about having "sensibility and taste for the infinite" (*Sinn und Geschmack fürs Unendliche*).[6] If thought falls within the domain of knowledge, and action within

2 Schleiermacher 1996, 50.
3 Tóibín 2014.
4 Schleiermacher 1996, 14.
5 Schleiermacher 1996, 20.
6 Schleiermacher 1996, 23.

the domain of morality, then human beings' predisposition towards religion lies closer to the realm of aesthetics. At this point we can begin to discern the basis for Novalis's enthusiastic opinion that Schleiermacher was proclaiming a religion of art. Quite simply, Schleiermacher equates a sense for religion with a sense for art, that is to say, with the capacity to be amazed, touched, and overwhelmed. Schleiermacher imagines a sense for religion, like a sense for art, as an inherited predisposition in human beings. As such, it can be either cultivated and developed, or neglected and left to atrophy. Unfortunately, declares Schleiermacher, it is the latter which is taking place in the enlightened culture of the present: "With anguish I see daily how the rage of understanding does not allow this sense to arise at all and how everything unites to bind us to the finite and to a very small spot of it, so that the infinite is removed from our view as far as possible."[7]

RELIGION AS A CAPACITY FOR WONDER

How has having a sense and a taste for the infinite fared in our own era? Not well, I am inclined to answer. Judging from a quick survey of the media and popular-scientific landscape, the conversation becomes strikingly insubstantial as soon as it turns to religion. Especially notable is the way in which we continue to work the meagre seam that Schleiermacher sought to expose two hundred years ago. Now as then, there is a proliferation of attempts to treat religion on the basis of rational criteria which, it is eagerly claimed, it does not live up to, or, it is no less eagerly claimed, it fulfils to the letter. In this category can be numbered, on the one hand, the entire wave of neo-atheistic literature since 2000, and, on the other, the countless apologetic ripostes authored by those more hypersensitive representatives of organized religion. Where the former adduce arguments for the irrationality of believing in God (the theodicy problematic, the structural similarity between faith in the divine and faith in UFOs or woodland fairies, etc.), the latter cites arguments for the rationality of believing in God (the subjective experience of purpose in existence, the violence of godless regimes, etc.). Religion is in both cases reduced to a question of our capacity for rationality.

Now as then, we also see a desire to reserve a place for religion in the realm of morality. In recent decades, talk of Christian values has repeatedly been heard in a Europe that otherwise remains firmly de-Christianized. Such was the case, for example, with the debate over the wording of the treaty defining the EU constitution in the early 2000s, when influential voices on the Continent pressed for Europe's Christian values to be written into the treaty. The other side of the coin is represented by those

7 Schleiermacher 1996, 59.

unreasonable voices who see religion as nothing more than a set of reactionary moral prescriptions and who zealously strive to eliminate even the most indirect of interactions between religion and public politics. In both cases, religion is reduced to a question of our moral ego.

In this dreary climate for debate, I have more than once conjured with the thought that our era needs a renewed discussion of religion's proper place, another brilliant thinker of Schleiermacher's calibre, someone capable of writing and talking about religion in a way that is neither banal nor distorting yet without being apologetic and intrusive. A few years ago, I found just such a thinker, and I am ready to commit a literary theft and declare: she promulgates a kind of "art-religion, almost a religion like that of the *artist*, who worships beauty and the ideal"!

I am referring to the American author Marilynne Robinson, who has been praised and honoured for her insightful essay collections and extraordinary if infrequent novels (five to date in a 41-year writing career). It was Marilynne Robinson who seven years ago prompted Colm Tóibín to write an article, "Putting religion in its place", the title of which most immediately gestures towards James Joyce's conviction that one of the purposes of literature is to put religion in its place. Expressing his genuine regard for the battle waged against religion by high modernist authors such as Joyce or Virginia Woolf, Tóibín comments "Having rejected religious faith, they got on with the business of dealing with human consciousness and language and form in the novel without having to genuflect or take the divine into account. We know where we are with them." Immediately after uttering these words of acknowledgement, however, Tóibín turns his gaze to Robinson and continues "Part of the result, however, of reading Marilynne Robinson's formidable, serious and combative essays is that knowing where you are – or thinking you do, and being happy with that – comes to seem a sort of illusion and an example of foolishness."[8] Tóibín thereby hints at the deeper meaning of his article's title: in Robinson's concentrated body of work, her capacity to make us wonder at ourselves, to be amazed by the most everyday things, it is no longer a matter of putting religion in its place in the sense of rebutting it but rather of restoring religion to its proper place.

Colm Tóibín is not alone in his fascination with the aesthetic power of Robinson's writing, a power that ultimately turns out to be difficult to separate from the religious or indeed divine. When Robinson published her fourth novel, *Lila*, in 2014, Canadian literature blogger Nicole Cliffe tweeted "If I could write like Marilynne Robinson, I would believe in God too".[9] Writing in *The New Yorker* a few years earlier, liter-

8 Tóibín 2014.

9 Cliffe 2014.

ary critic Mark O'Connell had made a similar confession: "I have read and loved a lot of literature about religion and religious experience – Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Flannery O'Connor, the Bible – but it's only with Robinson that I have actually felt what it must be like to live with a sense of the divine. [...] She makes an atheist reader like myself capable of identifying with the sense of a fallen world that is filled with pain and sadness but also suffused with divine grace."[10]

At a time when religion is largely seen in a negative light, associated either with bestial violence or moral narrow-mindedness (or both), Robinson has a rare capacity to show another side to religion. She rarely writes about religion in an abstract or conceptual sense, focusing instead on the profundity encapsulated in religion at its best. In Robinson's third novel, *Home* (2008), the main protagonist Glory reminds herself that as a little girl she often confused the words *secret* and *sacred* – indeed, she did not merely confuse them; they quite simply merged into each other. To have a feeling for the sacred is also to have a feeling for the secret, the inexhaustible – in a word, to be capable of wonder. This capacity for wonder expresses itself above all in the affection with which Robinson describes the simplest of objects in the most mundane of situations, as when, in one of the many touching scenes in Glory's anything-but-illustrious life, she passes the time with her parents' old radio set:

> Sometimes she listened to the radio, if there was an opera or a drama, or if she just wanted to hear a human voice. The big old radio grew warm and gave off an odor like rancid hair tonic. It reminded her of a nervous salesman. And it made a sullen hiss and sputter if she moved away from it. It was the kind of bad companion loneliness makes welcome. A lesson in the success of clumsy courtship, the tenacity of bad marriage. She blamed and forgave it for its obsession with "The Flight of the Bumblebee" and Ravel's "Boléro". To appease the radio she sat beside it while she read. She even thought of taking up needlework. She might try knitting again, bigger, simpler things. Her first attempts were a baby sweater and bonnet. Nothing had come of that.[11]

It is not just radio sets and everyday situations that are depicted with affectionate wonder in Robinson's world. Above all else, it is the people who throng her novels, in which Robinson evinces her special liking for individuals who are not of any great consequence. *Home* is set in the 1950s, just after Glory's return to the mid-Western town where she grew up, now 38 years old, unmarried and childless. Nor is there any indication that her fortunes are about to change; Glory remains destined to care for her aged father and worry about her misfit brother Jack, and she fills her days by reading the Bible, listening to the radio, and pottering about in the garden. To all appear-

10 O'Connell 2012.
11 Robinson 2008, 14f.

ances an insignificant figure, even tearful and sentimental. But in Robinson's world she nonetheless becomes *Glory*, a soft-spoken heroine with a peculiar aura who slowly casts a spell on the reader.

ROBINSON AS A ROMANTIC AUTHOR

Robinson is a Romantic in the fullest sense of the word. Like few other authors, she possesses the art of "endowing the commonplace with a higher meaning, the ordinary with mysterious respect, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the appearance of the infinite".[12] Novalis's famous words are usually cited as examples of the very quintessence of early Romanticism. But the words could equally well have been penned by the Reverend John Ames, the fictive author of Robinson's Pulitzer Prize-winning work *Gilead* (2004). In his diary-like will, Ames conveys his perspective on high and low, great and small, heavenly and earthly. His addressee is the longed-for son with whom he has been blessed late in life but whom he, now 77, will be unable to follow into adulthood. "This morning I have been trying to think about heaven, but without success", he writes to his son, and continues:

> I don't know why I should expect to have any idea of heaven. I could never have imagined this world if I hadn't spent almost eight decades walking around in it. People talk about how wonderful the world seems to children, and that's true enough. But children think they will grow into it and understand it, and I know very well that I will not, and would not if I had a dozen lives. That's clearer to me every day. Each morning I'm like Adam waking up in Eden, amazed at the cleverness of my hands and at the brilliance pouring into my mind through my eyes – old hands, old eyes, old mind, a very diminished Adam altogether, and still it is just remarkable.[13]

What is taking place here might seem to be a displacement from the heavenly to the earthly, from the divine to the human. Posterity often portrays Romanticism's concept of religion thus, as an anthropocentric turn that begins with Schleiermacher and ends with Ludwig Feuerbach's postulate that religion in the final instance is no more than wretched humanity's dream of a better world. This was Karl Barth's critique of Schleiermacher and it has been reiterated *ad nauseam* by theologians in our era. Yet it is wholly misleading to claim that Romanticism reduces religion to a self-reflection of humanity. For Romantics like Schleiermacher, Novalis, or Schelling, it was not a question of distilling the divine into the human. The Romantics aimed at precisely the opposite – to use aesthetics as a means to elevate humanity to the divine, to whet our sense of the ineffable, and to rediscover the sacral depths of life.

12 Novalis 1997, 60.
13 Robinson 2004, 75f.

Such is also John Ames' aim, as he makes clear to his son through his daily meditations upon life. If we have hardly begun to understand our present existence in all its sensuousness, how then can we be expected to imagine anything of a life to come? This is not a matter of rejecting, with Feuerbach, the dream of heaven as a mirage produced by the human psyche. Rather, it is a question of adopting a fitting humility towards humanity's place in the cosmos, of not believing ourselves capable of saying more than we can about the inexhaustible reality into which we have been cast.

Yet not even Feuerbach deserves the banality that has often been conferred upon him by posterity. In a thought-provoking passage in her collection of essays *Absence of mind*, Robinson remarks that she herself, had she not been a religious person, would likely have echoed Feuerbach's understanding of religion. To claim that religion is a projection of humanity's notions of beauty, goodness, and powerfulness boils down to an admission of the grandeur of our imagination – a deeper insight than any of modernity's reductionist theories of religion. On this view, religion finds itself close to art, a powerful expression of the capacity of the human mind to reach beyond its own conceptual frames.[14]

RELIGION AND KNOWLEDGE

The conviction that art and religion are capable of conveying insights otherwise unavailable to a purely notional language represents another feature shared by Robinson and the early Romantics. And yet this conviction does not mean that religion or art may be consigned to a sphere protected from criticism. Nor does it mean that these aesthetic domains have nothing to contribute to the domains of knowledge or morality – to return to Schleiermacher's tripartite distinction between knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics. As regards the realm of knowledge, religion can, at its best, remind knowledge of its limits, indeed, can return knowledge to its proper place.

For her part, Robinson has a rather fixed notion of what the wrong place for knowledge is. The wrong place is the burgeoning market for pseudoscience, where bestselling authors hawk sweeping theories packaged in a would-be scientific language:

> What I wish to question are not the methods of science, but the methods of a kind of argument that claims the authority of science or highly specialized knowledge, that assumes a protective coloration that allows it to pass for science yet does not practice the self-discipline or self-criticism for which science is distinguished.[15]

14 Robinson 2010, 127.
15 Robinson 2010, 2.

Accordingly, Robinson has authored a series of coruscating ripostes to everyone from popularizing evolutionary biologists to crowd-pleasing theologians who seek to launch more accessible variants of Christianity. The main problem with this literature is not its visionary theses but its tendency to simplify and gloss over important aspects solely in order to be able to get more mileage from its own theories. For example, Robinson wrangles with Stephen Pinker's thesis that humanity has grown less violent throughout history. This is not to say that she disputes Pinker's tidy statistical summaries of how fatalities during the great wars of the 20th century are trifling, percentage-wise, when compared to the corresponding figures for many pre-nation states. But what definition of violence does such a comparison presuppose? Pinker's statistics are based upon the "immediate" victims of war on those continents where wars were fought. Another statistic emerges if one includes the colonial violence that was required in order to keep the machinery of war in motion – for example, in the rubber industry that claimed millions of African lives during the First World War. Or, for that matter, the countless civilian victims of the siege of Stalingrad or any other of the unmarked sites of wars.[16]

Another writer of whom Robinson makes short work in her critical essays is the Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong, who made a name for himself in the late 1990s with a book titled *Why Christianity must change or die*. With satirical acuity Robinson exposes the way in which Spong, for all his liberal-theological good intentions, repeats every received cliché about the primitive observance of the Old Testament before arriving at the dangerous stereotype of the "God of the Jews" instead of the God of Love announced by Jesus. But Spong is merely symptomatic of a whole wave of popular accounts that recycle the myth of how the Old Testament gives birth to a violent monotheism from which, it is asserted, all evil in the West derives. If one takes the trouble to study the texts, as Robinson does (reportedly her home is full of Bibles in different versions and translations), one finds that the thesis of a violent and exclusive monotheism is not so easily defended. On the contrary, one finds a literature that urges compassion for the weak and vulnerable, that values life above property, and that reminds readers that land ultimately belongs to God and that the Israelites should therefore treat with respect all strangers in that land.[17]

Robinson is provoked by the careless and tendentious treatment of historical sources, whether of Feuerbach, Calvin, or the figure she calls Moses and by which she denotes the spirit that maintains the Mosaic Law: "when people do things that are honorable and fine, it's terrible to see them slandered. And it doesn't matter if they did

16 Robinson 2010, 16–19.
17 Robinson 2012, 95–124.

them 3000 years ago, you know?"[18] Robinson evinces the same love for historical figures, particularly those misunderstood and maligned by posterity, as she does for her oddball novelistic creations. Here, too, there are strong echoes of early Romanticism. Thus, for example, Novalis could stress that only by means of a strenuous engagement with the past can we hope to understand ourselves and the times we live in.[19] For Novalis, this critical lancet was directed towards the French Enlightenment's lack of respect for the works of the past. For Robinson, it is this same inheritance, this same downside of the Enlightenment legacy, which haunts the tendency to detract and oversimplify the past that characterizes the contemporary writers against whom she polemicizes.

Robinson's lack of respect for poorly substantiated popular science is mirrored, however, by the high esteem in which she holds good science. In actual fact, good science has a great deal in common with good religion: "In both cases the vastness of reality is assumed, and the value of pondering the imponderable assumed also."[20] Good science, like good religion, makes us rethink once again those things we think we know all too well.

RELIGION AND MORALITY

A few last words on religion and morality. Just like Schleiermacher, Robinson has little time for the ploy of reserving a place for religion in the realm of morals after first ejecting it from that of knowledge. Using religion for moralistic purposes all too often boils down to using it in an exclusionary fashion, in the form of nationalistic pride in the international arena or petty territorialism within the border of the nation itself. Thus Robinson expresses her alienation from those who propagandize that the United States rests upon Christian values and, moreover, see their own country as a promised land:

> I am the sort of Christian whose patriotism might be called into question by some on the grounds that I do not take the United States to be more beloved by God than France, let us say, or Russia, or Argentina, or Iran. I experience religious dread whenever I find myself thinking that I know the limits of God's grace, since I am utterly certain it exceeds any imagination a human being might have of it. [...] Making God a tribal deity, our local Baal, is embarrassing and disgraceful.[21]

And yet, as her attraction towards odd, misfit figures confirms, Robinson's firm dissociation from moralizing Christianity does not mean that her writings are lacking

18 Robinson in Mason 2014.
19 Novalis 1983, 586.
20 Robinson in Maughan 2014.
21 Robinson 2012, 136f.

in moral pathos. Robinson frequently uses these figures in order to lay bare the pettiness of Christian moralism, even as she reveals the deeper prophetic pathos that runs through the biblical texts. This is nowhere more explicit than in the mysterious figure who lends her name to *Lila*, the novel that follows *Gilead* and *Home* but is set in a time prior to the other two stories. Lila is the mother of John Ames' child, the longed-for son who is the object of the diary-like letters that make up *Gilead* (which is, incidentally, the name of the small community in the mid-West where the three novels take place).

When Lila turns up in Gilead one Whitsunday in the late 1940s, she does so through pure chance. She is a rootless hobo who has lived her life among itinerant casual labourers and with no promise of any other existence. On this particular day, however, she is caught in a downpour and seeks shelter in the small church where John Ames is giving a sermon on the theme of Pentecost. And so it turns out that Lila settles in Gilead, where her story unfolds in the gap between the rough life she has pursued before coming to Gilead and her new life as a pastor's wife in a large house with clean sheets and food on the table.

The gap is not obviously bridgeable. With warmth and humour, Robinson depicts Lila's laborious efforts to enter into the biblical world that is Ames' everyday. Barely literate, Lila resolves to read the Old Testament, and she painstakingly writes every verse in a notebook. Ezekiel, of all books. "But why Ezekiel?", asks Ames, worried that she will be discouraged, "That's a pretty sad book, I think. I mean, there's a lot of sadness in it. It's a difficult place to begin."[22] The lines that Lila has just transcribed relate how the Lord threatens to destroy Jerusalem on account of its crimes: "I will make thee a desolation, and a reproach among the nations that are round about thee, in the sight of all that pass by. So it shall be a reproach and a taunt, an instruction and an astonishment unto the nations that are round about thee, when I shall execute judgments in thee in anger and in fury and in furious rebukes." (Ezekial 5:14–15). Undeniably hard words, and Ames does all he can to soften them by explaining their historical and theological context. But Lila needs no profound exegetical explanations:

> She was mainly just interested in reading that the people were a desolation and a reproach. She knew what these words meant without asking. In the sight of all that pass by. She hated those people, the ones that look at you as if they want to say, Why don't you get your raggedy self out of my sight. Existence don't want you.[23]

Reading the book of Ezekiel, Lila finds that her own windswept existence is reflected in its pages: "Don't matter if it's sad. At least Ezekiel knows what certain things feel

22 Robinson 2014, 124f.
23 Robinson 2014, 125.

like."[24] Robinson has since commented that it was this that she wanted to explore in *Lila* – how the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, gives voice to those who do not have a voice: "It is as if a truly sacred book should be more polite, a little less insistent on bringing up painful subjects. [...] [But] the importance of these subjects in scripture means that scripture is very largely addressed to those who know this side of experience, those who labour and are heavy-laden, those who mourn, who hunger and thirst."[25]

To say that religion is close to art and appeals to our aesthetic sense is not to say that religion merely comprises beautiful cathedrals and beloved psalms. Martin Luther knew this when he distinguished between "the theology of glory" and "the theology of the cross", claiming that you cannot have the former without the latter. Marilynne Robinson knows this, too. If we avert our gaze from the Bible's more unpleasant and demanding texts, we also miss something essential about the message of the Bible: to see value in that which is distained and outcast; to see the wondrous in that which is lowly and insignificant; to see the divine in the human.

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24 Robinson 2014, 126.

25 Robinson in Maughan 2014.

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HEATHER WALTON

The children are always lost: Marilynne Robinson and the poetics of theology

THE EXPERIMENT

Almost a decade ago I was fortunate enough to take part in a unique experiment. Marilynne Robinson, whose work as a writer, cultural critic, and Christian thinker was already widely celebrated, agreed to spend nearly a month with a small group of theologians. The intention was to help us become better writers. In the long liminal years between *Housekeeping* [1] and *Gilead* [2] her vocation had been to inspire and teach creative writing. The challenge was to see whether the skills and insights that she had carefully nurtured in others could be fostered in us. Her commitment to this project was very deep for two reasons. First, she loved theology – intensely. Second, she was deeply concerned that this holy enterprise was not flourishing. As she stated "With all respect for theologians and scholars of the modern period, my brothers and sisters in Christ [...] the vision of Christ, of Jesus of Nazareth, they have retrieved out of the tempests and the droughts of their period is gravely impoverished".[3]

We met in Princeton. We sat around a huge polished wood table each morning until lunchtime. We listened to her. We presented our own work and we struggled together with its form and content. It was an intimate privilege to be in such prolonged proximity to Robinson and witness her thinking aloud on many issues. There were many deep and insightful moments. However, there was also an uneasy sense that the challenges and concerns we identified in our theological work did not quite correspond to her own. We were approaching theology instrumentally – seeking to engage tradition for ecclesial or emancipatory ends. Robinson had a rather different approach. "You must

1 Robinson 1981 (UK edition).
2 Robinson 2005a (UK edition).
3 Robinson 2016, 189.

return to doctrine", she said. "It is beautiful. You must write it beautifully". We heard but we did not understand what she meant and our conversations returned again and again to the unresolved question, "What *is* this theological-writing-thing we are supposed to be doing?" In this chapter I return again to this challenge – but this time attempting to comprehend it from the perspective of my teacher. I am asking "What form does theology take for Robinson?" And, more particularly, "How does her literary writing offer a means to understand her theological vision?"

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

As I begin to approach this topic I note a self-evident fact I believe is important in coming to an understanding of her theological vision. Robinson is a popular writer. I mark it because it is so very unusual for a profoundly religious author to have such widespread appeal. We live in an age of culture wars in which aesthetic tastes are frequently elided with fiduciary frameworks and mobilized antagonistically against those whose belief systems differ from our own. Furthermore, her writing addresses mid-century domestic piety and dwells on themes that could appear parochially Presbyterian or period-bound. And yet somehow Robinson manages to speak to her many believing and unbelieving readers in a manner that provokes emotional response and intellectual respect from both camps. So, for example, fellow novelist Neel Mukherjee celebrates *Gilead* as a book of, "spiritual intensity [...] You might not share its faith, but it is difficult not to be awed, moved, and ultimately humbled by the spiritual effulgence that lights up the novel from within."[4] From a theological perspective Rowan Williams similarly testifies to the breadth of her appeal: "She has brilliantly voiced a story [...] – unmistakably a Christian story, but [...][its] moral acuity and insistence on what it means to allow the voiceless to speak give it a [...] weight well beyond any confessional limits."[5]

There are, no doubt, many reasons for Robinson's ability to reach such a wide audience. I will note two that I consider particularly important. The first is that Robinson is, in every respect, a serious writer who offers serious gifts to her readers. Significantly these gifts appear to coincide with their own sense of loss or lack.

Cultural critics, particularly those from the United States, are thankful for the way she offers back to them the heterogeneous spiritual, poetic, and political traditions that form the heritage of this country. So Professor of the Practice of Literary Criticism, James Wood, states that "Gilead is a beautiful book, demanding, grave and lucid

4 Mukherjee in Spinks 2017, 147.
5 Williams 2014.

[...] suffused with a Protestant bareness [...] [and] the American religious spirit that produced those bareback religious writers, Emerson, Thoreau and Melville".[6] This is a heritage, he implies, that is particularly to be prized in our own intellectually darkened times. Professor of American Literature Sarah Churchwell ventures that Robinson's theological commitments may not *actually* be incompatible with the pragmatism and scepticism that characterize American radical thought. The works embody a yearning for right relations amongst people and deep, integral connections with the wild forces of the natural world. This being the case, "the Gilead novels can be read as an act of national and cultural recovery, resurrecting powerful ghosts to remind America of a forgotten moral lineage".[7]

Christian commentators approaching Robinson's work also celebrate its restorative power. She gracefully bestows on them the sense that it is defensible (ethically, intellectually, and aesthetically) to be a person of faith. Many religious reviewers go on to note her stories have biblical references, theological themes, and present believing characters as if they might have some wisdom to contribute to the world rather than being the dangerous dupes of reactionary forces. Some delight to have Barth and Calvin as vital presences in the texts; as a central character in the *Gilead* trilogy, Lila, remarks to her clergy husband Ames, the way you talk about Calvin, "I had no idea he was dead".[8] Others claim to identify the literary expression of a panoramic redemptive vision which provides an arc of meaning transporting us from exile to home again echoing the meta-narrative of Christian doctrine. Fewer note the troubling and challenging theological questions that Robinson's novels articulate with audacious, imaginative power – *but some do*.[9] All are united in the experience of exalting in being able to breathe fresh air. In the space of the *Gilead* texts theological issues are not closeted away in shaded and stuffy places but brought into conversation with themes that normal people care about: big political themes like racism and poverty as well as the exquisite pain of familial and domestic relations.

So part of Robinson's appeal is as a serious writer able to restore to secular and religious readers alike a sense of heritage, values, and intellectual worth in a period when all of these appear under threat. Or, to put this another way, she appeals firstly through the power of nostalgia – often treated as a negative word but I do not use it in a negative sense. In a perceptive article on Robinson, Sinead McDermott[10] argues that her

6 Wood 2004.
7 Churchwell 2014.
8 Robinson 2014, 131. After this article was written a fourth novel in the Gilead series, *Jack*, was published in 2020.
9 Potts 2017.
10 McDermott 2004.

writing is structured around a reflective nostalgia which – although it looks back and mourns what appears to be lost (or occluded) in contemporary experience – does so as a means of enabling restorative imagination and mobilizing yearning for transformation. However, I do not believe that Robinson's theological contribution can be understood simply as nostalgic, even in-a-good-sense. Nor does nostalgia alone sufficiently explain Robinson's wide appeal. Her writing also seems to construct a spiritual space for her readers; a space in which they are able to be differently attentive to the sacred resonances of the world – and to wonder at them. And so I turn to a second reason I believe her writing is so widely attractive. That is her poetics; the issue of creative form in her writing. As I seek to explore her theological perspective further Robinson's poetics will form the main focus of this chapter.

POETIC PROBES

In a number of interviews and essays Robinson has described how she began to construct her first novel, *Housekeeping*. During her doctoral studies she had immersed herself in the work of great 19th-century American writers such as Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman. Most particularly she had become absorbed in the work of the transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau – all good, serious authors who themselves transgress borders between the sacred and the secular. One thing that struck her particularly during these studies was the way in which these authors used strong metaphors not as literary adornments but as epistemological probes. She writes that they enabled her to understand that metaphor might be seen "as a highly legitimate strategy for real epistemological questions to be dealt with in fiction and poetry [...] that reality must somehow be describable as linked through analogue". Furthermore, "the discovery of anything that seems communicative, that satisfies the mind, that is emblematic or that answers to the mind [...] [represents] an opening".[11]

Robinson here is clearly not employing metaphor in a limited, technical sense. Rather she is adopting a distinctly Emersonian way of proceeding in writing. Emerson called on his contemporaries to abandon rotten, decadent, literary rhetoric and "fasten words again to visible things".[12] This is because he considered that it was through a deep and rapt engagement with the world around us, the natural world in particular, that humanity achieves self-understanding and learns of God. For Emerson there are no natural elements, no tides and motions, that are not in analogous relations with

11 Robinson in Chodat 2017, 350.
12 Bergthaller 2007, 82–83.

spiritual realities. So the world is animate with symbols and attention to this fact not only enables us to address real epistemological questions – it even opens up for us the possibility of participation in the life of the divine.

To give an example. An important metaphor for Emerson (and also for Robinson) is water. Attention to the fluid movement of water is attentiveness to a marvellous divine motion not only in nature but in the minds and souls of people. As Nina Baym writes for Emerson, "The continual replacement of water in bodies through circulation suggests the continual refreshing influx of spirit from the source, as well as the perpetual motion of embodied spirit towards the source".[13] And so, Emerson states, "The waters of the great deep have ingress and egress to the soul".[14] What is being presented here is a profound vision of the interpenetration of matter and spirit, and Emerson's analogical writing method forges links between them in order to present the world as a totality – unified and animated by the divine spirit. This interpenetration, to quote Baym further, "turns the whole world into miracle".[15] Robinson was deeply inspired by this approach. She began to note and write down things she thought of as metaphors, and discovered that they appeared to cohere together, bind together as atoms do to create compound forms – and it was out of this process of analogical thinking and deep connective symbolization that her fiction emerged – from what she describes as the "deep integral use of metaphor".[16]

Writing that contains dominant metaphors repeated, revisited, and realized in many forms generates that lucid, reflective, and "spiritual" quality that many of Robinson's readers cherish. Of course if you work in this way economy is called for. You should not proliferate images to excess but rather forge a limited symbolic repertoire from which to constantly and creatively improvise. As other commentators have noted there are in Robinson's work a number of major tropes – and these are consistent throughout her oeuvre. Amongst these would be, just to take some key examples: the town of Gilead itself; transient people like Sylvie, Ruthie, Jack, Lila; water – a major metaphor; and, I would add, not only prodigal sons but many, many lost children. Children who are rejected and abandoned. Children who are wounded, missing, or dead.

So, the second major factor in Robinson's appeal as I understand it is the multilayered poetic construction of a symbolic world full of deepening analogies which the reader sometimes notices but often simply absorbs and experiences as satisfying. And crucially they are satisfying in a spiritual sense. As Hungerford has it, Robinson's po-

13 Baym 1966, 236.
14 Emerson 1984 [1841], 426.
15 Baym 1966, 236.
16 Robinson in Owens 2007.

etic strategy is "to knit up a broken world through simile and analogy",[17] making each local landscape, each common or domestic encounter a re-engagement with a cosmic mystery. But a deepening sense of wonder in the everyday commerce of life, however lyrically achieved, might soon appear contrived, overly pious, and become alienating to the contemporary reader. By and large we are not 19th-century transcendentalists seeking the forms of harmony Emerson reaches towards. Our sensibilities react against moral and aesthetic closure. It is thus important that Robinson's readers are not only offered a warming sense of spiritual uplift but also touch the ragged edges of tragedy through her writing. The sense of wonder she communicates is counterbalanced by the depths of sorrow, pity, and pathos she evokes. And again I believe her poetics offers the key to understanding how this is achieved.

SYMBOLS THAT SPEAK BUT DO NOT SAY

To go back again to the major tropes and devices I previously listed: all of them are profoundly unstable, ambivalent; capable of signifying differently. Gilead is a place of balm and kindness. But it has sunk to the very depths of hell in its racism. Or again, to be a transient is to wander in the cold and darkness, unhomed and always on the outside of brightly lit domestic life. But to be a transient is to move freely in the wildness where the spirit also dwells. As Emerson states in his essay on Swedenborg, "The Eden of God is bare and grand [...] we pity those who can forego the magnificence of nature for candle light and cards".[18]

As stated, water plays a major symbolic role in Robinson's works. It is the dominant metaphor in *Housekeeping*, which is set in the town of Fingerbone established beside a deep lake. The water can show a calm countenance "permeated by sunlight [...] green life and innumerable fish".[19] But below the warm shallows lie the deeps; lightless and airless. "Sometimes in the spring this old lake will return. One will open a cellar door to waddling boots floating tallowy soles up and planks and buckets bumping at the threshold [...] The earth will brim, the soil will become mud and then silty water, and the grass will stand in chill water to its tips."[20] Here we have water symbolizing primeval power that cannot be prevented from welling up and flooding human dwellings. People drown in this water and are lost. Biblical images of creation, chaos, and flood are transported into Robinson's text and mingle here

17 Hungerford 2010, 120.
18 Emerson 1987 [1850], 72.
19 Robinson 1981, 9.
20 Robinson 1981, 5.

with literary images from Melville's *Moby-Dick*[21] and Kate Chopin's *Awakening*.[22]

In the novel *Gilead* water takes on a kinder aspect. The lyrical fluidity of Emerson and Thoreau meets with biblical images of overflowing cups, wells and springs flowing out of barren rock, the waters of life run freely – renewing and refreshing. The work is resplendent with spring showers, children making rainbows, streams and bathing, fertile waters that bless lovers, and the advent of Lila out of the rain – redeeming love and life for Ames. However, it must be stressed that water in both novels can, and does, turn and become its opposite – it is never straightforwardly one thing or another. In Robinson's fourth novel *Lila* the symbol is profoundly ambivalent throughout. So Lila poised between Gilead and the wild is baptized and then seeks water to cleanse herself of this baptism. A "baptism" of ice-water provokes a gasp and cry from her child after its perilous birth. However, baptism itself stands as much for fearful, legalistic, ludicrous approaches to faith as it does for renewal and rebirth. Feeling confined by Gilead and longing for wildness and wandering again, Lila imagines herself as wading out into an icy flood that freezes but also cleanses to the very bone.

PARENTS AND PRODIGALS

I have argued that Robinson's poetics, employing "the deep integral use of metaphor", mobilizes a restricted range of key symbols that give resonance and coherence to her writing. These metaphors carry biblical and literary allusions and affects into her texts in explicit and intuited ways. The books are resonant and echoing. I have also argued that her key symbols are made to signify variously. She is no poststructuralist but difference and deferral are words that could be used here; each symbol carries its own "other" into the text, destabilizing assumed meanings. This results, as Potts states, in poetic work does not depend "upon the fixed correspondence between signs and their referents – upon stable definitions – but upon the freedom of signs to signify in novel and creative ways, to look for and create new meanings".[23] The metaphors are animate and they are in motion. To explore this matter further I now turn to the images of lost children in Robinson's writing. I believe the power of metaphor to act as eptistemological probe emerges with particular force in relation to this constantly recurring symbol.

For Robinson the child/parent relation within the Christian tradition is not only significant, it is the "major metaphor for the situation of a human being in the world

21 Melville 2004 [1851].

22 Robinson wrote an introduction to the reissued version of this classic work of feminist fiction. See Robinson 1988.

23 Potts 2017, 490.

relative to God".[24] This being the case clearly there is great literary and theological resonance to be gained from the deployment of images that evoke this relation. As Wood argues, Robinson mobilizes in her fiction many of the major biblical stories of fathers and sons – and particularly the narrative of the prodigal son, "most loved because most errant".[25] However, whilst these intertextual references are certainly present and active they do not function in the manner that might be anticipated or, indeed, in the way we assume they will when we first encounter them. So in the Gilead trilogy we meet the two engaging, ageing clerics, Ames and Boughton, whose piety, intellectual integrity, ability to quote scripture and poetry as well as their deep care for each other dispose us to trust and respect them. Because they *speak of God* and we assume they *speak for God* and in wrestling with the return of the wanderer Jack we expect them to behave eventually as forgiving and welcoming fathers to this lost child. We want this to be the story of the prodigal son that comforts and restores us. Some Christian commentators, for example Alison Jack,[26] do read it in this way. For her the novel *Gilead* functions as a supplement and complement to "Both the parable and the narrative of salvation [which] rely on the movement from the heights to the depths, from home to the far country and back again".[27]

Ames is particularly attractive to readers because of his whimsical but earthy mysticism and his Emersonian capacity to see wonder in the everyday. Todd Shy states he is that rare literary character who exhibits "simple, complete piety".[28] However, although his presence is luminous and subtly compelling, Robinson gradually leads us to perceive another side to Ames' character. She reveals his willed ignorance concerning the racism of his community (particularly in regard to the burning of the black church), his narrow mindedness, woolly-mindedness, and the bitterness he harbours towards Jack his godson and namesake. Ames' friend Boughton is less sympathetic from the outset but we still *want* to believe his professions of love for Jack his son and his lost illegitimate granddaughter. We strive to understand and excuse his failures in forgiveness and his legalistic concerns for who might, or might not be, be included in the family of God.

Robinson is less charitable in her judgement of these men. For her Jack represents the challenging advent of grace/judgement in Gilead and in portraying him thus she spectacularly turns the tables on her readers and confounds our expectations. As Rebecca Painter writes when Ames "realizes and acknowledges that the man he has al-

24 Robinson 2005b.
25 Wood 2008.
26 Jack 2018.
27 Jack 2018, 112.
28 Shy 2007, 251.

ways perceived as the bane of his best friend's and his own existence, is actually a loving husband and father and a good man, [this] is the miraculous high point of Robinson's novel".[29] Jack, the son whom Robinson loves, is portrayed as having overcome the parochial curse of Gilead. Although living a wilderness existence that is by no means innocent or entirely virtuous, he is deeply loving towards his black partner Della and their child; toward his father and his sister and even towards the home where he is not, and never has been, at home. He wants to return to Gilead with his family (Iowa is one of the few places in the US in the 1950s where miscegenation laws do not apply) but as all three novels make clear neither Ames or Boughton have the capacity to envisage that such a return might be possible. Marking his narrative as truly tragic, Jack is never able to disclose the truth of his goodness to his father who continues to believe him lost and wasted. So Robinson states:

> I have changed the terms of the parable [...] In the biblical story the prodigal has squandered money and consorted with prostitutes, and he is brought home by sheer destitution [...] The prodigal [...] leave[s] his old life behind him. Jack brings his to Gilead – in the form of loss and loneliness and also hope, and a painful and precious secret [...] His father cannot absolve him of the pain and difficulty of his life, and Jack does not expect him to. He comes home seeking help in restoring a good life he had made, which has been destroyed by the pressures of law and social custom. I suppose people take the issue [in the novel] to be forgiveness because they think about Jack's youth rather than about his present situation. But really he is bringing judgment home with him, and he finds himself continually having to forgive his father and to love him graciously [...] despite all.[30]

There are many clues to the grace which is also judgement Jack brings with him to Gilead in the trilogy of novels. Some are subtle. So at the close of *Gilead* when a chastened Ames says "I'll pray, and then I'll sleep,"[31] we might read this as an ordinary statement from a pious old man who has had a tiring day. Or alternatively we might interpret it as an elegiac reference to his long years of prayer and his forthcoming sleep in death. But these words, chosen by a writer who is also a Shakespearian scholar, are a direct quote from King Lear. They are spoken at a dramatic turning point in the play when Lear realizes how at fault he has been in neglecting the plight of the unhoused ones like poor Tom; the destitute of his kingdom. "Oh," Lear realizes, "I have ta'en / Too little care of this!".[32] So Ames, we who cannot help love him are glad to discover, is not beyond achieving at last an understanding of his own culpability. Some of Robinson's markers of judgement are not as subtle as this. "Jesus Christ",

29 Painter 2011, 229.
30 Painter 2009, 487.
31 Robinson 2005a.
32 See William Shakespeare, *King Lear,* Act 3 Scene 4, lines 27–33.

Jack exclaims in *Home*, voicing outrage and passionate protest at television footage of police brutally turning dogs and water cannon against black protestors. That kind of language "has never been acceptable in this house",[33] says his father in a deeply ironic judgement on his own inability to name Christ in relation to issues of unjust human suffering – although he evokes his name piously in almost every other circumstance.

To remain with the much-debated prodigal son theme a little longer, what is particularly revealing about the relation between Jack and his two fathers is that he asks them theological questions. He has read theology. He understands in broad terms the teachings of Calvin, the thinking of Barth, and he has been trying and failing to find theological answers to his own questions about the tragic alienation that has marked his life. However, the two old men who delight in nothing more than discussing the subtle intricacies of doctrine between themselves on the porch in long summer evenings cannot make any meaningful replies to his questions on matters of faith. They consider them irreverent traps – they cannot turn their precious doctrines into words of life. The holy formulas they exchange incessantly to each other don't make any sense when they are voiced to Jack. It is only his sister Glory, herself an outsider, and Lila, a fellow wanderer and transient now married to Ames, who can speak real words of love, forgiveness, and hope to him. Glory tells Jack that she certainly can forgive him past wrongs (so why not God, why not his father?) and Lila tells him things can change, really change, "Everything can change".[34]

MOTHERS OF THE LOST

The overwhelming weight of critical attention to the symbol of the lost child in Robinson is devoted to the father/son relation and the question of forgiveness. However, as I seek to approach Robinson's theology through her poetics I find that the motif of the lost child is opened out in far-reaching and differently challenging ways by attending to Robinson's female characters. Through these women Robinson imports a whole other set of biblical images into her fictional texts. We now recall the ancient biblical narratives of barren women who long for children: Sarah, Rebecca, Hannah, Elizabeth. We hear frightening echoes of children as "sacrifices" in a masculine divine economy and remember the knife held to Isaac's throat, the annihilation of the children of Job, the massacre of the innocents, and Rachel weeping for her children because they are not. However, alongside these dark images there are annunciations, visitations, restorations; dead children are brought back to life[35] and weeping

33 Robinson 2008, 97.

34 Robinson 2005a, 174.

35 Recalling the raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:21–43, Matthew 9:18–26, Luke 8:40–56).

mothers reunited with their offspring – as in this poetic passage from *Housekeeping:* "Lott's wife was salt and barren, because she was full of loss and mourning and looked back. But here rare flowers would gleam in her hair [...] and there would be children all around her, to love and marvel at her for her beauty".[36] In fact there is such an abundance and richness in the feminine symbolics of the lost child in Robinson's work that, within the limits of this chapter, I will focus principally upon the character of Lila particularly as presented in the fourth Gilead novel.[37] However, I will refer to other characters and other novels in order to show how certain metaphors and symbols are enduring, and indeed gather in momentum, as they are developed throughout Robinson's oeuvre.

The novel *Lila* opens with the narrative of a little girl who has been locked out at night, for many nights; a story that is beyond painful to read.

> The child was just there on the stoop in the dark, hugging herself against the cold. All cried out and nearly sleeping. She couldn't holler anymore and they didn't hear her anyway, or they might and that would make things worse [...] There was a moon staring straight at her, and there were sounds in the woods.[38]

Starved, sick, and scratched by the cats who lived under the stoop, Lila is almost dead and is certainly then, and possibly forever, lost to the safe domestic world of warm light and candles. So, Lila is a later type of Ruthie from Robinson's first novel *Housekeeping* who is painfully exiled from her familial and communal roots, from home and hearth. Like Ruthie, Lila is pictured as an outcast victim and *also* as someone who gains wisdom from her exile and who finds, in Emersonian terms, the dangerous outdoor life to be one of intense sensory perception, fundamental passions, and piercing vision – there are keys to understanding existence that can only be found here.

Like Jack, Lila brings her knowledge as a form of grace to Gilead. She uneasily (and we must never forget temporarily) finds love and rest beside Ames and becomes the mother of his beloved son. However, she never ceases to be the voice of the lost child challenging his customary norms and theological understanding. Her challenge is sometimes practical. She brings lost children to memory: quite literally by clearing and marking the grave of Ames' first baby who died shortly after birth. She also tends the neglected grave of Jack's illegitimate daughter. In a parable within a parable Lila

36 Robinson 1981, 153.

37 This means leaving out, for example, the important theme of Glory's relations with Jack's living and dead children in *Home*. It also entails limiting discussion of the huge significance of this theme in Robinson's first novel *Housekeeping.*

38 Robinson 2014, 3.

also meets a lost child, a true prodigal son in desperate need and running from the law. She gives him money, food, and clothing. When the clerics Boughton and Ames meet the same boy their fear and judgement scare him away.

But Lila's challenge is not only practical. In some of the most important passages of the book Lila discovers stories of lost children in the Bible and begins to challenge Ames about their plight. She is particularly fascinated by the passages in which Job's children are killed by an act of God, swept away by a wind that breaks down the walls of their dwelling.[39] She also ponders deeply upon verses in Ezekiel about a baby cast out at birth:

> And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water [...] None eye pitied thee [...] to have compassion upon thee; but thou wast cast out in the open field [...] in the day that thou wast born. And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto [...] "Live"; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, "Live".[40]

Lila questions Ames insistently about this text.

> There's a baby cast out in a field, just thrown away, and it is God who picks her up. But why would God let somebody throw her out like that in the first place?[41]

> But if God really has all that power why does He let children get treated so bad? Because they are sometimes. That's true.[42]

> Does he [Calvin] say anything about why a child would be treated so bad in the first place?[43]

When Ames inadequately answers that Calvin "says basically that people have to suffer to really recognize grace when it comes",[44] this is not accepted: "A baby like that one in the Bible, just born, it wouldn't feel what it was to have somebody take it up. Or it wouldn't remember well enough to know the difference. So there wouldn't be no point in the suffering".[45] While Ames theologizes further about the meaning of the passage in relation to covenant and idolatry she sticks to her guns. "A child is just a child. It can't help what happens or doesn't happen to it."[46] Furthermore, she remem-

39 Job 1:19.
40 Ezekiel 16:4–6.
41 Robinson 2014, 129.
42 Robinson 2014, 129.
43 Robinson 2014, 131.
44 Robinson 2014, 131.
45 Robinson 2014, 131.
46 Robinson 2014, 135.

bers, it was not a pious believer who bent down to rescue the child she was, unwashed, rank, and unloved, but another transient and homeless person.

So Lila speaks the theological challenge of the lost child to Ames in direct and forthright ways. And she also bears to him a child who cannot be sheltered and made safe. This is an undernoted theme in the trilogy and one which I shall return to later. I will state at this point not only is the birth perilous but we are casually informed in all three Gilead novels that Ames cannot provide any security for the son of his late years. The prodigal cleric has already squandered his substance on expensive theological books from far countries and has nothing at all for his widow and son to inherit when he dies. Gilead, we already know, is definitely not to be trusted as a place of refuge for the widow, orphan, or stranger. Lila contemplating her child's uncertain future remembers how they placed the near-lifeless newborn in her arms: "That orphan he was first he always would be, no matter how they loved him. He'd be no child of hers otherwise".[47]

GRIEF AND GRACE

In the above passage we see Lila is not only herself a lost child; as the carer for and advocate of lost children she also becomes in some sense their mother. It is important to note here that while the theme of lost children is always for Robinson an issue of justice and of care, always, it is never only that. This is an analogical symbol that speaks a spiritual reality. So there are many passages in the book *before* Lila gives birth, when she mourns for children who are unborn, not present, lost in a different sense. A pivotal passage in the novel is her car drive at night across states to Gilead. Lila and the woman who offers her a lift both share intimate secrets of denied motherhood. They speak the unnamed grief of this loss that is not a loss. This scene evokes many similar ones in *Housekeeping* in which the theme of needing to mother and yet being unable to mother lost children is elaborated upon in more detail again and again. This is a typical passage:

> [Grandma once] told us, she dreamed that she had seen a baby fall from an airplane and had tried to catch it in her apron, and once she had tried to fish a baby out of a well with a tea strainer. Her mother she told us, knew a woman who, when she looked out of her window at night, often saw the ghosts of children crying by the road. These children, who were sky black and stark naked and who danced with the cold and wiped their tears with the back of their hands and the heels of their hands furious with hunger, consumed much of the woman's substance and most of her thoughts [...] Sometimes it seemed to me my grandmother saw our black souls dancing in the moonless cold and offered us deep-dish apple pie as a gesture of well-meaning and despair.[48]

47 Robinson 2014, 255.

48 Robinson 1981, 25–26.

This evocative scene precedes Ruthie's visionary experience of herself searching for dead children. This point marks her own acceptance that she will live safe and sheltered. It marks her entry into wilderness life:

> Children had been sleeping in this fallen house. Soon I would uncover the rain-stiffened hems of their nightshirts, and their small, bone feet, the toes all fallen like petals. Perhaps it was already too late to help. They had lain under the snow for far too many winters. [...] [but there were no children trapped in the ruin]. They were light and spare and thoroughly used to the cold and it was almost a joke to them to be cast into the woods, even if their eyes were gone and their feet were broken.[49]

This vision is epiphanic, theological for Ruthie. It gives her a new credo. A statement of faith with which the book concludes; *all the lost children though they appear unable to walk are travelling home*.

> The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to be an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return. So [...] – there will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine.[50]

Robinson was a much older, and decidedly more Calvinist author, when she penned *Lila* than when she wrote *Housekeeping* – but the later novel makes the very same concluding point. Lila has her own epiphany and it is very similar indeed to Ruthie's. Waiting in the church for Ames to join her after the baptism of their son, she reflects on Boughton's comic insistence that the little baby, his godson, must be baptized as soon as possible to ensure its home in the community of faith and place in heaven. Lila thinks that heaven can't be conceived of in this closed and barred way. Heaven must be ludicrously open because of the love we bear for each other and the longing that this love creates which itself redeems the desolation of all loss. In Lila's visionary imagining every prodigal that ever lived had better be pulled into heaven because otherwise their mother would mourn them; indeed the whole of China might well be swept up into eternity simply because Boughton was rather troubled on its behalf. And what about the other lost children? "If any scoundrel could be pulled into heaven to make his mother happy, it couldn't be fair to punish scoundrels who happened to be orphans, or whose mother didn't even like them",[51] she reasons. As she remembers the many transient people she has met on the road she dares to believe that each and every one of them will astonished to find themselves

49 Robinson 1981, 158–159.
50 Robinson 1981, 192.
51 Robinson 2014, 259.

touched by grace and brought home. Grace; "There was no end to it. Thank God, as the old men would say".[52]

In this lyrical and mystical ending to the novel Lila reflects upon an intuition of grace she has received that Ames cannot yet grasp: "Someday she would tell him what she knew"[53] are the final lines. However, hers is not the knowledge of someone who is settled now, brought back inside and made safe at home. Someday very soon, and taking her son with her, Lila knows that she will set out again on the road again. The boy would realize he had no place in Gilead and she would say "It don't matter, We'll just wander for a while. We'll be nowhere and it will be alright. I have friends there."[54] At this point we should remember that this young son is the one addressed throughout the first novel as well as at the end of this one. He functions, in a sense, as the reader also; the one to whom the messages of these texts are being addressed. We are on the road too, we are outcast in wild places. This is Lila's/Robinson's testimony to us:

> All the tangles and knots of bitterness and desperation had to be pitied. No better grace had to fall on them [...] That is how it is. Lila had borne a child into a world where a wind could rise that would take him from her arms as if there were no strength in them at all. Pity us yes, but we are brave she thought, and wild, more life in us that we can bear, the fire unfolding itself in us.[55]

GRACE AND GLORY

The challenge I set myself in this chapter was to interrogate Robinson's poetics in order now to ask "What form does theology take for Robinson?" And, more particularly, "How does her literary work offer a means to approach her theological vision?" I argued that she has created a coherent analogical poetics, that initially drew upon Emerson but now draws much more upon her own aesthetic interpretation of God's glory manifest in the world employing the insights of Calvin. Integral metaphors recur throughout her work linking the material world and human relations to spiritual truths. What is particularly interesting about the symbols she employs and the manner in which she employs them is that their meanings are mobilized in ways that are challenging and confounding. As Robinson stated in an interview in 2005, "both poetry and theology push conventional definitions and explore perceptions that might be ignored or passed off as conventional, but when they are pressed yield much larger

52 Robinson 2014, 260.

53 Robinson 2014, 261.

54 Lila imagines him looking at the graves of his father and his first family and realizing that there was no space left for them to rest there. Robinson 2014, 251.

55 Robinson 2014, 260.

meanings, seem to be part of a much larger system of reality".[56] Her poetics appears conventional and is often read as such – but it is not. It yields much larger meanings.

Further, I have argued, the symbol of the lost child is particularly important for Robinson in theological terms. It is the dominant trope for exploring relations between the divine and the human, it awakens a concern for social justice and compassion – but more than this. Particularly in the feminine register she employs through the characters of Ruthie, Glory, and Lila, it institutes an alternative divine economy in which absence and loss are met by grace. Actually more than this. The absence and loss in themselves appear to be somehow the vehicles of grace.

Latterly in her essays Robinson has begun to quote from a favourite medieval dream poem titled 'Pearl'. It narrates the story of a man whose beloved daughter died in childhood. He encounters her again in visions of a beautiful young woman dwelling serenely in a paradise he cannot yet enter. It contains the lines "My soul by grace of God has fared, venturing where marvels be." In the wilds and wastes of grief a glory is revealed. These lines sum up Robinson's mature faith and theological understanding. If she has a favourite word it would be grace. A favourite understanding of that would be the unprecedented work of God that restores *in beauty* (it is fundamentally an aesthetic act) that which has been lost. So she writes:

> ['Pearl'] speaks beautifully and tellingly of such loss, acknowledging a depth of grief that is, finally, embraced in the consolations of a cosmic order that is as tender and profound as such sorrows would require. We might call this wish fulfilment, the projection of human hopes on an empty heaven. Or we might call it a vision of Being that is large and rich enough to accommodate the experience of human love and grief. The beauty we see in this world is a sign and portent of an ultimate beauty, and we are rightly enthralled by it.[57]

This is a wild and brave vision. Matthew Potts[58] is one of the few critics who have come near to approaching it in their work on Robinson. He compares Robinson's poetics to the understanding of sacrament in the work of Rowan Williams. For Williams material signs and sacraments do not so much locate and then communicate the presence of God in the world but alert us to a continuing, "alienation, estrangement and renunciation in the crucified Christ".[59] Sacraments are the signs through which we recall this kenotic "deferral, estrangement, forsakenness, and absence".[60] "Posses-

56 Robinson 2005b.
57 Robinson 2018, Kindle location 1586–1592.
58 Potts 2017.
59 Potts 2017, 492.
60 Potts 2017, 492.

sion and presence would overwhelm or obscure it", writes Potts.[61] But loss, deferral, and estrangement can open it like a wound. Longing and love go together. And this is why Williams insists that sacraments must speak a loss. You might also think of doctrine in this way perhaps? That it does not articulate some propositional truth but opens a wound, marks a loss? This approach to doctrine attracts me and alerts me to new creative potential. Why did I not grasp this when we met in Princeton? There is a reason I think.

As I have stated Robinson's work nurtures deep nostalgia. So when she writes and speaks phrases that irritate me such as "I would like to see a revival of real no nonsense scholarship and the emergence of rigorous theologies",[62] or when she berates the churches for an "uncoerced abandonment" of their former riches of theology and tradition,[63] I tend to rebel against a lurking magisterial conservatism I think I identify here. I have no idea at all how to go back to the kind of propositional doctrinal theology she *appears* to be advocating. But maybe I should listen and read more subtly. Alongside this nostalgia lies a radical vision, one that is linked to the integral poetics I have explored here.

Robinson's nostalgia is for theology that she feels reaches the grandeur expressed by her great heroes Calvin, Bonhoeffer, and Barth. Of Calvin and Bonhoeffer she makes the same observation that they do not innovate theologically but the express doctrine "beautifully [...] with a kind of visionary orthodoxy".[64] She goes on to state in relation to Bonhoeffer that great theology does not define its creedal terms which are the symbolic inheritance of the community. It accepts them as given but instead "reveals what they contain". As such doctrine functions like "a kind of giant and intricate poetry",[65] I would go further than this and argue that she is treating doctrine in a similar way as she treats the symbols she employs in her writing. Vitally able to move between material and spiritual worlds, they are charged and meaningful, fluid and animate; able to contain a world of meaning without fixing meaning and capable of communicating alterity as well as establishing presence. I am not wishing to oversimplify here. I am positing that there is an affinity – not a direct correspondence but certainly an analogy – between the way her poetics operates in fiction and the way doctrine functions for her within theology.

This insight goes some way to explaining the fact that Robinson, neither in her books nor in her essays, gives systematic accounts of what the doctrines she so deeply

61 Potts 2017, 493.
62 Painter 2009, 492.
63 Robinson 2016, 100.
64 Robinson 2007, 115. I don't agree with this judgement of their work.
65 Robinson 2007, 117.

treasures actually mean. Nor, except in the very broadest of brushstrokes, does she apply them to concrete situations. In a sense she writes in or through doctrine, not about it. "You have to forgive me [...] I could probably not say more than that life is a very deep mystery and that finally the grace of God is all that can resolve it. And the grace of God is also a very deep mystery", says Ames to Lila.[66] Says Robinson to us. Furthermore, right alongside her nostalgic elegies on theology's decline she appears to offer an altogether different account of lively theological work taking place all around her; in her own imaginative creation and the work of others. It is about wonder and beauty she affirms; string theory and social justice. It is where "inquiry, imagination and ethics collide".[67] It even happens in church through liturgy, sacrament, and sermon. The sermon she best remembers is the one which as a small child drew her attention to mystery[68] by pointing out that there were different accounts of the resurrection and that these resisted compilation into one account and expressed various forms of the longing, *let it be as if*, which is the heart of poetic representation. So she muses "what can these strange stories mean [...] After so much time [...] the mystery is only compounded." "I study theology", she says, "as I would watch a solar eclipse in shadow".[69]

These apparently contrasting approaches to theology are I believe not in contradiction although they may embody paradox. A way of proceeding with which Christians appear quite comfortable argues Robinson. The children are safe at home in bed; the children are always lost. The theologian works beside the fire in candlelight. The theologian's hands are numb and they watch from outside in the darkness. You might think that you want the assurance of faith but maybe what you are seeking is the wild journey along dark and narrow pathways. Robinson puts it this way: there is a synthesis that is unique to theology, an acknowledgment that, in sacred matters, in this theatre of God's glory ... love means awe, and awe means love.[70] So the wild calls and as Lila ponders in her heart:

> Fear and comfort could be the same thing. It was strange, when she thought of it. The wind always somewhere, trifling with the leaves, troubling the firelight. And that smell of damp earth and bruised grass, a lonely, yearning sort of smell that meant, Why don't you come back, you will come back, you know you will.[71]

66 Robinson 2014, 31.
67 Robinson 2005b.
68 Robinson 2007, 233.
69 Robinson 2007, 230.
70 Robinson 2018, Kindle location 572–580.
71 Robinson 2014, 240.

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ANDREAS NORDLANDER

Nature and human nature: Evolutionary reductionism and the witness of the mind in Marilynne Robinson

Readers of Marilynne Robinson's essays immediately find themselves drawn into a critical conversation in which three nodes are constantly being related: reductionism, religion, and the experience of being human. In what follows I want to explore this conversation as it appears primarily in *The death of Adam: Essays on modern thought* and *Absence of mind: The dispelling of inwardness from the modern myth of the self*.[1] I shall also situate Robinson's argument within the very different fictional worlds of her first three novels, *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, and *Home*, in order to display how the essays throw light on the novels and – perhaps more surprisingly – the novels point to avenues still untravelled in the essays.

REDUCTIONISM'S "POLEMIC AGAINST THE MIND"

In order to enter into Robinson's very sharp critique of reductionism we might ask: What is this thing called "modern thought" or "myth" that occurs in both subtitles? It's used by Robinson somewhat ironically, since she is herself rather orientated to modernity in a philosophical sense. She uses this expression to describe a set of thinkers who are definitive of intellectual culture in the late 19th and 20th centuries, characterizing these as operating with a "hermeneutic of condescension" in relation to previous thinking. These thinkers see themselves as having crossed a "threshold" in history, where science has discovered things about human beings that tend to make previous knowledge irrelevant. They have, as she says, "a conception of humanity that is itself very limited, excluding as it must virtually all observation and speculation on this subject that has been offered through the ages by those outside the closed circle that is called modern thought".[2] What is excluded by these modernist thinkers is an

1 Robinson 2005; 2010.
2 Robinson 2010, x.

understanding of human nature and motivation that Robinson thinks was common to the traditions of Western religion and humanism – two trajectories of thought that she understands as intimately entwined both historically and in human experience. But, she says, any kind of critique of what becomes the modern consensus is now branded as "nostalgia" and scepticism about its validity suggests that "the doubter's mind was closed and fearful."[3]

Who are the thinkers that have ushered us into this new era? Those who Paul Ricœur dubbed "masters of suspicion" hold a prominent place – Nietzsche and Freud, in particular.[4] Common to them all is the idea that what we thought was the character of human nature and motivation turns out to be something else entirely, something much less appealing. I need not, however, go through these strategies of suspicion because I want to focus on Robinson's most prominent target of criticism, namely Darwin and Darwinism, but also contemporary Neo-Darwinian thinkers such as Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker.

Let me initially state that I do not believe Robinson's criticism is reserved for *social* Darwinism and its modern expressions in sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, and that there is really nothing wrong with authentic Darwinian biological science. This is sometimes said, as if to exonerate Robinson from too severe and sweeping a critical stance, but it does not do her justice. For it is abundantly clear that she thinks the very roots of Darwinism, and Darwin himself, is infected with the disease she diagnoses in modern thought (as opposed to the idea of a natural evolution, which is of course much older than Darwin). After all, Darwin wrote not only the *On the origin of species* but also *The descent of man*, that much "less presentable book," as Robinson puts it, which is the very charter of sociobiology.[5] In the long opening essay of *The death of Adam* Robinson argues that Darwin's theory is fundamentally dependent on ideas in Thomas Malthus in much the same way that contemporary Neo-Darwinism is dependent on the economic calculus of Richard Hamilton, who in turn inspired Richard Dawkins' genocentrism. "Why do these innocent ideas," Robinson exclaims, "veer so predictably towards ugliness and evil?"[6]

Having said that, it is nonetheless clear that Robinson's bone of contention with Darwinism is precisely how it has been used in the understanding of human nature and behaviour. She summarizes it well as follows: "The core assumption that remains [...] through all the variations within the diverse traditions of 'modern' thought is that

3 Robinson 2010, 21.
4 Ricoeur 1977.
5 Darwin 1859, 1871.
6 Robinson 2005, 56.

the experience and testimony of the individual mind is to be explained away."[7] Having crossed the threshold of modern thought, in other words, we can no longer naively believe that our experience of the world, or of ourselves and our deepest motivations, or of other human beings, gives us some kind of truthful access to reality. Instead we are taught to discard our experience – both our own personal experience and that cumulated over the course of human history and expressed in cultural tradition. Thus, we learn that religion is really motivated by a resentful yet impotent envy of the powerful by the weak and infirm, or else that a sense of the sacred is really only an ideological superstructure put in place to keep the masses at bay.

Most perniciously, though, when it comes to morality and the question of unselfish acts, acts of kindness for which we ourselves do not stand to benefit somehow, we are given to believe that these must be explained by reference to some hidden self-seeking rationale: an enhancement of individual fitness, or at least the fitness of kin, or, indeed, the reproduction of genes. In this way, what was previously understood as human charity, love, sacrifice, and altruism is revealed to be driven by selfishness. And all of this is presented as scientific discovery – though Robinson insists that it is not science but "para-science".[8]

In other words, what we are confronted with is the powerful impulse to reductionism in "modern thought". A reductive explanation is one that explains complex phenomena in terms of simpler underlying causes – causes at a more basic level of reality. Thus, the felt properties of water can be explained by reference to the properties of molecules and their causal interaction. This, one might suggest, is the most powerful tool of modern natural science. In an attempt to honour the difference between explaining and explaining away a distinction is sometimes made between an explanatory or methodological reduction on the one hand, and an ontological reduction on the other. The point would be to say that even though something can be given a reductive explanation, the thing explained is not thereby necessarily explained away but can have existence in its own right. After all, the transparent liquidity of water is still there even when we realize that the molecules of H_2O are themselves not liquidous.

When it comes to the explanation of human behaviour, however, this distinction often breaks down. In this case reductive explanations take the form of a reduction of *proximate causes* (i.e. human motivation as experienced by the agent) to *ultimate causes* (i.e. evolutionary hard-wiring undetected by the agent), which means that the experienced human motivation we are left with – what we thought were our reasons for acting this way or that – turns out to be *epiphenomenal*; that is to say it carries no

7 Robinson 2005, 22.

8 Robinson 2010, 32–33.

real causal weight, but floats above, so to speak, the real causal chain. Some even go so far as to say that consciousness itself is epiphenomenal in the sense that it need not make an appearance in the causal explanation of human behaviour.[9] Thus, a parent's selfless acts on behalf of a child should not be explained by the proximate cause of a felt love, for such love can itself be explained by the ultimate cause of an evolutionary trait developed as an effective means of propagating one's own genetic material. In this way love, benevolence, altruism need not figure in the causal explanation of human behaviour, which is at the most basic level a story about self-interest. As Robinson puts it with regard to Steven Pinker: "For him our conscious motives are entirely distinct from the biological reality that actually prompts behavior. [...] In its way [this is] the ultimate statement of the modernist impulse to discredit the witness of the mind."[10]

Of this kind of approach to reality and to human phenomena, Robinson is a fierce and relentless critic. And it is not hard to see how reductionism of this sort cuts against the grain of the novelist's intuition, obsessed with character development, of understanding precisely the human experience, and describing the complexity of human motivation. In fact, Robinson thinks that in a culture where the humanities flourished, such reductionism would never have risen to prominence. She says "The flourishing of these ideas, of neo-Darwinism in general, would not be possible except in the absence of vigorous and critical study of the humanities. Its 'proofs' are proofs of nothing except the failure of education, in the schools and also in the churches."[11]

The most insidious consequence of the Neo-Darwinian reductionism of evolutionary psychology, as far as Robinson is concerned, is the fact that what tradition and experience thinks of as moral goodness turns out instead to be base and ultimately driven by a struggle for survival, thus naturalizing what tradition and experience condemns as moral evil.[12] "Our positivist writers on human nature assume that only self-interest can account for individual behavior [...] the deep and persistent acceptance of this vision has had an epochal significance for the way we think."[13] It becomes clear that "modern thought" is for Robinson entirely Hobbesian, driven by the *bellum omnium contra omnes*. The British philosopher and cultural critic, Roger Scruton, describes this development as well as any when he says "Human nature, once something to live up to, becomes something to live down to instead. Biological reductionism nurtures this 'living down', which is why people so readily fall for it. It makes cynicism respectable and degeneracy chic. It abolishes our kind – and with it our kindness."[14]

9 See e.g. Kim 2005.
10 Robinson 2010, 56.
11 Robinson 2012, 201.
12 See e.g. Pinker 2019, 318.
13 Robinson 2010, 38.
14 Scruton 2017, 49.

This is obviously not to entertain the notion that contemporary Darwinian thinkers recommend morality be built upon biological principles, or advocate a radical revaluation of all values (though Nietzsche, not a Darwinian but a quintessentially "modern thinker", did take such a path) – that is not the point. Nonetheless, Robinson claims that when these Darwinian ideas have taken hold of a culture's moral imagination, they cannot but effect the way in which we are able – or unable – to image ways of living together peacefully. At this point it is worth underlining that her quarrel with Darwinian thinking was from the very start located in debates about social policy. In *Mother country*, her first essay, a connection is made between Darwinian ideas and British attitudes to the poor.[15] It is in light of this that she says "I believe it is only prudent to make a very high estimate of human nature, first of all in order to contain the worst impulses of human nature, and then to liberate its best impulses."[16] And in answer to her question above, Why do these ideas veer so predictably towards ugliness and evil? she responds "I would suggest they do so because they systematically disallow the legitimacy of benign, or for that matter merely neutral, motives and behavior."[17]

Robinson wants to claim that ethics is not simply in the business of curbing biological tendencies, but that altruism, say, is as deeply rooted in our biology as aggression and selfishness. "There is something in the nature of most of us that takes pleasure in the thought of a humane and benign social order."[18] "Human fellow-feeling" is as much a human capacity as the capacity for selfishness and hatred; it is not just a cultural accretion to discipline human nature as it really is.

At the centre of this debate is thus the question of human nature: Are we most fundamentally prehistoric hominids, subconsciously engaged in battle with others who do not share our gene pool, and with only a thin veneer of civilization? Or has "something terrible and glorious" befallen us, such that we have begun to operate on a different logic than the evolutionary one?[19] If, as Robinson contends, "it is a strategy of para-scientific argument to strip away culture-making, as if it were a ruse and a concealment within which lurked the imagined primitive who is for them our true nature," then how is this strategy resisted?[20]

At this point Robinson turns to the traditions of Western humanism and religion, which encourage an understanding of human beings and their actions entirely at odds with that encouraged by "modern thought". "Genesis tries to explain human excep-

15 Robinson 1989.
16 Robinson 2010, 32.
17 Robinson 2005, 56.
18 Robinson 2010, 41.
19 Robinson 2010, 135.
20 Robinson 2010, 134.

tionalism, and Darwin tries to discount it."[21] Against "the persistence [...] of something like a polemic against the mind," Robinson turns to the human soul and its endless historical expressions.[22]

RELIGION, HUMANISM, AND THE DEFENCE OF THE SOUL

There could be many entryways into the religious humanism Robinson proposes as an antidote and alternative to modern reductionism. The most straightforward would perhaps be to focus on a set of ideas which has constituted the tradition she defends: the *imago dei* and its consequent need of *Bildung*, as evidenced in the humane learning originating with the Renaissance, and of individual dignity. Or the theological notion of voluntary covenant and its political ramifications in the development of democracy. I want to take a somewhat different approach, though, and focus instead on Robinson's notion of *human experience* as the common root from which both religion and humanism grow, and grow together. We can get at this by asking "What are the data" – Robinson's own way of expressing it – "by which the question of what a human being is should be decided?". In Robinson's work these data are variously called "self-awareness", "self", "soul", "mind", "consciousness", "inwardness"; "subjectivity". As Robert Chodat points out, "in themselves these terms are not always satisfying, evoking an unwelcome residue of Cartesianism or an exaggeratingly Protestant sense of interiority. But at their core they are driven by an entirely justifiable critical impulse."[23] What is at stake here is, of course, what much philosophy refers to as the first-person perspective, or simply subjectivity; or as Robinson also puts it, "the felt life of the mind."[24]

The point of speaking about the first-person perspective here is to insist that ordinary scientific methods, limited as they are to a third-person perspective, have no direct access to the intensely personal sphere of the first person. Science is, on principled grounds, barred from this sphere. As such it has two ways of proceeding: it can either say, science as science studies only the processes that make possible this felt interiority, in terms of evolutionary history or neurophysiological structures, but has no access to the phenomenon itself; or else it can say that science is able to discover that this sphere was only ever an illusion, that what we thought was the centre of human experience and action, on closer scientific inspection turns out to have been but an epiphenomenal ghost. Reductionists follow this latter line: "Scientific reductionism [...] begins

21 Robinson 2005, 62.
22 Robinson 2010, 74.
23 Chodat 2016, 333.
24 Robinson 2010, 35.

with the assumption and ends with the conclusion that subjective experiences are not as they present themselves to individual or to common experience."[25]

The central conflict here is clearly that between a position that respects human self-experience as "testimony" to the truth about human nature, rather than seeing it as an illusion conjured up to hide the "evolutionary logic" of selfishness as the basic motivational factor for human behaviour. "I have spoken of the suppression of individual consciousness and experience among us, and this is one reason it has fallen silent. We have been persuaded that it is a perjured witness."[26]

However, to argue against this modern worldview, and claim that the felt experience of the mind – far from being explained by science – is not even accessible from a third person point of view, is not to say that it is therefore private and incommunicable. To the contrary, the personal experience of being human leaves a rich history of communication behind, and this is the record of human civilization – art, literature, philosophy, and religion. Robinson's counter-strategy is to pit reductionism, not against some vague privately felt intuition, but against human civilization and culture as such, particularly as evidenced in the Western tradition which arguably revels in the richness of precisely this felt interiority. As she puts it: "Subjectivity is the ancient haunt of piety and reverence and long, long thoughts."[27] Again, regarding the gene-based explanation of human behaviour: "All this is plausible if the experience and testimony of humankind is not to be credited, if reflection and emotion are only the means by which the genes that have colonized us manipulate us for their purposes."[28] And, finally, in a pithy formulation: "As proof of the existence of mind we have only history and civilization, art, science, and philosophy."[29]

Let me try to formulate as clearly as I can what I take to be Robinson's overall argument here. *First*, that the reductionist ideas of modern thought, and of Neo-Darwinism in particular, could not have seemed plausible, let alone flourished, if it were not for the poverty of humanistic learning among us, the fact that the legacy of the human mind is no longer vigorously studied and valued as an end in itself. *Second*, that there is the deepest and most intimate bond between this tradition of humanism and religious experience. Thus, in attacking religion, Neo-Darwinism also attacks humanism. And conversely, religion and humanism both need to be defended; they stand and fall together.

This point is worth underscoring since it arguably represents one of the more idi-

25 Robinson 2015, 75.
26 Robinson 2010, 59–60.
27 Robinson 2010, 35.
28 Robinson 2010, 61.
29 Robinson 2010, 120.

osyncratic aspects of Robinson's thinking. What she is saying is that art and literature on the one hand and religion on the other witness to the same kind of human experience, and therefore the same kind of reality; they point in precisely the same direction. This is somewhat odd coming from a self-professed Calvinist. To be sure, Calvin speaks about the *sensus divinitatis*, through which all people have an intimation of the divine. But for Calvin, as for Saint Paul in Romans, such a natural knowledge of the divine is arguably brought up mainly to emphasize how wickedly we suppress this knowledge, preferring instead to run after idols and false gods. The human mind, Calvin says, "is a perpetual factory of idols".[30]

Such, however, is not Robinson's theory of religion, which is indebted much more – and somewhat ironically – to a set of typically modern thinkers, whose theories of religion tend to be more benignly universal. William James, for instance, who said of religion that it is "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."[31] It is suggestive that in the late 1950s, in which *Gilead* is set, Reinhold Niebuhr was the most prominent public theologian in America. He argued that religion has its origin in the self-transcendence of a subject who experiences the contradiction of being on the one hand a finite material being in history, an animal destined to die, and on the other hand someone asking for the very meaning of his or her own life and of history. Thus, he says, "the essential homelessness of the human spirit is the ground of all religion."[32] This liberal Protestant intuition about the origin of religion is the necessary assumption of Robinson's argument against Neo-Darwinism. That is, it is necessary if one wants to argue that Western religion and humanism both witness to a mysterious depth of human experience to which the Darwinian tradition is – not to put too fine a point on it – stone-deaf.

This is just to say that Robinson at this point falls back on a rather amorphous category of religion, where, as Todd Shy has argued, Calvinist themes are humanized and brought very close to the conceptions and concerns found in American romanticism, and the works of William James, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others.[33] Thus, in her speech on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate from Lund University, later published as 'Theology for this moment', she describes theology's tasks in precisely these terms: "A theology for our time would acknowledge [...] [the reality of moral choice]

30 Calvin 1960 [1559], 1.xi.9.

31 Quoted in Robinson 2010, 7. See pp. 7–11 for a discussion of James on religion, in which his views are clearly endorsed.

32 Niebuhr 1948, 36; for a moral rather than existential reading of this tension, see Niebuhr 2013. On the anomaly of human existence, see Robinson 2018, 41.

33 Shy 2007.

along with the entire complex of subjective experience – love, generosity, regret, and all their interactions – without a diminishing translation into veiled self-interest. It could create a conceptual space large enough to accommodate human dignity."[34] And again: "One thing theology must do now is to reconsider and reject the kind of thinking that tends to devalue humankind."[35] Similarly, in Robinson's hands Christology, this most particular of doctrines, is turned into a meditation on the general human condition. *The givenness of things* is the collection of essays where this is most pronounced. A specific kind of high Christology is brought in to defend an exalted anthropology: "For me a high Christology implies a high anthropology."[36]

This is not to point to a flaw in Robinson's thinking. To the contrary, there is arguably something salutary and much needed in the attempt to reconnect theology with what is deepest and most abiding in human existence.[37] Nor do I wish to dispute the rootedness of a certain humanism in early Protestant theology, leading to political and educational reform. My point is simply to highlight the particularity of Robinson's vision of religion, parsed as it is through the categories of distinctly modern theories of religion. The consequences of this is what matters here: the close bond that unites religion and humanism through the category of human experience. A defence of experience – the witness of the mind – is therefore a defence of religion and humanism alike. In concrete terms this means that a contemporary justification of the humanities against the economic logic of utility must be based on a religious sense of awe before the phenomenon of human existence.

ROBINSONIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

Robinson's argument is thus not merely that religion and humanism are connected at the level of historical development, such that together they generated a set of convictions, say of human dignity, and a set of institutions, say of liberal democracy, and a set of unrivalled cultural artefacts, say the most brilliant literature of the 19th century, and so on and so forth, though many of the historical essays could be read at this level. Such a connection could always be seen as entirely contingent and therefore shed at a later stage of historical development. We could argue, for instance, that the notions

34 Robinson 2018, 37.

35 Robinson 2018, 40.

36 Robinson 2015, 201. Cf. 222: "I take the Christian mythos to be a special revelation of a general truth, that truth being the ontological centrality of humankind in the ontological order, with its theological corollary, the profound and unique sacredness of human beings as such."

37 On the importance of religious experience, John Ames says "it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion, for the purposes of the individual believer." Robinson 2004, 145.

of human dignity and individual rights, while having an important root in religion, could be severed from it – secularized and naturalized so as to function better in the economy of the modern world. But Robinson advances a stronger claim, which is phenomenological in nature. Namely that the intertwining of religion and humanism is ultimately phenomenologically grounded; that is to say grounded in the same kinds of constitutive human experiences – of the nature of Being, the mystery of human consciousness, the lure of the good and the gravity of evil.[38] Therefore, it is impossible to disentangle religion and humanism; they are two expressions of the same kind of experience, and history gives evidence of this for those who have eyes to see.

Such an argument inevitably brings us back to the question of "data" – of self-awareness, consciousness, the felt experience of being human, moral agency. You can try to explain these reductively, as mere epiphenomena, but then you cannot keep humanism willy-nilly. Or you can accept that these phenomena are irreducible and real, but must then also accept the religious impulse they contain.

Where do we find such experiences best articulated and available? As I have said, there is no need to appeal to the private and incommunicable, nor are we left at the mercy of philosophical treatises. Rather, poetry and fiction are arguably our best means of capturing the richness and depth of human experience.[39] In what follows I therefore want to turn to Robinson's fictional work and investigate how it may be related to the essayistic preoccupations we have been concerned with so far.

There is obviously no way in which the novels could be said to simply represent the argument in the essays – Robinson is too skilled a writer to allow that to happen. But there is nonetheless a great deal that stands out in the novels if read against the background of the essays. Moreover, and perhaps more surprisingly, there are certain things in the novels that seem to unsettle the argument of the essays.

Consider *first* how *Gilead* dramatizes the critique of Darwinism.[40] John Ames lives out his life in Gilead very much in the shadow of his warrior-saint-like grandfather, but also of his own father. One of the most salient features of grandfather Ames is what Robinson might call his dominically ordained altruism. Much to the exasperation of John Ames' mother, he is wont to give things away to those in need – money, his overcoat, even stealing clothes from the clothesline to give away. Indeed, in a sense he gives away his own life. And he seems to do this with no regard for the well-being of his closest kin. This can be read as a stark reminder that human moral behaviour cannot be analysed in the Neo-Darwinian terms of selfishness, not even on the level

38 Robinson acknowledges her affinity with the phenomenological tradition in 2015, 283–284.

39 For a strong argument for the indispensability of fiction to moral life and reflection, see Nussbaum 1990.

40 This reading is suggested in Chodat 2016, 339–340.

of kin, which the grandfather in the end also abandons in a last wild gesture, much to the chagrin of his son.

Similarly, John Ames recounts that his grandfather would not care more for his dying wife that for other widows and fatherless in the region, "since her grief was not in excess of the average in that region, he could not take any special time for it." Commenting on this episode, Ames says "I believe the old reverend's errors were mainly the consequence of a sort of strenuousness in ethical matter that was to be admired finally."[41] And then, as if to drive home the point, he recounts how the grandfather's Greek New Testament, lost in retreat across a river from the pursuing Confederates, was mailed to him years afterwards from a Confederate who had taken the trouble to retrieve it and find out to whom he should mail it. A small act of kindness in defiance of the ethics of self-interest. None of this is presented as entirely unproblematic – the borderline eccentricity of the grandfather, like some holy fool, is kept constantly in the reader's mind – but it is held out as an example of a kind of incandescent holiness that is finally inspiring.[42]

The descendants of grandfather Ames follow this pattern in their own way and with a little less radicalism and bravado. John Ames and his father are both pacifists, for instance. A pacifist is someone, you might say, who has widened the circle of altruism to include all humanity, even the enemy – something that on a Neo-Darwinian account can only be described as in defiance of nature.

That this radical pattern of giving without benefit to self or kin is said to characterize Reverend Ames himself becomes clear when he explains to his son their rather dire financial situation: "I have given money to people over the years, not a large amount, but a fair portion of my salary. I made up stories about forgotten funds and anonymous donations. Whether most of them believed me I doubt. [...] I didn't keep any record, and I have no certain memory of individuals or circumstances."[43] None of this is to say that Robinson is blind to the dangers of in-group ethics, as something into which we are all only too prone to fall. The subplot of racial complicity in *Gilead* and *Home* makes this very clear. Even so, Robinson never allows us to forget that the other story is every bit as true.

Consider, *second*, the question of predestination and human freedom, and Robinson's depiction of human beings changing and being held morally accountable. Per-

41 Robinson 2004, 90.

42 This is similar to an argument made by the theologian Sarah Coakley against the attempted reduction of altruistic behaviour to genetic selfishness: What, she asks, are we on such a scenario to do with the saints? See 'Teleology reviewed: A new "ethico-teleological" argument for God's existence', the fifth of her Gifford Lectures of 2012 (Coakley 2012).

43 Robinson 2004, 138.

haps this is most clearly visible in the person of Jack, who is very conscious of being a sinner. "I've wondered from time to time if I might not be an instance of predestination. A sort of proof. If I may not experience predestination in my own person. That would be interesting, if the consequences were not so painful. For other people."[44] And this self-perception is well founded. As the story is told, Jack got a very young and poor girl pregnant while in college, for which he refused to take responsibility. When the little girl born from this illicit liaison later dies, three years old, it is his family that must make the arrangements and bury the child in Jack's unforgivable absence.

When Jack returns to Gilead, John Ames at first cannot see him without seeing in him "that old meanness", possibly dangerous to Ames' own wife and child after he is gone; until the very end of *Gilead* he is unable to see the truth about Jack, as are we, the readers. Jack himself repeatedly wonders whether someone like him can find peace, or whether, born sinful, he is destined by God to perdition. The following exchange between Jack and Ames, told with slight variation in both *Gilead* and *Home*, is telling:

> "Are there people who are simply born evil, live evil lives, and then go to hell?"
>
> "On that point Scripture is not so clear."
>
> "What does your own experience suggest, Reverend?"
>
> "Generally, a person's behavior is consistent with his nature. Which is only to say his behavior is consistent. The consistency is what I mean when I speak of his nature." ...
>
> "People don't change, then," he said.
>
> "They do if there is some other factor involved – drink, or some sort of personal influence. That is, their behavior changes. Whether that means their nature changes or that another aspect of it becomes visible is hard to say."[45]

A little later Ames writes of Jack: "And here is a prejudice of mine, confirmed by my lights through many years of observation. Sinners are not all dishonorable people, not by any means. But those who are dishonorable never really repent and never really reform."[46] At this point it is as if Ames confirms Jack's worries about being an example of predestination, being destined by God to perdition, though he says it is not in Scripture and he could be wrong.

Jack's inner struggle about this question – whether we are determined by our own specific nature or whether we can in fact change – sets the stage for some of *Gilead's* and *Home's* most theologically sophisticated reflections about predestination and human freedom. In the end it is Lila, speaking from the bedrock of personal experience,

44 Robinson 2008, 225.
45 Robinson 2004, 151.
46 Robinson 2004, 156.

who reassures Jack, after that long and vexing discussion about predestination on the Boughton porch:

> She looked up at him and said, "A person can change. Everything can change."
>
> Jack said, very gently, "Why, thank you, Mrs. Ames. That's all I wanted to know."[47]

And the fact is that Jack is the prodigal son, even if unrecognized as such until the very end of *Gilead*. He has already changed from his irresponsible former self; unbeknown, even to his closest kin, he has come back to Gilead in search of a place to settle down with his "wife" – an African American woman – and their son, for whom he deeply cares. He is in the business of finding a way to take responsibility, in the course of which he exposes his still racially prejudiced hometown and even Ames' own lack of charity and understanding.

In the person of Jack, then, there seems to be an affirmation of the possibility of change and a rejection of determinism. I suggest there is a subtext about scientific determinism here as well. The doctrines of original sin and predestination, as Robinson understands them (with a nod to Karl Barth), does not curtail human freedom, but much positivist science does:

> It was in reading this text [Jonathan Edwards on predestination] many years ago that I was rescued from the determinist, even mechanistic implication of *positivism, a determinism more constraining than either original sin or predestination*, the first of these implying to me a realism that profoundly and appropriately complicates the impulse to lay blame, the second entering so far into the mysteries of time and causality that only incomprehension could see it as determinist.[48]

The philosopher Michael Ruse has argued that Robinson's depiction of freedom and moral responsibility in *Gilead* and *Home* is precisely meant as an alternative to what many take to be the ultimate consequences of Darwinism.[49] At any rate we can plausibly read the life story of Jack, so carefully constructed, as a refutation of the idea that human nature is something static we are simply born with and that determines our behaviour. Indeed, in a further riposte to the logic of selfishness Robinson detects in much Neo-Darwinism, the story of Jack is presented so as to evoke sympathy in the reader rather than disdain. And towards the end of *Gilead* the humanity of Jack – "the beauty there is in him" – is revealed even to John Ames, who embraces him as another son.[50]

47 Robinson 2008, 227–228. Cf. Robinson 2004, 153.

48 Robinson 2015, 88 (emphasis mine). Cf. Robinson 2012, 4–5.

49 Ruse 2019, 274–280. Cf. "Robinson does not bring Darwin or Dawkins or sociobiology into her novels. But they are there in the shadows. She is writing from within the other paradigm, the other world picture, the other religion." (279).

50 Robinson 2004, 232.

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Granting the argumentative force of Robinson's polemic – essayistic and fictional – against Neo-Darwinian reductionism, a nexus of critical questions nonetheless announces itself: What is the significance of the human rootedness in nature? How much of human behaviour can be explained by reference to human biology? And how much is cultural evolution? Robinson does not in fact say much about this in the essays. Her interest is in refuting mistaken views, and invoking the human phenomena these views fail to explain or even understand. She is clearly no social constructivist when it comes to such things as moral truth and religion. From what she says about religion, for instance, it is clear that she thinks there is some kind of generic human access to an experience of the sacred. Moreover, she suggests that the capacity for generosity and benevolence is in fact part of our human nature. In other words, it is not that she thinks human *nature* is irrelevant to questions of meaning and morality; she simply thinks "modern thought" has got it wrong in its sole emphasis on the dark origins of human behaviour. But then how does she propose nature and biology *is* related to meaning, morality, and religion? What is the relation between evolutionary history and human behaviour? There is a noticeable absence in her writing of positive interaction with schools of thought that propose a *non-reductive* use of biology and evolution in the understanding of human being. For example, she could have supported her case from the phenomenologically inspired philosopher of mind Evan Thompson; or from the cognitive psychology of Merlin Donald; or from the school of cognitive semiotics.[51] She complains that the thinking she criticizes has no room for a *cultural* evolution, which seems always to spring directly from biology without historical development.[52] But the schools of evolutionary thinking just mentioned are interested precisely in giving the "independent" logic of cultural evolution its due, *pace* mainstream evolutionary psychology.[53]

This point can be related to Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*, which can in fact be read as unsettling some strands in the later work. Most particularly, when it comes to the invocation of nature this novel is very different from *Gilead*. In the latter, nature is mostly calm and pastoral, the object of serene contemplation. Take the example of water, as when Ames approvingly quotes Ludwig Feuerbach about the purity of water and its natural symbolism as utilized in baptism: "Water is the purest, clearest of liquids; in virtue of this its natural character it is the image of the spotless nature of the

51 Thompson 2007; Donald 1991; Dunér & Sonesson 2016.

52 Robinson 2010, 20.

53 For a critique of "Mainstream evolutionary psychology" from the point of view of cognitive semiotics, see Sonesson 2016.

Divine Spirit."[54] This is very much in keeping with how nature appears in Robinson's essays – marvellous, mysterious, fecund. Above all, nature is to be contemplated in delight: "I have spent my life watching", she says, "not to see beyond the world, merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes."[55] Perhaps the finest image of the loveliness of nature comes towards the end of *Gilead*: "It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor grey ember of Creation and it turns to radiance [...]. 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."[56]

But in *Housekeeping* nature is instead often presented as a threat, as symbolized – in perfect contrast to *Gilead* – by the waters of the lake, which floods annually and always threatens to engulf the town of Fingerbone, like the flood of Noah. The water tastes, says the narrator, "a bit of blood and hair. One cannot [...] drink from the rim of any lake without remembering that mothers have drowned in it."[57] The house itself, a shelter from the cold nature that surrounds it, is placed such that the flood never quite reaches it. It is safe. But when Sylvie begins her housekeeping, the barrier between the human house and the encircling nature begins to break down: it gets colder, hot food is no longer served, and leaves begin to gather in the corners of the rooms. Sylvie and Ruth, but not Lucille, learn to adapt, to sink back into the natural world and eventually leave the house and its keeping behind and take to the road.

It has been observed that *Housekeeping* chronicles an increasingly porous boundary between nature and humanity, and indeed "the continuity between nature and humanity, their similarity and intrinsic relations, their inscrutability and strangeness, their tensions and oppositions."[58] Part of the brilliance of *Housekeeping*, it seems to me, is that it does not allow its reader to come to any easy conclusions about the evaluation of this porosity and the different ways the main characters – Ruth and Lucille – come to terms with it.

Andrew Brower Latz goes so far as to suggest that *Housekeeping* can be read as an imaginative articulation of the doctrine of the fall, with the story of Noah and the flood as the dark intertext, whereas *Gilead* articulates the doctrine of creation in a much brighter register.[59] This seems a fruitful suggestion. In terms of their respective

54 Robinson 2004, 23. Cf. The passage where Ames recounts seeing drops of water falling from branches onto a young couple strolling along: "It is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing" (pp. 27–28).

55 Robinson 2008, 243.

56 Robinson 2004, 245.

57 Robinson 1981, 193.

58 Brower Latz 2011, 292–293.

59 Brower Latz 2011, 287, 294.

emotional tonality it is obviously true, but as an analytical point I take it to be an oversimplification. In fact, there is a thematization of sin also in *Gilead*, not least in Ames' failure to recognize Jack for who he is, as well as the town's complicities in mid-century racism. Conversely, there is plenty of creation going on in *Housekeeping*, even though it is conceived of in much more ambiguous terms – the created world is wilder and stronger, such that human culture only has a frail hold on it. That much granted, Latz does identify a darker subtext – theologically articulated as the fallenness of creation and the dream of redemption – that is absent, at least in the terms articulated here, from the later novels, as well as the essays.

Perhaps there is a *scientific* intertext in *Housekeeping* as well, one that is related to the more threatening dimensions of nature. What I am getting at is that *Housekeeping*, much more powerfully than the later novels, particularly *Gilead* and *Home*, brings before us the darker depths of nature and its intertwining with human life, such that it is seen to be constantly vulnerable and human beings continuously negotiating the boundary between themselves and nature. This is a suggestive opening for dialogue with strands of evolutionary thinking that thematizes precisely this boundary and its inherent ambivalence. Yet this dialogue never occurs in the essays.

In other words, between the reductive naturalism of much Neo-Darwinism, which loses the phenomena of human experience in its desire to explain them reductively, and the humanism that has nothing really to say about the rootedness of humankind in nature and that tends to downplay the darker aspects of human nature, including sin – which as philosopher James K.A. Smith has pointed out tends to be absent in Robinson's essays as well – a third space suggests itself.[60] This is where science tries to understand and explain human rootedness in nature in a non-reductive way and – in a parallel move – theology is attentive not only to the luminosity of nature but also to its fallenness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of Robinson's own heroes, exemplifies this approach in his theological interpretation of Genesis. Even though humankind was set to rule over creation and its non-human inhabitants, he states, this is most certainly no longer the case after the fall into sin. The peace of creation is disrupted at its root and the only way back to communion is through reconciliation at every level.[61]

I do not want to suggest, with Joan Kirkby, that "*Housekeeping* enacts and recommends, though not without ambivalence, a relinquishing of human arts, including housekeeping and society as we have known it, and a surrender to the forces of nature."[62] I believe this reading puts the case too strongly – the novel does not precisely *recommend* a surrender to the forces of nature. Especially since the forces of nature are

60 Smith 2018.

61 Bonhoeffer 2015, 62–63.

62 Kirkby 1986, 92.

not presented as unequivocally benign. But it does suggest a deep continuity between humanity and nature that is a far cry from the epiphanic creation celebrated by Reverend Ames – a nature, to revert to the Noahic intertext, that is fallen. A nature – and therefore a human nature – that is morally ambivalent.

I find it suggestive that Robinson's earliest work points to the relation between nature and humanity in a way that to some extent questions what *Gilead* and in particular the essays seem to say about human nature. At least it complicates her critique of modern thought. This is not to say that there is anything of reductionism in *Housekeeping*. But it does indicate an important question about the continuity between nature and humanity that the later essays do not seek to answer in any constructive way, as far as I can see. Rather, Robinson seems content with criticizing the exaggerated claims of reductive Darwinism, which she does to devastating effect. But again, this in itself does not answer the question that remains of our relation to the natural world, the question *Housekeeping* puts before us with such evocative power.

To conclude, Robinson's essays present a formidable challenge to any attempt to reductively explain the nature of human beings and their behaviour. At the core of her argument stands the mystery of human consciousness, or the felt life of the mind, which gives rise to a sense of the sacred that encompasses both cosmos and psyche, nature and humanity. Religion and humanism are rooted here and are thus united already at the level of experience. But their intertwining at the root is borne out in history as well, as evidenced in the cultural record the mind has left of itself. Still, while Robinson's polemic hits the mark, this reader is left wondering if there is not also a more constructive case to be made about humanity's deep rootedness in nature. Parts of her earlier writing seem to suggest as much. As such, Robinson's essays and fiction clearly identify the mysterious phenomenon of which we need to take account, and the essays in particular point to the inadequacy of the Neo-Darwinian framework for this undertaking – but her work also opens up as yet unanswered questions, settling us with the renewed task of thinking about the enigma of our own place in the cosmos.

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ARNE RASMUSSON

Another history: Marilynne Robinson and the writing of Christian history

GILEAD, REVIVALISM, AND ABOLITIONISM

Marilynne Robinson's writings, both novels and essays, are deeply embedded in American and European history. Gilead, the small-town setting of the three novels *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*,[1] is patterned on Tabor, a town in south-western Iowa established in the early 1850s by Congregationalist Christians during the struggle for the abolition of slavery. It became an important hub in the so-called Underground Railroad that helped fugitive slaves fleeing to Canada.[2] It was also the location of a college established by abolitionist Christians. Congregationalism was one of the original Calvinist or Puritan churches in New England. Today, after a merger with Reformed churches, it is called the United Church of Christ. Robinson is member of this church, as was, for example, Barack Obama.

The Congregationalist minister John Ames, the main character in *Gilead*, writes in his long letter to his son, "Towns like ours were a conspiracy. Lots of people were only there to be antislavery by any means that came to hand."[3] In an interview Robinson says that she placed the story in the 1950s so it would be possible for Pastor Ames' grandfather to have been part of the abolitionist movement before the Civil War.[4] Some of the stories told about the grandfather are based on real historical events.

The grandfather, who like his son and grandson also has the name John Ames,

1 Since I originally wrote this text Robinson has published a fourth novel in this series, *Jack* (Robinson 2020). It involves the same persons, but it is not set in Gilead.

2 Robinson 2012, 178; 'Tabor Antislavery Historic District', https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/ia1.htm, accessed 13 November 2018.

3 Robinson 2004, 180. However, historical Tabor is actually also mentioned in passing in *Gilead* as the place of one of the radical colleges. Robinson 2004, 57.

4 Mariotti & Lane 2016b.

moved from Maine to the Kansas territory in the 1830s to be part of the movement that wanted to keep the territory free from slavery.[5] It seems that grandfather Ames, who is the Congregational minister in Gilead at this time, is partly patterned on John Todd, one of the founders of Tabor and its first Congregational minister and an ardent abolitionist.[6] The social basis for the abolitionist movement is to a large extent found in churches: from early on among Quakers but later – during the so-called Second Great Awakening, the large revival movement in New England and the Midwest in the first half of the 19th century – also among Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and others. The abolitionists constituted minorities in these churches, but it was mainly minorities from these churches and movements. There are many allusions to this history in *Gilead*.

We are told, for example, that grandfather Ames had listened to the leading abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld preach during an anti-slavery campaign. "My grandfather had heard Weld preach every night for three weeks until he had converted a whole doughface settlement to abolitionism, and the old man numbered it among the great experiences of his life."[7] Weld himself had been converted in a revival meeting with Charles Finney, the greatest and most influential revival preacher in the antebellum period and one of the most significant persons in 19th-century America.[8] Having served for a time as Finney's assistant, Weld had become one of the most influential abolitionists – some historians would say the most important. In his campaigns for abolition, he used the methods he had learned in revivalism work. He was also very active in sending out other abolitionist missionaries. Together with his wife, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Angelina's older sister, Sara Grimké, Weld wrote the book *American slavery as it is: Testimony of a thousand witnesses*, published in 1839.[9] It is considered to be the most influential book on the subject after Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). The latter was to a large extent based on the reality described in the book by Weld and the Grimké sisters. *American slavery* sold 100,000 copies in its first year alone.[10] For periods of time, Weld spent most of his social life with the African-American population.[11] The Grimké sisters, also mentioned by Robinson, were in their own right and before they met Weld important abolitionists and promoters

5 Robinson 2004, 10f, 56, 86.

6 Morgans 2006; Todd 1876. In the novel, the name of grandmother Ames is Margaret Todd Ames. Margaret was the name of John Todd's daughter. The name of mother Ames was Martha, which was the name of John Todd's wife. Robinson 2004, 10.

7 Robinson 2004, 214.

8 Robinson writes about Finney in Robinson 1998, 137–140; 2008, 178–179; 2012, 166–175.

9 Weld 1839. See further Abzug 1980 and Muelder 2011.

10 Abzug 1980, 210–214.

11 Robinson writes about Weld in Robinson 1998, 138–140; 2012, 175–177.

of women's rights. They may have been the two most famous, or infamous, women in America in the 1830s.[12]

Robert Boughton, the Presbyterian minister in Gilead and John Ames' close friend, had named one of his sons after Weld. It seems he had first intended to give this name to an older son, one of the main characters in the four novels, but at the baptism, administered by John Ames, the father changed the name to John Ames, though John later came to call himself "Jack".[13] At the time Boughton named his son after Weld, the abolitionist was unknown to most people. Because Weld usually published anonymously, refused offers of visible official positions, and didn't live in the big cities in the east during his active time, he had disappeared from history. He never became well known to the broader public, but for scholars he was rediscovered in the 1930s by the economic historian Gilbert Barnes, who after much detective work, and with the help of Weld's grandson, found many of Weld's letters and other writings in a trunk in an old farmhouse.

However, Weld was not unknown to Boughton and Ames. For Ames he was a crucial part of family history. That Boughton names one of his sons after Weld provides an important twist to the plot. Although the abolitionist Weld is held up as a role model for his struggle against slavery by Reverend Boughton, the latter could still take for granted the segregation of American society (against Weld's example) a century later. In addition, Gilead, once a stronghold of abolitionism and desegregation, had changed. Although there were no laws against mixed marriages in Iowa, as there were in many other states, John Ames was not sure that Jack Boughton's marriage with an African-American woman would be accepted there in the mid 1950s.[14] On one occasion the grandfather, as one of the founders of Gilead, had been asked by the Swedish Lutheran mayor, a newer resident of the town, to give a speech at a Fourth of July celebration. The following is part of the speech.

> When I was a young man the Lord came to me and put His hand just here on my right shoulder. I can feel it still. And He spoke to me, very clearly. The words went right through me. He said, Free the captive. Preach good news to the poor. Proclaim liberty throughout the land. [...]. I would call that experience a vision. We had visions in those days, a number of us did. Your young men will have visions and your old men will dream dreams. And now all those young men are old men, if they're alive at all, and their visions are no more than dreams, and the old days are forgotten. [...] The President, General Grant, once called Iowa the shining star of radicalism. But what is left here in Iowa? What is left here in Gilead? Dust. Dust and ashes. Scripture says the people perish, and they certainly do. It is remarkable. For all this His anger is not turned away, but His Hand is stretched out still.[15]

12 Robinson 1998, 86, 134.
13 Robinson 2004, 99, 214.
14 Robinson 2004, 264.
15 Robinson 2004, 200–201.

The grandfather had also defended the necessity of violence for ending slavery and assisted John Brown's violent Christian apocalyptic movement in the 1850s.[16] Brown used Gilead/Tabor as a place of refuge. It was situated at the south-west corner of Iowa and close to the border of Kansas. In historical Tabor, Pastor Todd's house was built to function as part of the Underground Railroad, and Brown also stored weapons there. John Ames writes to his son:

> A stranger might ask why there is a town here at all. Our own children might ask. And who could answer them? It was just a dogged little outpost in the sand hills, within striking distance of Kansas. That's really all it was meant to be. It was a place John Brown and Jim Lane could fall back and rest. There must have been a hundred little towns like it, set up in the heat of an old urgency that is all forgotten now.[17]

Jim Lane was an influential, if erratic, politician and military leader who used force to keep Kansas free of slavery. He also often came to Tabor/Gilead.

A central story in the book *Gilead* revolves around the possibility that the grandfather had killed an American soldier searching for John Brown, who had just left Gilead. During the Civil War grandfather John Ames participates as chaplain (just as John Todd had done).[18] He also convinces the majority of the young male members of his congregation to enlist in the war.

> [He] had preached his people into the war, saying while there was slavery there was no peace, but only a war of the armed and powerful against the captive and defenseless. He would say, Peace will come only when that war ends, so the God of peace calls upon us to end it. He said all this with that gun in his belt.[19]

Most of his young congregants do not return.[20] His son (the younger John Ames' father), who was also to become a Congregationalist minister, reacts against his father's support of violence. "This has nothing to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing."[21] He also frequently attends the services of the pacifist Quakers rather than his father's church.[22] The Quakers had long played a crucial role in the abolitionist movement, but they did not support violence. Before the Civil War, in fact, there was minimal support for violence in the abolitionist movement as a whole. John Brown was atypical; nonviolent methods were at the forefront of the movement.

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16 Robinson 2004, 97, 119ff. On John Brown, see Smith 2014 and Morgans 2006, 118–134.
17 Robinson 2004, 267.
18 Robinson 2004, 85f.
19 Robinson 2004, 115.
20 Robinson 2004, 100. Historic Tabor had far fewer casualties.
21 Robinson 2004, 96.
22 Robinson 2004, 99, 113, 220.

As mentioned, Tabor was the location of one of a number of radical Christian colleges that had been founded in the Midwest in the 1830s, 40s, and 50s. The most famous was Oberlin College, also mentioned in *Gilead* and discussed by Robinson in *When I was a child I read books*.[23] John Todd, who was the co-founder of both Tabor and Tabor College, was one of Oberlin's first graduates. When the younger John Ames writes about his grandfather and the latter's ministerial friends, he says:

> They had been to Lane and Oberlin, and they knew their Hebrew and their Greek and their Locke and their Milton. Some of them even set up a nice little college in Tabor. It lasted quite a while. The people who graduated from it, especially the young women, would go by themselves to the other side of the earth as teachers and missionaries and come back decades later to tell us about Turkey and Korea.[24]

The grandfather, who may seem quite eccentric, was in fact a highly educated man. Lane was a theological seminary in Cincinnati founded to spread revivalism in the west. It was one of the first seminaries to accept African-American students. Theodore Weld, who was both sent out to found the school and a member of the first class, converted the whole student body to abolitionism. The students' determination to openly and publicly treat African Americans as social equals in everyday life led to many protests, mob actions, and threats to close down the school. The board of trustees, consisting primarily of local businessmen dependent on doing business with nearby slaveholding Kentucky, forbade the discussion of slavery in the seminary in 1834. Forty students, one professor and one member of the board, the Presbyterian pastor Asa Mahan, left. Most of them went to Oberlin. Asa Mahan became the first president of the college. Weld himself ended his formal studies.

The town of Oberlin and its College were founded in 1833 "as a utopian community whose sole mission was to save souls and prepare the world for the coming millennium of Christ."[25] Charles Finney, the revivalist preacher mentioned above, joined the college as professor in 1835, and between 1851 and 1866 he also served as president of the college.[26] Revivalism, conversion, and sanctification were at the centre of college life. Social reform was part of the conversion from sin towards a sanctified life. Abolitionism, the rights of native Americans, temperance, peace, simple living, educational reform, and the importance of manual labour were among their concerns. Many were vegetarians. For Finney slavery was, together with the treatment of native Americans, the great sin of the nation and of the church. The church could not be neutral. He

23 Robinson 2012, 163–180.
24 Robinson 2004, 57.
25 Morris 2014, 2.
26 Hambrick-Stowe 1996.

would, when he could control it, refuse to accept a slave holder as a church member, and he didn't allow such a person to take communion.[27] Oberlin College not only admitted both black and white students, it was also the first institution of higher education to admit both men and women. Important later leaders of the women's rights movement studied there. So did African-American leaders. This small place sent out more abolitionist missionaries than any of the big cities in the East, including Boston and New York. When eastern abolitionists lost some of their influence during the 1840s and 50s, it was Oberlin that kept abolitionism central to American political debate. After the Civil War many Oberlinites, more than from any other place in the US, went south in order to set up educational opportunities for former slaves and new generations of African Americans. Robinson contrasts Oberlin and other revivalist or orthodox colleges with the more respectable Harvard, which by this time had been taken over by Unitarians and by Enlightenment perspectives. "The Unitarianism of Harvard was seen even then as more sophisticated, if not more learned, than the old religion. I will observe, in earnest hopes of being corrected, that Harvard figures very little in this epic tale. I know of no college founded from Harvard in this period."[28] Harvard was also much later in admitting African Americans and women as students.

One historian of Oberlin says that within two years of its founding it "had become the most progressive academic environment in the nation, perhaps the world."[29] For this reason, it was also an extremely controversial college. Many politicians wanted to force Oberlin to shut down. When in 1842 the college was debated in the Ohio legislature, one member

> described the largely abolitionist faculty and students there as a "great maelstrom of seditious faction [...] exerting a more potent influence in exciting sectional animosities [...] than any, I may say all, all other malcontent institutions in the U.S." Other lawmakers seeking revocation called Oberlinites in general a "banditti of lawbreakers," "n[----] stealers supported by enemies of this country abroad, and emissaries at home," and a "thoroughfare for slaves en route to Canada."[30]

The role of Oberlin in the abolition of slavery was large. But in the end, slavery was ended only through a terrible civil war, something Oberlinites did not want, but in which many came to participate. With the outbreak of war, the disagreement between the elder and younger Pastor Ames over the legitimacy of violence became far more acute.

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27 Finney 1868, Lecture 15; 2013, loc. 12551–12586, 12609–12616.

28 Robinson 2018, 176.

29 Morris 2014, 2.

30 Morris 2014, 1.

WOMEN AND DISSENTING PROTESTANTISM

Another narrative often mentioned in Robinson's writings, but not systematically developed in the same way as abolitionism, involves the role of women in these movements. It is a history that was to become even more invisible than the role of revivalism in abolitionism.[31] The practice of co-education in Oberlin, Tabor, and other places depended on a long history of public activity and leadership by women in the revival movements, although it was highly controversial in the more "respectable" circles in New England. Angelina Grimké, Theodore Weld's wife, was the first American woman ever to make a political speech to a state legislature when twice in 1838 she was invited to make speeches against slavery in the Massachusetts legislature, delivering her speeches from the Speaker's desk. Sarah and Angelina Grimké grew up in a very prominent, slave-owning, Anglican family in South Carolina. They first converted to Presbyterianism and then to Quakerism. Both became leading advocates for abolition and for women's rights.[32] When Theodore and Angelina married, Theodore renounced the male rights provided in the marriage pledges and the American law.

Two famous revivalist women had preached before 1838 to Congress in Washington with the president in attendance: Dorothy Ripley in 1806 and Harriet Livermore four times between 1827 and 1843. As the examples of Ripley and Livermore show, there were many highly influential women preachers and authors in these revival movements. In England, Quakers had had women preachers since the 1600s, the Methodists since the 1700s. Women preachers and leaders existed among English Baptists earlier than among Quakers. On the Continent women already had leading roles among Anabaptists in the early part of the 1500s, though in contrast to the Quak-

31 Keller & Ruether 2000; Brekus 1998.

32 "Sarah Grimké's feminist thought had leaped far ahead of her generation, even her century. Seen in the light of 20th-century feminist theory, her accomplishment is remarkable: she offered the best and most coherent Bible argument for woman's equality yet written by a woman; she identified and characterized the distinction between sex and gender; she took class and race into consideration; and she tied the subordination of women both to educational deprivation and sexual oppression. She identified men, individually and as a group, as having benefited from the subordination of women. Above all, she understood that women must acquire feminist consciousness by conscious effort and that they must practise asserting their rights in order to think more appropriately. Angelina, in several of her pamphlets and speeches, developed a strong argument for women's right to political equality. In her insistence on women's right, even duty, to organize for political participation and to petition, she anticipated the practice and tactics women would follow for the rest of the century" (Lerner 2004, xix). See, e.g., Grimké 1998 and Grimké & Grimké 2014.

ers, this practice soon largely disappeared from these traditions.[33] Among American Puritans there were some women preachers in the 1600s, though they were often persecuted or even killed. The ministry of women became much more common during the First Great Awakening in the 1700s. The Harvard historian Sarah Brekus writes,

> Scholars who have been sensitive to the revivals' social and political implications have missed the most momentous development of all: the unprecedented appearance of women's voices in the churches. [...] For the first time in American history, large numbers of evangelical women tried to forge a lasting tradition of female ministry. Ultimately they failed, but for a few brief years during the 1740s and 1750s, it almost seemed possible to imagine a church where women as well as men would be free to speak in public – a church where there would be "neither male nor female".[34]

Women preachers were rare during the more Enlightenment-inspired Revolutionary period, but they again became common during the Second Great Awakening in the first half of the 19th century, as Robinson often notes. This time the ministry of women was to have longer staying power, though it was again made invisible in historiography. To a great extent, the American women's rights and suffrage movements had their origins in these circles. This is easy to see when one considers the founder figures in the canonical narrative of the women's movement. Elisabeth Cady Stanton was converted in a Finney revival meeting and later married a co-worker of Weld who was a friend from their common study time at the Lane Seminary. Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Antony were Quakers or had a Quaker background. Lucy Stone was educated at Oberlin College. Some of them turned in time against organized religion because of the resistance they encountered, but they all came from this background. And this was no accident.[35] Later on, the suffrage movements had a large part of their social basis in these type of revivalist movements. Organizationally the worldwide Women's Christian Temperance Union was crucial. For a long time it was led by the Methodist Frances Willard, who in her childhood in the 1840s lived in Oberlin while her parents studied at Oberlin College. The suffrage movement in New Zealand, the first country to give voting rights to women (1893), had similar sources. Its most important organization was again the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and

33 Bradstock 2010, ch. 1; Snyder & Hecht 2010; Willgren 2017; Freeman 2011.

34 Brekus 1998, 26.

35 It was Cady Stanton and Antony who wrote the movement's early history, but as Lisa Tetrault (2014) says, this standard history is really Cady Stanton's own personal history. In this narrative the beginning of the American women's rights and suffrage movement is placed at the conference in a Methodist church in Seneca Falls 1848, organized by Cady Stanton and Antony. But why start the story here, Tetrault asks, and not with the Grimké sisters or other earlier events, groups, or persons, or with the role of women in churches?

the most visible leader was the Congregationalist Kate Sheppard. The same is true in Finland, the first country in Europe to grant women the right to vote (1906), and later on also in Sweden. In all these cases the Women's Christian Temperance Union was central and the social basis was to a great extent Pietist and so-called free church movements.[36]

LOSING FERVOUR

The Civil War, in the words of the historian Mark Noll, was a theological crisis that in part "took the steam out of Protestantism's moral energy".[37] Take the example of Oberlin. It was on the winning side, but the victory was a military victory, not a moral one. They had not persuaded the churches of the south, which originally had been shaped by Anglicanism. As Methodism and Baptism had migrated to the US South, they amalgamated with the slave-holding economy and culture. After the Civil War these churches often became ardent supporters of segregation and white supremacy.[38] Moreover, as revival fervour decreased and the first generation retired, Oberlin College at the turn of the 20th century became increasingly integrated into established and respectable American culture. The new leadership wanted to make the college into a modern university, in which religion was only a part, not the foundation of the institution. One consequence was that the student body was racially segregated.[39] The same seems to have happened in the novels' town Gilead.

There is also another history. The radical Christian egalitarianism in some of these churches sometimes turned into an individualist spirituality that undermined the ecclesial discipleship that was the strength of these movements. This is both a classic Catholic critique of Protestantism in general and a critique directed by established Protestantism against revivalist and dissenting Christianity. This maybe especially true of the Quaker tradition, when the emphasis on the inner light overwhelms the strongly communitarian nature of original Quakerism. Moreover, Spiritualism also becomes an influential movement among American intellectuals in the mid- to late 19th century.[40] It tended to a more individualistic spirituality less interested in shaping moral movements. Some Christian abolitionists and feminists also reacted against conservatism, indifference, and outright resistance in their own church contexts by developing a more individualistic faith. Theodore Weld and the Grimké sisters are examples of

36 MacDonald 2009, 19–22; Sulkunen 2009; Bengtsson 2011.
37 Noll 2006, 160.
38 Heyrman 1997; Wilson 1980; Noll 2006.
39 Morris 2014, 241–247.
40 Albanese 2007.

this, in part. After the marriage between Angelina and Theodore they increasingly became Christian intellectuals separate to some degree from both organized church life and from abolitionism. One reason was that Angelina was excluded from her Quaker church because she married a non-Quaker. Weld was Presbyterian. And Sara was expelled because she attended the wedding. It is revivalism that creates Weld's (and the Grimké's) radicality. Finney and the revivalism he represents created movements, moral change, and institutions. Weld was long part of this. But in his radical perfectionism, he was disappointed by churches, revival movements and practices, and political movements. All of them failed, in his eyes. Slavery didn't disappear. In the end he could see only war as the means for ending slavery. The institutions, especially in education, that he tried to build in his later years all failed in the end. Weld ended up where he started, as a New England don. He didn't leave the Christian faith, but the sort of theology and ecclesial practice he came to support did not have the creative power of his former revivalist practice. Freed from Quaker orthodoxy Angelina and Sara became interested in both apocalyptic speculation and in Spiritualism. One may see similar developments in the women's movement if one compares Stanton, who becomes increasingly negative towards organized religion, with Willard, who builds a movement on a much broader basis of church women. Without this broader basis, the American women's suffrage movement would not have had the continuing influence it had.[41]

One might perhaps say that John Ames II is an example of these developments. He is a minister during the post-Civil War period when religious, moral, and social fervour were in decline. He reacted against his father's militant radicalism. While both were Congregationalist ministers, his father was drawn to the Methodists while he himself was drawn to the Quakers. His elder son Edward was sent to Germany to study for ministry but came home with a Ph.D. from Göttingen as an enlightened atheist, telling his younger brother: "John, you might as well know now what you're sure to learn sometime. This is a backwater – you must be aware of that already. Leaving here is like waking from a trance."[42] Though this was at first hard for John Ames II to accept, in time he became increasingly influenced by his elder son and the intellectual world he represented. He finally left Gilead, while his younger son stayed to serve as a minister in the Congregational church. All three read Ludwig Feuerbach's *The essence of Christianity*,[43] but they read it very differently. The youngest John Ames was also influenced by German thought, but in his case it was the new theology shaped by the Swiss Reformed ("Calvinist") theologian Karl Barth, whose reading of Feuerbach be-

41 Hempton 2008, esp. chs. 4–5 and Abzug 1980.
42 Robinson 2004, 30.
43 Feuerbach 1957 [1841].

came very influential.[44] Barth, in turn reacted against the type of "individualist" and nationalist liberal theology he had met during his studies in Germany and developed a more Trinitarian and ecclesial theology that became important for the Confessing Church's resistance to the Nazi state.[45]

RETRIEVING FORGOTTEN HISTORY

Robinson says "History has ebbed away from Tabor since then, but it would be difficult to estimate the impact of this one little settlement on American culture and world culture – influence that derived from Oberlin."[46] This history is part of the often forgotten, ignored, or distorted history that Robinson wants to retrieve. In the historiography of most disciplines in the humanities, the main story line seems to run through Germany and France, and sometimes through the British and American Enlightenments interpreted as primarily secular events. But perhaps Charles Finney, Theodore Weld, and Sarah and Angelina Grimké, institutions like Oberlin and Tabor, and more precisely the religious movements they represented, have been of more significance for (and a more benign influence on) the course of world history than Rousseau and Hegel.[47]

For Robinson, narratives about the Second Great Awakening and abolitionism form part of a larger narrative about the formation of some central aspects of modernity. It is a narrative of how certain forms of dissident Protestantism, although going back to pre-Reformation traditions and of course always in complex and ambiguous interaction with many other religious, ideological, social, economic, and political forces, were crucial for the emergence of religious freedom, an independent civil society, democracy, rights language, and social reforms such as the abolition of slavery and women's rights. Robinson's concern with Calvin and Calvinism is part of this. Her interest is especially the role Calvinism played in England and how it migrated to New England (though she also mentions its role in the Netherlands).

One could criticize Robinson for not differentiating enough and for not seeing that the historic Calvinist influence she talks about has as much to do with ecclesiology as with theology and piety. It is not so much Calvinism as theology, but rather certain ecclesial forms and practices that are decisive. Robinson herself points to the Cathars as one background to the emergence of Calvinism in France and, much closer in time, to Wycliffe and the Lollards in England. During the English Civil War, Presbyterian Cal-

44 Barth 1957.
45 Rasmusson 2007; 2020a.
46 Robinson 2012, 178.
47 Cf. Rasmusson 2020b and Rasmusson 2021.

vinists wanted to replace the Anglican state religion with a Presbyterian state religion. However, the opposition that wanted an independent church and freedom of religion and expression was also often Calvinist. One of the earliest champions for general religious freedom was the French Calvinist Sebastian Castellio, about whom Robinson also writes.[48] A contemporary of Calvin, Castellio debated Calvin on this issue. The earliest defence of religious freedom in England was written by the Baptist minister Thomas Helwys, who in 1612 argued for religious freedom not only for dissenting Christians like himself, but also for Catholics, Jews, and Muslims. Imprisoned because of this book, he died in gaol.[49] He did not belong to the more Calvinist branch of the Baptist movement. Quakers emerged out of Puritanism, but they can hardly be called Calvinists. Methodism, which appeared in the following century and became such an important movement in America during the Second Great Awakening, was not Calvinist. Influenced by Methodism, Finney radically revised orthodox Calvinism. Thus it was not in Calvinism generally but largely in dissenting or non-conforming Protestantism – some forms of which were Calvinist to one degree or another – that separation of church and state, a separate civil society, and democratic habits began to emerge. John Locke, who is usually part of the official history of religious freedom and freedom of expression, is only explainable against this backdrop, which also was his background, although he himself was much less radical than the non-conformists.[50]

One can easily find other examples of this history. African-American churches, particularly Baptist and Methodist congregations, constituted the most important social basis for the civil rights movement in the US a century later.[51] Jack Boughton, a main character in the *Gilead*-series, lives in common-law marriage with the daughter of a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Grandfather John Ames is well-known to the bishop.[52] The African Methodist Episcopal Church was the first denomination in the US established by African Americans (1816) in reaction to the racism they encountered in white churches, and this denomination was also behind one of the first colleges for African Americans, Wilberforce University, established in 1856 near Xenia, Ohio.[53]

Freed slaves, with this type of Christian background, went as missionaries to West Africa and created a form of congregational Christianity that became the primary ac-

48 Robinson 1998, 200f.
49 Helwys 2009.
50 Robinson 1998, 174.
51 Chappell 2004.
52 Robinson 2004, 255, 259; Robinson 2020, 188.
53 Dickerson 2020. 'Wilberforce University (1856–)', www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/wilberforce-university-1856/, accessed 11 February 2020.

tors against slavery in West Africa.[54] And while Dutch Calvinism, closely bound up with the political and economic powers of settlers, created apartheid in South Africa, more or less the entire early leadership of the ANC was shaped by Congregationalism, Methodism, and similar types of churches. John Dube, the first president of what was to become the ANC was a Congregational minister who had studied at Oberlin College. Albert Luthuli, ANC president from 1952–1967 and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, was also a committed and active Congregationalist. Nelson Mandela was a Methodist, and during his time as student (at various Methodist or ecumenical institutions) he participated actively in the Student Christian Association and taught Bible classes.[55] It goes without saying that this history is highly complex, ambiguous, and contradictory, and that people like Dube and Luthuli had tense struggles inside their own churches.[56]

Or to take the example of a more recent Nobel Peace Prize laureate: Denis Mukwege, a Pentecostal pastor and doctor from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, works in a hospital founded and to a large extend funded by Pentecostals (a tradition that through holiness churches go back to Methodism).[57] Studies by economists, political scientists, and sociologists argue that one can correlate such things as democracy, social trust, level of corruption, level of education, prevalence of sexual violence, and so on, with differences in religious background.[58]

This account of history differs significantly from the set of stories that talk about a major conflict between Enlightenment and the secular state, on the one hand, and religion and the Church, on the other, with both understood as monolithic entities. There are also influential Catholic counter-stories. In Swedish and German Lutheranism a similar story is told about the role of the Lutheran Reformation in creating the modern individual, modern freedom, and the secular state. In all these narratives, Calvin and Calvinism often represent the repressive religious other. Robinson, however, is not alone in telling another history. Among outsiders one can find elements of this history in the works of Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited America in 1831, as well as in the German law scholar George Jellinek's book later in the century on the emergence of rights language, and in the theologian and sociologist Ernst Troeltsch's work at the turn of the 20th century. Troeltsch also travelled in America with Max Weber. Today the leading German sociologist Hans Joas, the late American economic historian (and Nobel laureate) Robert Fogel, and the American sociologist Robert Woodberry are

54 Sanneh 1999.
55 Hughes 2011; Couper 2010; Cruywagen 2016.
56 Elphick 2012.
57 Åkerlund 2018.
58 Rasmusson 2021.

further examples of scholars developing different versions of this history.[59] The late American economist Robert H. Nelson shows how this non-conformist free church tradition, building on the Lutheran reformation and in combination with more Lutheran Pietistic movements, shaped what he calls the 19th-century Second Reformation of the Nordic countries, which forms the nature of the Nordic welfare states.[60]

CONTESTING HISTORY

The retrieval of certain strands in Protestant history is important for Robinson. For her interpreters it seems to be the most frustrating part of her writings. It is difficult to find interpreters who try to do something constructive and positive with her project of retrieval.[61] Instead, her historical contruals are criticized, relativized, remade, or simply ignored. Even more, for some of her commentators it seems to be intrinsically objectionable and morally doubtful to give any prominence to these religious groups over others, and especially over secular forces. Alex Engebretson, in his book on Robinson, spends several pages defending Robinson from this charge by arguing that she does not really make any such claim.[62] But she certainly does.

The part of history at the centre of this article is mostly ignored or conflated with a generalized history of Puritanism. Most of the time, it seems simply not to be noticed. Robinson answers this critique both with further retrievals and with historiographical reflections. As she writes: "Again, I am aware of exploring lost history."[63] "I am fascinated by history, and I don't know what it is. I believe that, whatever it is, it is profoundly important, and I don't know why. I am especially fascinated by erasures and omissions, which seem to me to be strongly present in their apparent absence, like black holes, pulling the fabric of collective narrative out of shape."[64]

Much of the history she tells is almost completely unknown to most people inside and outside the academia, except among specialists. Other parts, such as Calvin, Calvinism, Cromwell, and Puritanism, are widely known, but mostly in caricatured forms and as part of powerful social, cultural, and political narratives that are very difficult to challenge. As Robinson says,

> Coherence means something like "stickiness, adhesion." An assumption, if it is firmly held, and

59 de Tocqueville 1999 [1835/1840]; Jellinek 1901 [1895]; Troeltsch 1986 [1911]; Joas 2013; Fogel 1989; 2000; Woodberry & Shah 2004; Woodberry 2012.

60 Nelson 2017.

61 One exception is the very interesting and informative chapter Larsen 2018.

62 Engebretson 2017.

63 Robinson 2018, 179.

64 Robinson 2018, 136f.

> especially if it is unconscious, will attract information that preserves or renews its stability, testing its credibility as information by its stickiness, rejecting anything that will not be assimilated to it – unless, and then only in certain cases, some external shock or some shift of consensus causes it to decohere, to lose the logic of its structure.[65]

The alternative narratives she tries to retrieve do not "stick"; because they have nothing to stick to, they are either ignored or rejected. At best they become isolated facts without a consequential larger narrative or context.

There is a whole book dedicated to Robinson and political theory: *A political companion to Marilynne Robinson*.[66] The eleven authors discuss Calvinism and Puritanism but hardly mention the revivalist movements of the first half of the 19th century so crucial for Robinson and her novels. People like Thoreau, Emerson, and Marx often appear, but Todd, Finney, Weld, Sarah and Angelina Grimké, or Oberlin and Tabor Colleges are not even mentioned.[67] The Second Great Awakening is mentioned a couple of times, but mostly in quotes from Robinson. One main religious figure from this epoch, one who plays an important role in *Gilead*, figures prominently in several of the chapters: John Brown. His violent campaigns fit the narratives of contemporary political theory. The more broadly influential people around Finney, Weld, and Oberlin do not fit these theories, so they are simply not noticed. The historian Mark Noll has written "that Finney should be ranked with Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Andrew Carnegie [...] as one of the most important public figures in nineteenth century America."[68] He had more influence on American life, Noll continues, than other notable figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, to whom Robinson's interpreters often refer.[69] Abolitionism is a central theme of this *Companion*, but not the close connection of abolitionism to the Christian movements Robinson writes about. Think of the strangeness of this quote from one of the editors of the book: "If Robinson writes primarily about the familiar figures of American culture, classic nineteenth-century American writers such as Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville, she writes of these traditional heroes to remind us of the radicalism – especially a kind of religious radicalism – that is also part of the legacy of American culture."[70] If one thinks of

65 Robinson 2018, 138f.

66 Mariotti & Lane 2016a.

67 This is not to say that people like Thoreau and Emerson, and other important literary figures of the 19th century, such as Dickinson, Whitman, Melville, and Poe, are not important for her. It is the history she was shaped in.

68 Noll 1992, 176.

69 Noll 1992, 177.

70 Mariotti 2016, 48.

Robinson and religious radicalism, why mention these figures, and not the ones I have named, who appear throughout her writings? It is because the latter do not "stick".

One essay in the *Companion* discusses what the authors call two models of action against racial injustice: the romantic-heroic model and the tragic-everyday model.[71] The grandfather represents the first model, they assert, Jack the second. In the process, however, the grandfather's Christian faith and context have been reduced to the heroic individual embodiment of absolute ethical principles. This is already a misleading description of the novel's grandfather Ames, not to mention a mischaracterization of actual historical religious abolitionism, which was a well-organized and strategic social movement. The authors refer to and quote precisely the essays in which Robinson discusses how just these traditions have disappeared from canonical history, but they reduce this to a general forgetfulness of American history. In no way does the reality that these traditions represent impinge on their theoretical accounts.

Other chapters of the *Companion* analyse and criticize Robinson's account of Calvinism and Puritanism, but they deal mainly with the earlier 17th and 18th-century forms of Puritanism, a story that is part of canonical American history. Robinson's use of 19th-century traditions is simply invisible in this book, as in much of the rest of the secondary literature. It doesn't fit the narratives and theories that shape the thinking of the contributors to this volume, so they don't even notice what she writes.[72] As Robinson says: "The religious revivals of the time looked to many contemporaries like mass hysteria, dangerous to those caught up in them, and to religion, and to the whole structure of democracy. Yet these passions fueled what was indeed the greatest period of reform in American history."[73] If these movements are ever discussed, the focus, she says, is usually on religious enthusiasm, not on reform, and certainly not on the connections between the two.

I will conclude by allowing Marilynne Robinson herself to have the last word:

71 Zamalin & Skinner 2016.

72 As another example, Christopher Douglas (2016, 84–116) argues that by focusing on the conflict between violent and non-violent Christian abolitionists (grandfather and father Ames) and thereby ignoring the conflict between Christian slavery and Christian abolitionism, Robinson suppresses both Christian slavery and the Christian segregation in the 1950s. Christopher Leise (2017, 109–127), in discussing the role of Puritanism in general, does not show knowledge of the history to which Robinson alludes, but he criticizes Douglas for not understanding that racism in mid-20th-century Protestantism is a crucial theme in Robinson's novels (125–126). Douglas fails to understand not only the specific history behind *Gilead*, but also the fact that, even though it is true that the Christian support of slavery was strong and that racism permeated also Northern churches, it was primarily minorities from the Quaker and revival movements that constituted the main force in the abolitionist movement.

73 Robinson 1998, 148.

> I have no conclusion to offer in place of the old one, except that history is very strange and beautiful and instructive in the absence of all conclusion. The reform movement I mention here was centered around people who were theologically conservative even in the terms of their time, many of whom took their theology jot and tittle from Jonathan Edwards. [...] Precisely the same energies that produced the revival that swept Mount Holyoke College during Emily Dickinson's time there produced Mount Holyoke College itself, and the unprejudiced admission of women to Oberlin College, and the unprejudiced admission of blacks to Oberlin College, and the proliferation of schools, especially in the Middle West, meant to promote and to normalize just such reforms. All this runs contrary to expectation. Yet if one reads Calvin, the New England Primer, and Edwards, as these reformers did, it all seems logical enough. Our historiography is too ridden with expectation, which in its workings is like bias or partisanism, incurious and self-protective. That expectations change or vary a little hardly matters, since they are crude in their nature. I wish it could be as if we knew nothing. Then we would be freer to wonder where those audiences came from whose intelligence and patience and humanity taught and encouraged Abraham Lincoln to speak as he did [...].[74]

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74 Robinson 1998, 146–147.

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DOUG GAY

The Edinburgh books and the Iowa books: The challenge of Marilynne Robinson's literary-theological recovery of Calvin and Calvinism

Obama: "You're a novelist but you're also – can I call you a theologian?
Does that sound, like, too stuffy? You care a lot about Christian thought."

Robinson: "I do, indeed."[1]

Indeed she does. She cares a lot and, reading as a theologian I will argue, knows a lot. Marilynne Robinson's fiction and her critical essays have rightly drawn appreciative and even glowing attention from both literary critics and theologians. In this article I trace how, in the first three Gilead novels, Robinson draws deliberate and significant lines of connection between Iowa and Scotland, which have been underplayed in the existing scholarship. I go on to discuss what lies behind these connections; that is, Robinson's commitment to a literary-theological recovery of Calvin and Calvinism/Reformed theology, which is performed in the novels and explicated in the critical essays. I relate this discussion of Robinson's work to established traditions of literary-cultural Calvin/Calvinism reception in Scotland and argue that her work crystallizes a challenge to these traditions and opens up new possibilities for the "Calvinist novel" in contemporary Scottish literature.

BLAMING CALVIN

At the 2009 quincentenary of Calvin's birth, it was clear, by the extent of continued disdain and neglect, that Calvin's rehabilitation as a major figure in the Western intellectual canon was far from complete.[2] That this was true in Scotland is significant, because Scotland is one of a number of European countries in which and about which

1 Robinson 2015, 291.

2 Luther, I think, while in no way getting a free ride, fared rather better in 2017 on the quincentenary of his 95 Wittenberg theses.

the term Calvinist has been and still is routinely invoked as a way of explaining how things are and came to be. That is to say, in literary and cultural terms it would be invoked "diagnostically". Here the words Calvinism and Calvinist were deployed as codes, markers, or even synonyms for repression, joylessness, and severity.[3] One of the best recent summaries of literary and cultural anti-Calvinism can be found at the beginning of Linden Bicket's 2017 study of *George Mackay Brown and the Scottish Catholic imagination*. Bicket explains her need to "unseal" that tradition, with its talk of "the Knox-ruined nation":

> Ironically, it is the by-now dominant orthodoxy of early twentieth-century literary critical writings, with their fierce, hostile resistance to Scottish Calvinism, which have sealed a Calvinist imagination as the defining characteristic of the Scottish novelist. The critical anxiety to diagnose the doctrinal cast of Calvinism as haunting the mind of the Scottish author has led to the exclusion of other literary religious imaginaries, so that the idea of a modern Scottish Catholic writer can barely be countenanced. Brown, and most especially his early teacher, the critic and poet Edwin Muir (1887–1959), are not innocent of this charge. Indeed, Muir is the main proponent of such criticism.[4]

Introducing their 2012 collection *Things: Religion and the question of materiality*, Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer suggest that "far from erasing the idol, acts of iconoclasm load it with power through negative affection".[5] If that was true of the worst iconoclasm of the Scottish Reformation, (which historians are now concluding was less extensive and extreme than has often been suggested), Bicket's study argues that anti-Calvinism has approached such levels of caricature and fixation that in addition to the distortion this has introduced, it has obstructed our view of other traditions present within Scotland's cultural history. What she is unsealing also needs to be addressed for another and perhaps even more ironic reason: that because the tradition has dealt so savagely with the cultural influence of Calvinism, the idea of "a modern Scottish *Calvinist* writer" can barely be countenanced either; at least not one of the highest rank.

Bicket's insights were anticipated in various ways by earlier studies. An early outlier was Mary Paton Ramsay's 1938 *Calvin and art, considered in relation to Scotland*,[6] but a more sustained pushback began with Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull's two volumes from 1989 and 1997[7] in which they drew on Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theory to argue that 20th-century Scots' anti-Calvinism represented a form of "inferiorism",

3 Duncan 2001; 2004.
4 Bicket 2017, 2.
5 Houtman & Meyer 2012, 15.
6 Ramsay 1938.
7 Beveridge & Turnbull 1997; 1989.

an internalized contempt for key aspects of Scottish cultural history and intellectual tradition.

In their 2009 volume on *Literature and the Scottish Reformation* volume, Crawford Gribben and David Mullan took up these themes in a post-devolution Scotland, which had grown significantly in both confidence and capacity.[8] In his introduction, while arguing that other historians have begun to develop a more nuanced and balanced view of the influence of Calvinism on Scottish culture, Gribben cites Sarah Dunnigan's verdict that "Scottish literary history [...] still ignores, or misunderstands, the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries".[9] Gribben argues that "[d]espite the evident weaknesses of their approach, the reading of the Reformation developed by Muir and MacDiarmid has exercised immense influence on twentieth-century criticism", going on to speak of "the bigotry of this new literary orthodoxy" as surviving only because it had been untested. This 2009 volume, the editors claim, marks the emergence of a "re-revisionist" account of literary tradition, but they caution that "Although these developments have made some impact in historical studies, it remains to be seen how these changing theoretical perspectives will impact the study of Scottish literature".[10] Gribben cites Patrick Collinson's 2003 assertion that "the Reformation was awash with words", and that in Scotland these words contributed an "immense creative as well as disruptive influence". He notes the effect of this in rejecting what Collinson calls that "ignorant if understandable proposition that 'protestant art' is virtually an oxymoron".[11]

My argument in this chapter builds on that revisionist (or re-revisionist) work, in dialogue with Bicket's observation, to argue that the tradition had also in effect sealed off the prospect of a modern Scottish Calvinist writer who was not by definition some kind of toxic cultural force. I will argue here that just as the "native" tradition is recovering its sense of itself and its own possibility, the work of Marilynne Robinson opens a new and highly promising space which helps to create the possibility of a modern Scottish Calvinist novelist, even if they have yet to appear.[12]

8 Gribben & Mullan 2009.

9 Dunnigan 2002, 143 quoted in Gribben & Mullan 2009, 1.

10 Gribben & Mullan 2009, 6.

11 Gribben & Mullan 2009, 6.

12 I would argue that the poet Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh is an example of a first rank (though under-recognized) Scottish Calvinist writer, but I have not yet encountered a novelist who would bear that description – although crime novelist Liam McIlvanney would not see it as an insult.

ROBINSON AS "CALVINIST"

Marilynne Robinson's self-identification as "Calvinist" has provoked a range of responses within recent critical studies in North America. In the 2016 *A political companion to Marilynne Robinson*, Christie L. Maloyed cites Todd Shy's argument that Robinson "overextends" Calvin, while herself arguing that Robinson so sanitizes North American "Puritan" (*sic*!) traditions that "her version of Calvinism may not require Calvin at all".[13] Matthew Scherer's essay on 'The ministerial exception' offers a more nuanced judgement, more in line with the verdict of Christopher Leise's 2009 essay in which Leise had argued that Robinson's reading of Calvin, is "a radical, but legitimate re-reading" which "places the humanist Calvin before the theological one".[14] Scherer argues that "her interpretation of Calvin, seems, then, to be true to key currents in his thought, while at the same time producing an unfamiliar portrait of him" adding that "[w]hat is perhaps most surprising in Robinson's reimagining of Calvin is her emphasis on the joyous apprehension of the goodness of God's creation".[15] Political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain's brief but illuminating 2010 essay on 'The incarnational vision of Marilynne Robinson' is unabashed in its delight in the "incarnality" of her (quietly political) ontological vision of the human person, no longer reduced to a "sovereign" island, but "re-incarnated" within a web of human and divine relationship.[16]

Critical commentary on Robinson's Calvinism falls into three main strands: *betrayal* readings which argue she has departed from a true version of Calvinism, *sanitizing* readings which argue that she cherry-picks and "improves" the tradition, and *revisionist* readings which defend the legitimacy of her re-reading of the tradition, recognizing that it introduces new emphases but, as Leise says, it has a legitimate place within the patchwork of American Calvinist tradition.[17]

These are all North American readings, and two other things should be noted. Firstly, a number of them unhelpfully conflate Calvinism and North American "Puritanism". Robinson is of course addressing both of these traditions (although she is more alert to the difficulties attached to the term "Puritan" in Old and New Worlds than some of her critics, particularly Maloyed) but, as I will argue below, she does not only read Calvin through the lens of North American Puritanism. A second point is that

13 Maloyed 2016, 199 and 217 citing Shy 2007.
14 Scherer 2016 and Leise 2009, 351.
15 Scherer 2016, 181–182.
16 Elshtain 2010.
17 Leise 2009, 355.

most of these readings come from scholars of literature or politics, not all of whom are as acquainted with theology as Robinson herself.[18]

Moving on to consider how Robinson as Calvinist works in a Scottish context, I want to invoke a crude, but I think fair and accurate, sociology of knowledge argument. The history of Calvin reception in Scottish arts and letters described above has largely become a history of inherited and transmitted second-hand verdicts. The Muir-MacDiarmid view of Calvin and Knox proved so potent because as eminent writers and critics, they were "influencers". Most of those who followed them in these judgements did not return *ad fontes*, but rather took the verdict "as read". There is a certain poetic justice therefore in acknowledging that Robinson's power to disrupt this tradition of Calvin reception sees a similarly crude, "sociological" dynamic at work. Put simply, she makes people think again about the term Calvinist, because of the remarkably positive critical reception her work has had.[19] This represents a profound disruption of the Scottish anti-Calvinist narrative which is heightened by her not only being a leading contemporary novelist, but also, what is doubly transgressive, a woman! In terms of contemporary Scottish literary culture this makes her a monstrous hybrid who should not even be possible. Since she does exist, Scottish critics need to decide what to make of her. Is she a dupe? An eccentric? A victim of false consciousness? In an interview with Irish scholar Andrew Cunning in November 2017 conducted as part of his doctoral research, Robinson said "[w]hat I've been interested in doing in both *Home* and *Lila* is complicating the sense of what the religious is".[20] Robinson as novelist and critic/theologian/public intellectual at the very least "complicates" the Scottish tradition of literary and cultural anti-Calvinism.

THE EDINBURGH BOOKS[21]

In case my linking Robinson to Scotland seems forced or contrived, I want to turn to the novels to present the internal literary evidence for the connection I am ex-

18 Scherer's theological awareness stands out here, while Leise's opposition of humanist and theological Calvin begs questions. Mariotti & Lane 2016.

19 Issues of reception differ markedly between Scotland and the US, where the presence of a variety of Calvinist traditions, denominations, and associated institutions of higher education, representing Scottish, English, and Dutch Calvinisms in particular, has maintained more cultural space and diversity around the identity (Princeton, Yale, Harvard and, on a smaller scale, Calvin College, Michigan). The idea of a Calvinist tradition has persisted there without the direct political and social baggage it has acquired since the 16th century in England, Wales, and (Northern) Ireland, but especially in Scotland.

20 The interview took place in November 2017 and is cited in Cunning 2020.

21 Robinson 2008, references to "the Edinburgh books" are on pp. 60, 311, 323.

ploring. Scotland has, since 1560, been a nation profoundly shaped by the Calvinist Reformation and its legacy. The Church of Scotland stands in the Calvinist Reformed tradition as mediated in the 16th century by John Knox, George Buchanan, and Andrew Melville. Remade by a Calvinist Reformation in 1560, its Presbyterian identity was decisively confirmed towards the end of the 17th century, with this identity then established and made the subject of specific constitutional protections in the 1707 Treaty of Union with England. Presbyterian Scotland is a significant part of the back story of Presbyterian Gilead as it is described in Robinson's 2008 novel, *Home*. In conversation with Jack (and Glory), his father says: "We're Boughtons because my father's grandfather was an Englishman, but except for him we're Scots. You know about all that."[22] In a significant passage, we learn about the Edinburgh books:

> NOW SHE WAS HOME AGAIN, JACK WAS HOME AGAIN. The furniture and the damage done to it in the course of the old robust domestic life were all still there. And the old books. Their grandfather had sent a significant check to Edinburgh asking a cousin to assemble the library needed for instruction in the true and uncorrupted faith. He had received in response a trunk full of large books, bound in black leather, in which they all assumed the true faith did abide. Sometimes they pondered the titles and wondered about them together. *On Predestination, an Answer to an Anabaptist*; *On Affliction; The first Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women; Booke of the Universall Kirk of Scotland; De Vocatione, a Treatise of God's Effectual Calling; The Hind Unloos'd; Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himselfe. Or A Survey of our Saviour in his soule-suffering, his lovelynesse in his death and the efficacie thereof.* They were respectfully proud to have these books in the house, as if they had been given the Ark of the Covenant for safekeeping and knew better than to touch it, except of course, for Jack, who took down a volume from time to time and read or seemed to read a page or two, perhaps only to worry his father, who was as respectful of the Edinburgh books as they all were and as little inclined to open them and who clearly dreaded the thought that they might be damaged. Are you finding anything of interest there, Jack? he would say and Jack would answer, "No sir, not yet" and seem to read on and then after a few minutes, set the book on its shelf again.[23]

The Edinburgh books which are deposited in the Boughton house represent a touchstone of Calvinist orthodoxy, though as befits the "Ark of the Covenant", they are revered but for the most part left unopened and even untouched. Only Jack is named as occasionally opening them and this attention is given a thoroughly disrespectful twist when we later learn that he has taken advantage of their neglect by the rest of the family, to use them as a hiding place for one of the stashes of money he used to buy alcohol. The books are now unread and perhaps are unreadable, with the spaces

22 Robinson 2008, 139.
23 Robinson 2008, 60.

between their pages even functioning as a resource for Jack's reprobate behaviour.

Not just his grandfather, but his grandmother is mentioned by Robert Boughton, in a way which inserts Scotland into the multi-layered concept of "home" in the novels. In *Home* he recalls her singing 'The ballad of Sir Patrick Spens' and goes on: "She said the life was very difficult in Scotland, but she was always homesick."[24] The Edinburgh connection and the indignant defence of Scotland's reputation are always more of a Boughton thing than an Ames thing, but the broader inheritance of Reformed theology of which they are symbols, is something common to both the Presbyterian and Congregationalist ministers in Gilead.[25] It represents a shared treasure and resource for Boughton and Ames, one which binds them in common cause and in a lifetime of conversation, but it also represents a troubled and troubling theological theme, which is repeatedly questioned and challenged in both *Gilead* and *Home*.

The question and challenge we find there in 1950s America, is of course one which has also been long present back in Scotland. Calvinist theology in some of its classic accents was famously subjected to a ruthless and devastating attack from Scotland's national poet Robert Burns in his biting satire 'Holy Willie's prayer' (1785). As well as offering bitter commentary on the apparent arbitrariness of divine judgement, the poem points up Presbyterian hypocrisy, seen in Willie's resort to the evils of drink and fornication.[26] Calvinist doctrine and the rigour with which it should be adhered to, became a major source of controversy and division within Scottish churches in the 19th century. In the 20th century, from the 1920s onwards, it became the focus of a cultural narrative within Scotland which grew to become a new orthodoxy among many literary and artistic figures, both non-Presbyterian Christians and others who were atheist or agnostic, like the poet Hugh MacDiarmid and the novelist Lewis Grassic Gibbon.

Gibbon and MacDiarmid's fierce cultural critique of Scottish Presbyterianism and its Calvinist roots was joined by other prominent voices; famously by Edwin Muir in his poem 'Scotland 1941', and in the following decade by Orcadian poet and Roman Catholic convert George Mackay Brown.[27] In the 1960s, poet Alan Jackson wrote: "Oh Knox he was a bad man/he split the Scottish mind/one half he made cruel/ the other half unkind".[28]

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24 Robinson 2008, 77.

25 Congregationalism in the US would have primarily had English or Welsh roots, since it was a stronger tradition in those countries than in Scotland.

26 See Jack 2009.

27 Muir 1943. "For Scotland I sing/the Knox-ruined nation/that poet and saint must rebuild with their passion" from 'Prologue', the first poem of Brown's debut collection, *The storm and other poems* (1954).

28 Jackson 1990.

There was a ferocity to the cultural critique – the majority of Scotland's most gifted poets, artists, and novelists as well as many leading cultural commentators and critics seemed united, to a man or woman, in their verdict on the baleful influence of Calvinism and the Kirk. Calvinism was portrayed as a blight on national life: life-denying, repressive, philistine, anti-sex, anti-art. Its most notorious doctrine of predestination was seen as ethically monstrous, making God into an arbitrary, capricious despot; while its much misunderstood doctrine of total depravity was seen as corrosive of human worth and dignity. From the 1920s onwards, therefore, modern Scotland was to become an increasingly tough place to be a Calvinist and an almost impossible place to be a Calvinist artist, writer, or "aesthete".

The presence of "the Edinburgh books" in Robinson's novels represents a legacy which had also become largely unreadable and unread in 20th/21st-century Scotland. A dry and typically layered Robinson formulation appears in Jack's grimly self-deprecating quip to Glory in *Home*: "Can the Scotsman change his skin or the leopard his spots?"[29] On closer examination, the substituted biblical term from Jeremiah 13:23 (KJV: can the Ethiopian change his skin) has a deep resonance in this passage of the novel where Jack is telling Glory about his "mixed" marriage to Della and her father's hostility to it. And on reflection, the quip unfolds into a trebled despairing observation about how whiteness and blackness fix social roles and boundaries in a racist society; how Jack's alcoholism and past misdemeanours appear to predetermine his current options and future fate; and, how the Scottish/Calvinist theological script seems to underwrite such fatalisms about the limits to human freedom and human virtue.[30] This same theme had appeared in an earlier conversation between Glory and Jack about Boughton family history:

> She said, "Beware the Thane of Fife."
>
> "Yes," he said. "This being a Scotsman is no bed of roses. A Scotsman!" He laughed.
>
> "I don't think I've ever even seen one of those."
>
> "I suspect Scottishness is another name for predestination. It explains everything, more or less."[31]

For readers in Scotland, the Iowa books offer an unexpected invitation and opportunity to re-engage with this legacy from their own past. Firstly, for the crude "sociological reasons" noted above, Robinson's status opens up new possibilities for *disruption* of this legacy in Scotland: if she is interested in this legacy, perhaps we can also dare

29 Robinson 2008, 289.

30 This is a potent example of the intellectual density of Robinson's prose and of her use of biblical intertextuality.

31 Robinson 2008, 141.

to be.[32] Then there is the *dislocation* of the Edinburgh books to their new setting in Gilead, Iowa. Even though we may feel these books would "know their place" at home in Scotland, what happens when they are very deliberately taken from Scotland to a new location? As noted in considering Jack's "riffing" on Jeremiah 13, the themes for which they are notorious acquire new resonance in a new location. Do these old books (some of which were of course prized by colonists and slaveowners) with their uncompromising account of the human capacity for depravity have anything to say to the evils of racism in 1950s America?[33] Do these old books (ditto) with their uncompromising accounts of providence and divine sovereignty, election, and predestination, have anything to say to the hubris of the American Dream, with its heresies of manifold destiny and civilizational progress? Do these old books (which Weber and Tawney might in their different ways have linked to the rise of capitalism) with their strong account of "calling" have anything to say to the rival religions of the free market and psychological/ethical egoism? Moving the books to Gilead – including them in *Gilead* – making them in some sense constitutive of Gilead: such a dislocation (diaspora?) should provoke a new curiosity among Scottish readers as to whether we do know the place these books rightly occupy in our culture.

The final factor which invites a re-engagement with Calvinist/Reformed tradition is the *dialogue* which Robinson conducts with it in both her fiction and her critical essays and that she considers it a tradition worth dialoguing with. Where Scottish novelists and poets have often been repelled by this inheritance, she is compelled by it. A strong claim here would be to see this dialogue as a key intellectual theme of the Gilead trilogy, working in tandem with the other structural device of re-reading the parable of the prodigal son.[34] Robinson's dialogue is a serious and respectful one, she

32 As someone *we* are interested in (and impressed by)!

33 A theme never far from the surface of the Gilead novels, crackling through the radio and the television reports, surfacing in memories of the town's history, and taking flesh in the story of Jack and Della and Jack's son.

34 This is all-encompassing, but by name in Robinson 2005, 155: "There's a sermon here. The Prodigal Son as the Gospel text. I should ask Boughton if he has noticed this. But of course he has, of course he has. I must give that more thought." It also seems to underly the hints in the text that Robinson has followed many others within more recent reformed theology in using Karl Barth's revisionist treatment of election as a way to address some of the most problematic aspects of a classic Augustinian or Calvinist account of it. For Barth, the parable of the prodigal son is used as a central framing device for his Christology, which he presents under the rubric of "The journey of the Son of God into the far country" and "The homecoming of the son of man". Barth 1956 and 1958. Robinson has Ames make exactly this point in his conversation with Jack as recounted in 2005, 174: "[Ames] There was an uneasy silence, so I remarked that he might find Karl Barth a help, just for the sake of conversation. He [Jack] said, 'Is that what you do when some tormented soul arrives on your doorstep at midnight? Recommend Karl Barth?'"

is fond of the adjective "venerable" and in her essay on 'Metaphysics' in *The givenness of things* she "nominates"

> the venerable doctrine of predestination as a classic instance of an inquiry beyond human capacity, which has multiplied disputes and confirmed skepticism and has distorted Christianity as often as the doctrine is embraced or evaded. The difficulty of the issues it raises regarding justice and free will are intractable.[35]

Here we begin to see something of the shape of her engagement with Calvinism. I cannot think of a Scottish writer, artist, or critic, who would opt to describe the doctrine of predestination as "venerable". Robinson does. She then immediately "complicates" this respect for tradition by stressing the ways in which this doctrine is highly problematic. She may be eccentric, literally or literarily, in offering this veneration, but she is no dupe or theological ingenue. Her sympathy for the doctrine and her willingness to remain in dialogue with it are fuelled by a sense of epistemological (and in this essay "metaphysical") complexity, which takes the form of an epistemological/theological bind: Christianity is "distorted [...] as often as the doctrine is embraced *or evaded*".[36] Her work of complicating here re-opens the possibility of the reception of the tradition because it implies the mere *rejection* of it is too simplistic. The simplistic reflex which revolts against this doctrine does not understand the nature of the bind it represents or the difficulty of the terrain the doctrine is trying to map.[37] It belongs to an intellectual habitus, all too common within Scottish art and letters since the 1920s, which is tempted to view religious ideas as the consolation of the simple-minded and in consequence, to venture the least taxing and most damning interpretation of them.[38] Robinson is offering us something different with her claim that the issues raised by this doctrine regarding justice and free will are "difficult" and "intractable". Her work here could be compared to the way Adrienne Rich speaks of "diving into the wreck" – Rich famously says "I came to see the damage that was done/ and the treasures that prevail". Robinson too comes to see these things – fully aware

35 Robinson 2015, 192; c.f. Robinson 2005, 171: "He [Jack] nodded. 'I take you to mean that you do believe in predestination.' [Ames] 'I dislike that word. It's been put to crude uses.' 'Can you propose a better word?' 'Not offhand.' I felt he was deviling me, you see."

36 Robinson 2015, 192.

37 Rowan Williams (2012) memorably said that doctrine comes down to the least stupid thing we can say about God.

38 Robinson 2015, 88: "polemic and ignorance have made cartoons of both these famous doctrines, original sin and predestination, which were not aberrations of Puritanism but were in fact virtually universal in Christian theologies, Catholic and Protestant, for as long as meaningful theology was written."

that her name as a woman does not appear in these Edinburgh "books of myths".[39] It does make her seem remarkable within a contemporary Scottish literary milieu, that she is interested in paying such attention to the barnacled hulk of Calvinism, to the damage done and the treasures that prevail.

ROBINSON'S CALVINISM

Just because the damage done to our humanity, creativity, and self-esteem by Calvinism has been such a key theme for Scottish arts and letters,[40] it is particularly transgressive that Robinson is deeply appreciative of Calvin's anthropology and his doctrine of creation. A striking literary example of this can be found in *Lila*, in relation to Lila's fixation with a text she has read in Ezekiel, the whole of chapter 16 but particularly verses 5 and 6.

> None eye pitied thee, to do any of these unto thee, to have compassion upon thee; but thou wast cast out in the open field, to the lothing of thy person, in the day that thou wast born. And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live.[41]

Lila encounters this in a "raw", naive reading of the text and reads it in the light of her rescue/abduction by Doll. Ames is puzzled and even dismayed by her fixation with Ezekiel but Robinson uses her husband's anxious efforts to help Lila to read that text, to connect it to the doctrine of Israel's election in the Old Testament.[42] As opposed to the approach of anti-Calvinist critics, for whom the implications of this doctrine make it impossible to "think" the goodness of God, Robinson's theological strategy is much more traditionally orthodox in Reformed terms, beginning with the goodness and love of God as axiomatic and letting these controlling convictions shape possible readings of what election might mean. The quadrilateral of Boughton, Ames, Jack, and Lila is crucial for how Robinson does this. Boughton and Ames mediate, defend, and interpret the tradition in its classic and Barthian/revisionist forms. Jack probes it critically, antagonistically, and experiences it with an existential dread. Lila offers an apparently naive counterpoint, which is actually extremely knowing and worldly-wise and which, crucially for any attempt at theodicy, carries the authority of someone who has been marginalized and brutalized.[43]

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39 The full text which I am alluding to in various ways is Rich 2007.

40 See also Craig 2011.

41 Robinson 2014, 42.

42 Robinson 2014, 124: "The old man had said, 'Why Ezekiel? That's a pretty sad book, I think. I mean there's a lot of sadness in it. It's a difficult place to begin.'"

43 Robinson 2005, 227: "Then it might be that she seemed to him as if she came straight out of the Bible, knowing about all those things that can happen and nobody has the words to tell you."

In *Gilead*, the poetics of Ames' voice presents a winsome picture of divine love, which also incorporate a subtle feminist refiguring of the love of God in maternal terms:

> your mother could not love you more or take greater pride in you. She has watched every moment of your life, almost and she loves you as God does, to the marrow of your bones. So that is the honoring of the child. You see how it is godlike to love the *being* of someone. Your *existence* is a delight to us.[44]

Lila's fixation with Ezekiel 16 offers its own visceral statement of this, in its focus on the God who, encountering the new-born child, abandoned and "weltering in its own blood", says "Live". Perhaps more than anything, her portrayal of Lila's attachment to this verse expresses the vividness of Robinson's sense of and belief in a "God of Life".[45] This in itself offers a striking counterpoint to the trope in Scottish anti-Calvinism of Reformed faith as "life-denying".

Behind and beyond that intense apperception by Lila of a moment of divine affirmation of life, Robinson's fiction and her critical writings continually return to the theme of human and divine delight in the sheer existence of people and world.[46] Calvin's naming the world as "the theatre of God's glory" and the centrality of the doctrine of the *imago dei* in Reformed theology underpin Robinson's own articulation of what Charles Taylor has called "the affirmation of ordinary life".[47] In *Home* Glory speaks of "ordinary happiness. The kind of happiness she saw in the luncheonette, passed in the street".[48] Similarly, Ames' reflection on the resurrection in *Gilead* begins with a glowing affirmation of the here and now:

> I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and

44 Robinson 2005, 155. This is the passage Elshtain associates with "incarnality".

45 Two famous articulations of this in 20th-century theology come from the Peruvian Liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez (Gutierrez 1991) and the German Reformed theologian, Jürgen Moltmann (Moltmann 1992). Its repeated association in *Lila*, with the actions of Doll towards Lila, also offers another subtle feminist refiguring of divine character, and a fiercely unsentimental one, given Doll's status as a murderer.

46 Or Ames in Robinson 2005, 142: "I suppose Calvin's God was a Frenchman [...] I do like Calvin's image, though, because it suggests how God might actually enjoy us. I believe we think about that far too little. It would be a way into understanding essential things, since presumably the world exists for God's enjoyment, not in any simple sense of course, but as you enjoy the *being* of a child even when he is in every way a thorn in your heart."

47 Taylor 1989, 209. Taylor is speaking directly about the influence of the Reformation on European thought and the development of a sense of "the self".

48 Robinson 2008, 23.

> perishing that meant the whole world to us. In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that is passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try.[49]

That quote opens towards Robinson's religiously informed celebration not just of the worth of the world but of its beauty. This involves something which is deeply alien to the Scottish tradition of Calvin reception: the positing of Calvin as a theologian of beauty. In a 2009 interview with *The Guardian*, Robinson said:

> One of the things that has really struck me reading Calvin is what a strong sense he has that the aesthetic is the signature of the divine. If someone in some sense lives a life that we can perceive as beautiful in its own way, that is something that suggests grace, even if by a strict moral standard they might seem to fail.[50]

For a public intellectual space in Scotland habituated to scathing accounts of Calvin's influence, it is a thoroughly incongruous observation. The rash among those baffled by Robinson's view might be tempted to question her knowledge of Calvin's theological anthropology, but they would be wise to ensure such judgements could match her extensive first-hand engagement with the sources. It is precisely the fact Robinson still thinks Calvin (very much) worth reading that disrupts Scottish traditions of Calvin reception or non-reception. In her critical essay on 'Experience', she addresses the "depravity" question rather matter-of-factly: "Calvin's sense of human depravity, however honestly come by, is by far the most conventional aspect of his thought".[51] In *Home*, Glory observes of her father: "The doctrine of total depravity had served him well. Who after all, could cast the first stone?"[52] What marks Robinson out as a Calvin interpreter, particularly in wider literary circles but even to a degree within contemporary theology, is that she does not see his sobering account of human capacity for evil as toxic to his vision of the human person. In fact, the opposite is true as she continues in the essay on 'Experience': "He is unique, so far as I can tell, in rescuing out of the general ruin of the whole human being, body, mind, and spirit."[53] For Robinson, as the longer passage from which this is taken makes clear, just as depravity is "total", so Calvin offers a "total" account of human experience, integrating the spiritual and tem-

49 Robinson 2005, 65.
50 Brown 2009.
51 Robinson 2015, 227.
52 Robinson 2008, 116.
53 Robinson 2015, 227.

poral in a glorious unity, which refuses to read soul as "diaphanous second presence".[54] Her celebration of Calvin's soulful vision of humanity as enabling a rich sense of self marked by holistic embodiment, existential pleasure, intellectual brilliance, and dazzling sensuality is so contrary to received wisdom in Scottish arts and letters as to make jaws drop or have hearers react as if she were speaking in a strange tongue.

My contention is that Robinson's discursive work as critic and performative work as a novelist should at the least provoke renewed interest in this intellectual tradition by which she is so deeply inspired. It invites those who have disparaged and dismissed that tradition to at least consider her readings of it, while noting that her attachment to Calvinist and Reformed tradition, even her veneration of it, does not exclude the proper work of dialoguing with that tradition, interrogating it critically, and offering fierce challenges to it. These surface in the musings of Boughton and Ames, in Glory's questioning, Jack's angst, and Lila's apparently naive reactions.

Although what Calvin called the *decretum horribile* is ever present as a theme, the most direct engagement with predestination occurs in a conversation at the Boughton house, with Robert, Jack, and Glory present, as well as Ames and Lila. This is a key episode in the trilogy which is described by Ames in *Gilead*, by Glory in *Home*, and by Lila in *Lila*.

Lila cuts through the ministers' uneasy equivocation with a response to predestination which is directly personal: "one afternoon as she listened she understood that Doll was not, as Boughton said, among the elect. Like most people who lived on earth she did not believe and was not baptized".[55] In response to the now-hated thought of resurrection, she puts on her old dress, goes to the river, and unbaptizes herself.[56] Lila's visceral rejection of the consequences of "thinking predestination" in real, personal, relational terms is a vital part of Robinson's engagement with this "venerable" doctrine, which puts paid to any sense that she is some kind of mere apologist for it. With Lila's rejection of it, we now have three distinct positions arranged: Jack who doesn't believe but is haunted by it; Boughton and Ames who hold uneasily to it (with a bit of help from Karl Barth) but don't fear it personally, and Lila who finds its implications monstrous.[57]

Jack functions as devil's advocate[58] in terms internal to systematic theology. When

54 Robinson 2015, 227.

55 Robinson 2014, 97.

56 Robinson 2014, 103, 105.

57 Glory's engagement with it seems less strong and her position less clear. Barth's place in the story has a certain historical resonance given its period; he was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine on 20 April 1962.

58 Robinson 2005, 171: [Ames] "I felt he was deviling me."

his father avows that "[t]he grace of God can find out any soul, anywhere", Jack responds "[t]hen isn't grace the same as predestination? The pleasanter side of it?"[59] Although Lila is far from naive, her response is not informed by theological terms in the way Jack's is. So Ames recounts in *Gilead*: "But your mother spoke up, which surprised us all. She said, 'What about being saved?' She said, 'If you can't change, there don't seem much purpose in it?' She blushed."[60] She provides an unequivocal answer to Jack and Jeremiah's question: "Your mother said, 'A person can change. Everything can change.' Still never looking at him. He said, 'Thanks. That's all I wanted to know.'"[61]

Lila's interrogation of predestination is particularly poignant and powerful because she is the one who gets saved and baptized; who then unbaptizes herself. She has a testimony to grace and transformation in her own life, but as the child God has elected to rescue in Ezekiel 16, her experience of grace troubles her. Why has this God who says "Live!" let the child be a victim in the first place?[62] Lila's dancing is turned to mourning by the implications of predestination. It is telling, therefore, given that she does not and cannot escape this bind, that is to her Robinson gives the job of forgiving God. Ames in *Gilead* writes:

> I love the way she talks, or the way she talked when I first knew her. "It don't matter," she would say, in that low, soft voice of hers. That was what she said when she meant she forgave someone, but it had a sound of deeper, sadder resignation, as if she were forgiving the whole of the created order, forgiving the Lord Himself.[63]

Near the end of *Lila*, Lila also speaks what must from Robinson's side be a deliberate paraphrase of T.S. Eliot from 'East Coker': "She kept thinking, Wait. Don't hope, just wait."[64]

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59 Robinson 2008, 230.

60 Robinson 2005, 173.

61 Robinson 2005, 174.

62 Robinson 2014, 129: "'But I did mean to ask you something' she said. 'There's a baby cast out in a field, just thrown away. And it's God that picks her up. But why would God let somebody throw her out like that in the first place?'" It is fascinating that Robinson uses Ames in this conversation, while he is unable to answer Lila's indignant questions and largely shares them, to present Calvin as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief: "'What about them children nobody ever finds?' 'My question exactly. In fairness to Calvin, he had only one child, and it died in infancy. A little boy. It was a terrible sorrow to him. He knew a lot about sorrow'" Robinson 2014, 131.

63 Robinson 2005, 169.

64 Robinson 2014, 229; Eliot 1942.

CONCLUSION

Marilynne Robinson is a crucial interlocutor for contemporary Scottish artists, writers, and critics because she provides the single most effective and sophisticated complication of the tradition of anti-Calvinism which has become established in Scotland over the last century. Her achievement is so important because it is both explicated critically in her essays and performed theologically in her novels.[65] She knows she is no fool and she is unapologetic about her interest in and attachment to Calvin and Reformed theology. To adapt Bicket's insight, Robinson's work "unseals" the Scottish literary tradition of anti-Calvinism. At a minimum, this invites fresh attention and critical testing of Calvin and the themes of Reformed theology. Has Robinson genuinely offered us new ways to read and understand these? Has her complicating work, moved the doctrine of predestination, for example, from simple pariah status to something more akin to Derrida's *pharmakon* – functioning as both poison and cure? Can we entertain the possibility she offers, that the unbearable tensions invoked by predestination and providence may have to be held in faith, as a simultaneously horrible and hopeful mystery, which can be resolved from God's side, though not from ours? If so, has Marilynne Robinson, by bringing the Edinburgh books into the Iowa books, decisively represented and reimagined the possibility of being a modern/post-modern Scottish Calvinist writer and artist?

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65 Although I have not found a source in her work for this, I wonder if Robinson may be more knowing and self-conscious than some about the irony that the novelist is themselves, in the act of plotting (or plot creation), something of the predestinator par excellence – performing this "horrible" function in person as they guide their own characters to their appointed ends. Her theological work in the novels could also be connected to the call of homiletician Anna Carter Florence in her 2018 book *Rehearsing scripture* for preachers as readers of scripture to be willing to "stay in the scene" (Florence 2018), exploring and performing even "texts of terror" as a way of negotiating a critical and ethical relationship to them, which may involve resistance and "rescripting".

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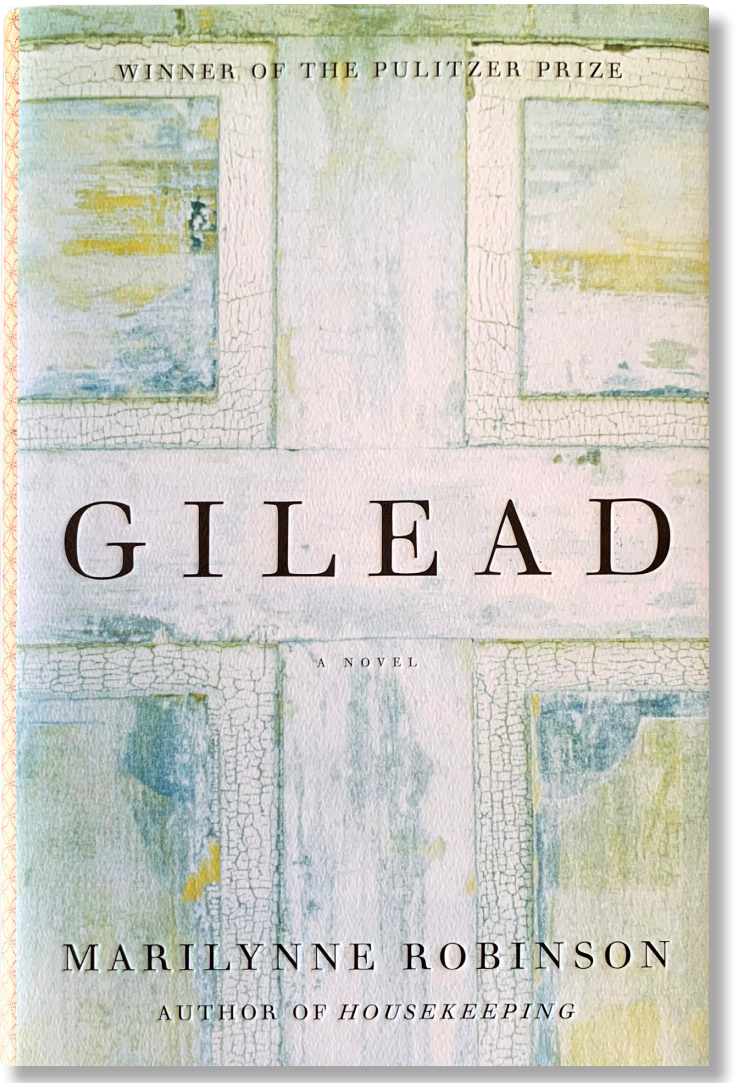
Return of the prodigal son, *oil panting by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (ca 1668), Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.*

ON THE NOVELS



Gilead *by Marilynne Robinson, published in 2004.*

BEATA AGRELL

"I pray all the time": Genre, address, and self-examination in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*

Gilead is Marilynne Robinson's second novel. Published in 2004, it attracted great attention and was awarded several prestigious prizes. At first glance, the novel does not look remarkable: no vigorous drama, no striking aesthetic experiments, just calm everyday realism in a clear and straightforward language. But as literary text and rhetorical discourse, *Gilead* turns out to be quite tricky. Formally, it is a fatherly letter from the old and sick Reformed clergyman John Ames to his seven-year-old son Robert, to be read when he himself is dead and the son is grown up. The letter, however, is written over a long period when much is happening; depending on the nature of the reported events and Ames' relations to them, the appeal and the genre character of the text alternate: from didactic admonition, advice, and sermon, to self-biography, apology, confession, prayer, and death-bed epistle, pertaining to the *ars moriendi*.[1] Yet, these genre variations are kept together by the fundamental rhetorical form of epistolarity: the address of an I to a You. Since the receiver is absent, the epistolary text is not a dialogue, but its multiformed addressivity generates dialogicity within the text itself.[2]

Gilead has been the subject of much scholarly study, except in the issue of genre. My aim here is to clarify how the epistolary novel incorporates these genre variations and forms of address, as well as how that strategy affects the thematic and rhetorical appeal of the novel. It is not self-evident, however, how to distinguish between the *father's* address to his son and the *novel's* address to its reader. The novel is a rhetorical design with a double address, where the relationship between genre, form of appeal,

1 Engebretson 2017, 45f. For *ars moriendi*, see Atkinson 1982.

2 Altman 1982 emphasizes "the call for response from a specific reader" as fundamental for "the epistolary pact" (p. 89). In *Gilead*, however, there can be no such response, since the letter-writer is supposed to be dead when the letter is to be read by the addressee. Yet, Ames' letter is imbued with an addressivity to be stored for a future reading, when the sender is no more there to receive a response.

and thematic is brought to the fore in both the fictional letter and the published novel.

Gilead is the first novel in a tetralogy, which also includes *Home*, *Lila*, and *Jack*,[3] but here I will focus on *Gilead* in its own right. Home and homelessness are fundamental themes in all three novels, and the parable of the prodigal son fulfils an important function. *Gilead* is set in the 1950s, in the eponymous fictional city in Iowa of the title. Complicated human relations are in focus, and the main perspective is ethical-existential and religious, but implicitly also socio-political. The ambivalence of these relations mirrors the double significance of the name "Gilead" in the Old Testament: "a city of evildoers, tracked with blood" and "the 'balm of Gilead'" as a metaphor for healing and instruction.[4] Stylistically, the novel is descriptive, reflective, and reasoning rather than emotionally expressive, thus pertaining to traditional Puritan "plain style".[5] But this restraint also adds a powerful sub-pressure to the text, betraying a dense subtext.[6] Bible scholar Robert Alter has noted that Robinson's primary stylistic device is *parataxis*, as in the Old Testament – simple main clauses lined up after one another, connected only by "and".[7] The logical context, thus, must be construed by the reader alone.

EPISTOLARITY, GENRE, AND EXIGENCE

Gilead is composed as a single long letter, made up of short passages of varying character, separated by a blank space. The text lacks chapter headings, but is divided into two parts separated by a page break. The first and longest part is largely retrospective with the aspect of memoir and family history, but gradually, problematic events in the present are given more space. They are reproduced in diary-like notices, observations, and confessions, which develop into a process of self-examination and self-confrontation in the vein of spiritual self-biography.[8] The short second part, with the likeness of an epilogue, is fully anchored in the current present and represents the breaking point in the self-confrontation. Part one deals with Ames' family history of a lacerated relationship between three generations of fathers and sons. But the account is increasingly infiltrated by Ames' ambivalent reactions to the return of the prodigal neighbour son Jack Boughton to the city of Gilead; and the second part deals entirely with the final

3 Robinson 2005; 2008; 2014; 2020.

4 Engebretson 2017, 102–103.

5 See Roberts-Miller 1999, ch. 4 for "plain style".

6 Cf. Engebretson 2017: "amenable to a loose, digressive narrative structure; it allows for a complex rendering of human consciousness; and it encourages an intimate, confessional tone" (p. 46).

7 Alter 2010, 163–167.

8 Starr 1965, 4–7, 33–36; Leise 2009, 352; Evans 2014, 133f.

confrontation with Jack before his second leaving. Jack is Ames' godson, but because of young Jack's moral transgressions, Ames has always had difficulties in getting along with him. When Jack, after his return, also insinuates himself into the confidence of Ames' young wife and son – then Ames becomes worried and jealous, though without admitting it to himself. Lack of forgiveness and guilt, often linked to mistrust and self-deception, are recurrent problems throughout the novel. These problems are processed through various inserted genres within the letter, corresponding to various rhetorical situations and needs. The main issue of my chapter here is how *Gilead* as an epistolary discourse switches between different genre types and forms of address, and how that strategy influences the novel's thematic and rhetorical appeal.

The *concept of genre* I assume here originates from rhetorical genre theory, according to which genres are schematic textual patterns, which correspond to typified ways of rhetorical acting in recurring situations, where they condition discursive behaviour.[9] According to that view, a genre is not primarily a neutral container for a particular type of text, but an active socio-rhetorical function that steers how individuals perceive and act in different discursive situations.[10] This *genre function* therefore shapes not only the development of the discourse, but also the participants in the discourse.[11] However, this relationship is dialectical: genres exist because authors produce them, and authors produce them because genres already exist.[12] This pragmatic genre concept might call to mind Hermann Gunkel's historical concept of *Sitz im Leben*, that is, the idea that each biblical genre is tied to a special type of social and historical situation, within which a text is repeatedly used; and these situated repetitions gradually result in a standard kind of text, a *Gattung*.[13]

The idea of genre as a schematic textual pattern, however, also pertains to cognition theoretical concepts like *script* or *schema*, that is, a mental structure or an inner discourse, which may be likened with a potential text or a textual semimanufacture.[14] This schema is activated in/by a certain kind of rhetorical situation, characterized by a

9 Miller 1984, 153, 163; Devitt 2004, 3, 14, 169, 172; Bawarshi 2003, 7–9; cf. also Bawarshi's definition of genre as "typified rhetorical strategies communicants use to recognize, organize, and act in all kinds of situations, literary and nonliterary" (p. 17). For an overview of rhetorical genre theory, see Frow 2007, 1629–1631.

10 Genres interact with mode or modus, which is a way of verbal production pertaining to a particular genre, but also adaptive to other genres. The boundary between genre and mode is therefore somewhat fluid (Fowler 1982, ch. 5).

11 Bawarshi 2003, 22.

12 Bawarshi 2003, 9.

13 See Byrskog 2007, 3f.

14 Frow 2007, 1631f.

need or quandary: an *exigence* in Lloyd Bitzer's terminology.[15] The exigent rhetorical situation in the fictional world of *Gilead* is the father's imminent death and his fatherly duty to convey his life wisdom to his son before it is too late. This duty calls forth didactic genre conventions supporting an admonishing appeal. But the writing process is also governed by the father's personal need to inscribe the image of himself in the memory of his future adult son. Thereby the genre patterns of self-biography and diary are evoked, giving way for personal reflection. The process of autobiographical writing, in turn, gradually awakens the father's need to come to terms with himself, especially in the face of Death. This need paves the way for the modes of self-examination and confession, with their mixture of apologetics and submission, in this case also as a practice of *ars moriendi*, "the craft of dying". In the process, short prayer calls are continually inserted, so-called *ejaculatory prayers* or prayer sighs, of the type "God bless his soul!" or "Praised be the Lord!"[16]

The exigent rhetorical situation of the very novel *Gilead*, on the other hand, is rooted in a postmodern right-wing populistic United States, characterized by neoliberalism, individualism, narcissism, contempt for weakness, and similar issues that Robinson criticizes in her essays; but just as urgent is a problematic religious heritage, split between fundamentalism, revisionism, theological misunderstandings, and secularism.[17]

GILEAD AS A SPEECH ACT IN TWO TIMES

The fatherly letter has, as stated, a fragmentary structure that follows the course of memories, thoughts, and events. This structure, as well as the ability to accommodate many different genres and discursive modes, characterizes the letter as a rhetorical genre.[18] But Ames' letter is of a certain kind: as a didactic letter from parent to child, it originates from the ancient deliberative rhetorical tradition as well as from the Bible and Christian devotional literature.[19] In the early Puritan tradition, the didactic letter could evolve into a spiritual autobiography to be read after the sender's death in order

15 Bitzer 1968, 6f.; Miller 1984, 155, 157f.

16 See e.g. Spurgeon 1872: "Pray without ceasing", "labor to be much in ejaculatory prayer".

17 Engebretson 2017, 64.

18 Fowler (1982) sees the epistolary novel as an "aggregation" (p. 172). Since letters are "suited to application within, and alongside, numerous forms of writing", van Hensbergen 2010 proposes that a letter should be conceived as a discourse rather than a genre (p. 513). Likewise Beebee 1999: "the letter is not a particular form or object, but a set of functions and capabilities" (p. 202). These dynamic pragmatic perspectives, however, pertain to the rhetorical concept of genre presented here.

19 See e.g. 1 Timothy 1:18.

that the younger would learn from the experiences and mistakes of the elderly.[20] But in *Gilead*, this traditional form is given new aspects. The opening passages are illustrative.

Father Ames does not begin the letter to his son Robert with a conventional formal greeting, but with a direct personal appeal, which immediately sets out the rhetorical situation for the son and sends the reader *in medias res.* The passage reads:

> I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I'm old, and you said, I don't think you're old. And you put your hand in my hand and you said, You aren't very old, as if that settled it.[21]

This is an account of a conversation between father and son the previous day, preparing the son for his father's imminent death. However, the passage is not to be read until the son is grown up and the father indeed is dead. This temporal distance between the writing and reading situations is fundamental in epistolarity. In *Gilead*, however, this distance is at once widened and bridged, since the narrator-father constantly oscillates between the present and future *now*.[22]

The next passage develops the theme of death in an unexpected direction, namely from the point of view of the dead themselves. In the now of writing Ames remembers his son's special looks at him and states "I will miss them," that is, after death. But then he adds "It seems ridiculous to suppose the dead miss anything," and in the next sentence, he expresses his intention that his son would read this now-ongoing letter after his death (p. 4). In such a way, it is paradoxically implied that the father already in advance imagines the loss that he, however, can *not* experience after death; but it is also implied that in this anticipated mourning now he is comforted by the hope to still be able to communicate with his son via the left-behind letter – as if from the other side of the grave. This *present* need of future consolation *then* is thus another rhetorical incentive – an *exigence* – that motivates the letter *now*. The time dimensions of the epistolary novel here intersect in a hardly concievable way.

In the next passage, the death theme is elaborated, for example, by the father's apologizing for not leaving anything substantial for his heirs; all he had been able to offer in life was prayer, "and I pray all the time," he assures; "I did while I lived, and I do now, too, if that is how things are in the next life" (p. 5). Here, indeed, he tries to speak as if from the grave, in a *future* now after death. In the next passage, however, he returns to the present now, hearing the delightful voice of his beloved wife. The beauty of her voice reminds him of the beauty of the Creation itself, in its every plain detail, and the joy of life inhabiting the Creation (pp. 5f.). This in turn, reminds him of the joyless

20 Leise 2009, 352f.

21 Robinson 2005, 3. References to *Gilead* will be given hereafter in parentheses in the main text.

22 Cf. Altman 1982, 118, 123f., 129 on "temporal polyvalence".

ascetism that is commonly associated with Church and clergy (p. 6). That reflection takes the father-narrator to the ministerial family history that will traverse the first part of his letter.

So far, the text looks like a series of fragments tied up by seemingly loose associations; but in essence, the account has encircled the rhetorical situation within which father Ames addresses his son. The father has clarified the *exigence*, the urgent existential situation of the letter as well as the future now of the intended reading, when the then-dead father is imagined speaking from the other side of the grave.

THE FAMILY HISTORY: MEMORY, MEMOIR, AND EXEMPLUM

After this introduction, the fatherly letter continues with a summary of the family history. It has a clearly didactic purpose, both as a warning and as an edifying collection of *exempla*. But the story is often interrupted by associative insertions, which evolve into explicit admonitions, Bible comments, or personal meditations. Ames' information that the family is characterized by three generations of Reformed ministers is immediately followed by the confession that he himself never learned self-control, but still loses his temper for the slightest thing. This gives rise to a didactic digression: "I tell you so that you can watch for this in yourself," he explains; and he continues with an exposition of the harmful effects of wrath and evil words, supported by a Bible quotation from James' letter: "Behold how much wood is kindled by how small a fire, and the tongue is a fire." (p. 7).[23]

The continued family story reveals that the three generations of ministers were alien to each other. The grandfather was a strict Presbyterian and militant abolitionist during the American Civil War.[24] He actively participated in the battles and also ruled with a rod of iron over his congregation and home. His son – Ames' father – became a Congregationalist and a pacifist in protest, which caused father and son eventually to part as enemies and never to reunite. Ames, who himself, too, was a Reformed clergyman and Congregationalist, seems torn between these two authorities. He tells that his father subsequently felt guilty about his (Ames') grandfather and sought for a possibility of reconciliation after death.

Reconciliation is given in the form of a pilgrimage to find the grandfather's unknown grave. Several pages on the first part of the letter depict how Ames as a child

23 James 3:5–6.

24 Grandpa Ames, although Presbyterian, is not unlike the contentious British Puritan Congregationalist William Ames (1576–1633), influential in New England and especially on Jonathan Edwards (van Vliet 2002, ch. ix), "who was much revered in my grandfather's generation," according to grandson Ames (Robinson 2005, 98).

accompanied the father on this pilgrimage. The journey becomes strenuous, both an adventure and a process of maturation. The narrative now adopts the character of a memoir, with detailed descriptions of events, places, and meetings and an instructive epic appeal. But Ames also explicitly refers to the *typological* pattern of the Old Testament wandering in the wilderness, with thirst, hunger, dangers, and travail on the way to the promised land of reconciliation and salvation (p. 12). More unequivocally, the story about Abraham and Isaac is also brought to the fore, as a reminder of the right of fathers to sacrifice their sons for an alleged higher purpose (p. 12). But the Abrahamic wandering in the wilderness instead brings Ames and his father closer to each other. When, finally, they find the abandoned grave, they help each other to put it in order, and then unite in a prayer, which also becomes a kind of reconciliation ceremony for all three generations (pp. 16f.). This memoir episode depicts the relationship between fathers and sons, but it also reveals problems of guilt and reconciliation as a main theme in the novel.

GENERIC WRITING PRACTICES: SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY, JEREMIAD, SERMON

Despite his desire to create a bright memory of himself for his son, Ames emphasizes his weakness: "I say this because I want you to realize that I am not by any means a saint"' (pp. 44f.). He is neither wise nor learned, he declares, and most of his writings are valueless. The only sermon he was pleased with he burned before it was to be preached. The exigence of this sermon was the raging of the Spanish influenza among the soldiers during the First World War. It was designed as a divine judgement over the congregation, which supported the war by sending their sons into it. This punishing sermon seems like a *jeremiad*.

The jeremiad was a kind of hellfire sermon, which presents an ongoing misery as a sign and a warning as well as a punishment for apostasy from the Lord, urging to conversion.[25] The jeremiad was a central genre in Puritan tradition, especially in America, with the tension between sin and grace as driving rhetorical force. It was also used extensively by Ames' militant grandfather. However, Ames' jeremiad is pacifist, condemning the war from which the death in the Spanish influenza in fact rescued the soldiers. "I said, or I meant to say," Ames tells his son,

> that the Lord was gathering them in before they could go off and commit murder against their brothers. And I said that their deaths were a sign and a warning to the rest of us that the desire for war would bring the consequences of war, because there is no ocean big enough to protect us from

25 Bercovitch 2012, 41–44.

> the Lord's judgment when we decide to hammer our plowshares into swords and our pruning hooks into spears, in contempt of the will and the grace of God (p. 48).

Thus, the sermon had presented the plague as both a punishment and a rescue. Ames originally thought that this sermon against the war would please his pacifist father, but then he realized that such a hellfire sermon would not help his already mourning and oppressed congregation. Therefore, he burned the jeremiad and instead wrote another sermon – dealing with the lost sheep, that is, forgiveness and grace.

Ames' account of the jeremiad is addressed to his son in an autobiographical writing that varies between didactics, edification, reflection, and confession. But the account is also itself an indirect jeremiad, communicated through Ames' description of his burned sermon, quoted above. The account of the jeremiad is addressed to the son, but the jeremiad enclosed in the account is not; as reported speech it lacks a current addressee and thus also rhetorical force.[26] Nevertheless, the writing of the account does trigger Ames' reflection on the theology of the jeremiad: was the disease really a sign of the Lord or not? At first, he consents: "I believe that plague was a great sign to us, and we refused to see it and take its meaning, and since then we have had war continuously"' (p. 50). But in the next sentence he is in doubt: "I'm not entirely sure I do believe that." That belief may be "the pulpit speaking," but what does *that* mean?

This meditation paves the way for reflections on the genre of the sermon. "A good sermon is one side of a passionate conversation," Ames declares (p. 51). A sermon must not be "the pulpit speaking" in an impersonal monologue, but a spiritual interaction between preacher and congregation as dialogical subjects, exchanging the roles of I and You.[27] But this dialogism includes not two but *three* parties, because the Lord himself participates too, Ames explains. Thus, the genre of the sermon expounds the Bible word as the Lord's own appeal, conveyed by the preacher to the congregation, who responds through a personal reception. Within the sermon several different genres and modes may be developed – like narrative, meditation, admonition, consolation, invocation, and prayer – but all variants participate in the three-part dialogue of the sermon.

Ames also describes his own thinking as such a three-part dialogue: "the self that yields the thought, the self that acknowledges and in some way responds to the thought, and the Lord" (p. 51). The same kind of dialogicity also governs Ames' writing: "For me writing has always felt like praying, even when I wasn't writing prayers, as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone" (p. 21), that is, with himself as a reader, the intended addressee, and the ever-present Lord.

26 See further, Austin 1962, 98f., 108, 114, on illocutionary force.

27 See further Lorensen 2014 on dialogical preaching. Dialogue, however, was not the way of Puritan preaching; see Roberts-Miller 1999, chs. 3 and 4.

When writing, Ames tries to write neither as he speaks, nor for the pulpit, but as he thinks. But his thinking transforms when he tries to find words for it, and the closer his writing comes this transformed thinking, the more "pulpitish" it becomes. All his writing therefore *inevitably* tends towards the sermon, he states: "the more it does seem to be my thinking, the more pulpitish it sounds, which I guess is inevitable" (p. 33). This statement comes close to a description of the *genre function*: that the sermon is the habitual discursive script that inevitably governs both his writing and his thinking.

IN FEAR OF THE PRODIGAL SON: WARNING, APOLOGY, AND CONFESSION

Ames' letter to his son proceeds according to the dialogical three-part pattern, alternately addressing the son, the Lord, and himself. But the dialogicity becomes tenser when the outside world turns problematic and permeates the ongoing writing. It happens at Jack Boughton's return, affecting Ames' naked innermost, stripped of the role of pastor or father. From that moment on, the letter becomes more introvert; the fatherly admonition and intimate appeal are now used as tools for the father's private self-confrontation and attempted self-deception. Thus, Jack Boughton's return creates a new rhetorical situation with a new *exigence* driving the writing: the threat from Jack Boughton. Warning his son of Jack from now on is the strongest incentive of the letter. "My impulse is strong to warn you against Jack Boughton. Your mother and you," Ames writes. (p. 143). But this present exigence is only hypothetical, since the letter won't be read until the warning is too late. So what shall he do? Addressing his grown-up son in the now of the future reading, Ames expounds his present dilemma:

> You may know by now what a fallible man I am, and how little I can trust my feelings on this subject. And you know, from living out years I cannot foresee, whether you must forgive me for warning you, or forgive me for failing to warn you, or indeed if none of it turned out to matter at all. This is a grave question for me.
>
> That paragraph would itself amount to a warning. Perhaps I can say to your mother only that much. He is not a man of the highest character. Be wary of him.
>
> If he continues to come around, I believe I'll do that (p. 143).

Shall he warn them or not? He mistrusts himself as much as Jack, and he fears the consequences of warning just as much as not warning; he is conferring with himself as much as confessing his ambivalences to his son. As Ames tries to hide his thoughts and keep himself from warning them, he gets trapped in his own conflicting thoughts. The passage therefore illuminates how Ames' will to honesty collides with his need of

self-deception after Jack's appearance. This also renders Ames an *unreliable narrator* in the epistolary novel.

That Jack represents a problem is gradually indicated in the letter, initially in the form of fragmentary information about his ethically dubious past, in particular his abandoning a destitute girl, who had borne his child. Ames condemns this ruthlessness, while simultaneously fighting against his own hardness. However, the problems pertaining to Jack's return above all concerns Jack's warm relationship with Ames' family. Ames suspects that Jack is dangerous to his family, but he also fears that Jack's youth and vitality will threaten him as a husband and father – even after his death. He is simply *jealous*, but that fact he tries to hide under the cover of family responsibility.

It is therefore important for Ames to interpret everything Jack says and does in a way that ascribes unsympathetic features to him. Jack's kind greeting after his homecoming is taken by Ames as an insult: "'You're looking wonderful, Papa!' he said, and I thought, after so many years, the first words out of his mouth would have to be prevarication" (p. 105). Over time his suspiciousness grows. But it also strikes back at Ames himself. When he feigns kindness to Jack, he assumes that Jack sees through his hypocrisy but still plays with it – out of sheer meanness:

> I'm trying to be a little more cordial to him than I have been. He sort of steps back and smiles a little, and looks at me *as though* he's thinking, "Today we're cordial! What can account for that?" And he looks me right in the face, *as though* he wants me to know he knows it is a performance and he's amused by it. I suppose an attempt is a performance, in some sense. *But what else can I do*? Most people will go along with you in these situations, whatever their private thoughts might be. I hesitate to call it *devilment*, but it certainly does make me uncomfortable, and I'm fairly sure that is what he intends. And I believe he truly is amused as well (p. 140; my italics).

Here Ames presupposes that Jack is both mean and suspicious, thereby paving the way for overinterpretation. He feels guilty both about faking cordiality and about his inability to like Jack. Thus, he projects his own suspiciousness on Jack, ascribing to Jack his (Ames') own tendency to read malicious intentions into neutral opinions:

> He treats words as if they were actions. He doesn't listen to the *meaning* of words, the way other people do. He just decides whether they are hostile, and how hostile they are. He decides whether they threaten him or injure him, and he reacts at that level. If he reads chastisement into anything you say, it's as if you had taken a shot at him. As if you had nicked his ear (p. 149).

Ames apparently has decided that Jack is of bad character, is incorrigible and cannot be forgiven. But Jack is also the son of his best friend and his own godson, baptized by himself and, on request of father Boughton, even given Ames' own name: "John (Jack) Ames" (p. 214). But this naming was against Ames' will, making him cold while

baptizing the child. Now he feels guilty: "I do feel a burden of guilt toward that child, that man, my namesake" (p. 215). Therefore, Ames wrestles with his implacability in an uneven struggle between opposing positions: "I have to try to be fair to him" (p. 139); "I must somehow contrive to think graciously about him" (pp. 140f.); "I do not forgive him. I do not know where to start" (p. 187). In this mental struggle, the letter fully assumes the genre characteristic of the spiritual autobiography: the discourse switches between self-examination, meditation, confession, Bible commenting, and overinterpreting signs of everyday situations, especially when Jack is involved. Such passages are sometimes addressed more to the father himself than to the son, but it happens that he himself discovers his deviation from the didactic purpose of the letter: "Sometimes I almost forget my purpose in writing this, which is to tell you things I would have told you if you had grown up with me, things I believe it becomes me as a father to teach you" (p. 152).

END OF STORY: REPORTED NARRATIVE, RITUAL ACTS, PERFORMATIVE SPEECH, ATONEMENT, AND *ARS MORIENDI*

Jack does not tell anyone why he has returned to Gilead. But he repeatedly goes to see Ames for talk about sin and mercy, judgement and forgiveness. Ames mistrustfully accepts, he tells his son, but gradually they get closer, and Ames' implacability and preconceptions begin to dissolve. A true reversal happens when Jack in one of these conversations in confidence reveals why he has returned and what has happened during his long absence (p. 247). Ames reproduces his narrative in direct speech (pp. 253–265). Jack tells that he now lives with a black woman and has a son with her. This time, he is very much concerned about the woman and the child, but he has difficulty in finding a home for the family. Because of racist laws forbidding marriage, they cannot marry, and because he is white, her own black family opposes their relationship. He has returned to Gilead to see if the family might settle there.

As hinted at by the story of the abolitionist grandfather, Gilead was previously a refuge for black people. But now, in 1956, the church of the blacks in the city has burnt down and the population is completely dominated by whites. Therefore, Ames tells Jack that a race-mixed family probably would not be well received in Gilead. He also expresses doubts that old Boughton, Jack's father who is ignorant of their existence, would accept them. He isn't even sure about himself in that matter (p. 262).

Still, Jack's long narrative of his struggle for his family convinces Ames that Jack is not the villain he has made of him: "he was a better man than I ever thought he could be," he now tells his son (p. 264). This is in fact a reason for him to reveal this secret story: he wants to let his son "see the beauty there is" in "a man about whom you may

never hear one good word, and I just don't know another way to let you see the beauty there is in him" (p. 265). Here he claims the opposite to his previous judgements about Jack: "He is not a man of the highest character" (p. 143). Writing about Jack he even inserts the ejaculatory prayer "God bless the poor devil!" (p. 266). Now he is all compassion and empathy: "I felt as if I'd have bequeathed him wife and child if I could to supply the loss of his own" (p. 266). Jealousy, the selfish "sin of covetise," as he names it (p. 152), seems replaced by generosity and a spirit of self-sacrifice.

The result of Jack's return however, is that he leaves his father's house and Gilead a second time. In the farewell moment, Ames gets the sudden impulse to read the traditional biblical blessing over Jack (Numbers 6:24–26). But in doing that, Ames adds some words, calling Jack by his full name "John Ames Boughton" and praying for him to be blessed in the capacity of "this beloved son and brother and husband and father" (p. 276). This speech act, as described by Ames, seems to transform the blessing into a renewed baptismal ritual where Ames bestows Jack his own name once again; yet this time not reluctantly and cold, but with godfatherly love. Simultaneously, he confirms Jack in the roles of responsibility that Jack had previously failed, this way rehabilitating him. Blessing is a ritual prayer, but transformed into baptism it also becomes a rhetorical act with performative function. The impact on Jack is remarkable: he "sat back," looking at Ames "as if he were waking out of a dream" (p. 276) – maybe as reborn. If so, Ames also has fulfilled his remorseful wish to redo the original christening: "I do wish I could christen him again, for my sake" (p. 215).

In essence, however, all aroused problems remain unresolved: Jack loses his wife and child; he is not reconciled with his father; and he does not improve his official reputation as an irresponsible loser. Ames is still dying, and his family will soon be deprived of its breadwinner. And not least: racism manifests itself, even in Gilead. Ames ends his letter by simultaneously reflecting on "the sacred beauty of Creation" and "our mortal insufficiency" (p. 280), that is, exercising the *ars moriendi*. He imagines himself "going into the ground here [in Gilead] as a last wild gesture of love" and then "smolder away the time until the great and general incandescence" (p. 282). But for now, he will pray for his son "to find a way to be useful" – "I'll pray, and then I'll sleep," he closes. These last words of his letter have been refrained throughout the entire letter, ending each section. Still, each section holds an implicit prayer in itself: "I pray all the time" (p. 5); "For me writing has always felt like praying, even when I wasn't writing prayers, as I was often enough" (p. 21).

RHETORICAL FORCE OF THE NOVEL: AMES AS AN EXEMPLUM

What future impact this, presumably edifying, letter might have on Ames' grown-up son is not to be known. But through writing this letter, processing his thoughts and feelings through the different genre schemas that his discursive situations call forth, Ames himself has mitigated his implacability and opened himself to forgive his presumed enemy. By following his spiritual journey through the various genre conventions and writing modes of the epistolary novel, even the reader of the novel is drawn into the process. There is a tension between the various exigences and underlying forces at different levels of the letter; another tension is between the kinds of genre rhetoric pertaining to those forces and Ames' ambivalent searching for an adequate personal mode of expression. The ways of these tensions during the unfolding of the epistolary discourse eventually conveys what might be the deepest significance of the novel. That is: Charity – or loving your neighbour, as Ames might say. Forgetting yourself for your alien neighbour and loving your enemy (pp. 152, 215) appears to be the hardest problem and highest value of the novel.

This vision of *agape* is not a powerful political message. But it contrasts with the present political reality – not least in the contemporary United States of America – and illuminates what could or should be. To dig up a final message in *Gilead*, however, would be a mistake. The dialogic and problem-processing character of the text rather generates reflective reading and further questions. My task has been to elucidate how the text prepares for such readings by intersecting different rhetorical genre patterns within an existential epistolary novel.

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MARTIN WESTERHOLM

"And his own did not receive him": Homelessness and the exclusion of the prophetic from the literary world of *Gilead*

INTRODUCTION

A pregnant episode in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* raises a question that is crucial not only to consideration of the literary world of her novels, but also to reflection on modes of theological speech and of Robinson's wider contribution to public discourse today. John Ames, an elderly Congregationalist minister in a small town in Iowa, finds an old magazine article that his best friend and theological alter ego, a fellow minister, had passed on to him years before. The article, taken from a real 1948 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*, is a critique of the way that the majority of Americans practise their faith.[1] For Ames, the article is irksome, and raises a crucial question concerning the identification of the prophetic. "How do you tell a scribe from a prophet?"[2] Ames takes the writer to install himself in the position of the prophet and to condemn American Christians more generally; but Ames supposes that the relation is in fact the inverse. The writer seems "to be a bit of a scribe himself," and fails what Ames himself takes to be the test of the prophetic: he does not appear to love the people whom he chastises (p. 162).

"How do you tell a scribe from a prophet?" Though raised in a brief episode, the question is central to an important set of literary, cultural, and theological questions. Ames wonders throughout the novel just where his family's long history in ministry has risen to the level of the prophetic, and questions regarding the identification of prophetic voices are central to consideration of Robinson's own cultural place, and of the place of theological speech in the wider cultural sphere. My aim is to take up a pair of tasks in relation to these questions. I intend, in the first place, to highlight the

1 See Barnett 1948.

2 Robinson 2005a, 162. References to *Gilead* will be given hereafter in parentheses in the main text.

centrality of questions regarding the prophetic in Ames' reflections on his family's ministry, and to show that Ames' thoughts are marked by an ambivalence regarding the place of the prophetic in the spiritual economy that he inhabits. I then propose to consider Ames' ambivalence in relation to Robinson's own theological convictions. My goal in concluding the essay is to suggest that tensions in *Gilead* between general and particular modes of divine presence reflect a tension in Robinson's own thinking on these themes, and that this tension shapes her capacity to imagine the forms that redemption might take in her literary world. I intend finally to suggest that the prodigal son character in Robinson's novels is unable to find redemption because Robinson's theological imagination makes it difficult for a form of redemption that does not include embrace of the world to come into view. Her emphasis on the sacramental blessedness of human creatureliness obscures a form of redemption that reaches those who experience life as a struggle rather than a gift.

THE QUESTION OF THE PROPHETIC IN GILEAD

I propose to begin developing these claims by considering the place of the prophetic in Robinson's *Gilead*. My aim in considering this topic is to suggest that one task confronting Robinson's readers is to wrestle with the ambivalence regarding the prophetic that marks her literary world. Three preparatory points will be useful for us in approaching the topic. The first is that the prophetic appears in a mode of particularity rather than generality.[3] In contrast to, say, the generality of God's sustaining presence in and to all things, the prophetic appears in a mode of particularity, bound up with the vocations and acts of concrete individuals like Isaiah and Jeremiah. The second point is then that the prophetic word often has as its particular function the conveying of words of judgement. Where the priests have among their tasks the administration of rites of blessing, prophetic figures like Elijah, Isaiah, or John the Baptist are most commonly tasked with speaking words of judgement that recall people to the ways of God. The third point concerns the world of symbols that surround prophetic work. It is crucial for us in tracking Ames' own reflections that fire is a symbol of the prophetic, and stands in a two-sided relation to prophecy. On one side, fire stands as a sign of the bestowal and presence of a prophetic vocation. Moses receives his prophetic vocation from a burning bush, Isaiah from the touch of a burning coal; Elijah is marked out as a true prophet, in distinction from the false prophets of Baal, because he is able to call down fire; the prophetic spirit settles on early believers in Jerusalem in tongues of fire. On a second side, fire stands as a test that distinguishes true and false prophecy. The

3 See here Moberly 2008, 1–41.

notion of fire as a test of works that do or do not bear the marks of divine validation is developed explicitly by the apostle Paul. It emerges in relation to questions of the prophetic in particular through Elijah's encounter with the false prophets of Baal, and the validation of Daniel and his friends as servants of God by surviving the fiery furnace. Fire symbolism is crucial to the prophetic, both marking and testing its veracity, designating and proving where a vocation to speak for God is operative.

The two-sided operation of fire imagery in the Bible is important because it is repeated in *Gilead*, and provides keys to tracking reflection on the prophetic in the novel. I propose to develop an account of the role of the prophetic in *Gilead* by attending to two aspects of the text: Ames' reflections on how far his father and grandfather, both ministers before him, were representative of the prophetic, and also his consideration of how far his own ministry has served as a conduit through which prophetic truth was brought into his community. The first of these aspects, Ames' reflections on his grandfather and father, marks out a crucial point of tension in the novel. These two figures stand in a fundamental polarity, the one a radical abolitionist who fought with John Brown and, in Ames' own words, preached his people into war, the other a radical pacifist who was repulsed by his father's actions and, in a moment pregnant with meaning, buried his gun. The tension between the two provides a space in which questions regarding the prophetic may be asked; disagreement between them regarding what it means to speak for God is a crucial element in the novel. On one side, the grandfather's prophetic vision is expressed in the biblical notion of God as a purifying fire. A needlework embroidered with an adaptation of words from 1 Peter, "The Lord Our God is a Purifying Fire," hung above the communion table at the front of Ames' grandfather's sanctuary; upon seeing it, Ames' father walked out of the church (p. 113). On the other side, the father's vision is expressed in the notion of loving the neighbour and the primacy of peace. Hearing the father preach on these themes, the grandfather, in turn, walks out of the church, and expresses regret that the seraphim never touched Ames' father's lips with coal. The father responds by questioning the veracity of the grandfather's own "so-called visions" (pp. 96–97). Ames writes that this dispute about who is touched with fire and possesses the true vision of the prophet opened a decisive chasm between them that was never properly closed (p. 97).

As a starting point, we can see that the issue that runs between Ames' grandfather and father is the question that Ames encounters in the *Ladies' Home Journal*: "How do you tell a scribe from a prophet?" Ames' wrestling with the relation between these figures sets the question in a central position in the literary world of *Gilead*, and it is crucial that it also allows us to see a measure of ambivalence entering into the depiction of the prophetic. Two points are important for us in tracing this dynamic. The first is that, in important respects, Ames sides with his grandfather in supposing that he is

the true bearer of a prophetic vocation. This dynamic is brought to the fore through the fire imagery of the novel. Ames tells us that his grandfather was "like a man everlastingly struck by lightning, so that there was an ashiness about his clothes" (p. 56). Ames recounts attending a baseball game with his grandfather that was cut short by a thunderstorm; he writes that it was as if the thunder and lightning were tipping their caps to his grandfather, and refers again to the ashy quality of his coat (pp. 53–54). The grandfather could not, it seems, reach for a bit of candy without his fingers in the bag sounding like fire; it is appropriate, Ames thinks, that his grandfather's gravesite looks like a place where someone tried to smother a fire (pp. 53, 57). By contrast, Ames is quite clear that his father does not stand in the ranks of the prophets. The father turns his back on a notion of the divine as a purifying fire; Ames writes, as part of an "experiment with candor," that his father "was a man who acted from principle, as he said himself. He acted from faithfulness to the truth as he saw it. But something in the way he went about it made him disappointing from time to time, and not just to me" (p. 7). The father's views feel hollow: he discouraged any notions of visions or miracles; his ministry is described in such a way that we are not surprised when he seems, later in life, to have abandoned his faith as an expression of old, provincial ideas (pp. 55–56, 268). The grandfather and the father are divided by different understandings of where the prophetic operates. It is clear that Ames takes his grandfather to be much more nearly the bearer of prophecy.

Equipped with this recognition, it is important for us, as a second point, that Ames' depiction of his grandfather introduces ambiguity regarding the place of the prophetic in the world of *Gilead*, for one of the crucial features of Robinson's novel is the way that the grandfather stands outside the spiritual economy that otherwise binds it together. The focal point of this economy, central to wider assessments of Robinson's work, is "experience of the divine in the immediate and the immanent", a sense of the sacramental sanctity of everyday life and the goodness of the world.[4] Ames speaks of being drawn into the world in the course of it, of loving "this poor, perishable world", hoping that his son will too, and of the pleasure that has come when he has thought that his wife feels at home in the world (pp. 35, 60–64). Senses of the sanctity of and attachment to the world pervades Robinson's Gilead trilogy;[5] but it is crucial that they are wholly alien to Ames' grandfather. We see this, first, in the grandfather's attitude to the objects of everyday life. For the other characters in Robinson's world, quotidian objects – egg sandwiches for Ames, a radio for the Glory of *Home*, a shawl for the

4 See, for instance, Liese 2009, 351.

5 The other texts in the trilogy that are referenced here are entitled *Home* and *Lila* (see Robinson 2008 and 2014). A fourth novel entitled *Jack* appeared in 2020 after this essay was written.

titular character of *Lila* – stand for a sacramental blessedness; but Ames' grandfather is free of these attachments. He made life difficult for the rest of the family by giving away everything that was not nailed down, forcing Ames' mother to hide valuables and the young Ames to wear his Sunday best every day lest it otherwise disappear. "My grandfather never kept anything that was worth giving away," Ames writes; objects in a home were, for him, opportunities to give rather than experience grace (p. 35). In relation to the comforts of everyday life, the prophetic fire by which he was consumed is, Ames writes, "worse than a house fire" (p. 35). The grandfather's attitude towards the everyday situates him outside the circle of the sacramental sanctity of Robinson's world, and it is crucial that this first difference rests on a fundamentally different conception of visions of the divine. In considering the work of his grandfather, Ames makes plain that he thinks him the recipient of a prophetic form of vision, but he goes on to suggest that his grandfather suffered from too "narrow" an understanding of what vision might mean (p. 103). A vision of Christ in the guise of a slave who wished to be free wholly determined the expenditure of his energies; but the particularity of this prophetic vision was not balanced by awareness of a broader mode of vision that is bound up with the gradual disclosure over time of the goodness of human life generally. Ames describes his grandfather as "too dazzled by the great light of his experience to realize that an impressive sun shines on us all", and suggests that consciousness of the "impressive sun" of the goodness of existence generally is intimately connected with the power of memory to disclose goodness retrospectively (pp. 103–104). The point is of decisive importance for Ames: "Perhaps this 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 [...] I believe there are visions that come to us only in memory, in retrospect" (pp. 103–104). The power of retrospective vision to sanctify experience is a key source of the sense of the blessedness that pervades the Gilead trilogy; but it is just this power that is wholly foreign to the grandfather's prophetic sensibility. We might say that attention to the prophetic prevents the sacramental from entering the grandfather's field of vision. He is so consumed by the particularity of his vision that he lacks a sense of a general mode of divine blessing.

The distance between Ames' grandfather and the wider sacramental economy of *Gilead* comes to a kind of culminating expression through the symbols that convey a sense of blessedness in the novel. Robinson consistently deploys water as a symbol of the sacramental – a river, droplets illuminated by light, the water of baptism – and it is crucial that the grandfather is depicted as having a fraught relation to water. In an episode that Ames takes to be rich with metaphorical significance, the grandfather encounters a river as he is fleeing enemy soldiers, and his New Testament is swept away as he tries to cross (pp. 86, 103). Encounter with water is not a source of blessing, but is

rather an obstacle that effects a literal separation between the grandfather and the living water of the gospel text. "The waters never parted for him, not once in his life, so far as I know," Ames writes. "I always felt there was a metaphor in that" (p. 103). Ames' sense of the significance of the episode highlights the distinction between the blessing that others find in water, and the affliction that it marks for the grandfather. Much is at stake in this distinction, including the nature of blessing, which the grandfather, on the basis of an etymology that Ames describes tellingly as uncharacteristically forced, associates with being bloodied rather than with appreciation of life's goodness (p. 36). For our purposes, however, we can conclude simply by observing that the grandfather's spiritual world is not the spiritual world of the rest of the novel. Touched by prophetic flame, he is a stranger to the sacramentality of creation. The grandfather struggles to integrate into the wider theological world of the novel.

At this point, then, we can see that important ambiguities surround the figure of the grandfather. He is, on one level, depicted as sharing in a prophetic vocation in a way that Ames and his father are not; but he is also depicted as standing outside the wider economy of blessedness that marks the novel as a whole. Consideration of the grandfather sets us before a tension between the prophetic and the sacramental within Robinson's literary world. We can take consideration of this tension forward by turning from Ames' reflections on his father and grandfather to his understanding of his own vocation. It is not only in looking back on the work of his forebears, but also in considering his own career in ministry, that Ames inquires regarding the presence of the prophetic. It is important for us that his self-examination furthers a sense of the ambiguity of the prophetic in *Gilead*. The centrality of concern for the prophetic in Ames' self-reflection is clear: he writes that the word "preacher" comes from the French term for prophet, and the fire imagery of the novel shows that his reflections on his ministry are organized in part around consideration of how far his preaching has been true to the original sense of the word (pp. 266–267). We see this, first, in Ames' attitude regarding his old sermons. These sermons, totalling about 67,000 pages' worth, equal to the output of Augustine and Calvin, sit in boxes in the attic, and Ames makes plain that he wishes them to be burned (pp. 22, 280). They are a "record of his innermost life", and Ames is clear that "there is not a word in any of those sermons I didn't mean when I wrote it," but they never lived up to his expectations, and he does not wish to answer for them in the next life. The prophetic fire was not in them; Ames is aware that his vocation is not touched by fire in the way that his grandfather's was; and he does not think his work will stand the test of fire (pp. 35, 44–45, 232). His awareness of their inadequacy is revealed in part by their failure in the face of Lila, the young woman who comes to his church from some "unspeakable distance" and "unimageable otherness" and ends up marrying him (p. 24). Preaching with Lila in attendance

is, for Ames, a test of his vocation, an experience that he compares to preaching with Christ in attendance (p. 156). He says that there is a truth in her face that tests what he is saying. He continually reports that, in face of this test, his words seemed to turn to ash in his mouth (pp. 24, 77, 156). Though he meant every word of his sermons, they do not survive the test of fire.

The complexity of Ames' own attitude to the prophetic is conveyed in a further form in his reflections on one sermon in which he supposes that he did rise to the level of the prophetic. In considering his sermons up in the attic, he writes that there is one that is not there, and it is one in which a particular prophetic fire was present. In face of the post-war epidemic of Spanish flu, Ames penned a sermon in which he took the flu as a sign of judgement for the evils of the war. In so doing, he fulfilled his own understanding of the function of the prophetic, which he identifies with finding meaning in trouble, and he has no doubt that was right to see the plague as a sign of judgement: "if these things were not signs, I don't know what a sign would look like" (pp. 48, 266–267). Yet he cannot go through with preaching the sermon. Rather than delivering a word that is tinged with prophetic fire, he himself consigns the sermon to the flames, dropping it in the stove rather than preaching it (p. 49). Ames himself burns up the one sermon that might have survived the fires that distinguish the prophetic from the pharisaical. The episode is indicative of the tension between prophetic and sacramental modes of divine presence within the spiritual economy of the novel as a whole, for Ames goes on to suggest that the underlying issue is that he did not think that his prophetic word had any place in the sacramental space of his church. He imagines preaching the sermon to the old ladies who populate his pews, saintly souls who weed his garden and bring him casseroles, and he feels the absurdity of a prophetic message. His church is a space that he associates with the blessedness of the sacramental; he cannot see the sense that the prophetic word would have in it. To don the mantle of his grandfather in this space would seem an absurdity.

Ames' sense of the dissonance between the prophetic word and the context in which he operates provides a useful point from which to draw together the strands of the discussion so far. To this point, we have seen that, through differing depictions of the ministry of the three generations of the Ames family in small-town Iowa, Robinson's novel poses freighted questions regarding the identification of the prophetic. We are shown a world in which Ames' grandfather bore the fire of prophecy, his father stood at some remove from the prophetic vocation, and Ames himself was but once touched by the fire of prophecy and drew back from the encounter, reducing to ash the one word that would survive the flames of judgement. This depiction would suggest that Ames' grandfather stands, in an important sense, as a spiritual hero of the novel; but it is crucial to the spiritual economy of the novel that this is not the case.

At the heart of this economy is a sense of sacramental sanctity rooted in the power of retrospective vision to uncover the blessedness in things, and Ames' grandfather stands decisively outside this economy. There is, it seems, no space for his prophetic vocation in the sacramental sphere of the novel, and this same dynamic appears to mark Ames' own experience in ministry. His one encounter with the prophetic serves only to highlight how out of place the prophetic word would be in his world. His is a sphere of decent souls who have shared an economy of general blessedness, bringing him food in his bachelorhood and tolerating with serene grace the abstract and speculative tendency of his preaching. These souls stand squarely within the sacramental economy of Robinson's fiction, and Ames recognizes that, within this economy, the prophetic seems simply out of place. The fire of prophecy seems foreign to a place nourished by waters of blessing.

ON THE AMBIGUITY OF ROBINSON'S THEOLOGICAL VISION

What are we to make of the ambiguities that surround the prophetic in *Gilead*? The question is important because the nature and identity of the prophetic are topics that are of considerable wider significance. Assessment of Robinson's own cultural place turns at points on how far she herself speaks with a prophetic voice.[6] A range of contemporary voices suggest that the prophetic is the mode in which theological speech properly operates.[7] The question for us is how we might position ourselves to progress in thinking about fraught questions regarding prophecy and theological truth-telling. A range of alternatives suggest themselves: we might consider the answers that are suggested within the world of the novel itself, or the relation between the novel and the theological sources on which it draws – John Calvin, for instance, or Karl Barth – but I propose to take up the question by bringing the literary world of *Gilead* into dialogue with the theological conceptions that Robinson herself has expressed in her own essays, and to ask how far the theological ambiguities in Robinson's fiction may reflect points of difficulty in her own thinking. Relating questions internal to *Gilead* to the views expressed in Robinson's essays is not without danger, for critics have sometimes gone astray by treating Ames' voice in *Gilead* as synonymous with Robinson's own;[8] yet it should not be overly difficult for us to build up the qualifications

6 See, e.g., Chakrabarti 2005; McClay 2018; Shea 2004, 170; cf. the more critical tone, suggesting failure to speak truth to power and to do more than preach to the converted, in Jacobs 2016.

7 See, e.g., Jackson 2015.

8 See, e.g., the suggestion that Robinson is guilty of neglecting Christianity's historical support of slavery in Douglas 2011.

that are required in order to avoid this danger. While Ames' voice cannot be identified with Robinson's, it may be illuminated through dialogue with Robinson no less than through the more conventional scholarly ventures of dialogue with Calvin or Barth. Once this dialogue is begun, no more than a moment's reflection is required in order to see that there are at least elements of a shared sensibility between Ames and Robinson – a sense of the wondrous blessedness of things and of the importance of a mode of vision that apprehends this wonder, appreciation for Calvin and the abolitionists, and so on. Suitably cautioned about the dangers of conflating author and narrator, intelligible dialogue between the two ought not to be impossible.

I propose to approach this dialogue by considering Robinson's own understanding of differing modes of divine presence. In considering *Gilead*, we saw that ambiguities regarding the notion of the prophetic are rooted, at points at least, in a tension between particular and general modes of divine presence. Ames' grandfather allows attention to the particularity of his vision to crowd out attention to the providential blessings in which all share. Ames knows a life that is shot through with a general blessedness that comes to light through the power of retrospective vision, but he cannot find a place for the particularity of the prophetic word within his wider sacramental vision. The figures that populate *Gilead* struggle to balance general and particular modes of divine presence. My aim is to show that the difficulty is, at the very least, a mirror of an unresolved issue in Robinson's own theological vision. In considering her essays, I will argue that she herself shows signs of uncertainty about the integration of the particular and the general, and that the uncertainty has significant theological consequences. As she herself takes up theological questions, her work is marked by a movement of deflection through which indications of a particular mode of divine presence are repeatedly dissolved into affirmations of generalized divine blessing. This tendency is motivated by a desire to avoid the kind of "Christian exclusivism" that can arise through attention to particularistic modes of divine presence; but I wish to suggest that in fact dissolution of the particular grounds a form of exclusivism that is reflected in a central theological problematic of the Gilead trilogy: the inability of Jack Boughton to find redemption. By dissolving a particularistic mode of divine presence that includes judgement of the world as a key element, Robinson does not leave herself with the theological grammar that is required to articulate a form of redemption that reaches those who understand their lives only in terms of suffering and hardship. In privileging a general creaturely blessedness for the sake of avoiding exclusivism, Robinson seems to exclude a mode of divine presence that reaches those for whom existence appears to bear the mark of curse rather than blessing.

I propose to develop these claims by attending to three instances in Robinson's essays in which she is confronted by theological material that appears to speak of a

particular mode of divine presence, and employs a reading strategy that allows her to dissolve attention to particularity into affirmation of generality. These instances concern the incarnation of Christ as a whole, and Christ's crucifixion and resurrection in particular. Turning, first, to questions of incarnation, it is important that, in a recent essay, Robinson takes up the theme only after suggesting that she has been "slow in arriving at a Christology, at least in articulating one".[9] The difficulty, she says, had been finding an account of Christ's person and work that avoided any hint of "narrowness" or "Christian exclusivism".[10] The solution, she recounts, arrived through recognition of the way that the Prologue to John's gospel places Christ "at the center of the phenomenon of Creation".[11] John tells us that all things were made "through" Christ, and that, without him, "nothing was made that has been made". Robinson takes these verses to mean that, by virtue of Christ's humanity, the human is "profoundly intrinsic to Being" and the bearer of a particular "sacredness".[12] On her construal, all things were made through the divine Word, and the Word takes on humanity; thus, it is proper to affirm an "ontological centrality of humankind in the created order", and to insist that this "ontological centrality" has a "theological corollary, the profound and unique sacredness of human beings as such".[13] Or, put slightly differently, because Christ is "at the origin and source of Being," "a quality which can be called human inheres in Creation", and the human is "a uniquely sacred and intrinsic aspect of Being".[14] Because of creative work of the divine Word, "our love and hope are sacred," "existence honors them and will honor them,"[15] and any kind of theological "exclusivism" seems to lose its sense, for the notion "that the reach of Christ's mercy would honor the narrow limits of human differences" seems an aesthetic impossibility.[16] In the words of a different essay, "we as Christians cannot think of Christ as isolated in space or time if we really do accept the authority of our own texts".[17]

In short, then, the key to the development of Robinson's mature Christology is a reading of the Johannine prologue in which attention shifts from announcement of the astonishing particularity in which the creative Word is incarnate to affirmation of a general sacredness of human beings. Shifts of this kind are ubiquitous in and determinative of her more recent work. Her theological emphasis falls repeatedly on the gen-

9 See Robinson 2015, 209.
10 Robinson 2015, 209, 216.
11 Robinson 2015, 209, 216.
12 Robinson 2015, 209, 216.
13 Robinson 2015, 216, 222.
14 Robinson 2015, 209, 216.
15 Robinson 2015, 225.
16 Robinson 2015, 209, 216.
17 Robinson 2015, 125.

erality of "the Christ-presence in Creation,"[18] on Christ as a "gracious abiding presence in all reality"[19] and the "experience of sacred presence in the world" that this abiding presence brings.[20] The question that we face is what we are to make of these emphases. It should be stipulated, though not pressed with undue gracelessness (even an essayist of Robinson's talents can, after all, only work out so much in a single piece), that shifts from "all things were made through him" to "a human quality inheres in creation," to "the human is intrinsically sacred," to an expansive theological universalism gloss over so much contentious theological material that they cannot meaningfully be called more than impressionistic associations. We can further consider these movements in Robinson's thinking by turning to her comments on the resurrection.[21]

This second topic might seem to draw Robinson's attention away from the generality of a Christ presence in creation, for the resurrection appears to represent a point at which the particularity of the incarnation is at its most scandalous; indeed, Robinson herself suggests that the intention of the gospel writers in recording the resurrection is to "heighten its singularity".[22] But Robinson goes on to steer the discussion in directions that typify her mature thought by interweaving reflection on the resurrection with examination of Psalm 8. This psalm contains the wondering affirmations of the psalmist: "When I consider the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou has ordained, what is man, that thou art mindful of him?"[23] For Robinson, the psalmist's wondering "what is man that thou are mindful of him?" helps to exegete the resurrection story because it holds the clue to understanding the confusions regarding identity that litter the resurrection accounts. Where different gospel writers seem confused about whether angels or a single man dressed in white appeared to the women at the tomb, Robinson suggests that the lesson – "central to the meaning of the resurrection," we are told – is that angels can pass for men, and men, by extension, for angels, appearing in their "immortal nature" when appearing "under the aspect of joy and kindness and holiness".[24] The psalmist asks "what is man that thou art mindful of him?"; Robinson answers that human beings are the possessors of an angelic immortal nature, and suggests that recognition of this nature is the key to un-

18 Robinson 2015, 145.
19 Robinson 2015, 125.
20 Robinson 2015, 136.
21 Robinson 2005, 227–244. This essay was first published in 1996; *The death of Adam* was first published in 1998.
22 Robinson 2005, 238.
23 It is perhaps part of Robinson's aesthetic sensibility that she quotes Psalm 8 from the King James Version, which uses male terms to refer to humanity as a whole. I will simply follow her usage here, in large part so that the pronouns in quotations from her work remain intelligible.
24 Robinson 2005, 233–234.

derstanding Mary's inability to recognize the risen Christ. What the narrative shows, she claims, is that the "most dazzling vision of holiness" takes the form of "mere commonplace, ineffable humanity", for, risen to glory, Christ appears in "the composure of an ordinary man [...] going about his work".[25] Robinson suggests, in sum, that the resurrection story is a commentary on the psalmist's answer to his own question. Having asked "what is man that thou art mindful of him?," the psalmist goes on to describe human beings as "crowned with glory and honor," and this, for Robinson, is the lesson of the resurrection. The resurrection shows that man "is in a singular sense what God has made him, because of the dignity God has conferred upon him, splendor of a higher order, like that of angels".[26] And so, Robinson writes autobiographically that, nurtured by the lessons of the resurrection, "I have spent my life watching, not to see beyond the world, merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes. I think the concept of transcendence is based on a misreading of creation. With all respect to heaven, the scene of miracle is here, among us."[27]

In these comments, we encounter an earlier articulation of the theological sensibilities that Robinson associates with her late-blossoming Christology. As in her reading of the Johannine prologue, an account of the resurrection serves as the ground for instruction in the general sanctity and dignity of humanity, and for directing attention away from the particularity of the risen Christ to the miracles that unfold in the every day. We encounter one more instance of this pattern in reflections on a set of old hymns. One such hymn refers to Christ's bearing of "the dreadful cross"; here, if anywhere, we might expect to find attention to a mode of divine presence that is bound up with problematization rather than embrace of the world. In the wider world of the New Testament, the death of Christ signifies the condemnation of sin, and the need for a putting to death of a sinful old self. On Pauline terms, whatever is to be said about the glory and dignity of human creatures is to be said about the new person, rooted in Christ, who is put on after a putting to death of the old self. For Karl Barth, the cross signifies that reconciliation and judgement always form a pair, the affirmation of God's yes always accompanied by God's no; but, though others have found resonances of these notions in her novels, they are not to be found in her essay. She deploys a two-step account of the hymn in order to argue that it encapsulates the meaning of incarnation narratives as articulations of the worth of the world "more powerfully [...] than whole shelves full of books".[28] She claims, first, that the "main point" of the crucifixion narratives is that "God is of a kind to love the world extravagantly, wondrously" – and

25 Robinson 2005, 239–240.
26 Robinson 2005, 240.
27 Robinson 2005, 243.
28 See Robinson 2012, 128.

so far, so good, we might say. But Robinson then executes a shift through which the "main point" shifts from the love of God to the worth of the world. What God's love means, Robinson says, is that the world is "worth, which is not to say worthy of, this pained and rapturous love".[29] Here we might pause for a moment. That the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ indicate a wondrous divine love is theologically fundamental; but the shift from the marvel of gratuitous divine benevolence to the worth of the world is curious. A pivot from the particular to the general has again occurred: the crucifixion has become occasion for affirming the goodness of the whole, but here something crucial has been missed. The wonder of divine love is that it is directed to a world that, while good in its created essence, stands under the sign of sin and must be subjected to the sign of condemnation in order for reconciliation to occur. The cross represents a word of judgement, associated at other points in biblical narratives with the work of prophets, that must stand alongside affirmations of creaturely worth. A central point about the particular mode of divine presence that is signalled by the cross is again lost in a pivot to generality.

In sum, then, we can see that, in considering the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, Robinson is consistent in employing interpretive strategies that shift attention from the particular to the general. Her essays appear to mirror aspects of her fiction in that they are sufficiently absorbed in sacramental modes of presence that prophetic modes of presence struggle to break through. Just as Ames' prophetic word simply did not belong in a church of saintly old ladies, so, in Robinson's essays, the Christ who is incarnate in prophetic particularity seems not to belong in a cosmos suffused by his own dignifying presence. The question for us is what we are to make of this pattern in Robinson's work. We could perhaps pursue conversation with her claim to have arrived late a Christology by asking if, in repeated deflecting the particularity of the incarnate Christ, she has arrived at a Christology at all; but I propose instead to turn back to her literary world and inquire into the existential stakes of the theological question. Questioning how far Robinson's work is shaped by a fully-formed Christology might sound like an exercise in the kind of theological hairsplitting that is a very real hallmark of the pharisaical; yet I wish to conclude by suggesting that the issue is crucial because it takes us to the heart of questions regarding redemption. The question of the forms in which God may be present is the question of the forms in which redemption may be understood to arrive. The question I wish finally to raise is whether Robinson has a sufficiently expansive understanding of divine presence to ground a sufficiently expansive vision of redemption.

The question can be put sharply in relation to the dynamics of redemption in her

29 Robinson 2012, 128.

novels. Why is it, finally, that *Gilead* ends with no sign of reconciliation between Ames and Jack, or any sign of a homecoming for Jack? Why is that redemption, as it is imagined for Jack, comes only at the end of *Home* as his son enters into a circle of sacramental blessedness by finding his visit to the family home sanctified by the stories that his father told? And why is it that this redemption demands so much of Glory, who gives up her life in order to maintain the family home, holding open a space of sacramentality, rooted in memory, into which Jack's son can enter? Feminist critics have suggested that there is something troubling about the way that Glory is pressed into the role of the woman figure who sacrifices everything in order to give possibilities to others. I wish to suggest that there is something troubling about a theological world in which redemption cannot be imagined in any form other than Jack's son entering the economy of sacramental blessedness that shapes his grandfather's spiritual world. It may be a sign of a theological vision not quite come to maturity that redemption appears only in terms of participation in a sense of sacramental blessedness, for this vision of redemption does not obviously include space for those whose experience is marked by a sense of curse rather than blessing. The worry can perhaps be summed up like this. Robinson indicates that she was slow to arrive at a Christology because she struggled to see how affirmation of the particularity of divine presence in the incarnation avoids feeding a "Christian exclusivism"; but we might ask if her decision to address the issue by systematically pivoting from indications of a particular mode of divine presence to affirmations of a general divine presence reinscribes an "exclusivism" in which salvation cannot appear for those who do not experience the world as blessing. Do we not, for the sake of those who are at home neither with themselves nor with their world, require a vision of redemption that includes a word of judgement regarding the world and its injustices? Does Jack remain homeless because Robinson's theological imagination does not leave space for redemption to reach those who need a grace that is coupled with prophetic judgement, rather than sacramental blessing, of the world?

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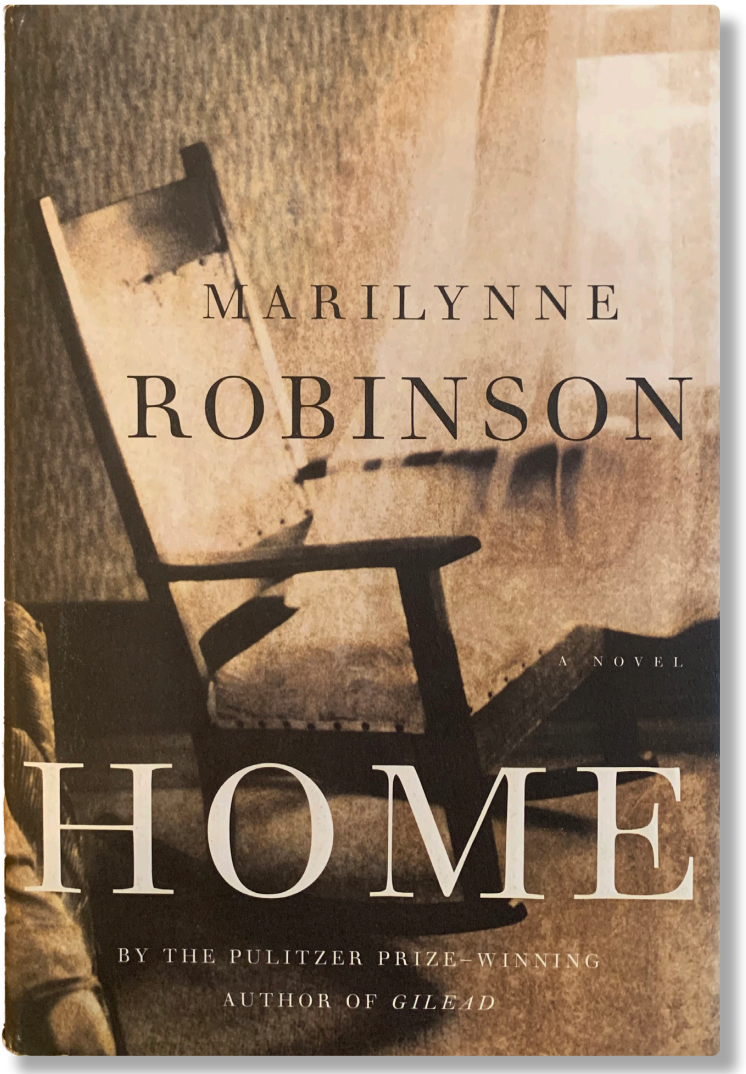

Home *by Marilynne Robinson, published in 2008.*

HÅKAN MÖLLER

The art of forgiveness – in Robinson's *Home*

INTRODUCTION

"How is guilt in others, real or imagined, to be dealt with? How is one's own sense of guilt to be borne or relieved?" asks Marilynne Robinson in her essay 'Grace' in *The givenness of things*. Further on in the same essay while discussing Shakespeare's plays she maintains that reconciliation is the main theme in many of his plays, and that many of them end with reconciliation. She writes: "They are about forgiveness that is unmerited, unexpected, unasked, unconditional. In other words, they are about grace".[1] She has herself made forgiveness and reconciliation a central theme in her writing.

In one novel this seems to me to be the subject of major characterization: *Home* (2008). In this chapter I concentrate on this work, which I analyse as follows: (a) I shall first mention several examples of forgiveness in the New Testament; (b) and then focus on the parable of the prodigal son in the New Testament, in literature in general, and in Robinson's 2004 novel *Gilead* in particular; (c) I shall then take an example from *Home* to throw light on several instances of this thematic concentration. In addition to the influence of forgiveness and reconciliation I shall also draw attention to the importance of space and to some extent time in *Home*: the space where words and events take place is another central theme in Robinson's writing. And within the home, the kitchen, where the three central characters often converge. The point at which they find themselves on their passage through life also influences their relationship to their home – and to forgiveness.

1 Robinson 2015, 33.

IN THE BEGINNING: JESUS AND FORGIVENESS AS A WORD AND AS AN EVENT

Most people would probably instinctively consider forgiveness a central element in the Bible. God forgives, or to put it another way, forgiveness is part of God's being, and forgiving of what He does. God forgives, and people, who have been created in God's image, do their best to forgive too. But as Anthony Bash points out, forgiveness occurs only infrequently in the New Testament.[2] Jesus hands out forgiveness in several exceptional cases, but without any exact explanation of who forgives or why forgiveness is granted (see Matthew 9:2ff. / Mark 2:5, 9 / Luke 5:20, 23 and Luke 7:36–50). In Mark 2:1–12 it is clearly stated that Jesus forgives the sick, and discussing with those who question his legitimacy he describes himself as "the Son of Man" when referring to his power to forgive sins. But as Tobias Hägerland has shown, the presentation of Jesus as a man of action who can forgive sins does not reflect the concept of forgiveness in the early Christian church.[3] The dominating image in early Christianity is of Jesus acting under instructions from God. Jesus is, if anything, an intermediary of forgiveness. The relevant action comes to a large extent via God.[4]

But there are also instances where forgiveness is not announced by any individual but is understood, present as a significant aspect of an event. Perhaps the most important passage in this connection is the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). I shall return to this. There are also instances in the Bible which deal with the question of forgiveness between individual human beings. No less important in this context is the Letter to the Colossians which mentions forgiveness as partly a consequence of baptism (Colossians 2:12), and partly because Jesus in heaven through his death and resurrection has made forgiveness possible (Colossians 1:20, 22) – so that here too it is basically God who is the agent of forgiveness. But there is also a passage that seems to indicate Jesus directly, and more precisely Jesus in heaven as the giver of forgiveness: "Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye" (Colossians 3:13, and compare Ephesians 4:32). As far as this extract from the Bible is concerned, Hägerland has made it clear to me that Jesus' forgiveness – through his death and resurrection – has already been granted once and for all, while the forgiveness which members of the congregation or "the Christian family" may grant one another, is something that must be constantly

2 Bash 2010 [2007], 79.

3 Hägerland 2012, 130.

4 Hägerland 2012, 82ff., 92ff., and 104, 110, and 130f., and in relation to Robinson's authorship, see Johnson 2019, 80.

repeated.[5] Forgiveness is a gift granted to believers through righteousness, and which they may grant mutually to each other. It is not a gift that can be given away; the point is that the repeated giving of it between individuals is the important thing.

In Robinson's *Home*, such mutual forgiveness occurs again and again, in accordance with Pauline theology, thus ensuring admission to the Christian community and to achieving the correct relationship with God. This is a part of ongoing creation.

Forgiveness is always a practical action and a gift. Those whose aim is to forgive in words and actions prove the presence of God's kingdom. It is – as Robinson will show – not a question of exceptional events or grandiloquent actions. It is a simple statement or gesture, that people can share every day. The gift comes from God, and may be passed repeatedly from one person to another. Forgiveness has the power to regenerate, rebuilding relationships and enabling them to be born again.

As in the case of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), we are reminded that forgiveness must not only be directed towards the offender but also be accepted by him. The father had already forgiven his repentant son before he came home, as well as when he did actually come home, his father's response was to arrange a celebration for this son who so far as he was concerned might no longer have still been alive – the father's forgiveness was immediate and unconditional. He also forgives his jealous elder son who is unwilling to join in the celebrations.[6]

Forgiveness was of course not invented by Christianity. But within Christianity it has become a central feature, accepted as an act of unearned goodness in accordance with the love God has shown towards humanity (cf. Colossians 2:13, 3:13 above and Ephesians 4:32). But in the Christian religion forgiveness occupies a special position comparable, among other things, with love, repentance, and grace. Forgiving is considered ethically good behaviour.[7]

THE PRODIGAL SON IN LITERATURE

The parable of the prodigal son in the 15th chapter of the Gospel according to St Luke (15:11–32) is, with the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), the best

5 Hägerland 2012, 104ff.

6 But there are other parables in the Gospels that explain that forgiveness between human beings can be both limited and incomplete. In the story of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36–50), Jesus implies that there is a correlation between the love shown by a simple sinner and the forgiveness granted to the same person. [...] "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little." (Luke 7:47). This Bible passage too, centred on forgiveness, can cast light on the low-key reconciliation drama in *Home*.

7 Bash 2010 [2007], 24f.

known and most deeply loved of Jesus' parables. As Klyne Snodgrass has pointed out, this short narrative has been considered – quite remarkably – the quintessence of the whole Gospel.[8] It is also one of the longest, and from the point of view of narrative, most highly developed of Jesus' parables. With its concentrated drama and ethical theme, it has also been the subject of countless commentaries, and naturally, through two thousand years, of repeated homiletic interpretations, and also of many kinds of adaptations in various media, including literature (novels, plays, and poetry), film, and visual art.[9] The particular aspects of the parable that have most appealed to its interpreters have also varied widely over time between the various genres. This has also been reflected to some extent in the different titles that have been developed for the story, for example "the parable of the waiting father," "the parable of the father's love", and "the parable of the compassionate father and his two lost sons".[10]

The last of these titles also draws attention to another distinct aspect of the story, as a so-called "triangle parable", or short drama with three main characters. A commonly accepted analysis of the text sees it like this: after a short introduction in which the two sons are named and in which the younger asks to have his share of the inheritance, a request to which the father agrees (15:11–12), a report follows on the younger son's conduct. He sells his share of the inheritance and leaves home. While abroad he dissipates his inheritance. Destitute in a land afflicted by famine, he is reduced to looking after pigs for a prosperous local citizen. In this humiliating situation in which the pigs are fed on husks that would have relieved his own hunger, he decides to go home, to ask his father for forgiveness, and to ask to be paid to work for him instead. So he returns home (15:13–20a). The third part consists of a description of the son returning home and of his father. At the sight of his son, the father is overcome with compassion, and hurries to meet him and embrace him. He also reacts to his son's repentance by telling his servants to bring the son expensive clothes, jewellery, and shoes, and to organize a great feast centred on the fatted calf (15:20b–24). The fourth and final part of the parable contains the older son's reaction to the festivities arranged by the father to celebrate his younger brother's return home, and the father's response to the older son's anger and disappointment. The older son, who has been working in the fields, reacts negatively to the celebratory music and dancing. When he learns from a servant that the reason for these festivities is the return of his younger brother, he is angry and confronts his father who has come out to explain to him what is happening and why. According to the older son, this is unfair because he himself has always acted accord-

8 Snodgrass 2008, 117, 137.

9 Snodgrass 2008, 117, Thurén 2014, 77f.; Gowler 2017, 106–110 (medieval drama), 111–113 (Albrecht Dürer), 134–137 (Shakespeare), 214–218 (classical blues lament).

10 Snodgrass 2008, 118.

ing to his father's wishes and never been guilty of any transgression, and has never received so much as a kid (i.e. a young goat) over which to feast with his friends, while his younger brother, having squandered his inheritance "with harlots", is being rewarded by the killing of the fatted calf in his honour. The father now forgives his elder son too and shows great generosity to him, finally trying to persuade him to join the festivities in his brother's honour (15:25–32).

An allegorical interpretation of the parable was established early in the history of the church and became popular among the church fathers.[11] Most of these early interpretations see the parable as a schematic expression of the relationship between God, the sinner, and the righteous. Snodgrass rejects with good reason any thoroughly allegorical interpretation – too many details of the story are impossible to understand from an allegorical point of view.[12] All three main actors play an essential part in the story and there is no reason to consider any one of them more important than the other two. The narrative seems to have more than one purpose. Snodgrass, for his part, emphasizes three main aims. First, to emphasize compassion and the unconditional love demonstrated by the father. Second, the ability to rejoice over the return home of a repentant sinner and arranging a celebration to mark this. Third, the parable functions as an educative guide to encourage the audience to take the same attitude to sinners in general as the father has taken to his returning son.[13]

With its multiple dimensions, the parable of the prodigal son has also stimulated many theological interpretations. These have emphasized many fundamental theological themes: conversion, grace, atonement – and forgiveness. But it is also possible to see the parable as a starting point for human relationships in general and the family as a social unit in particular, emphasizing such themes as exclusion, alienation, the possession of private property, harmony – and forgiveness. An example of this is Miroslav Volf's discussion of the parable from the point of view of a "theology of embrace", and his sociological reading of it in which he focuses on "the question of how identities need to be constituted if broken relationships are to be restored."[14]

In other words, responses to and interpretations of the parable of the prodigal son vary widely in relation to the many opportunities for expansion and exploration in depth that this compressed narrative offers. Manfred Siebald distinguishes a considerable number of dimensions in Luke's parable that explain its popularity in literature; these involve space and time, and also socio-economic, moral, religious, and anthro-

11 Gowler 2017.

12 Snodgrass 2008, 136; Thurén 2014, 78.

13 Snodgrass 2008, 140f., and Gowler 2017 on Roman the Melodist (*c.* AD 485–555) and his *kontakion*, a chanted sermon, 'On the prodigal son', 60–63.

14 Volf 1996, 156, and his discussion of the parable, 156–165.

pological dimensions, including internal relations between the members of a family.[15] Siebald takes us through a large and extremely varied collection of cultural, folkloric, political-theological, and above all literary links to the parable, ranging from a puritanical interpretation during the early British colonization of North America, to such 20th-century writers as Flannery O'Connor and John Barth with his novel *The sot-weed factor*.[16] With several well-chosen allusions to western English-language literature, Alison Jack has drawn attention to the wide use of the parable and how differently it has been emphasized through time: from English Renaissance drama and Shakespeare's apposite allusions to the parable, to the Victorian novel, with George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Margaret Oliphant as examples, and the American 19th-century short-stories' sometimes dark perspective on home and homecoming, including Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James among others, and several examples of "prodigal ministers in fiction" – among them Robinson's *Gilead* – until, finally, the use of the parable in poetry by Elizabeth Bishop and Iain Crichton Smith.[17]

In particular, Jack has chosen to highlight "the theme of homecoming", and it may be profitable to consider some of her examples and observations in an analysis of Robinson's novel *Home*. In Jack's commentary on Robinson's *Gilead*, this involves Pastor John Ames' many returns home: to God, to others, and to himself, and if anything his identification with the elder brother in the parable, who has stayed at home and worked on the home property. But it is also Pastor James' role as a father to his returning godson Jack Boughton, a reception with considerable impediments, that attracts Alison Jack's attention.[18]

THE PRODIGAL SON AND GILEAD

Robinson uses many literary links with the Bible. These are characterized by an ingenious working through of particular stories and biblical characters. The principal figures in the Gilead trilogy (with the novel *Jack*, 2020, extended to a tetralogy) break with religious thoughts and problems with more or less obvious biblical connections. Though the characters in these novels can also sometimes be interpreted as variations on roles in biblical narratives – such as the story of the prodigal son.

The parable of the prodigal son is already used in a many-faceted manner in the novel *Gilead*. In *Gilead* there are also three direct references to the parable, which un-

15 Siebald 2003, 32f.
16 Siebald 2003, 51–348.
17 Jack 2019.
18 Jack 2019, 124ff.

derline its fundamental importance in that novel.[19] Rebecca Painter has pointed out how Pastor Ames, through his initial obstinately unsympathetic attitude to his godson Jack Boughton on his return home, and his inability to accept and forgive him, takes on the role of the elder son who has stayed at home and is incapable of feeling joy. John Ames has already been described in the novel as the one who stayed at home in Gilead, in contrast with his older brother Edward who has settled in Germany to study and lost his faith there, and his own father who has also left Gilead to live with his elder son in Germany and, far from Gilead, has tried to persuade John too to move. But Ames undergoes a transformation during the course of the novel, from the dismissive elder brother to the forgiving father who in his role as Jack's godfather also recognizes him as "my son".[20]

Pastor Ames finds a couple of sermons under the Bible on his night table, placed there by his wife for his attention, he supposes. The subject of one of the sermons is forgiveness. This is partly founded on Jesus' similarity to the prodigal son; forgiving someone who may be thought undeserving of forgiveness, and who has not himself asked for forgiveness for his sins. Doing this, and in addition honouring him with a celebration, and giving him a position he has never even expected, offends every obvious consideration. The parable in St Luke's Gospel here serves to demonstrate a form of forgiveness which in Robinson's own words is "unmerited, unexpected, unasked, unconditional". It is a matter of grace.

Forgiveness precedes man's sinfulness. Ames' concluding point is that this state of affairs is precisely illustrated in the father's attitude in receiving his lost son – the son is forgiven without ever asking to be forgiven, and from a homiletic point of view the point is that the parishioners shall assume the role of the father. In the following key passage Ames sets out the text on God, mankind, grace, and forgiveness: "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."[21] Alison Jack recognizes an obvious link with Karl Barth's interpretation of atonement theory in *Kirchliche Dogmatik* 4/1, and there is considerable evidence that Robinson has made use of one of her favourite theologians. Barth's view is that God does not atone for man's sins as such, but that this atonement is an expression of the Creator's love for man.[22]

One fictional figure in the world of Robinson's Gilead incorporates John Ames'

19 Jack 2018, 108–110; Robinson 2004, 73, 161, 238.
20 Painter 2010, 326, 329–330; Jack 2018, 108f.; Robinson 2004, 234f., 241f.
21 Robinson 2004, 161.
22 Jack 2018, 109f.

words better than anyone else: this is Glory in the novel *Home*.[23] This novel has for obvious reasons been described as a "companion piece" to *Gilead*. Here the same reality as in *Gilead* is described from a new perspective which thus makes more complicated the description of this reality. But *Home* also takes a special position in relation to the parable of the prodigal son: with its three principal characters, it can be seen not only to complicate the parable, but to give it additional depth.

ASPECTS OF FORGIVENESS IN *HOME*

Forgiveness is a daily requirement of the principal characters in Robinson's third novel *Home*. It takes place mostly in the Boughton family home in the little town of Gilead. Pastor Ames' lifelong friendship with his elderly priestly colleague Robert Boughton now enters its final act. The house also contains two adult children who have returned to it, each in his or her own way now a battered or crushed middle-aged person: the daughter Glory and the prodigal son, Jack Boughton.

Glory is another loser who has returned home. Deserted by a man who turned out to be married and robbed of her savings, she has returned to look after her elderly and enfeebled father. But once home, she develops a role entirely different from that of the elder son who remains at home in the parable. The price Glory has paid for her choice may well be considered a high one. Possessing a Master's degree and working as a high school teacher in Des Moines for 13 years, she has given this up in favour of the role generally prescribed for women by her religious patriarch of a father, to be an angel restricted to the home and thus inferior to the officially employed male.[24] But it is Glory who, for Robinson, embodies forgiveness and grace, and not her father, the patriarchally paralyzed priest.[25] Not only are Glory's theological reflections evidence of her positive attitude to grace and forgiveness, but her daily actions also confirm that she is living in a state of grace: "Then there were grace and forgiveness to compensate, to put things right, and these were the greatest goodness of God after creation itself, so far as we mortals can know." (p. 114).

In her analysis Painter claims that Glory's understanding and loyal attitude to Jack and her willingness to take care of him after his attempt to take his own life in the barn when seriously drunk, display an abundance of forgiveness. Her identification, empa-

23 I agree with Painter 2010, 332 on the reading and characterization of Glory in *Home*. See also, Painter 2011, 224f.

24 Robinson 2009 [2008], 21. References to *Home* will be given hereafter in parentheses in the main text.

25 See Painter 2011, 225, and also Engebretson 2017, 63f.

thy, and loyalty go so far that "forgiveness seems irrelevant".[26] The point that Painter is trying to drive home is that Glory's actions are signs of love and as such an expression of grace, which is how God forgives.

*

Like the prodigal son in St Luke's Gospel, Jack has come home empty-handed, but bringing with him all the memories and unanswered questions that have involved him during his long absence.

His appearance is in itself a reminder of his unreconciled condition, while his guilty state presents an obstacle to himself and his environment. He is happier to apologize than to forgive. Throughout the novel he remains guilt-laden, tentative, and apologetic. He has been characterized as "consumed by irony", and is clearly a divided figure, though first and foremost striving to be seen as a better man, despite the fact that feelings of guilt burden him, making him oversensitive about how he may appear in the eyes of others.[27] Back in his old home environment, his guilt seems to be a more or less constant obstacle, making any moral progress difficult, if not impossible.

One of Jack's problems is that he is incapable of asking forgiveness for any particular transgression. If anything, he finds himself in a permanent condition of guilt, of doom even.[28] He feels guilty towards the family he abandoned, and with whom he has had no contact for 20 years, and this influences his every action or comment. He is the captive of his feelings of guilt. Nor can he forgive himself.

He if anyone is in need of unconditional forgiveness. A forgiveness unqualified by suspicion and that does not insist on first asking questions about why things happened the way they did. But that is not the attitude of his father. Jack cannot find in him someone willing to listening, or who by expecting neither apologies nor justifications, can make rebirth possible. Why does not this father who has so long waited and hoped for his son's return, and who wants nothing more than to give him love, not see that his son has come in the hope of resuming the very connection he was once responsible for destroying? But the father capable of liberating this son from his past does not exist. Instead Jack finds himself in the presence of a dying father who is himself in need of being forgiven. This is why any simple action from either side seems so difficult.

The father's attempt to forgive the son who has caused him so much distress and sorrow runs aground repeatedly on his own inability to leave the past behind him, to let his concept of the past give way to forgiveness. Forgetting can also be a way of forgiving

26 Painter 2010, 335.

27 Willams 2011, 8; Engebretson 2017, 60.

28 Cf. Painter 2011.

– but this is something the elderly Robert cannot accept, when confronted with the son he has so longed for bringing home a story involving so much sorrow, distress, and disappointment. A key passage concerning forgiveness concerns daughter-and-sister Glory's reflections, that draw attention to a well-known maxim which, though the fact is never stated, derives from Blaise Pascal, and means more or less: that to understand is to forgive (p. 46). Glory remembers that her father has rejected this view and that, on the contrary, he has often maintained in his sermons that one must forgive in order to understand. If one starts by forgiving one also removes any eventual obstacle to understanding. Glory then insists that the example her father was presenting was the living example of Jack. And that the people he was trying to persuade that forgiveness must precede understanding were not merely his assembled congregation but also himself (p. 47). But now when Jack has actually come home, his father does not manage to act according to his own belief. He speaks of grace and forgiveness, but more often acts as an embodiment of the Law, judging Jack and his past behaviour. Glory, on the other hand, with her ethical approach to Jack, is instead the one who forgives by acting with respect, kindness, and even curiosity towards Jack before trying to understand him.[29]

A sort of ethical change of position now takes place in *Home*. The returning "culprit" Jack comes up against his old environment, especially in the form of his father (and to begin with also his father's best friend Pastor Ames), and he becomes a victim of his father's inability to be reconciled with the past, so that the person who was once victim of Jack's transgressions now becomes himself a perpetrator of limitation and transgression.

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Home has a variable significance for the three main characters. And even if the work of reconciliation in the home continues to swing to and fro between discouraging setbacks and hopeful breakthroughs, their home is at the same time the place where all three lose hope of anything better to come. For the elderly Robert Boughton his home with all its old furniture, books, and ornaments is not merely a familiar place that affords him relief and coherence, but is also where his life will end. And he, who has lived for 20 years above all in the hope of being reunited with his lost son, when the moment comes can no longer find his well-rehearsed words (p. 42). Instead he is gradually forced to realize how difficult it is to do what he for so long hoped he would be able to do: to forget, forgive, and reconcile.[30] For Glory it is a place of rest and exile

29 On Calvin and how well we understand our roles discussed in relation to *Gilead*, see Leise 2009, 363; Engebretson 2017, 67.

30 Cf. Painter 2011, 227.

that threatens to become permanent. The idea that she too may have already reached her final resting place causes her unease and contributes to sorrow over how her life has developed. For Jack it is a place he visits as a stranger, little more a place of transit, from which he may at any time resume his journey away from home and Gilead. To Jack home is exile, but his basic existential dilemma is that he is an exile wherever he goes, in the Gilead community and in the nation as a whole, being married to a black woman, Della.

Jack abuses God's name in a commonplace expression of frustration when his father shows himself unable to understand what he considers the increasingly offensive civil rights movement of the mid-1950s; in his disappointment he is unable to see that his son has engaged himself in something positive. The action of the novel seems to take place in the autumn of 1956 – not only the year of Elvis Presley's breakthrough and the wedding of Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller, but also a presidential election won by Eisenhower and the racial agitation involving Rosa Parks' bus boycott in Montgomery. This is the childhood of television – a new window of a world that may threaten an entrenched idyll. The deceptive Jack's anti-racist stance is based on experiences far from the family home at a distance where serious new antagonisms may be dismissed as trivial disturbances. And Gilead "lacks the spiritual sustenance needed to nurture a truly integrated community, which is why he [Jack] chooses to remain a prodigal son."[31]

THE DIMENSIONS OF SPACE: HOME AND KITCHEN

Robinson's novel is a chamber drama. The stage for the action is the home: a political and religious scene, and a home where the generally positive story of a family is enacted. But like every family's story it contains both light and dark. Jack is the dark shadow in the family history, and he has returned home bringing dissonances and so destroying the family's imagined symmetry. And he enters through the kitchen door – a deeply symbolic act.

Many meetings and conversations take place in the living room with its newly-acquired TV, and on the veranda, but it is in the kitchen that most things happen. A social arena for family life in an American consumer society in which the kitchen's furnishing can reveal much about the period of the action. In Robinson's novel the kitchen is among other things the place where gestures and words can be tried out and either be exchanged or left hanging in the air. From the point of view of forgiveness and reconciliation, it is the most important place in the house. And at the centre of the kitchen is the kitchen table. With the passing of time, this has developed from being the worktable behind the scenes

31 Andujo 2019, 119.

of the 19th-century middle-class home, to become one of its most important features, the accepted centre for meetings, conversations, work, and some meals. The kitchen table is now more than a piece of furniture; it is a multifunctional place where for various reasons and at various times of day the home's inhabitants and their occasional visitors gather. It has come to be associated with a type of intimacy particularly strong on familiarity and authenticity.[32] The kitchen table is now an accepted central point for organizing important aspects of the home's social life.

As early as Robinson's first novel *Housekeeping* (1980), the kitchen holds a central position in the narrative as a place where changes in the everyday lives of aunt Sylvie and her two nieces Ruth and Lucille are indicated by small but significant factors. About halfway into the novel a late meal is prepared and served by Sylvie. The care she takes over it and the sense of a warm cosy room derive from the fact that the kitchen is dark and pervaded by the smell of the fried eggs and bacon, but an important first sign that this is not the place in the house traditionally associated with security, stability, and continuity, is revealed when the children notice that they are to eat from plates that originally came with boxes of detergent and must drink from glasses that were previously jam-jars. When Lucille suddenly flicks a switch and floods the room with light, the kitchen is revealed as being in a state of decay – a symbolic image of the American family's most sacred room as profaned, abandoned, and neglected:

> Lucille had startled us all, flooding the room so suddenly with light, exposing heaps of pots and dishes, the two cupboard doors which had come unhinged and were propped against the boxes of china. The tables and chairs and cupboards and doors had been painted a rich white, layer on layer, year after year, but now the last layer had ripened to the yellow of turning cream. Everywhere the paint was chipped and marred. A great shadow of soot loomed up the wall and across the ceiling above the stove, and the stove pipe and the cupboard tops were thickly felted with dust. Most disspiriting, perhaps, was the curtain on Lucille's side of the table, which had been half consumed by the fire once when a birthday cake had been set too close to it. Sylvie had beaten out the flames with a back issue of *Good Housekeeping*, but she had never replaced the curtain.[33]

The sight makes them feel uncomfortable, Lucille switches the light off, and they go on with their meal at the table in a darkened kitchen.

*

Forgiveness liberates not only the person forgiven but also the forgiver. Sister Glory is a key figure in the choreography of forgiveness – with her, every movement, position, intonation, pause, and word seems calculated to contribute towards reconciliation. And this occurs in the kitchen.

32 Torell 2018, 162ff.

33 Robinson 1981 [1980], 101.

Glory is nearly always to be found in the kitchen, and being thus at the centre of the home she is often the link between her father and brother as a possible intermediary for forgiveness and reconciliation. She has come home to help her father, left to live as a widower in the large house. The housekeeper, Mrs Bank, herself stricken in years, happily withdrew when Glory returned home. It is Glory who keeps the refrigerator and larder filled with everything she remembers that her brother likes, at the same time worrying over what to do with all the food her brother will not eat. Even before his return he has become an object of suspicion and reproach (pp. 29f.).

The kitchen also sees the first loaded interview of the returning son with his sister and father: "Sit down. I'll get you some coffee" (p. 31). With her duties in the kitchen and her food preparation, Glory establishes connections between the past, already a kind of hazy golden age, and the present. The home is confirmed as the place for the consecration of the everyday by Glory's activities. But mealtimes, as the most intensive recreation of a lost past, cannot be real except during the ritual moment when the smells and tastes are experienced by the collected members of the family.[34]

The dining room in the Boughton house, which has so often seen the extended family gathered together for big meals and social gatherings in the past, can with its antiquated decor recalling bygone times, now no longer act as a suitable venue for the big party to celebrate the return of the prodigal son. It makes Engebretson associate the home with "a museum – or a mausoleum."[35] No sooner have father and son sat down together at the ceremonially laid table than the past overtakes them. And Glory decides "[s]he should have served dinner in the kitchen" (p. 42). And thus it is in the kitchen that the first events and words leading towards reconciliation are formulated and spoken:

> She came into the kitchen and found him [Jack] almost done, the kitchen almost in order. "Amazing," she said. "This would have taken me an hour."
>
> He said, "I have had considerable professional experience, madam. I share the Boughton preference for the soft-handed vocations." She laughed, and he laughed, and their father called out to them, "God bless you, children! Yes!" (p. 44)

The kitchen table is not only the site of hope, but also functions as the symbol of absence and want of a happy large family that no longer exists. The three people left are trying to reach one another via the language of forgiveness and reconciliation. They are stranded round the kitchen table, left exposed to each other.

Contrasting with the area of grace is the barn, Jack's place of refuge, where he gets drunk, destroys the old car which he had himself restored and which had previously been a vehicle of freedom and joy, and tries to kill himself. Glory comes to his rescue, and to some extent resurrects him and helps him to return to life.[36]

34 See also Engebretson 2017, 74f., and on the "ordinary", 57–59.

35 Engebretson 2017, 61.

36 Engebretson 2017, 71–73.

In the end it is only Glory who recovers any hope of better times to come. She who has been the least at fault and the most forgiving is able to foresee a future in which her brother's son may perhaps one day be able to return as a grown man to a different Gilead, where a better inheritance will have been created on a new earth.

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As the place where small words and acts of trust and hope develop, the kitchen also has a narrative function. Robinson's three most recent novels are not divided into chapters. They consist of longer and shorter sections, mostly divided by double spacing. In *Home*, forgiveness very often brings a section to a close. The people involved are often in the kitchen, and give a simple gesture, word of thanks, or helping hand. Even the most mundane "thank-you", and even if Jack's "thank-yous" to the sensitive and attentive Glory sometimes seem "so unfailing as to be impersonal" (p. 47), they nevertheless contribute to driving forward the process of forgiveness.[37] This aspect of the novel's composition serves to illustrate its central theme. The space that follows permits these words of forgiveness to resonate, giving the reader the chance to reflect on the fact that what is simplest may at the same time be what is most difficult.[38]

CONCLUSION

Seen theologically, reconciliation is the aim of forgiveness. But do the principal characters in Robinson's drama of reconciliation ever reach a point at which forgiveness is able to alter the assumptions of the drama or enable it to start again from the beginning? This is doubtful. If the ultimate aim of reconciliation in this case is for relations between the characters to start again from the beginning, it is not certain whether this is achieved. But what do the events tending towards reconciliation lead to in *Home*? Do father and son ever achieve reconciliation? Yes and no. They demonstrate a willingness for it, but do not actually achieve anything sufficient to indicate the start of a new relationship. Willingness to forgive cannot in itself be classified as an action containing certain, pregiven elements. Forgiveness is an occasion which can consist of different types of actions and in the novel it is rather much a kind of state – of grace. Robinson does succeed in showing forgiveness in action at recurring points of moral

37 See also Engebretson 2017, 66.

38 The words and phrases of reconciliation and forgiveness in *Home* are abundant – but for these kinds of words and phrases and acts at the end of sections, see: 35, 44, 54 (twice), 67, 77, 79, 84, 88, 97, 98, 109, 118, 151, 157, 165, 174, 182, 184, 200, 205, 211, 214, 224, 238, 247, 261, 262, 275, 293, 303, 309, 312, 314, 322.

concentration throughout the slow progress of her narrative. Perhaps the point is just that the story's three main characters do attempt incessantly to forgive one another, each according to his or her particular assumptions. They converge and operate in a condition of grace that is in itself a good thing and brings a quality of healing. Their words and actions reveal an intention to achieve divine forgiveness.

But failure to forgive can increase guilt in those in search of forgiveness – a father may want to forgive his son, but unlike the father in the parable of the prodigal son, he may be unable to let go of the past to let simple joy over the fact that his son has come home sufficiently influence his every word, gesture, and action. Robinson demonstrates that forgiveness can be much more complicated than the model example in St Luke's Gospel can lead us to believe, though with her narrative of the possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation she does make a contribution towards broadening the applicability of the Gospel text. Her novel can be read as an uncommonly rich *midrash* or commentary on the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32, an interpretation that deepens at the same time as it complicates the meaning of forgiveness. Her tale is a fine contribution to Bible criticism in the sense that it amplifies the parable in Luke by adding an extra dimension to what is otherwise a clear message. The novel expands the margins of the parable as a contribution to the eternal discussion of the possibilities of forgiveness, grace – and God.

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Passages in English from the Bible are taken from the King James Version English Bible of 1611. This essay was translated into English by Silvester Mazzarella, December 2018 and March 2020.

CLEMENS CAVALLIN

The father and the prodigal son: A comparison between Marilynne Robinson's *Home* and Michael O'Brien's *The Father's Tale*

INTRODUCTION

Of all the parables in the New Testament, the tale of the prodigal son is one of the most important and popular as it presents with the clarity of fiction the intimate relationship between God and man; chronicling sin, conversion, mercy, and redemption.[1] A central feature of the story is the description of God as a loving father, who meets his repentant son halfway on the road.

In the following, two modern retellings of this parable, namely the novel *Home* by Marilynne Robinson (2008) and Michael D. O'Brien's *The father's tale* (2011) will be analyzed. In both of these novels, the focus is on the father, and then not a father overflowing with mercy, but a man troubled and afflicted with his ideal of fatherhood. Thus, it is the redemption of the father that is in focus, not primarily the son.

The character arc of the father provides the "spine" of the story, while it is not important or peripheral to the main storyline, when or whether the son goes through a true *metanoia*. The comparison will be between these two fictive fathers and what understandings they imply of the human-divine relationship.

The thesis of this essay is that although both authors seem to have exchanged the divine father for a very human one, these figures of earthly fatherhood, as the biblical parable, still speak in a figurative way about our understanding of divine fatherhood.

1 For an overview of the theme of the prodigal son in English and American literature, see Jack 2019, which treats Robinson's novel *Gilead* on pages 124–131 as part of the chapter 'Prodigal ministers in fiction', and an article by Colin Brown (1998, 391–405), which contains a wealth of references to studies of the parable of the prodigal son.

THE BIBLICAL STORY OF THE PRODIGAL SON

The "inciting incident" of the biblical story in Luke 15:11–32, is when the younger son takes his share of the inheritance and travels to a distant country, where he squanders his fortune, and has to work feeding pigs. The turning point is when "he came to himself", upon which we get an interior monologue in which he decides to turn back to the father and confess his sins. The climax of the story is when the father, filled with compassion, runs towards his son on the road and puts his arms around him and kisses him. The son is reinstated in his social role of son, and in the epilogue with its dialogue between the older envious son and the father, the latter's final words are "he was lost and has been found."[2]

In the biblical parable, the father clearly represents God who in his mercy welcomes even serious sinners, that is, if they turn back to him with remorse.

However, the two novels reverse and problematize this role of the merciful father in several ways.

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In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Home*, the prodigal son is clearly Jack, the son of the Reverend Robert Boughton. The first difference with the biblical story is that Jack does not come home due to remorse but out of necessity. Still, he is portrayed as a classical prodigal son, as the black sheep of the family, at last, coming home. The father tries to forgive Jack, but finds it hard as he admits:

> No, no, it isn't how I wanted things to be. I promised myself a thousand times, if you came home you would never hear a word of rebuke from me. No matter what.[3]

And later as part of the same scene:

> Why do I have to care so much? It seemed like a curse and an affliction to me. To love my own son.[4]

Further on in the novel, it seems that the father has suffered a stroke, as he first does not recognize Jack any longer, but after scrutinizing his face, he realizes that this person indeed is Jack. In this way, the father has a second chance to forgive Jack, but arrives instead at a deeper self-understanding: "Maybe I'm finding out I'm not such a good man as I thought I was."[5]

2 The Bible translation used is the *The Holy Bible* 2005.
3 Robinson 2009, 283.
4 Robinson 2009, 285.
5 Robinson 2009, 286.

Their final words are when Jack comes to say goodbye to his father:

> The old man looked at him, stern with the effort of attention, or with wordless anger. Jack shrugged. "I have to go now. I wanted to say goodbye." He went to his father and held out his hand. The old man drew his own hand into his lap and turned away. "Tired of it!" he said. Jack nodded. "Me, too. Bone tired." He looked at his father a minute longer, then bent and kissed his brow.[6]

In distinction to the biblical story, for Robinson, the relationship between father and son does not end in an embrace in which the father's merciful love surprises the son. Instead, in Robinson's version, the father turns away tired of the attempts at reconciliation, but perhaps even more tired of his own failure to measure up to the Christian ideal of forgiveness.

In an interview with Marilynne Robinson in 2009, which focuses on the theme of the prodigal son in the novel *Home*, she says that,

> Again, for me the issue between him and his father is not one of forgiveness. His father cannot absolve him of the pain and difficulty of his life, and Jack does not expect him to. He comes home seeking help in restoring a good life he had made, which has been destroyed by the pressures of law and social custom. I suppose people take the issue to be forgiveness because they think about Jack's youth rather than about his present situation. But really he is bringing judgement with him, and he finds himself continually having to forgive his father and to love *him* graciously, that is, despite all.[7]

And she says in the same interview: "I have changed the terms of the parable in ways that go beyond the fact that the story continues beyond the prodigal's return."[8]

In fact, Robinson moves away from the theme of the divine father's act of forgiveness to the theme of social justice, as Jack's predicament is due not only to his alcoholism and dissolute life, but also to his interracial marriage, which had broken down before he came home. This is the heart of the final scene where Jack's wife, Della, comes to visit the house after Jack had left, and instead, she speaks with Jack's sister Glory.

Secondly, Robinson focuses on the theme of grace instead of forgiveness as the heart of the story of the prodigal son. For her the act of the father running towards his son in the biblical parable is an act of grace irrespective of the son asking of forgiveness. That is, in theological terms, she moves towards a consideration of predestination, in which the sinful acts of the son cannot cancel out grace; in a way, *metanoia* is then

6 Robinson 2009, 331.
7 Painter 2009, 488.
8 Painter 2009, 488.

not required for righteousness.[9] It is, instead, imputed irrespective of the conversion or absence of it. In the interview, Robinson explicitly brings this up and plays with what kind of argument the reformer Calvin could have made regarding the prodigal son and predestination, "that whom God loves he loves, and no choice the erring son makes or fails to make changes that. [...] Seen from that side, predestination is grace in a very radical form."[10]

Robinson, therefore, considers predestination more favourably than, as she puts it, "harsh" free will, as predestination can console Jack with that although his life seems to be preordained "tending always toward 'perdition'"; "God loves no matter what."[11]

According to Robinson, the prodigal son does not need to ask for forgiveness, as his salvation is not dependent upon his actions, that is, judgement is essentially a mysterious decision of God to apply grace against all odds. Then, of course, the problem is shifted to the father, to his interior struggle with welcoming into his home the son who has not repented or essentially changed his life. The father, in this case, a very human father, struggles with the Christian ideals and understandings of love, mercy, and justice, and I interpret that as a symbol of the struggle with a traditional understanding of God the father in which justice has a central place as, for example, in the biblical texts.[12] In her reflections on her own novel and its theme, Robinson sees the son as bringing judgement to the father. It is the father who is judged as not measuring up to the standards of social justice.

In this way, the novel not only highlights the very real struggle of a human father but also our understandings of divine fatherhood. Robinson tends towards the mysterious grace of divine predestination instead of human conversion to God. In a sense, according to her, it is primarily our understanding of God and social justice that needs to change, not the moral failings of the biblical prodigal son. Indeed, the alcohol-

9 Rebecca Painter in an article published a year after her interview with Robinson (Painter 2010, 337), leans toward the interpretation that predestination in *Home* is the judgement of God in which all factors unknown to humans are taken into accord, and human judgement, therefore, has to settle for uncertainty. I think this is to lessen the radicality of Robinson's view of predestination. As Rachel B. Griffis writes in an essay (Griffis 2014, 141): "In other words, God's love is neither reasonable nor comprehensible. Neither does it align with human sentiments ...".

10 Painter 2009, 489.

11 Painter 2009, 489. In a short text in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, published in 2008, Robinson even embraces contradiction as a principle as regards the relation between free will and predestination: "In the universe that is the knowledge of God, opposed beliefs can be equally true, and equally false, and, at the same time, complementary, because contradiction and anomaly are the effect of our very limited understanding."

12 For example, as the principle of justice operative in divine judgement, see e.g. Matthew 12.36.

ic man, who left a teenage girl alone with her child and attempts suicide in his father's home, brings judgement to the house of the father. For the old man, Reverend Boughton, there is no solution, only a kind of redemptive giving up.

Therefore, the final words, "I'm tired of it."

*

In 1998, the year of the father according to the scheme put forward by Pope John Paul II for the preparation for the third millennium of Christianity, the Canadian author Michael D. O'Brien began to write a novel focused on fatherhood.[13] It developed for several years and was published in 2011, that is, 13 years later.[14]

In many ways, it is very different compared with Robinson's *Home*. It is a massive book running to over 1,000 pages, compared to the little over 300 of *Home*; it spans different geographical locations from Canada, England, Russia to China. The story is about leaving home, going on a journey, experiencing adventure, and then returning towards the end as a changed man.[15] Robinson's *Home*, on the other hand, is securely anchored in domesticity; travels are mostly handled as backstory or told in dialogues. The one real outing is when Jack, Glory, and their father tour the town in a car. O'Brien's father protagonist, Alex, instead, leaves home in the beginning of the novel in search of the lost son. In a sense, the whole novel is about the period when the biblical father sets out on the road to meet his son halfway, only to find that the son is not really coming towards him, but moving away, ever elusively. At the end, when the father returns home without the son, the son returns. And the father learns that the son had already returned during the beginning of the father's travels. So, O'Brien's story, in a sense, connects to the main theme underlying the three parables in Luke 15: the search for the lost coin, the one lamb of the hundred that was lost, and the younger son.[16]

The story is about the father setting out on a journey; but, in O'Brien's version, the son and the father miss each other, and the father is left alone on a long quest, having to come to terms with his own inadequacy. The final scene when the son comes home is, in contrast to *Home*, focused on forgiveness. The son asks for forgiveness, but the father also asks the son for forgiveness: for not measuring up to the standards of fatherhood. In the novel, the story is told from the father's point of view, while in the

13 See the apostolic letter of Pope John Paul II 1994.

14 O'Brien 2011.

15 In a sense, combining the story of the Odyssey, the father struggling to come home, with that of the prodigal son.

16 Luke 15.

biblical parable, the prodigal son is the protagonist and it is to his interior thoughts we get access.

O'Brien's novel mostly takes place in foreign lands, and the focus is on Russia. In a way, it is not only a story about the heroic father's search for his lost son, but also a novel about discovering Russia, and its soul. O'Brien made research trips to Russia in 1999 and 2000, and one of the central experiences during the first trip was when he visited the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg, which exhibits the famous painting of the prodigal son by Rembrandt. In it, the son is kneeling, resting his head against the father's robe. When O'Brien went into the exhibition room, he was moved and expected to have a spiritual experience of the meaning of the painting, so he stood there praying. But as he told me in an email interview:

> The room was fairly deserted, just myself and another person. Just as I began to pray this young man stepped immediately in front of me and blocked my view of the painting. I waited for him to leave, but he stayed and stayed. He stood before the painting with his head slightly bowed, and his arms dropped to his side, almost a standing at attention – which I later learned was a physical posture of prayer. I grew increasingly impatient as the minutes passed. I noticed that he was dressed extremely poorly, with ragged clothes and shoes without socks. His skull was shaved and scarred, his face stubbled and unclean. He looked by all appearances to be someone much battered by life. I felt sorry for him, but nevertheless I continued to be irritated that he had interrupted my spiritual experience. Finally he turned to me, looked me solemnly in the eyes, gave a little bow, then departed. Only when he was gone did I realize that he looked exactly like the prodigal son in the painting. And then it hit me that, at the moment, I was very much like the elder son in the parable. And *this*, I realized, was the real spiritual experience: what this providential moment was showing me about myself.[17]

For O'Brien, Alex in *The father's tale* is not an allegory of God the Father, but of human fatherhood in its heroic search for the lost son. Still, O'Brien thinks that Alex "lives in Christ, and so the story does reflect some of these aspects – grace and human nature integrated in a co-creative labor."[18]

The scene of the reunion of father and son in *The father's tale* ends with the Rembrandt version of the parable, in which, "[o]n an impulse, Andrew knelt on the floor and put his arms around the father".[19]

17 Attachment to an email message from Michael O'Brien to the author, 12 October 2018.
18 Attachment to an email message from Michael O'Brien to the author, 12 October 2018.
19 O'Brien 2011, 1065.

REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN AND DIVINE FATHERS

The reworking of the parable of the prodigal son in the two novels under scrutiny is not simply a way of incorporating theological themes into fiction. In a sense, for a Christian, the parable puts forward God himself as a literary author. The story has it all in a very concentrated format: a set of distinctive characters, the inciting incident, the increasing troubles and the lowest of the low, with the turning point, and then the climax with the conversion, merciful love, and the reinstatement of the protagonist; while the ending of the minor character, the older son, is left open and undecided. It shows God at his best in writing fiction, so to speak. Therefore, for a contemporary Christian author to remake such a divine story is, of course, to enter a daring game. To change the characters or elements of the plot is also to change the theme of the story. In a way, it is a conversation between a human author and the divine in the process of writing and rewriting fiction.

One of the main changes that both O'Brien and Robinson made was to transpose the father from someone defined solely by his generous will to forgive into a very fallible man, troubled by internal conflicts. The father sees himself failing to live up to the high ideal of Christian fatherhood. The old man in both novels is himself in need of forgiveness.

While Robinson even goes to the length of saying that the story is not about forgiveness at all, for O'Brien forgiveness is still important, but, I think, the personal quest of the father is more central.

Why is, then, fatherhood so troubled in both novels, when the father figure in the biblical parable is such a magnanimous figure? Both O'Brien and Robinson are practising Christians of different confessions, but their literary versions of the divine father are eclipsed by the troubled nature of human fatherhood.

My tentative answer is that the novels primarily focus on the human ideal of fatherhood, on the distorted reflection of the divine father in the modern condition. Both Reverend Boughton and Alex are men looking back at their lives with a sense of failure. And both Robinson and O'Brien were born in the 1940s and were young in the 1960s. The fathers of the two novels carry with them traditional ideals, but with the changes of society and family since the 1960s, to live these has become almost impossible.

For Robinson, the traditional ideal dies resigned in bed, while Jack, the modern father, wanders into the life of liquid modernity where nothing is stable.

For O'Brien, on the other hand, the ideal of the father is redeemed by confessing to the son, by the father making himself in a sense into the prodigal son. The ideal of the father was lost but is now found again. The final pages of *The father's tale* promise a new beginning, but the major emotional point is that of the father's last words to

his son: "The pain is gone now, Andrew, and I'm home. I'm a different person, and I hope a better person."[20]

It is as if Alex had to confess the failures of late 20th-century fatherhood. The son, then, as in the Rembrandt painting, falls on his knees and embraces him. With this act, the human father regains something of the nature of divine fatherhood.

In O'Brien's novel, redemption becomes possible when the father comes back to the starting point, to his home, after all the adventures of the quest; while in Robinson's *Home*, domesticity is both stiflingly oppressive and lacks redemptive force. Jack must leave; Glory cannot leave; while their exhausted father leaves by dying. Traditional fatherhood is gone and the modern father leaves home tired of it all.

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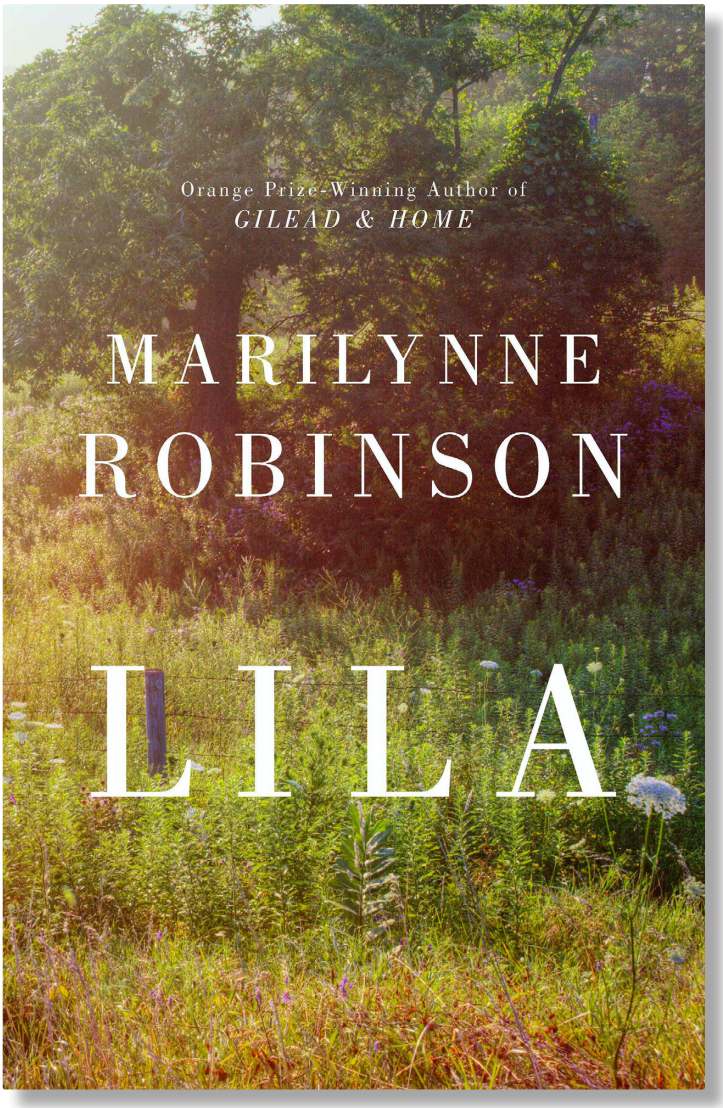
20 O'Brien 2011, 1065.



Lila *by Marilynne Robinson, published in 2014.*

KAMILLA SKARSTRÖM HINOJOSA

Lila between a nomadic and settled life: The stormy metaphors of Ezekiel as a language of transition

THAT OTHER LIFE

Adam and Eve were pushed out of the warm and friendly garden into a first exile, significant for human life in the world. The very self-designation "Hebrew" means someone who crosses borders, and the Hebrew Bible is replete with border-crossers. Indeed, its grand narrative, beginning with creation and ending with the Babylonian exile, is one about the social, theological, and ethical dynamics of nomadic (landless) vs. settled (landowning) forms of life: the patriarch Abraham leaves a settled life for a semi-nomadic one, and faces the many prejudices from the locals whom he encounters. Joseph, deprived of his home, is rescued by nomadic traders, and in turn rescues his starving people into an exile in Egypt. Moses grows up as a refugee child in the pharaonic family. As a young man, he finds himself in exile in Midian where he encounters Yahweh in a nature phenomenon (the burning bush), which becomes the starting point of the great Exodus. Although fulfilling the promise of God, the conquering and settlement in the Promised Land is also the beginning of corruption, selfishness and idolatry, leading to violations of the covenant with God and in the end to a new exile. This exile comes with the Neo-Babylonian Empire and Nebuchadnezzar II, who in the early 500s BCE deports the upper and urban echelons of the Judean community to Babylonia. When under Persian rule the Jews could return home, many chose to remain in Babylonia. Some of those who did return experienced a spiritual exile. This seems to have been the case with the Qumran movement, who chose a voluntary exile in the desert, as a guaranty for spiritual purity.

In a pure biblical fashion, Marilynne Robinson's novel *Lila* deals with the dynamics of nomadic life vs. settled forms of life and investigates the different ethics and theologies that spring therefrom. Like a Hebrew matriarch, the protagonist Lila moves between nomadic and settled forms of life. Intending to settle down in small-town

Gilead, she finds that her experiences from her erratic earlier life create an emotional and cognitive gulf between her and the residents of the town.

As an infant, Lila is thrown out on the veranda of her childhood home, mentally abandoned by her caregivers and crying. Having witnessed the child's misery for some time, a woman named Doll one day wraps the child up in her shawl and takes her with her. With Doll, Lila roams the countryside together with an itinerant gang of outcasts searching for temporary jobs and food. The nature provides a rhythm and beauty to the nomadic life they live: "They knew what time of the year it was when the timothy bloomed, when the birds were fledging. They knew it was morning when the sun came up. What more was there to know?"(p. 21).[1] There is no need for words, naming, or calendar. Doll and Lila are like Ruth and Naomi, wanderers in search of a home, "pulling weeds in the rows where the hoes couldn't reach" (p. 14); the older, Doll, struggles to find a better life for Lila, and for Lila to marry an older man.

When Doll disappears (wanted by the police), Lila ends up in a whorehouse in St. Louis, a house but not a home. Having saved up enough money, she is out on the road again. She finally ends up in an abandoned shack outside the town of Gilead. The shack, situated in wild nature but in close proximity to civilization, becomes the location where Lila processes her experiences of an erratic life, and searches for her self and the meaning of being. In the shack, and during her visits to town, Lila negotiates between her previous nomadic way of living and settled life in small-town Gilead. She finds a shelter in the church. It is here that she encounters the local Reverend, John Ames, and it is here that she borrows, or rather steals, a Bible in order to learn to write. Sitting outside the shack by the river, Lila practices writing by copying the reports of a vision seen by the prophet Ezekiel at a river in Babylon, thousands of years earlier. During her regular visits to town, Lila tends the reverend's garden, and the graves of his wife and child who tragically died, maybe as a way to colonize civilization. Reverend Ames walks her home to her shack, and one day he baptizes her outside the shack, on the border between civilization and wilderness. Although never fully, Lila slowly adapts to a settled form of life, eventually as his (unlikely) wife.

In Lila's processing of the past and the present in terms of existential, theological, and ethical questions, Ames becomes an important interlocutor. Due to their different life experiences, there is however a constant gap between them, Lila remarks that his life never changed while her erratic life is written all over her body. Still, they struggle with the same problems of guilt and salvation, problems that are accentuated by their very encounter. Lila, who has led a life without a God, discovers that her only expe-

1 Robinson 2015, 21. All subsequent page numbers in parentheses in the text refer to this edition.

rience of love – Doll – is a woman unbaptized and hell-bound. Her question, "why things happen the way they do" (p. 29) is a question that the book at large, and Ames in particular, tries to answer. Put differently, the question is whether there is salvation for people like Doll who never read the Bible or heard the Gospel. Where Lila finds answers in nature and in surreal visions of an exiled God, Ames searches for it in tradition; in the company of the "cloud of witnesses," (p. 87) and in discussions with his old friend, Robert Boughton, according to whom "souls could be lost forever because of things they did not know, or understand, or believe" (p. 21). Souls like Dolls.

A common theme of the novel *Lila* and the Hebrew Bible is then the social, theological, and ethical dynamics of a nomadic vs. settled form of life. In what follows, I will bring the literary figure and texts of Ezekiel into an encounter with the novel's protagonist Lila, and demonstrate how her encounter with Ezekiel's strange and often bizarre visions and metaphors enables her to transform her life and finally experience a homecoming. In the conversations of Lila and Ames, biblical quotations play a prominent role. By examining the historical and ideological contexts of the quotes, it will be argued that these quotes communicate the voices of the powerful and the disempowered, the landowners and the landless, the insider and the outcast, and display their respective theology and ethics.

THE STRANGENESS OF VISIONS

> In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God (Ezekiel 1:1).[2]

The book of the prophet Ezekiel is a witness of the turmoil of mind experienced by the prophet and the Judean community when deported from their land and exiled in Babylon in the 6th century BC. Ezekiel is known for his extraordinary visions, bizarre symbolic actions, and ingestible metaphors, the very means by which God "helps" Ezekiel and the Judean community to process the trauma of having their land and temple devastated, family and friends dead, scattered or left behind, and themselves exiled to a foreign land.

From the time of the Tannaim onwards, there have been commentators celebrating Ezekiel as a creative genius and others regarding him as a fraud: it has been disputed whether he even qualifies to be listed among the Prophets – rendered mute for seven and a half years he relied on strange performances to get people's attention. Accord-

2 All scriptural quotes are from the NRSV, the authorized revision of the *American Standard Version* of 1901 – the translation quoted in *Lila*.

ing to the Talmud, the book was saved from a destiny of being excluded and forgotten by a certain Hananiah ben Hezekiah who worked daily and nightly (burning 300 barrels of oil!) in order to harmonize the laws in Ezekiel with those in the Torah.[3] Even more troubling to the sages was the revelation of the vision of the chariot (*ma'aseh merkavah*) to the uninitiated masses, as well as him depicting God in the likeness of things.[4] In comparison to the sophisticated city man Isaiah, Ezekiel appears as a vulgar village man, unaccustomed to divine visions.[5] Despite this, his prophecies are ascribed an inherent power beyond comparison to other biblical books. The Gemara (Talmud) tells of a student who, while reading and pondering over the *hashmal* (amber, electricity) in Ezekiel 1:4, was suddenly burnt by it coming straight out of the book, and thus the book had to be concealed.[6] In addition, the metaphoric and nearly pornographic descriptions of the blatant evil-doings of Israel (chap. 16) were deemed highly objectionable. Rabbi Eliezer stated that chapter 16, depicting Israel as an adulterous woman, should not be read in synagogue at all.[7] The Mishnah Hagigah summarizes the criticism:

> The forbidden degrees may not be expounded before three persons, nor the Story of Creation before two, nor the [chapter of] the Chariot before one, unless he is a Sage that understands of his own knowledge. Whoever gives his mind to four things, it were better for him if he had not come into the world – what is above? what is beneath? what was beforetime? and what will be hereafter? And whosoever takes no thought for the honor of his Maker, it were better for him if he had not come into the world.[8]

According to the Mishnah, subjects such as forbidden sexual relations (the degrees), the account of Creation (Genesis 1), and the *Ma'aseh ha-merkavah* (Ezekiel 1), should not be speculated upon in public. The target of the Mishnah passage is clearly the book of Ezekiel where all these subjects are expounded upon, and even worse – revealed to the uncultured public. Mystic speculations about the unseen world is condemned.

3 b. Shabbat 13b, b. Hagigah 13ab, b. Menaḥot 45a.

4 Compared to Isaiah who had the good taste of discretion (see b. Hagigah 13b). Blake 1790 deals with this problem in his fictional dinner with Isaiah and Ezekiel. When he asks them about their respective vision, Isaiah confesses that he neither heard nor saw anything; still, to him it was real in the same way that poetry is real to the poet.

5 b. Hagigah 13b, see also the Mekilta to Exodus 15:2 where it is claimed that even young handmaidens at the Red Sea saw more of the divine glory than did Ezekiel.

6 b. Hagigah 13a.

7 At the end of Mishnah's tractate Megillah (4:10) questionable texts from the Hebrew Bible are discussed; here it is stated that neither Ezekiel chapters 1 or 16 are to be read as Haftarot, that is, as additional texts to the Torah on the Sabbath or on Jewish festivals.

8 m. Hagigah 2:1, transl. Danby 1933, 212–213.

Witnesses, by Luis Antonio Hinojosa Montellano.

Instead, only knowable subjects, such as the interpretation of Torah and the Halakah, are to be studied.

The ancient rabbis' ambivalent relationship to the book of Ezekiel is corresponded in modern scholarship. The book has not received the same amount of attention as its more appreciated counterparts, such as the prophet Isaiah.[9] The throwback of the prophetic role to earlier ecstatic prophets with enacted rather than spoken prophecies, the priestly perspective and focus on the cult, as well as a bizarre visionary imagery divorces him from the other latter Prophets.[10] This may well be the reason for Abraham Joshua Heschel not to include Ezekiel in his celebrated book on the Hebrew

9 For an overview of critical scholarship on the book of Ezekiel, see e.g. Levitt Kohn 2003; Darr 1994.

10 Scholars have psychoanalyzed Ezekiel and found him psychotic or drugged on hallucinogens, e.g. Halperin 1993.

Prophets.[11] Furthermore, the sexual metaphors in chapter 16 have been placed under feminist scrutiny and blamed for representing power dynamics similar to those of the battered woman.[12] With this background, it is quite surprising to discover that the chapters most criticized by both the Tannaim and modern critical scholarship, namely chapters 1 and 16, are the ones that Robinson's Lila most frequently engages with in her scribal activity.

UNCARED-FOR CHILDREN

During one of her visits to Gilead, Lila enters the local church and steals a copy of the Bible. Back home in the shack, she picks up the Bible and reads at the place where it fell open:

> As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you out of compassion for you; but you were thrown out in the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born. I passed by you, and saw you flailing about in your blood.[13] As you lay in your blood, I said to you, Live! (Ezekiel 16:4–6).

Ezekiel 16 contains a series of reproofs and warnings against the sins of the Israelites. The opening part of the chapter depicts Israel in terms of an infant, cast out with no one to care for it but then found and cared for by God himself. The infant grows up to become a desirable young woman who, in a symbolic language, marries God but then betrays him with a great number of other men. The description of the adultery is grotesque and the punishment even more so; the woman is to be cast out, stripped of her clothes, and exposed to public shaming in the most disgraceful way. God appears as an abusive male, acting the way expected (or even worse) in a society of honour-based violence. It is thus, in such a violent and repulsive manner, that Ezekiel chooses to express the trauma of the deported and disgraced privileged classes.[14] As a dominated minority in the Babylonian empire, they experienced an immediate drop of status and disempowerment, not to say a social death.[15] If they previously had attached their

11 Heschel 1962.

12 See e.g. Claassens 2014; Day 2000; Darr 1992.

13 As Calvin pointed out in his commentary on Ezekiel, God here assumes the character of a traveller, "I passed by thee", Calvin [1565] 1948.

14 According to Weber 1921, 3, the exile transformed the Jews from a national group into a "pariah people": "a guest people who were ritually separated, formally or *de facto*, from their social surroundings".

15 Mein 2006, 73, drawing on Patterson 1982, who thinks of the exiled community's loss of identity in terms of a "social death", something that is given graphic representation in Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones.

moral world to that of institutions, official cult, and foreign policy, they must now repent their individual shame and guilt and rearticulate faith and ethics, meanwhile experiencing destitution. Still, this loss of "mazeway"[16] – the sense of meaning and order in the world – did not result in a loss of identity but in a remarkable reformulation of the existing one.[17]

One may easily imagine how the story of Lila's infanthood was shaped after this Ezekiel account. As the biblical story continues, God spreads his shirt over the infant to cover its nakedness.[18] Similarly, Doll covers the infant Lila with her shawl every night on the veranda, the place where she is brutally cast out and uncared for. In the same shawl, Doll one day wraps the child while stealing her away from her home. Lila later comments on this saving act as one of reducing her shame – the shame of not being cared for. The blood, in which the infant is "flailing about" in Ezekiel, she interprets as her shame of not being wanted. Still, just as God calls the infant to life, she was repeatedly urged to live by the caring acts of Doll. "Live!" Lila ponders on these words and asks herself, why live? While washing and hanging her clothes to dry Lila reflects on her own life in an Ezekelian manner:

> Her shirts and her dress looked to her like creatures that never wanted to be born, the way they wilted into themselves, sinking under the water as if they only wanted to be left there, maybe to find some deeper, darker pool. And when she lifted them out, held them up by their shoulders, they looked like pure weariness and regret. Like her own flayed skin. But when she hung them over a line and let the water run out, and the sun and the wind dry them, they began to seem like things that could live (p. 78).

Lila's encounter with Ezekiel's brutal text has a redeeming effect on her. It retrieves her lost memories of being unwanted and uncared for but also, of the loving actions of Doll who urged her to go on living. The ugliness in Ezekiel's depiction of the infant articulates her trauma and helps her to face her feelings of shame and even to ask whether they are justified: "The blood is just the shame of having no one who takes any care of you. Why should that be shame?" (p. 135). When asking Ames about the interpretation of the passage he explains it as poetry, a figurative language not to be taken literally. Lila contrarily contends that "it's true what he [Ezekiel] says here" (p. 128); this is something that she knows about. This knowledge of Lila,

16 As Smith 1989 describes it.

17 As Mein 2006, 75, puts it: "This change, and the associated experience of status inconsistency on a grand scale, produced one of the most fruitful crises in the history of ideas, as people attempted to explain what had happened to them, to maintain the identity of their group, and eventually to hope for the future."

18 Ezekiel 16:9.

closely connected to her life experiences, is beyond the familiar world of Ames. He recommends her to read other texts from the Bible, less chaotic and more reassuring when it comes to questions of sin, guilt, and salvation. Still, her knowledge arouses his interest and he repeatedly asks her to tell him more about that "other life" of which he is unfamiliar.

DIFFERENT WAYS

In the novel, just after Lila has reflected on the "ways" of people like Ames', whom she defines as people "who have to be the ones to open a door, but then they have to wait there for you to go through it" (p. 18), Ames helps her up the steps at Boughton's house. The sight of the couple incites Boughton to quote Scripture: "There are three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not" (p. 18). It is a joke, and the two friends laugh. Back home again, Ames opens the Bible and shows Lila the verses alluded to, from Proverbs 30:18–19: "The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea: and the way of a man with a maiden" (p. 19).

Proverbs is part of the wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible. It belongs to a strand of wisdom thinking that is sometimes labelled "standard wisdom". Standard wisdom, unlike its opposite, speculative wisdom, gives an uncomplicated picture of life, certain actions are shown as always producing certain results. A wise person is able to recognize the right decision ahead of time and choose the path leading to blessing, happiness, and even wealth. The foolish person, on the other hand, always chooses incorrectly and receives punishment. Proverbs is the words of the privileged insider, the maintainer of social order. He marvels at creation and sexuality at a distance, and condemns social upheaval.

Proverbs 30, presenting itself as "The words of Agur son of Jakeh", is one of the more difficult passages from Proverbs in terms of exegetical and textual problems. One difficulty relates to the identity of the voice speaking in the text. Some discern here the voice of a sceptic, who is either agnostic or atheistic. Others take it as a dialogue between a sceptic and a pious Jew, the latter defending the Law of Moses and the authority of Scripture. The names, Agur and Jakeh, are not Hebrew names.[19] The critical apparatus of the *BHS* suggests that the first name be read as (the noun) *gor*.[20] The general meaning of *gor* has to do with settling or sojourning for a shorter or longer period without original rights to the land, such as the patriarchs in Canaan.[21] The two

19 Whybray 1972, 88 lists the many scholarly suggestions on how to translate the two names.

20 *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* 1977.

21 See e.g. *HALOT* 2001.

voices in the text could thus represent the *gor* and the resident, representing different ethics and theologies.

In Numbers 24, Balaam, son of Beor is portrayed as a non-Israelite who claims knowledge of the divine mysteries by personal revelation. His name, Son of Beor, may be read "son of stupid". In the opening verses of the Proverbs, the oracle of Balaam is alluded to in an ironic way with the sceptic (*gor*) confessing his stupidity:

> Surely I am too stupid to be human; I do not have human understanding. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the holy ones. Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in the hollow of the hand? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is the person's name? And what is the name of the person's child? Surely you know! (Proverbs 30:2–4).

The ignorance of Agur, the sojourner, is his failure to learn the transmitted wisdom that Moses once taught Israel. Instead, he speculates about the four forbidden things prohibited in the Mishna, namely: what is above, what is beneath, what was beforetime, and what will be hereafter.[22] In what follows, the pious (resident) Jew – or the same person – now representing a contrary position, answers to this question by proclaiming that the only source for knowledge is the written revelation of God: "Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or else he will rebuke you, and you will be found a liar" (Proverbs 30:5–6). This statement reminds of Mishnah Hagigah's attempt to reject claims such as expressed in Ezekiel and in apocalyptic literature – that human beings can bridge the gap and gain knowledge of God and of creation outside Scripture. Instead, the pious Jew claims that the only reliable source available for human beings is Scripture itself.

The verses quoted in *Lila* portray simple wonder at marvellous phenomena in God's creation, culminating with the mystery of sexual love; it marvels at the "wildness of things" from a secure distance. It adds to the opening verses, expressing the limits of human knowledge about God, by declaring that even the marvels of creation are beyond human comprehension. When transferred to the context of the novel, the Bible is the lens through which Ames and Boughton discern the world, all from a safe distance. Lila claims that the Bible is truer than life for Ames who, despite knowing the words by heart, needs the company of the written word during the ceremony of baptizing Lila in wild nature. For Lila, contrarily, the genesis of her experiences of the divine, spring from sleeping under an open sky, and come to expression in texts like Psalm 19:3 where nature is portrayed as the real book from which the whole world can derive knowledge of God (also quoted in *Lila*, p. 117; cf. pp. 126, 134).

22 m. Hagigah 2:1.

Although not quoted in *Lila*, the verses following the quote in Proverbs 30 are too exciting in the context of the novel to be disregarded. Proverbs 30:20 abruptly moves from delight and wonder at sexuality as created good, to a disturbing picture of good gone wrong. It pictures an adulterous woman, who perhaps worse than the deed itself, lacks guilt or remorse. This is followed by an account of social turnover and chaos. As an example of a world turned upside down is the case of a disliked woman who gets married:

> Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up: a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when glutted with food; an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maid when she succeeds her mistress (Proverbs 30:21–23).

One cannot but think of Lila's past in terms of guilt and shame, Lila, who for a long time was an unwanted woman, an outcast, a prostitute, and a homeless person, marries Ames and finds herself a new future. She is surely such an "unloved woman" who gets a husband. Her personal history challenges a theology such as expressed by Proverbs 20 and Boughton. By means of the scriptural quotes, Robinson then lets the two men represent a theological position radically contrary to that of Lila, and provide different answers to the questions of guilt and suffering.

KNOWLEDGE REGAINED

> As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures (Ezekiel 1:4–5a).

The objects of Lila's scribal activity could indeed be taken as a response to the Mishnah Hagigah 2:1 and Proverbs 30, speaking about forbidden areas of knowledge. She begins by copying Ezekiel 16 about the infant who grows up to become the adulterous bride of God, continues with the account of creation in Genesis 1, and finally takes on the vision of the chariot in Ezekiel 1.

Ezekiel 1 contains the call of Ezekiel to prophetic office. By the river Chebar in Babylon, Ezekiel receives a powerful vision rising out of storm and lightning phenomena in which God is sitting on a throne, placed upon a chariot. Beginning from the bottom and upwards, he sees something with the likeness of four living creatures, each with four sides, faces, and wings. They have the form of humans, but their bodies have a mix of human, animal, and angelic features. The vision is mobile; to each of the creatures is assigned a wheel, with concentric wheels within it and the souls/powers of these beings are in the wheels. Over their heads, Ezekiel sees a vault and above the

vault is something that looks like a throne and on the throne, he sees someone with the likeness of a human.

The vision has clear affinity with a fixed descriptive scheme of a throne scene, such as in the call narrative of Isaiah 6. The important difference is however that while Isaiah's account takes place within the safe boundary of the temple, Ezekiel moves the creatures carrying the throne of God out in the heathen wilderness. Just as there is a tension between the resident and the nomad in the Hebrew Bible, there is also a tension between the idea of a heavenly throne in the chosen sanctuary in Jerusalem in close proximity to the ark (Isaiah 6 and Psalm 132) and of the throne disconnected from the temple (1 Kings. 22). This vision takes even one more controversial step by situating the throne of Yahweh, not only at distance from the ark, but even in the midst of an unclean land. The meaning of the mobile throne, as Walther Zimmerli so pointedly puts it, is that "God reveals the sovereign freedom of his appearing, when and where he wills, even in an unclean land of the dead".[23] God returns to become the nomadic God who moves along with his people as in the Exodus, in contrast to the God who during monarchic times is resident in Jerusalem.

Out of the vision, God speaks. He calls Ezekiel to prophetic office. It is however clear from the very beginning that this prophet will neither be listened to nor recognized as a real prophet by his fellow exiles. The inauguration to prophetic office consists of eating a scroll, a symbolic act anticipating his future challenges; it is as if the gravity of the situation demands actions rather than words. Under the compulsion of what he has experienced, bitter and upset, he returns to Tel Abib, the place where the exiles of Judah dwelt. After seven days, God liberates Ezekiel's tongue from being dumb only to speak his words of warning to the people. Ezekiel is to be like a watchtower amongst the exiles who were trying to pick up the pieces of their lives. Although the exiled community must have considered their recent trauma a price high enough for whatever sins they committed, Ezekiel's words and symbolic actions project the people in the strongest possible light as sinful and guilty. If Ezekiel fails in his mission, the deaths will be required at his hand, making his fate completely intertwined with that of his neighbors' (Ezekiel 3:20). Being involuntarily invested with an infinite responsibility for the other makes Ezekiel into the ideal prophet in the eyes of Emmanuel Lévinas who wrote, "we are all familiar with the admirable passages from Ezekiel in which man's responsibility extends to the actions of his neighbor."[24] Ezekiel's fate is so intimately bound to that of his neighbors' that even his own righteousness before God depends on the choices of the "other".

23 Zimmerli 1979, 140.

24 Lévinas 1990, 21. See also the opening citation of Ezek 3:20 in Lévinas 1978.

It has been argued that it is quite possible to find the basis of the *ma'ase merkavah* in a natural experience. Lila also comments on the storm and lightning phenomena that it is just like a prairie fire in a drought year. Nothing in the vision, which she carefully copies, seems strange to her; she has experienced it all, or put differently "the strangeness of it" is familiar to her (p. 74). She realizes that she has received knowledge of God outside of Scripture and that she has encountered God more than once in her nomadic life. Ames on the other hand, takes side with the early Tannaim and critical scholarship and confesses to the obscurity of the vision. He even advises Lila to study other parts of Scripture. For Lila, the situation is quite the contrary. Although separated in almost every possible way, by time, place, culture, education, and gender, Ezekiel's vision and warnings express her experiences of, with the words of Lila herself, "why things happen" (p. 125), and "what certain things feel like" (p. 126). The obscurity of the vision, things which may or may not be what they seem to be, compare to how she so far has experienced life and herself, as someone with:

> the likeness of a woman, with hands but no face at all, since she never let herself see it. She had the likeness of a life, because she was all alone in it. She lived in the likeness of a house, with walls and a roof and a door that kept nothing in and nothing out. And when Doll took her up and swept her away, she had felt a likeness of wings. She thought, Strange as all this is, there might be something to it (p. 68).

The obscurity in the vision of Ezekiel expresses the obscurity she feels about herself, and her life. She has lived a faceless life; even her name is not her real name, but an invention of Doll. She has lived all her life without the shelter of a real home. She has suffered from the loneliness of not knowing herself. Nevertheless, she has been touched by the wings of an angel, named Doll. The vision of Ezekiel works as a counsellor for her; through it, she sees herself and takes form, something which in turn makes life in the small (and sometimes hypocritical) town of Gilead possible.

ONE DAY

Lila's experiences of "that other life" (p. 17) necessarily pushes Ames out of his theological comfort zone, into new domains and categories to which his language does not reach. Lila often reflects on this. How his thinking is formed by the Bible, and still, how she might seem to him "as if she came straight out of the Bible, knowing about all those things that can happen and nobody has the words to tell you" (p. 227; like the *hashamal*!). It seems then, that Lila is a modern Ezekiel for whom experiences of life's vulnerability and alienation may only be expressed by means of the bizarre, violent, and surreal. Her theology, formed by an erratic life, contains knowledge that is

remote for people like Ames and Boughton, and forbidden according to the Mishnah. She may be resident in Gilead, but her book is nature itself, her theology is that of the nomad sleeping under open skies, and her ethical outlook will always involve the outcast. One day, the novel ends, she will tell him (Ames) "what she knew" (p. 261).

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OLA SIGURDSON

Grace and subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*

What kind of being must a human being be to be able to receive grace? The very word "receive" signals something important, a central characteristic of grace itself, namely that grace, whatever it is and wherever it comes from, is not an achievement of the self but something that happens to it; it is a self in the mode of reception. In receiving grace, the passivity of the self is emphasized rather than the self as an agent. Or perhaps it is preferable to say that the passivity needs to be emphasized to be able to receive grace as grace. Grace has to do with gift, and for a gift to remain a gift when it is given, it could not be taken for granted, because if it would it would turn into a claim and cease to be a gift.

I cannot possibly take my lover's love for granted in the same way that I take for granted that my employer will pay my salary for work done. A salary is owed for work done, but love is not owed but given and I can only wait for it to happen. Love is not experienced as an economic transaction but as something more than an economic transaction; a loving relation could well incorporate economic transactions, like in a loving family sustaining their livelihood, but for the loving relation to remain loving it needs to be something more than something defined by a mutual contract.

The same thing is true for grace, both human and divine. The ability to receive grace seems to presuppose a certain attitude or comportment. But what such a comportment is or can be, that on the one hand waits for grace but on the other does not take it for granted, has been contested throughout history. Some have even questioned that it is possible to prepare for grace through a patient comportment, as this would seem to posit the possibility of grace within the sphere of the self's capabilities. But if it is not possible to wait for, prepare for, or even reach out for divine grace, or any other grace, how then would the grace that perhaps is bestowed upon me be of any concern to me? How would I be able to regard it as mine, if it did not find any resonance within my own self? Perhaps it turns me into another self, a new being, but if so, then

grace would not really be of any concern to me, just to this new being. The doctrine of grace in Christian theology, when we inquire after its experiential correlates, touches, as these short examples hopefully have shown, upon central issues of subjectivity, of what kind of being a human being is.

The relation between grace and subjectivity is a central and returning topic in Marilynne Robinson's essays and novels. As most accounts that try to stay true to human experiences, she understands subjectivity to have several dimensions.[1] On the one hand she seems to emphasize, in many of her essays where she discuss the cultural, educational, political, and social achievements of an earlier American spiritual tradition, how the self is a capable, intentional self. Such a self is an active self, a self that does not wait for something to happen but actively tries to achieve what it is capable of. This seems not to be a self characterized by its receptive qualities. At the same time, however, a persistent theme in her novels is how the doctrine of grace is developed in the life span of her novel's protagonists. As can be understood from both her essays and her novels, her understanding of grace is pronouncedly Calvinist, which implies a subjectivity that is, to the contrary of a modern understanding of the autonomous self, decentred and receptive. Those two dimensions of subjectivity, the active and the passive self, do not necessarily need to be opposites, and to be both a capable self and a graced self is a central theme of Reformation theology. But the challenge is how they are understood in combination as well as whether there is a tension between these two aspects of subjectivity.

In this essay I wish to explore how Robinson narrates the unfolding of grace in her novel *Lila*, what kind of subjectivity her novel portrays, and whether there is a tension, more generally, between the implied understanding of self in her essays and her novel.[2] Primarily this will be an inquiry of *Lila*, as the narrative format of a novel allows a more dynamic understanding of grace and subjectivity to be represented than in the more discursive format of the essay. To my help in giving an account of her understanding of subjectivity I will then call upon Charles Taylor's and William Desmond's contrast between the "buffered self" and the "porous self" – a contrastive distinction which, as we shall see, is not quite parallel to distinction between the self as agent and as patient. Finally, I will add some brief comments on the relation between the graced subjectivity as presented in *Lila* and the capable self as understood in some of Robin-

1 In fact, many of Robinson's essays amount to a defence of subjectivity as such, against contemporary reductionistic accounts of it in science as well as in the humanities. See, for example *Absence of mind* (2010). My interest in subjectivity in this article, however, is not precisely the same, although not unrelated. It concerns more *what kind of* subjectivity grace presupposes than *if there is* subjectivity at all.

2 Robinson 2015a. All page numbers in parentheses in the text refer to this edition.

son's essays. Before embarking on the inquiry of grace and subjectivity in *Lila*, which will take up the best part of this essay, I need to introduce some of the protagonists in the novel as well as say something about the claims of this essay with regard to what kind of inquiry it is.

In *Lila*, the main protagonist Lila Dahl is an orphan. Most of the novel consists of her monologue, or dialogue with other people from her own perspective. She has never known her parents nor, to be sure, her own name. "Lila" is not her Christian name, nor does "Dahl" identify her patrilineage; these were only names used for her rather than given to her. When she was very little and uncared for, a woman named Doll kidnapped her to rescue her from an unknown fate. Her young and adolescent years were spent together with Doll, her harsh and realistic but caring kidnapper and companion, as a vagabond, moving from town to town, sometimes in the company of other vagabonds, sometimes just on their own. A longer stay of a couple of months in a town gave her the opportunity to learn to read and write before it was time to leave again. As Doll eventually was pushed to commit a murder, was imprisoned but escaped and disappeared, Lila was left all alone, with no relatives, no friends, nor any economic resources or home. Lila Dahl was an orphan in all accounts.

The novel moves freely between different stages of her life, but the main story, and the perspective from which it is told, takes place in 1947 when Lila meets a reverend in the town of Gilead, John Ames, whom she marries and with whom she has a child. Ames is, in the novel, often referred to as the Reverend, a practice I will observe below. Ames is in his old age and has lived as a widower for a long time, as his first wife died giving birth, together with their child. Ames – the Reverend – is, so to speak, the voice of doctrinal theology in the frame of the novel, but is also a thoughtful person who uses his theological knowledge to reflect deeply on existential matters of concern to himself and the members of his congregation. Doctrinal theology of the reformed kind, a thorough knowledge of which he shares with his colleague and friend Reverend Robert Boughton, is not, *nota bene*, understood in the novel as an alternative to existential experience (at least not generally); to put it schematically: if experience gives substance to doctrine, doctrine interprets experience. The Reverend is quite surprised at marrying Lila, and so are most of those surrounding him. Lila, Doll, and the Reverend – those are the main protagonists of the novel, as well as the son of Lila and the Reverend who is born at the end of the novel.

As might already be clear from this introduction, my own interest in studying the relationship between grace and subjectivity in *Lila* is that of a theologian and a philosopher rather than of a scholar of literature. It is as a critical and speculative inquiry into the relation between grace and subjectivity that I approach the novel, as an instance and source of narrative reflection on this very relationship. This means that the

novel is not itself the object of critical inquiry. Instead, in the words of Rita Felski, I try place myself "in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible".[3] I approach the novel with the expectation that it can become a constructive interlocutor in the concern of this essay, namely what kind of being a human being must be in order to be able to receive grace. As the narrative representation of grace in *Lila* moves between the doctrinal and the experiential, it is certainly particularly apt as a dialogue partner for such an issue. Further, experience unfolds in time and is therefore best represented narratively rather than discursively like doctrine; thus, the novel is as a form relevant for understanding the experience of grace. Time is represented in *Lila* not as a chronological sequence, however, but past and present are continuously interwoven. In other words, the past is never just gone for Lila, but lingers on in her present as the source from which the present is born. Such a narrative representation of time is of fundamental importance for the understanding of the workings of grace in *Lila*, as grace here is not presented as a mere cessation of a troubled history but, so to speak, a redemption of the past as well as the present. As the past not only makes Lila into the self she is but also repeatedly returns to bless as well as haunt her, for grace to be of genuine concern to Lila it needs to be a grace for her entire self and not just her present. It goes without saying, perhaps, that my analysis of grace in the novel follows, for purposes of clarification, another mode of time that makes this temporal aspect of *Lila* less visible in this essay than it is in reading the novel, but as form this temporality is as philosophically and theologically significant as the content.

My inquiry of the relation between grace and subjectivity in the actual novel will consist of three sections: first, on the theme of existential loneliness, which I will argue defines the predicament of which grace might be a resolution in *Lila*; second, the sacrament of baptism, which might or might not be the instrument of grace as both institutional or spiritual transformation; third, the experience of grace, which will be the outcome of the possible transformation of the main predicament in *Lila*. In these sections, I wish to stay as close as possible to the text of the novel, keeping the more general discussion to the final section where I call upon Taylor and Desmond as philosophical dialogue partners.

EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS

The very first sentence of the novel gives us a sense of how Lila is trying to close herself against the external world: "The child was just there on the stoop in the dark, hugging herself against the cold, all cried out and nearly sleeping" (p. 3). Lila is portrayed

3 Felski 2015, 12.

as trying to hide, to make as little fuss of herself, just to avoid drawing attention to herself. This is just before Doll picks her up and leaves, but her loneliness as well as her physical demarcation against the world continues throughout the novel and becomes a constant theme: "Lila didn't know where to hide, so she just went into a corner and curled up as small as she could, with her eyes shut tight" (p. 13). She is hesitant and suspicious in all dealings with other people, and even when she finds herself established in a home together with the Reverend, she has recurring thoughts of escape, as if her finally coming to some kind of rest might be too good to be true. For periods she rarely or never talks. Overall, Lila expresses a strong sense of existential alienation, as having no real face, home, name, or roots, as in the following passage:

> Her name had the likeness of a name. She had the likeness of a woman, with hands but no face at all, since she never let herself see it. She had the likeness of a life, because she was all alone in it. She lived in the likeness of a house, with walls and a roof and a door that kept nothing in and nothing out. (p. 68)

Her name is not really her name but was given to her in young age by an old woman with whom Doll and Lila sought refuge for a while and who once had a pretty sister by the same name (p. 10). From the beginning, then, the name Lila is associated with loss as well as borrowed from someone else.

As a favourite pastime, at least until she meets the Reverend, Lila visits the movie theatre. These regular visits become a kind of essence of her lonely life: in the darkness of the movie theatre, she can be truly alone even in the company of strangers, since no-one can see her; the movie helps her to escape into someone else's story for a while and forget about her own life; but at the same time, she also escapes the acute loneliness of just being by herself. The movie theatre allows a way of being lonely in public without sensing any of the shame of being seen as alone that this might imply, and that Lila at times experiences in an almost visceral way. Her intense existential loneliness is rendered in the novel as a matter of fact, and also as a safeguard against being wounded, physically or mentally, but not as uncompromised or ultimately desirable.

In the novel, Doll is pictured as a helper; although the immediate reason for the kidnapping remains unclear (at least to me), we understand that it is out of care for Lila that she abducts the child. Doll becomes the constant companion in Lila's thoughts, and is also understood by Lila as someone who has constantly helped her. Doll teaches Lila what wisdom she has, but despite being a maternal figure, there is a loneliness also for Doll; as readers we are reminded by the story that Doll is a wounded person who helps Lila to understand how to cope on her own. When Lila and Doll eventually are separated, Lila is indeed able to get by alone – "She knew how to get by as long as nobody bothered her" (p. 27) – but what she has not learned from Doll is how to

genuinely relate to someone. The relationship between Lila and Doll is characterized, despite Doll in so many ways being Lila's helper, as being alone together: "Doll may have been the loneliest woman in the world, and she was the loneliest child, and there they were, the two of them together, keeping each other warm in the rain" (p. 5). The wisdom that Doll conveys to Lila is the wisdom of loneliness. She therefore avoided as much contact as she could, since "it was hard for her to be with people" (p. 36).

Doll's teaching is centred around this loneliness, as when she speaks about the unreliability of men:

> Men just don't feel like they sposed to stay by you. They ain't never your friends. Seems like you could trust 'em, they act like you could trust 'em, but you can't. Don't matter what they say. I seen it in my life a hundred times. She said, You got to look after your *own* self. When it comes down to it, you're going to be doing that anyway. (pp. 50f.)

As Doll suggests in this quote, the vanity of trusting men is something she has learned herself through hard-won experience. This is one of life's hard lessons according to Doll, and Lila returns to these again and again: "Talking to strangers was putting yourself within the reach of sudden harm. What might they say? What might they seem to be thinking?" (p. 253). One of the people whom Doll and Lila accompanies through their vagabonding life, Doane, has a similar lesson to teach about the vanity of trusting preachers: "This is how you got turned into an orphan. Then they put you in a place with other orphans and you can never leave. High walls around it" (p. 53). The wisdom of loneliness gives room for relations to other people, as when Doll and Lila join Doane's people, but such relations are more or less always of the instrumental kind: "You best keep to yourself, except you never can" (p. 70). In this part of the story, the reason that you cannot be without other people is just the struggle for survival, not for the sense of sociality itself. Lila is just too lonely to find that in herself.

Just after she was abducted, we learn that "Lila didn't talk then," but even if she could, she did not want to: "It was partly that Doll gave her anything she needed" (p. 12). Talking, for the very young Lila, is represented as a means of expressing one's wishes, and if those needs and desires Lila might have already were satisfied, there was no point in talking. Later, living outside Gilead in a small shack, she sometimes takes a walk into town out of loneliness, but that did not mean speaking to those living there: "She never meant to talk to anybody" (p. 27). Talking, as a wider means of communication between human beings, means in some sense opening up to the world, and thus risking being wounded by the other. Not talking, or just talking to express your needs, is minimizing this risk. As she starts to relate to the people of Gilead, she is given clothing, which she also accepts, but in a non-committal way. She then avoids saying any word of thanks, thinking that the givers were giving for their own reason

(and thus really not giving at all) but also because she did not want to establish a relationship of gratitude: "She wasn't beholden to them, because being beholden was the one thing she could not stand" (p. 40). To keep to yourself, for as long as you can, "seems better than asking for help" (p. 153). Keeping quiet is something Lila periodically practises, both in her time at the brothel, where she at one point realizes that it has been a long time since she has spoken to someone, and also when she is together with the Reverend.

In order that the picture of the relationship between Lila and Doll I give should not stand out as too grim, I need to mention that there also are instances of a more expressive use of language and voice throughout their relation. Whispering, cursing, laughing, Doll and Lila sometimes seem to enjoy themselves through language. Again, Lila's existential loneliness is not absolute, although the emphasis in the novel is found here; it is the main predicament of its main protagonist. As a counterpoint, there is a yearning to break out of the loneliness, but that means exposing oneself as vulnerable which is potentially shameful.

I have already mentioned that Lila, when she is established with the Reverend, has recurring thoughts about leaving. At the same time, however, here we also find this strong yearning for trust, a yearning that she nevertheless fights:

> She wanted to rest her head on a bosom more Doll's than Doll herself, to feel trust rise up in her like that sweet old surprise of being carried off in strong arms, wrapped in a gentleness worn all soft and perfect. "No," she said, and drew herself away. (p. 54)

Or another time: "With her head still resting on his shoulder she said, 'I just can't trust you at all' [...] He said, 'Is there anything I can do about that?' And she said, 'Nothing I can think of. I don't trust nobody'" (p. 58). And again, "'I just don't go around trusting people. Don't see the need'" (p. 80). And yet again: "'Oh,' she said, 'that's a fact. I don't trust nobody. I can't stay nowhere. I can't get a minute of rest'" (p. 89). And again: "All it meant was that she still didn't trust him and he'd be a fool to trust her" (p. 95). All of these quotations come from passages where their signification is more ambivalent, an expression of Lila's both wanting to trust him and thinking it is for the best not to do so. She is still drawn towards the old Reverend through their conversations, but she still observes that her profound loneliness is innately marked by a lack of language: "if you're just a stranger to everybody on earth, then that's what you are and there's no end to it. You don't know the words to say" (p. 79). One of these words that the Reverend uses and that she is unacquainted with is "existence", but she quite immediately figures out its meaning: "Hunger and loneliness and weariness and still wanting more of it. Existence" (pp. 74f.). Her own existence is an expression of "the struggle of living" (*conatus essendi*), a concept I will return to below, and she knows

it. The struggle of living could mean just surviving, and this experience of the struggle for survival is where the wisdom of loneliness comes from, but it is obvious in Lila's thoughts and for herself that this is not all there is to it; it is not enough.

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Another related and returning theme in *Lila* is the sacrament of baptism, and baptism understood as an instrument of transformation. Running through the entire novel are musings, reflections, as well as enactments of it. Baptism is referred to as a sacrament by the Reverend and his friend Robert Boughton in their theological discussion, and this is congruent with their reformed tradition. According to Calvin, baptism is "the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children".[4] Note that baptism is a "sign" for Calvin. This is the essence of its sacramental status, which for him means that it is a symbol that participates in the reality that it symbolizes, as a physical manifestation of a spiritual thing.[5] Baptism, as a sacrament, is, in other words, a medium for God's presence in the physical and spiritual world.

The Reverend himself speaks about baptism in the liturgical words accompanying the act of baptizing Lila as a sacrament, which "is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace" (p. 87). But at the same time, it is also a rite of initiation into the Christian community. That there are discussions of baptism in *Lila* that are theologically charged is hardly surprising, given the theological acumen of the Reverend. To a large extent his is a doctrinal perspective on baptism, as in the quote above. He also speaks about how the act of baptism washes the sinner in "the waters of regeneration" and turns him or her into "a newborn babe" (p. 90). Here another motif in the symbolism of baptism becomes prominent, as the water that is supposedly cleansing and regenerative, with its rich connotations of passing through a liminal stage. The only theological authority mentioned in *Lila* is Calvin, unlike in Robinson's earlier novel *Gilead*, where it is the Reverend himself who converses in the form of a letter and thus mentions a number of theologians or theologically inclined poets: besides Calvin also Augustine, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Barth, William James, George Herbert, John Donne, Georges Bernanos, and several others.[6] In *Lila*, compared to *Gilead*, the doctrinal discourses are kept to a minimum, with one exception being the theological quarrel between the Reverend and Boughton on the salvific significance of the intention to baptize (p. 250) – a very doctrinal dispute indeed! Most of all, however,

4 Calvin 1960b [1559], 1303 (4, 15, 1).

5 Calvin 1960b [1559], 1314 (4, 15, 14).

6 Robinson 2004, 19, 23f., 46, 115, 153, 172, 196, 235, *et passim*.

baptism comes through as an experiential matter, as Lila's own ruminations about her baptism are related to the possibility of trust and belonging.

Why is it that Lila should want to get baptized, as she repeatedly but hesitatingly states is her wish? This is not a thought occasioned by her relation to the Reverend. It occurs to her even before she is married to him. One reason she tells herself is that "there might be something about that water on her forehead that would cool her mind" (p. 34). Her wandering life corresponds to an equally wandering mind; Lila is seeking some kind of lasting attachment in her constant state of flux, and baptism could, perhaps, serve as a fixed point both temporally and socially. The idea of baptism seems to come from one of the revival meetings she visited with Doll and Duane's gang; one of the preachers mentions "[t]he great gift of baptism which makes us clean and acceptable" (p. 65) but Doll tells her that it is time to go. This is quite clearly related to the cleansing and regenerative function of baptism. The sacrament seems to give expression to the possibility of a new start and another life.

This is not all there is to baptism for Lila, however. Another deliberation made by Lila about baptism is particularly interesting for my purposes here. In a train of thought where Lila thinks about what things are really necessary, she questions whether existence itself really is something you need, whether you really need someone standing beside you, and whether her friend Marcelle really needs a ribbon tied around her wrist. Her answer is both negative and positive: "You don't, but you do. Take away every pleasure – but you couldn't, because there can be pleasure in a sip of water" (p. 76). As far as I can understand, "need" is contrasted here with something that is more than necessary; neither existence, friendship, nor beauty are "needed" in the strict sense of the word but could be characterized as a gift. Existence is a gift, since you, strictly speaking, would not be able to "need" anything if you did not exist; friendship and beauty are also gifts, but in the sense that they make it worth existing and not just possible. Even baptism seems to be more a gift than a need, as when she thinks: "There was no reason to let an old man dip his hand in water and touch it to your forehead, as if he loved you the way people do who would touch your face and your hair" (p. 76). There is no "reason" for baptism at the hand of the Reverend, or, in other words, it is not something you "need," but similar to an act of caressing it is an act of love, which means that it is something that is *given* to you, and that it is given to *you*. These things, existence, friendship, beauty as well as baptism, do not belong to the order of need but to the order of gift, in that they either establish the very ground of needing anything, as existence does, or that they transcend brute subsistence in making life worth living. As Lila reflects upon the pleasure of walking beside the Reverend, it is good, "like rest and quiet, like something you could live without but needed anyway" (p. 79f.). Here, friendship is considered as a need, contrary to what I have been suggesting above, but

a need that "you could live without" and so nevertheless a need of a higher order than mere subsistence. All of these things, then, are matters of grace, but perhaps not only in the primary theological sense, but also grace as the quality that makes something pleasing or attractive; the gracefulness of life.

Eventually Lila mentions her ambivalent wish to get baptized to the Reverend: "'I figure I better get myself baptized. No one seen to it for me when I was a child'" (p. 35). They speak of it on and off for some time, and, although he does not want to push things, he declares himself willing to perform the ritual. She comes to some classes about baptism in the Reverend's church but decides to cease attending and not to be baptized after all, as she is "just a stranger to everybody on earth [...] and there's no end to it," obviously not even through baptism (p. 79). The Reverend repeats his willingness to baptize her, even if she has not been taught all the theology behind the sacrament, but their conversation this time ends in a query about trust. Interestingly, however, the Reverend lets formal doctrinal knowledge bow to experience here, as he senses that Lila really does have an understanding of the significance of baptism, although not expressed in the conventional terms of the reformed theological tradition.

Lila is finally baptized, but the act is performed not in the church but outdoors, with water in a bucket brought from a river not far from Lila's shack outside Gilead (pp. 83–90). The Reverend and Lila are the only people present, but the Reverend picks a bouquet of flowers, and the act is rendered as beautiful as well as emotionally moving. One of the more important parts of the ritual is that Lila now is christened as Lila Dahl which means, says the Reverend, that it from now on really *is* her name, not just a likeness of a name. Thus, the act of baptism is supposed to anchor Lila in herself and work against her sense of existential alienation and loneliness. Interestingly, after the baptism is performed, Lila proposes to the Reverend, although somewhat ambiguously: "She wasn't crying. She couldn't look at him. 'I want this so damn bad. And I hate to want anything.' '"This"?" 'I want you to marry me! I wish I didn't. It's just a misery for me'" (p. 89). To begin with it is, I think, obvious that baptism and marriage are mentioned after one another in this passage not just by narrative accident but because they belong together. Marriage, in *Lila*, also stands for an act of fixation, and antidote against mistrust and alienation. Although not a sacrament as such in the reformed tradition but "a good and holy ordinance of God", in the novel it serves the purpose of letting Lila get used to attaching herself to a place (Gilead), a house (a home), and a person (a husband).[7] This means putting an end to being "just a stranger to everybody on earth," and instead starting a process of learning to trust places and people. Both baptism and marriage are, in one sense, punctual acts that mark a distinctive before and

7 Calvin 1960b [1559], 1480–1482 (4, 19, 134).

after, but in another sense, they are rather the initiation of an ongoing process which does not change everything at once but only gradually. If baptism makes Lila a spiritual stranger no more, marriage makes her an earthly stranger no more, although neither of them anchors her at once or once and for all. As marriage is a misery to Lila, probably because really wanting something like marriage also means making oneself dependent upon another person – or even realizing one's dependence on other human beings. To someone like Lila, with all her existential alienation and loneliness, this is troublesome, as she really does not trust anyone, which she makes clear to the Reverend, even right after her ambivalent proposal, but also afterwards: "I am baptized, I am married, I am Lila Dahl, and Lila Ames. I don't know what else I should want. Except for the same to be gone, and it ain't. I'm in a strange house with a man who can't even figure out how to talk to me" (p. 94). Here, baptism become an act of initiation but, interestingly enough, rather into the society of human beings than into "the society of the church", given that these societies are not co-extensive.

At one point, Lila decides to "unbaptize" herself. This is not primarily an act of rejecting Christian faith – as such or for her own part. It is rather a question of solidarity. We learn from the novel that Doll has been fundamentally uninterested or at least passively indifferent towards Christianity and its beliefs and rituals, although they visited a couple of revival meetings for the convenience of this as a social gathering. Doll was a stranger on earth, like Lila herself, and "she did not believe and was not baptized"; "no one had rested his hand on her head, and no one had said a word to her about the waters of regeneration" (p. 97). Lila's fear is that the renewal of her being, the "reckoning among God's children" that baptism implies, might make it impossible for Doll to recognize her, in the next life or in principle. Her own home-made ritual of "unbaptism" is, at least partially, rendered as an act of solidarity with Doll rather than an act of negation or withdrawal (p. 22). Doll not being among the "elect" but rather the "lost", Lila questions the scope of divine grace, especially with regard to baptism, which the majority of those having lived on earth did not know anything about. There are also hints of disappointment in Lila, when baptism really did not ease her mind in the way that she had hoped (p. 17). After getting married, and also with the first awareness of having conceived a child, she went back to the river in an "old dress [...] and washed herself in the water of death and loss and whatever else was not regeneration" (p. 103). Here, her act of "unbaptism" is pictured as the exact opposite of baptism: death instead of life, loss instead of being found, and whatever was not being born anew.

Her act of "unbaptism" did not suppress her doubts, however. The thought of having a child made Lila fear that she would inflict harm on it, and she regrets that she "unbaptized" herself before giving birth. At first not daring to mention her act of "unbaptism" to the Reverend, she asks, without mentioning her own act, whether it is

actually possible to "wash off" baptism, which he denies (p. 105). The Reverend does not accept Lila's analogy between baptism and prayer, suggesting instead that it is a fact (p. 237). In other words, baptism as a sacrament is to the Reverend what I call an act rather than a process, which means that once it is done, then it is valid whatever else might happen. Or, in other words, it really is a sacrament, according to the Reverend, a visible sign of abiding grace, and not just an expression of one's own yearnings. It is not possible to wash it off "'with all the water in the West Nishnabotna'" (p. 237; a river in Iowa). The Reverend's later emphatic denial of the possibility of "unbaptism" suggests to Lila that he actually did understand that she had tried to wash her baptism off: "She probably had that river smell all over her that afternoon and he figured it out when she asked him later" (p. 237f.). It is not entirely clear, however, whether the Reverend trusts his own words about the impossibility to wash off baptism, as he touches Lila's head three times with the baptismal water at the baptism of their son, for which he immediately apologizes (p. 257).

THE EXPERIENCE OF GRACE

What kind of experience of grace runs through *Lila*? Or is it better to speak of several different experiences of grace or perhaps a multidimensional experience? Grace, in Christian theology, has a wide range of meanings, and the actual meaning of the concept is dependent upon what it is contrasted with. Here I wish to introduce a typology, so as to be able to sort those different meanings more clearly. David W. Tracy finds three different paradigms in Augustine: the traditional Catholic "nature–grace paradigm", the classic Protestant "sin–grace paradigm", and the less obvious "tragedy–grace paradigm".[8] Grace, as a literary theme in *Lila*, does not, obviously, have to conform to any of these theological paradigms, but at the same time they could be used to interpret how grace is thematized in the novel. I shall begin this section by using these three paradigms as a heuristic typology for how the experience of grace in *Lila* is rendered, and then move on to a more general discussion of grace in *Lila*.

To begin with, despite being placed in a reformed setting, there are several instances in *Lila* of a grace that most of all belong to the nature–grace paradigm. In the nature–grace paradigm, grace is more continuous than discontinuous with nature, as in the classic formulation by Thomas Aquinas that "grace does not destroy nature but perfects it".[9] That does not mean that nature (as existence) is not a gift and therefore not grace for Aquinas, but perhaps this paradigm most of all elucidates the character

8 Tracy 2018, 27. Cf. Oakes 2016.

9 Thomas Aquinas 1981, I. 1.8.

of such gifts as friendship, beauty, and baptism as they transform or even transfigure subsistence into something more. Although Tracy speaks about this paradigm as traditional Catholic, I think we are allowed to trace another source of influence of this paradigm on Robinson, namely from Jonathan Edwards, the 18th-century American Puritan, philosopher, and revivalist preacher, who is well known for his emphasis on beauty.[10] One of the more obvious instances of this paradigm in Robinson's novel comprise the ruminations by Lila of the need for existence, friendship, beauty, and baptism that I discussed above. But this passage is not the only example of a kind of grace that informs not only Lila's or the Reverend's thoughts about grace; even more so in the exposition of the beauty of the natural world as well as the view of human sociality that runs through Robinson's novel. If sociality, more often than not, is a problem for Lila, apprehending the beauty of creation seems not. We find examples of this in Lila tending flowers in her own home, in other people's gardens, as well as on the grave of the Reverend's first wife who died a long time ago in childbirth. Another example is her change of clothes before baptism while the Reverend is picking sunflowers. Yet another when they pick blackberries and put them in the Reverend's handkerchief: "Fragrance and purple bled through the cloth" (p. 88). Or the sharp shock of a sudden, pleasant memory of "the taste of a clover blossom or the smell of the wind at evening" which made her talk out loud in an affirmation of existence: "'Yes, yes'" (p. 204). There is overall a strong sense of the giftedness of creation in Robinson's authorship that most likely also influences her depiction of the experience of grace in the more defined theological sense.[11] One could, perhaps, even speak about a sacramental quality of beauty in Robinson's novels; not, of course, in the more strictly defined Protestant sense but as a paradigm of how divinity is experienced.[12]

Further, the more discontinuous sin–grace paradigm is also present in *Lila*. If grace does not destroy nature according to the previous paradigm, it certainly is supposed to overcome sin, at least in the long run. According to Calvin, grace consists of both justification – "being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father" – and sanctification – "sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life".[13] In other words, in Calvin the emphasis is undoubtedly on the discontinuity between sin and grace. Two

10 See, for instance, Robinson 2018, 51–68.

11 See Martin Westerholm's contribution to this collection.

12 Robinson explicitly draws the connection between grace and beauty in 2018, 101–114. See esp. pp. 113f.: "To me [grace] means, among many things, a sense of our participation in the fullness of an act or gesture so that the beauty of it is seen whole, the leap and the landing." Cf. also pp. 32, 33, 37, 49, 67, 68, 76f.

13 Calvin 1960a [1559], 725 (3, 11, 1).

of the central experiential manifestations of sin, guilt and shame, are present in *Lila*: to begin with through Lila's awareness of her own existential loneliness as obvious in her outward appearance and therefore shameful; and further, the guilt of the murder committed by Doll is transferred to Lila (she keeps the killing knife) and although it was not carried out in cold blood but as an act of defence, it was still somehow wrong. Guilt has to be recognized, according to Lila: "There was no way to abandon guilt, no decent way to disown it. All the tangles and knots of bitterness and desperation and fear had to be pitied. No, better, grace had to fall over them" (p. 260). Grace, then, is a way of acknowledging guilt without letting it overpower her sense of self. This is also the background of the prominent regenerative motive in baptism: the cleansing and regenerative water that will allow a new start and a way of living not any longer defined by shame and guilt.

Finally, although less obvious as a paradigm, I would suggest that the tragedy–grace paradigm also figures strongly in *Lila* and that it relates to the theme of her existential loneliness. Although her loneliness at times might be related to sinfulness, not particularly her own but also other people's, Lila's loneliness is tragic rather than sinful. In her novel, Robinson very seldom images her characters as evil, but their misery is more often than not related to fate, chance, or fortune. This is not suggesting that *Lila* is a tragedy nor that there is no sense of sin at all, but just to note that a lot of the existential desolation she portrays is caused by tragic necessity rather than by evil or sin. Doll is a case in point: some of the wisdom she conveys to Lila does contribute to Lila's existential loneliness, but the advice not to trust anyone is hardly born from spite but rather through Doll's own, cruel experience. The same with the acts that she performs, like kidnapping and murder, and also Lila's own, quite unsuccessful, stint at a brothel; none of them is exactly sinful in the sense that they are born of a perverted will, but rather caused by appalling circumstances. The suffering that Lila experiences through her existential loneliness is not so much a matter of sin but of tragedy, and the grace that heals that kind of suffering is of the kind that locates her in a place she can call home – at least hesitantly – as well as in relations with other people that promises to have a certain permanence and therefore might be afforded some trust. A prominent aspect of baptism here is baptism as the act of initiation into the society of human beings.

My typology of different paradigms of grace here is not supposed to suggest that there are distinct experiences of grace that can be categorized according to this scheme or another. It is just an analytical way of highlighting different aspects of grace that figure in Lila's experience, often enough intertwined with each other. What the typology clearly shows is that Lila's experience of grace does not follow the

classic Protestant paradigm according to Tracy's typology, although it is present.[14] I would suggest that, instead, we find the emphasis on the two other paradigms: grace as something supervening nature as well as grace as the answer to tragedy. The dynamic of grace in *Lila*, then, is not found in the motif of sin and repentance, but if and how Lila can learn to acknowledge grace to the extent that it speaks to her condition of existential loneliness. Here, both beauty as well as trust as a gift play important roles. I shall now take a closer look at how grace is played out in relation to Lila's existential predicament.

Lila is, unsurprisingly, not portrayed as having a doctrinal approach to grace; for the Reverend, on the other hand, although not discoursing on grace to any extent, grace is related much more to the mystery of God (pp. 21, 31, 223) where the mystery of human life has its basis. To the Reverend, the mystery of life means that "we have no way to reconcile its elements" (p. 223); in other words, we cannot understand life as if we were able to regard it as revealed to our inquisitive gaze like an object on display, and therefore we cannot be in control of it. Life is "given out of no necessity at all except God's grace" (p. 223) which means that it is a gift and not an object we possess, however much we try. But, finally, this passivity of our existence does not drain us of subjectivity as agency altogether, since God's grace sustains us "as creatures we can recognize as ourselves"; this ability of recognition, which "always seemed remarkable" to the Reverend, is also a part of our existence (p. 223). The ability to recognize oneself as oneself is, indeed, a gift of God, but as a source of reflexivity it also provides us with the possibility (and necessity) to take a stand for or against oneself, other human beings, existence as such, as well as God. The reference to the mystery of life as well as grace, then, does not mean, to the Reverend, that we experience grace as a lightning from above but as something that asks of us to be involved as ourselves, authentically and gladly.

Do you have to suffer to know grace? In a discussion between Lila and the Reverend, the latter hesitates about Calvin's idea that the experience of suffering is a prerequisite for receiving grace: "Well, he says, basically, that people have to suffer to really recognize grace when it comes. I don't know quite what to think about that" (p. 131). The loss of his only son had made Calvin familiar with suffering, of course, and also the Old Testament seems to suggest that Israel learned to know what grace means through their suffering captivity in Babylon. Even the Reverend himself has had his share of suffering, "[n]ot so much by Ezekiel's standards" – the book in the Old Testament to which Lila repeatedly returns – "but enough of it by now to know that this is grace" (p. 132). "This" refers to the Reverend's current state of being married in old age and

14 In her essay 'Grace', Robinson starts by mentioning the classic Protestant paradigm sin–grace, but then, interestingly enough, widens its scope through her discussion of grace in Shakespeare. See Robinson 2015b, 31–49.

expecting a child, and the contrast between his own loneliness before and his unexpected liaison with Lila helps him experience the latter as grace.

Lila, on her part, is drawn towards the prophet Ezekiel's grim vision of the people of Israel as "a desolation and a reproach. She knew what those words meant without asking" (p. 125). To Lila, suffering is not so much a prerequisite as a matter of fact, a realistic view of how things actually are. Even if Lila is aware of the possibility that there are more things to life than just suffering, she hardly expects these things to happen and even further, she almost does not want them to happen, because they could lead her to a false sense of happiness. It is more realistic as well as a defence against disappointment to learn not to trust, to understand that "[e]xistence don't want you" (p. 125). This is why even marriage and pregnancy will not instill a sense of hope: "Don't go hoping. Let's see what comes of this child. Let's see how long I keep this old man. What a body might hope for just ain't in the way of things, most of the time" (p. 143). This does not at all mean that Lila is not hoping for the child. On the contrary, it matters immensely to her, almost exclusively so (p. 202). Here defence is perhaps, then, not against hoping as such but against putting any trust in that hope.

But Ezekiel also speaks about the cleansing and regenerative power of baptism, as she reads the prophet in the King James Version: "Then washed I thee with water; yea, I thoroughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil" (p. 135; Ezekiel 16:9). Even the grim prophet does not seem to think that suffering is a permanent and static condition. Suffering to Lila, then, is not so much a prescription and as such a prerequisite to grace, but the inevitable background of grace. Whatever hope or trust she can muster must be able to be measured against this realistic background of suffering to be authentic. Grace, in whatever form, can never be, to Lila, something expected but only something unexpected; but the unexpected form of grace also means precisely that it can be hard to trust the goodness of it. What must be the most dramatic part of the entire novel, the birth of their son, almost ends tragically, with the tiny baby just barely surviving, yet again confirming the fragility of any hope and the constant threat of more suffering. The child survives, however, as an affirmation of life despite all.

The child is a turning point to Lila's way of relating to the world. As I have shown at length above, her relation to other people as well as existence is marked by a deep distrust. As yet unborn but soon due, she addresses the child with a second person singular "you"; most of her inner monologues are *about* other people, including the Reverend, but her unborn child is the explicit addressee of her thoughts: "You. What a strange word that is. She thought, I have never laid eyes on you. I am waiting for you" (p. 243). Even if she dies bearing the child or if he dies at birth, he will still be a "you", and if they were to meet in heaven, they will find each other and say: "So there

you are!" (p. 244). The birth – and survival – of their son means that an "other life" (p. 249) begins, a life not characterized by that same old distrust but a readiness to seize life in spite of its fragility:

> She knew better than to waste that time. There isn't always someone who wants you singing to him or nibbling his ear or brushing his cheek with a dandelion blossom. Somebody who knows when you're being silly, and laughs and laughs. (p. 249)

Here we have a different tone in Lila's relation to the world. Suddenly, time is precious, which means that it can be wasted, instead of being just an instance of certain loss. This signals an aspect shift in her relation to existence, experiencing it as gift rather than precarious possession. Earlier in the novel, Lila reflects on how the Reverend makes every effort to make her feel at home, but she does not even know "how to begin," as she has not ever been at home (p. 107). This is an illustration of her existential loneliness, where she hardly knows what it would mean not to be lonely, except through a feeling of lack and shame. It might be an overstatement to say that her loneliness is cured through giving birth to her and the Reverend's son – Robinson is hardly the vendor of easy solutions, and Lila still confesses that "her heart" sometimes was "secret and bitter and scared" (p. 254). But this change of tone is certainly there as a turning point in the novel, a point which to a certain extent overwhelms Lila and makes her able to begin to know what it would mean to feel at home. The novel ends with Lila affirming both the vulnerability as well as the celebration of a force stronger than the threat of loss:

> That's how it is. Lila had borne a child into a world where a wind could rise that would take him from her arms as if there were no strength in them at all. Pity us, yes, but we are brave, she thought, and wild, more life in us than we can bear, the fire infolding itself in us. That peace could only be amazement, too. (pp. 260f.)

What kind of peace is it that is also brave and wild? Obviously, a peace that makes us stretch ourselves out of ourselves, as it is more "than we can bear", and somehow related to a fire that comes from outside as it has to "infold itself in us". Also, here, in these sentences, there is some kind of aspect shift going on, or perhaps better a transformation or reconfiguration of subjectivity, where inside and outside seem to enfold each other without any due respect for the integrity of their respective demarcation. The peace that is both "more life" and "fire" is expressed through "amazement", a term I would prefer to interpret, in the light of the figuration of grace in the novel, not primarily as shock or incredulity but rather as admiration and wonder. "Amazement" suggests the experience of something discontinuous with what you can reasonably expect, and so echoes an experience of grace as a gift impossible to take for granted.

The decisive difference between Lila in her state of existential loneliness is that she now is able to let go of control and start hoping, as what the future might bring need not necessarily amount to inevitable disappointment or even danger. To experience amazement as wonder is to be able to trust that what might come might be good.

A final note on an aspect of grace that does *not* figure as prominently in *Lila* as others, the grace of being incorporated into a new community; as Calvin calls it in his definition of baptism, "the society of the church". Lila's baptism does not mean an actual initiation into the church as the community of believers; "she felt strange in the church" (p. 21); "The best thing about church was that when she sat in the last pew there was no one looking at her. She could come a little late and leave a little early, when she wanted to" (p. 36). Her relation to the church remains ambivalent, even after the baptism of their son: "[h]ere she was practically calling herself a Christian" (p. 257). Calling herself a Christian – being a member of the community of believers – does seldom come spontaneously to Lila, or if spontaneous, as in this case, not without hesitance and reflection on this matter. There might be several reasons for this, on the diegetic level as well as with regard to Robinson's own theological profile: Lila's distrust of other people would not make it easy to be reconciled to the thought of belonging to a community; Robinson has an emphasis on the general sacramental quality of creation that might leave the communal aspects of sacramentality in a narrative shadow. But here I don't wish to speculate any further about the reasons for this relative absence but suffice it to note that it is there.

THE BUFFERED AND THE POROUS SELF

I shall now return to the question what kind of self a human being must be to be able to receive grace, informed by Robinson's *Lila*. In this novel, a transformation of Lila's subjectivity is narrated from her state of existential loneliness to a state of relative trust, where baptism as a means of grace have been operative, at least on a symbolic plane. Grace is, by Lila, experienced as a transformation of her subjectivity; not necessarily as a radical revolution of her self where everything before is different from everything after. Nonetheless, baptism is not unimportant: as an anchor point in the outer world it also provides a clear demarcation of before and after, which lets the transformation of subjectivity find some structure. How shall this subjectivity be understood?

A helpful indication of what kind of subjectivity that is presupposed by the ability to receive grace is found in Charles Taylor's distinction in *A secular age* between the "buffered" and the "porous" self. If the former is characterized by the possibility of "taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind," for the latter

"the very notion that there is a clear boundary, allowing us to define an inner base area, grounded in which we can disengage from the rest, has no sense".[15] In other words, the buffered self is a self that tries to take control over its boundaries, whereas the porous self is a vulnerable self who can be surprised by something outside itself. I think the connection to the reception of grace in *Lila* is quite obvious. To be able to receive grace, the self must be in the mode of porosity. However, as Taylor uses this conceptual typology of different subjectivities, it is above all related to a distinction in history between a premodern and a modern self; the modern self, living in a disenchanted world dominated by what Taylor calls an "immanent frame", is a buffered rather than a porous self in that it no longer experiences transcendence in any stronger sense of the word. Not that it is impossible to experience grace today and therefore *Lila* relates a story of the past, but that the very framework of making sense of transcendence is lost, and therefore the experience of grace is orphaned.

This periodic distinction of Taylor's has been disputed by another philosopher, William Desmond, who has engaged in more depth with the concept of the "porosity of being". According to Desmond, the "porosity of being is ontologically constitutive, not just historically relative".[16] Desmond's philosophical meditation on the porosity of being is larger in scope than Taylor's, but I shall limit myself here to his claim that the self still can be understood as porous, even in modernity. The porosity of self is always an open possibility, even though it might be more or less emphasized in different stages of life as well as in different historical periods.[17] There is an implicit experience of transcendence, even today, reflected in several everyday experiences, not just in those experiences that has been designated "religious". Examples of such experiences of porosity are the experience of being moved by music, of blushing, of doubling up through laughter, which are available to most human beings even today, even those who have no experience of prayer or other, more religious, experiences.[18] This primal porosity of the human being can, according to Desmond, be clogged up and thus hidden to ourselves, by forgetfulness or for other reasons. But as a possibility it is an essential trait of human existence. And, further, it is a possibility that can turn into an actuality, as these experiences may unclog the more primal porosity. Such everyday experiences show that the experience of being a porous self is not by necessity closed to modern human beings. Although not mentioned by Desmond, *Lila* and for that matter all of Robinson's novels would be examples of novels that try to express a framework that makes sense of experiences of transcendence, not only grace but beauty as well. I think this

15 Taylor 2007, 38.

16 Desmond 2016b.

17 On the historic context for the buffered self, see further Pfau 2015, 324.

18 Besides Desmond 2016b, 289–291; see also Desmond 2018.

conceptuality can be of good help in making sense of how subjectivity is understood in *Lila*, and therefore I shall spell it out in a little more detail.

In one sense, the porous self should not, in Desmond's thinking, be seen as a contrast to the buffered self. Although the buffered self is not an expression that Desmond would use about the capable self, the condition of possibility of the buffered self is something that is also a characteristic trait of human existence; this condition of possibility is what Desmond calls the "*conatus essendi* or endeavor to be".[19] This endeavour to be, that is expressed in for example self-preservation, self-affirmation, or even the creative urge to make one's mark in existence, is not understood as the negative opposite of the more positive value of the porosity of self. It is only when the endeavour to be is detached from the more primal porosity that it is perverted into a pure self-interest or a will to power. It is this perversion that is characteristic of the buffered self: "The buffered self tends to close down the primacy of receiving, and reconfigure the endeavoring as related primarily to itself."[20] The positive and even indispensable value of control and self-control – in an everyday sense of these words – finds its place when they appear out of the primal porosity. Through the primal porosity, to exist as a human being is always already to be in relation, as existence is a gift coming from somewhere else than the self itself. Thus, "[s]elf-interest is parasitical on the surplus endowments of the community of being; but it is taken as original, not derivative."[21] With regard to how grace is understood in *Lila*, it might be clarifying to point out that Lila's predicament is hardly characterized by an active self-interest. Her clogging up of the primal porosity is rather an effect of a self-preservation necessitated by her circumstances. But even if she is not to blame for her self being more or less buffered, the effect is similar to what Desmond describes as a closing down of the primacy of receiving. Her self-preservation takes the form of an existential loneliness where she is cut off from community as well as herself.

Still, if Lila's self is more or less buffered, it is not entirely so, as can be understood from the returning experiences of beauty. Flowers especially let her reconnect to the primacy of porosity and, for a while, unclog her buffered self. In the narrative, as she unfolds from her existential loneliness and opens up for the possibility of trust, this unfolding can be described as a gradual, even if not linear, unclogging of the porous self. As Desmond puts it, "[p]orosity opens the space allowing communication, enabling community", and this is precisely what happens to Lila.[22] The transformation of her initial speechlessness into the ability to say "you" and to communicate with the

19 Desmond 2016b, 289.
20 Desmond 2016b, 288.
21 Desmond 2016b, 293.
22 Desmond 2016b, 303.

Reverend, but also the related transformation of her loneliness into community are both anchored in the porosity of the self if we are to use Desmond's conceptuality. Indeed, the very essence of Lila's existential dilemma as portrayed by the novel can be described through Taylor's and Desmond's terminology: it is a matter of a – at least partially involuntary – buffered self in need of unclogging. Desmond even highlights the ritual aspects of such an unclogging, as the "liturgies of a community" – such as baptism – have the function of "keeping open, or keeping unclotted the porosity in an intimate and a communal sense".[23] Baptism, in *Lila*, draws Lila out of that buffered self that is caught in a loop with itself as the only centre. As long as the self is buffered, the other (whether in a human or divine form) is primarily seen as a possible adversary. The unclogging of the buffered self, however, opens up the possibility of communication and community with an other not defined by hostility and in a space not defined by boundaries understood as demarcations *against* the other but more as the means of communication *across* the threshold between the self and the other. Such a possibility is given because the primal, porous self is not experienced as a self-enclosed monad but through a primal giftedness where the self receives its existence from an other.

I mentioned at the beginning of this essay that there are passages in Robinson's essays where she relates to a tradition of American cultural and social activism and its emphasis on the self as a capable self, and this capable self is a recurring theme of Robinson's. Recurring themes in her essays are how and why public universities were built, what kind of social movements (Puritanism!) gave rise to solidarity and welfare in American society, and what kind of subjectivity is presupposed by a working democracy.[24] How do this capable self relate to the porous self that is able to receive grace in her novels, especially *Lila*? Is there not a tension or perhaps even contradiction between the active, capable self and the passive, porous self so that the capable self defeats the porous self through its active affirmation of the self's capabilities? As I have pointed out with regard to Desmond above, there is no necessary conflict between the primal porosity of the self and its endeavour to be, the latter more or less synonymous to what I call the capable self. The porosity is the source of the endeavour to be and not vice versa, and they do not exist side by side or one after the other, in some kind of indifferent truce. Their relationship could perhaps better be described as a kind of pulsation, so that there is a tension but not necessarily a conflict. This tension can be turned into

23 Desmond 2016b, 303.

24 In addition to the already mentioned collection of essays (Robinson 2018), see also Robinson 2005; 2012; 2015b. Of course, the intellectual range of Robinson's interests is much broader than American Pragmatism, but it seems to me that this is a tradition to which her philosophical interests belong and, further, that a common denominator between all those traditions she affirms are precisely the capable self.

a conflict between the buffered and the porous self, however. The porous self is by definition a vulnerable self. Lila's predicament is a case in point: her existential loneliness is an effect of her self being threatened, and as a defence against this threat, communication and community are experienced more as a threat than an opening towards the other. As Desmond puts it: "If the other on the boundary is suspected of will to power, we fear violation by an intruding power and seek protection in a boundary without porosity."[25] In such cases, the buffered self can be experienced as primary. Such adversarial situations are not the only reason for the rise of the buffered self; other situations with much the same effect would be the quest for domination and objectification. What they have in common is their forgetfulness or active eschewing of the human vulnerability that is an effect of our primal porosity. But not every act of defence needs to degenerate into hostility, nor does every aspiration for control turn into a quest for domination; the capable self is an essential and inalienable aspect of human existence and cannot be equated with the buffered self. Not every want or desire that a human being might have is an expression of a will to power, nor is the primal porosity of being a formless chaos without any borders.

In other words, I cannot see any necessary conflict or incoherence between an emphasis on the capable self in some of Robinson's writing and an emphasis on the primal porosity in other parts of it. To establish whether there is an actual conflict or not is of course a more extensive undertaking than the one I have undertaken here, but suffice it to say that in principle her different accounts of subjectivity can – and perhaps also should – be understood as reflecting different aspects of human existence. The experience of grace in *Lila* could be recognized as an unclogging of a buffered self that sets the capable self free to communicate and to commune with other people; the relation to the other is then no longer defined by distrust or hostility but by trust; porosity becomes a presupposition of a genuine relationality. In her coming life with her and the Reverend's son, even after the Reverend is gone, Lila is quite aware that she will need all her resourcefulness to manage a life, but this does not preclude an awareness of her own radical dependence and vulnerability; quite the contrary.

I shall conclude this essay by suggesting that in *Lila*, grace presupposes a porous self, but that this porous self is not the opposite of a capable self; it is only when the capable self for one reason or another is turned into a buffered self that it becomes perverted. Experiencing grace – through baptism, through beauty, through birth – leads to an unclogging of this buffered self that has been folded into itself. This unclogging releases not only the primal porosity of the self but its genuine capabilities as well in a more genuine tension between porosity and capability. The experience of grace does not destroy but liberates the self.

25 Desmond 2016a, 193.

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MARIA YASSA

Between the knowable and the unknowable: The "act of faith" in Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*. A Bionian reading

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to know a person? Getting to know them, becoming aware of their particularity? It is, to be sure, a matter of acquiring ever more complex knowledge. This, however, is knowledge that hardly corresponds to the accumulation of facts. Getting to know and knowing someone is about acquainting oneself with that person's essence, letting oneself be penetrated by their emotional field, to resonate with something in them that exists beyond fact, words, and reason. Knowing, or rather getting-to-know, is a process that is more emotional than rational and that has no given conclusion, since it does not coincide with the exhaustion of a finite, objective body of knowledge. In Bion's terminology, one might say that getting to know a person is to let oneself be affected by and involved in that person's origin.[1] This is what I believe Bion implies when he writes that one cannot learn *about* O – one can only *become* O – since we are dealing with intersubjective and transitive knowledge. To know is to be influenced and changed by the other, who never can, as in the physical world, be a finite object of knowing.

Bion's later theorizing is based on the premise that psychoanalysis – psychoanalytical theory and practice – is inevitably knowledge of the unknown. His thinking represents a paradigm shift in relation to Freudian and Kleinian canons, where the drives constitute a kind of mechanical, perceptible, and measurable force acting on the individual organism, resulting in mental manifestations. The psychoanalyst, argues Bion, must have the unknown as their constant centre of gravity. The unknown personality of the analysand must invariably have precedence over the known:

1 Bion 1965; 1970.

> What is "known" about the patient is of no further consequence: it is either false or irrelevant. If it is "known" by patient and analyst, it is obsolete [...] The only point of importance in any session is the unknown. Nothing must be allowed to distract from intuiting that.[2]

The concept of O represents this unknown, that the subject can only approach asymptotically and partially. Accumulating knowledge of O is impossible; one gets to know O through *at-one-ment* with it. For example one cannot know what psychoanalysis is by accumulating knowledge of it, one must *be an analysand* in order to know. Thus O is an epistemological concept that concerns knowledge of the human subject. Bion has given it many synonyms: "das-Ding-an-sich", "ultimate reality", "the truth about ultimate reality", and "the Godhead", many of them laden with religious and mystical overtones. One way of expressing O in phenomenological terms is to say that the reality/truth of the human subject will always exceed the sum of all thoughts one can have about it. Where our thoughts are finite, reality is infinite. Bion writes:

> To limit ourselves to the observation only of what we understand is denying ourselves the raw material on which present and possibly future wisdom and knowledge might depend. The fact that it is incomprehensible now, because our minds are unsuitable or ill-fitted to grasp it, is not a reason for limiting the facts such as are actually available.[3]

While O cannot be approached with the will or by the accumulation of factual knowledge, Bion claims that the attitude that opens the way to O is the "act of faith".[4] This denotes the abandonment of knowledge, memory, and desire. Since these modalities are based on sensory impressions, they are all too easily entangled in appearance – what a phenomenon looks like, how it sounds, how it seems. Memory can tend towards being a static register of what has been. Desire, in turn, too easily obscures that which is with that which is desired. Where memory and desire concern past events – ultimately, we can only desire what we have once lost – the act of faith concerns that which is unconscious and unknown because it has not (yet) happened. Thus the act of faith points to the future and becomes vector of hope – but also of trust.[5]

The act of faith concerns the faith, beyond certainty, that this beyond-appearance exists, and although unattainable through knowledge, will reveal itself, given time. The terminology of late Bion has a distinct mystical ring to it, and the act of faith is often described in lofty terms as a stance of dispassionate, passive waiting – which is contradicted by Bion's description of the act of faith as a *scientific* and dynamic *disciplined*

2 Bion 2013 [1967], 136.
3 Bion 1977, 52.
4 Bion 1970.
5 Grotstein 2007.

attitude, to be specific, the scientific attitude that enables the perception of psychical, as opposed to material, sensory qualities and quantities.[6] In the following, I intend to demonstrate the dynamic aspect of commitment, conflict, and passion that this attitude – the act of faith – implies, as I see it as a commitment to the fundamental and inviolable mystery of the human subject, a stance that requires discipline, patience, and endurance of uncertainty.

MARILYNNE ROBINSON AND THE GILEAD TRILOGY

In her essays, Marilynne Robinson has criticized the scientistic and positivist worldview that has come to monopolize Western thought, thereby rendering metaphysics superfluous. When the self or the mind is thus reduced to measurable force fields, it is at the exclusion of fundamental human experiences from the prevailing discourse, which is gradually impoverished. This, argues Robinson, also applies to Freudian, and to my mind, Kleinian canons. Robinson claims that what exists is never covered by what is knowable at any given moment:

> Making use of the conceptual vocabulary of science to exclude a possibility that in a present state of knowledge – or a former one – that vocabulary would seem to exclude, has been the mission of positivist thinking since Auguste Comte declared scientific knowledge effectively complete. If doing so is a reflex of the polemical impulse to assert the authority of science, understandable when the project was relatively new, it is by now an atavism that persists as a consequence of this same polemical issue.[7]

This ontological approach unites Robinson and the late Bion, the above quote being close to Bion's postulate that that which exists always exceeds that which is known.

Marilynne Robinson's fiction can be said to embody this attitude. It is informed by an unassuming simplicity, but the simplicity is illusory – for what she describes is nothing less that the human subject's infinitely rich experiential potential: through her characters she captures what is to be a truly seeing subject, what it means to be present enough to dare see the deep dimensions of existence. The idea that Robinson depicts is that existence contains an appeal to which the human subject is able to respond – that creation is a mystery into which the marvelling and understanding human can be drawn ever deeper.[8] This appeal can be likened to Bion's concept of O, and the response to it with the act of faith.

Best known are the novels *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), *Lila* (2014), and *Jack*

6 Bion 1970, 32.

7 Robinson 2010, 126.

8 Sjögren 2016.

(2020), all of which portray with a number of characters in the fictional town of Gilead, Iowa, in the mid-1950s. The protagonists are the old priest John Ames, widower of many years following the death of his young wife and new-born daughter in childbirth; Ames' friend, neighbour, and colleague the Reverend Boughton and his family, not least Boughton's alcoholic son, Jack; and finally Lila, a young orphaned woman, raised as an itinerant worker on the American roads, who seeks refuge in Gilead after having run away from her life in a brothel. Escaping from the rain in Gilead's congregational church, Lila meets Ames for the first time. *Lila* depicts the relationship between the two, an unlikely love given their vast differences, but nonetheless inevitable. Through their conversations, conducted in a seemingly sparse language that is, however, simultaneously precise and condensed, they seem gradually to reach beyond such superficial aspects that could make them an altogether mismatched couple to that which unites them: a kind of radical openness to existence.

For reasons of space and owing to the incredible richness of Robinson's novels, I will, in this paper, confine myself to the novel *Lila*, seizing upon its various themes in an attempt to describe the act of faith that takes shape between Lila and Ames as their relationship develops – with all that this implies in terms of patience, waiting, and uncertainty. Since Bion's O-centred conceptual apparatus is so intricately woven – Grotstein characterizes his theorizing as holographic – I will also necessarily touch upon other concepts.[9] I would like to point out that I make no claims to any authoritative interpretation of late Bion. In the following I simply proffer, with the help of *Lila*, my personal reading of both Bion and Robinson.

"WHY DO THINGS HAPPEN THE WAY THEY DO?"

Thus reads Lila's first question, her first words, to Ames. Maybe it is the first time she asks the question with any depth. The novel opens with scenes from Lila's early childhood, where she is neglected and denied by those with whom she lives, who might be parents or relatives. From these she is kidnapped by the Doll, a woman who becomes Lila's psychological mother. Doll saves Lila from the fever that almost kills the child as they run away. Together, Doll and Lila take to the roads with Doane and his company, scraping a living as itinerant workers. It is the 1920s, and the Depression has the American countryside in an iron grip. Life on the roads is hard and poor, but not altogether joyless. Lila grows up near Doll, whose care never leaves her. Doll ensures that Lila receives enough schooling to be able to read and count. Lila grows up, finds work. This is when the critical incident occurs which consists of Doll's stabbing of

9 Grotstein 2007.

the man who claims to be Lila's father. After the murder, Lila flees to a brothel in St Louis for refuge and, perhaps, in self-punishment for what she sees as her betrayal of Doll. From here, she makes her way to Gilead, where she finds temporary shelter in a shack on the outskirts of town. On one of her occasional forays into Gilead, looking for work, she meets the Reverend Ames while taking refuge from the rain in the local church. From that point, Lila starts gravitating around Ames – and he around her. Secretly, she begins to tend to the graves of Ames' wife and child, on which she plants roses. She sneaks into Ames' overgrown garden where she plants vegetables. Shy, ashamed, and lonely, she finally approaches Ames with her question:

> She said, "I don't know why I come here. That's a fact." He shrugged. "Since you are here, maybe you could tell me a little about yourself?"
>
> She shook her head. "I don't talk about that. I just been wondering lately why things happen the way they do."
>
> "Oh!" he said. "Then I'm glad you have some time to spare. I've been wondering about that more or less my whole life".[10]

Lila's question to Ames is nothing less than a question about existence, about why her life is what it is, and about the forces that shaped it. It also marks the beginning of a dialogue that continues throughout the novel. Meanwhile, Lila decides to practise reading and writing. Alone in her shack, with the help of a Bible she has stolen from Ames' church, she reads and copies out lines from Ezekiel – passages that she seems to find at random but that resonate with her own orphaned state: "And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to cleanse thee; thou was not salted at all, nor swaddled at all [...] but thou was cast out in the open field for that thy person was abhorred" (p. 42; Ezekiel 16:4). Lila's reading, like her question to Ames, can be said to refer to O – and constitutes her way of pondering and articulating it, of making the unbearable in the form of betrayal, poverty, vulnerability, and murder into something thinkable and bearable. In Grotstein's words, one could say that she alphabetizes her experience, makes it accessible to dream-thinking. It is a dream-thinking that she shares with Ames, since Ames carries Lila's question within him. He never answers it – which doesn't mean that Lila is left without a reply. Rather, his answer is a meditation on the mystery and infinity of existence, and is thus worthy of Lila's question. In a long, exquisitely respectful letter, Ames writes:

10 Robinson 2014, 29. All subsequent page numbers in parentheses in the text refer to this volume.

> Dear Lila (if I may), You asked me once why things happen the way they do. I have felt considerable regret over my failure to respond to your question. [Here follows a long, personal meditation on Grace and Divine Providence] I still have not answered your question, I know, but thank you for asking it. I may be learning something from the attempt. (pp. 74–77)

Ames never gives Lila any definitive answer to the question of her own existence. Instead, he becomes a participant in her dream-thinking, lets himself be affected by her O, by her grief and loss, allows them to resonate with his own grief and losses. Nor does Ames ask any questions of Lila. In his eyes, Lila becomes more than the sum of her misery, and this gaze is an aspect of *his* act of faith.

DOLL'S TWO MESSAGES

During her stay in the shack, the first refuge that Lila has found in Gilead, she begins to slowly remember her life. She does not actively seek the memories, they seem to come to her, organically and spontaneously. Paradoxically, Lila's remembering could be placed beyond memory and desire, as her remembering is mobile, alive, and coloured by what is happening in the present, in Gilead, in relation to Ames. Particularly, her memories of Doll are intensified as her relationship with Ames deepens. Doll saved Lila's life, first from the neglect of her original home and then from the fever that was threatening to take her life. Doll gave Lila her very first experience of being contained by someone who in her dream-thinking can desire the child's survival – who can contain, in Bion's terms, the infant's fear of dying, as illustrated by the following words, which Doll utters when the infant Lila is close to death:[11] "Now don't you go dying on me. Put me to all this bother for nothing. Don't you go dying." And then, so the child could hardly hear: "You going to die if you have to. I know. But I got you out of the rain, didn't I? We're warm here, ain't we?" (p. 8). Doll's words are an appeal to survive. Perhaps this memory comes to Lila as the shack offers a shelter/container that resembles that found by Doll from the rain, in the warmth, from the child's fever. Later in the novel, when Lila, in her shy, barely noticeable seeking of Ames, has started to tend to his graves and garden, this memory is followed by the memory of Doll's appeal not only to not die – but to actively live. Actively living can, here, be interpreted as something above and beyond surviving, as subjectification, as the search for meaning and development. Lila thinks, while working in Ames' garden: "Doll would be glad to see her no matter what. Ugly old Doll. Who had said to her, Live. Not once, but every time she washed and mended for her, mothered her as if she

11 Bion 1963, 26.

were a child someone could want" (p. 47). The two memories accompany each other, the latter can be read as a transformation of the former: the passive "don't you go dying on me" becoming an active "Live", and this unconscious, spontaneous transformation of Lila's memory can be interpreted as the fruit of her encounter with Ames and his ability to contain her question about existence, or subjectively lived life.[12]

Similarly, the memory of Doll's grey shawl, a ragged woollen cloth in which she once wrapped the infant Lila, and which she continued to wrap around the girl during all the years on the road, is analogous to the grey woollen sweater that Ames offers her during an early conversation one chilly evening. Lila steals the sweater and uses it as a pillow in the shack. She later asks herself why she has stolen it (as well as one of the Bibles from Ames' church) and reproaches herself the seemingly inexplicable thefts. However, the sweater can be seen as an expression of the containment which Ames offers with his respectful, open listening. Ames' containment becomes a transformation of that which Doll, with her enveloping grey shawl, once offered. One might say that Ames' sweater picks up where Doll's shawl leaves off: it becomes an extension of trust in life, and that meaning can be found and shared.

"Live" is not, however, Doll's only message. Doll, who once stole Lila – as Lila later steals the Bible and sweater – is a woman scarred by life. Her face is disfigured by a red birthmark covering her forehead and cheek – a possible reference to Hawthorne's *The scarlet letter*: the letter of shame, adultery, and illegitimacy.[13] Doll lives on the outskirts of the law, she carries a knife hidden in her stocking, which she sharpens and polishes in readiness of attack and of being robbed of that which she loves – Lila. Lila is, after all, not her legitimate child but an abducted child. It is no coincidence that when Lila, during her years in the St Louis brothel, starts to yearn for a child of her own, she imagines stealing the baby that Missy, one of the other brothel girls, is expecting once it is born. Doll's other message is that no one can be trusted, especially not men. This message, as well, echoes in Lila's mind during her lonely nights in the shack:

> She couldn't just stay around because she thought it might matter to him. Then the cold weather would come and he'd be thinking about something else entirely. Somebody else to feel sorry for [...] Well, she couldn't let *that* happen. Doll said, Men just don't feel like they sposed to stay by you. They ain't never your friends. Seems like you could trust 'em, they act like you could trust 'em, but you can't. Don't matter what they say [...] You got to look after your own self. When it comes down to it, you're going to be doing that anyway. (pp. 50–51)

These two messages dwell, collide, and struggle within Lila throughout the entire novel. She stays in Gilead, she seeks Ames, speaks with him, marries him, and eventu-

12 Bion 1965.

13 Hawthorne 1944 [1850].

ally has a child by him. However, none of this precludes an ever-present urge to run away, to return to life on the road, as if in loyalty to Doll's life and her warning not to trust anything or anyone. Perhaps it is also out of love for Doll and her old life that she wishes to flee. Lila's staying is the result of struggle and patience. It is an act of faith, since the outcome is far from certain and she knows nothing about Ames, but can only trust what she experiences in his presence. The following passage clearly illustrates how Lila abandons herself to what she cannot know, only believe (and hope), and how filled she is with doubt, but does what she does nonetheless – marries Ames. The words also illustrate what Bion calls the "language of achievement", which I understand as performative speech, speech that is also emotion and action, where the subject is one with her words:[14]

> She thought, I'll just do it [marry Ames] first and think about it afterward. Now afterward had come and she had no idea what to think. I am baptized, I am married, I am Lila Dahl, and Lila Ames. I don't know what else I should want. Except for the shame to be gone, and it ain't. I'm in a strange house with a man who can't even figure out how to talk to me. [...] If I say something ignorant or crazy he'll start thinking, Old men can be foolish. He's thought it already. He'll ask me to leave and no one will blame him. (p. 94)

BAPTISM AND MARRIAGE – CATASTROPHIC CHANGE AND/OR CAESURA?

The novel takes an astonishing turn when Lila, who has been thinking about being baptized, gathers the courage to ask Ames to perform the rite. Baptism is one of the Christian sacraments, which, beyond theological discourse, can be seen as constituting symbolic and common structures for human emotion. In Bion's terminology, they are containers for the subject at vulnerable moments of irreversible change, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death, all of which are accompanied by the respective sacraments of baptism, confirmation, matrimony, and funeral. The original purpose of baptism is to cleanse the new-born child of Original Sin; the modern, secularized significance places the emphasis on incorporation into a (Christian) community and on naming. The concept of Original Sin can be interpreted as transgenerationally transmitted traumas, narcissistic vulnerabilities, and destructive identifications. Baptism can thus be seen as a symbolic marker that the child is their own and under no obligation to carry the sins (i.e. traumas) of their parents/ancestors. Lila's wish to be baptized can be seen as a wish to break with Doll's "don't trust anyone" and with the loneliness and muteness that this message entails. Not least it represents Lila's desire

14 Bion 1970, 125.

to be taken up into a human community and symbolic order in which experience can be ascribed meaning by that which most characterizes human existence: language, with its intrinsic faculty for alphabetization and transformation of experience. Lila thinks, as she contemplates being baptized:

> But if you're just a stranger to everybody on earth, then that's what you are and there's no end to it. You don't know the words to say [...] It felt very good to have him [Ames] walking beside her. Good like rest and quiet, like something you could live without but you needed anyway. That you had to learn how to miss, and then you'd never stop missing it. (pp. 79–80)

Occurring shortly after Lila asks Ames to perform the baptism is the event that is the novel's absolute peripeteia, as it marks a complete reversal and radical change of Lila's external and, above all, internal life. It creates a point of before and after, where the new is juxtaposed with the old, with all that this implies of anxiety, doubt, and desire to flee. To her own, and the reader's utter astonishment, Lila proposes to Ames:

> She heard herself say, "You ought to marry me." He stopped still, and she hurried away, to the other side of the road, the flush of shame and anger so hot in her that this time surely she could not go on living. When he caught up with her, when he touched her sleeve, she could not look at him. "Yes," he said, "you're right. I will."
>
> She said, "All right. Then I'll see you tomorrow". (pp. 80–81)

"Catastrophic change" is Bion's term for such inner shifts in the framework of the psychoanalytical process – and also outside it, I believe – that transform the very foundations of the subject's experience and being.[15] He likens catastrophic change to an explosion, the blast of which creates irreversible changes to both the subject's inner being and their surroundings. What makes the change catastrophic is the fact that the subject faces it with no points of orientation in either the past – in the form of memories or experiences – or the future, in the form of some expected structure able to serve as a container for the outcomes of this change. It is therefore a leap into the completely unknown. The subject is thus bound to a now that is shaken by an experience of catastrophe. Since it creates a before and an after, catastrophic change is related to Bion's concept of caesura, which also denotes irreversible change from one state (of mind) to another, such as birth, puberty, marriage, pregnancy, and death.[16] In this context, however, the stress is on the continuity between developmental states, between that which precedes and that which succeeds the caesura. Bion posits here that while all states co-exist like the concentric layers of an onion, our limited mental

15 Bion 1965, 8–11.

16 Bion 1977.

faculties prevent us from seeing them: "One cannot go back – although we talk about it in those words – to childhood or infancy. It is in the present that we have a method of formulation which can penetrate the barrier."[17]

Lila's desire to be baptized is followed by her proposal to Ames. That she is in a state of catastrophic change is made evident by the irreversibility of what she is asking – being un-baptized is impossible, and from having been married one might get divorced but hardly re-unmarried. The question remains for the reader, however, whether the catastrophic change is represented by the baptism or the proposal – or whether the latter is a consequence of the former. I actually believe that the change exists within Lila as, through her love for Ames, she commits to a symbolic structure of desire, and that this commitment is depicted in both – baptism and proposal. When Lila, who has never dared trust anyone, never dared hope for anything, never wanted anything more than what is necessary for survival, connects with her desire, her world shakes:

> "Wait," she said. "I was wondering. Can you still get married to somebody you baptized?"
>
> He raised his eyebrows. "No law against it. Why do you ask?"
>
> "I don't know. Seems like I just want to rest my head –"
>
> He said, "I'd like that, too, Lila. But I think we made a decision."
>
> "No. No." She wasn't crying. She couldn't look at him. "I want this so damn bad. And I hate to want anything."
>
> "'This'?"
>
> "I want you to marry me! I wish I didn't. It's just a misery for me."
>
> [...]
>
> "Well, if that's how it is, I guess you'd better put your head on my shoulder, after all." She did. And he put his arms around her. (pp. 88–89)

To my mind, what differentiates catastrophic change from caesura is the perspective. Where catastrophic change is the subjective experience, which inevitably entails a sense of dread, a caesura is a deferred perspective. A subject placed in a state of radical change has no access to the experience of continuity – that experience comes much later, perhaps always retrospectively. And this is how I think it is with Lila. When she is shaken by the uncertainty of catastrophic change, she is per definition unable to perceive the continuity that exists between her past and the present she lives with Ames. Only the reader sees it. Running throughout the novel is a displacement of the signifiers of care and desire: Doll's embrace becomes the shack outside Gilead, which in turn becomes the shelter of Ames' church and of their conversations; Doll's grey shawl becomes Ames' warming sweater – which in turn becomes the coat with which Lila covers the young boy who moves into her shack after she abandons it on marrying

17 Bion 1977, 45.

Ames. All of these are preconceptions, in Bion's terms, of the coming change. This, however, Lila cannot see, only the reader. That Lila still does what she does, that she has herself baptized and marries Ames, irrevocably, even though she "hates to want anything," is nothing other than an act of faith, in which "hating to want anything" connotes all the doubt and all the pain implicit in change, and the readiness to pay the price for it.

FINAL WORDS

As its title indicates, the novel remains loyal to Lila's perspective. It depicts the continuously shifting boundary between the knowable and the unknowable in Lila's meetings with Ames and Boughton, but above all in Lila's relationship to herself, to her past, and to her desire. Throughout the novel, the boundary between the knowable and unknowable is displaced without ever being eradicated. This is also true of Ames – although not to Lila's, or the reader's knowledge. Ames' struggle is depicted in the previous novel *Gilead*, as Boughton's and his son Jack's perspectives are the focus of *Home*. The trilogy forms a kaleidoscopic picture of a number of characters whose inner worlds are articulated against each other, without respect ever being lost for their otherness. Despite her exquisitely sensitive rendering, Robinson's prose allows the characters to retain a measure of unknowability and mystery, which lingers long after reading. For me, Bion's concept of O, which is taken to stand for "Origin", could equally stand for "Otherness", connoting that existence, our minds, and the other possess an element of mystery that cannot be reduced but that ceaselessly appeals to us. To return to my opening question, what is it to know someone? – Bion and Robinson show us that knowing the other is committing to the other's mystery.

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