

Ordinary sanctity: grief and the fiction of Marilynne Robinson

by
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Abstract

Academic research on grief in the West is a twentieth-century phenomenon and until recently has been conducted almost exclusively in the psy- and cognate disciplines. One consequence of this is theory-led scholarship and a persistent set of erroneous assumptions which now pass for clinical lore. These include the presumption that grief is amenable to comparison and measurement, that it occurs in chronological time, that it is a process which ends and, if it persists or remains absent, that it can be treated and recovered from like an illness. Since the late-twentieth century, critical grief scholars from across disciplines and bereaved people themselves have argued that this does not reflect the lived experiences of those who grieve. Demands have been made for a far more expressive discourse which acknowledges grief's texture and open-endedness and seeks to depathologise bereavement, grief and mourning; however, problematic assumptions about bereavement persist. This thesis argues that adequate descriptions of grief can only be achieved if researchers privilege the poetics of loss over and above the logic of theories of loss.

American novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson has long been critical of the over-reliance on scientism that has evacuated contemporary knowledge of the felt experience of human lives. This thesis argues that felt experiences of intimate bereavement are at the core of her four novels, *Housekeeping* (1980), *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014), and as such that Robinson's fiction and thought can fruitfully expand knowledge about grief. Focusing in particular on her textured evocations of the first-person experience of grief; grief and timelessness; and grief and sociality, this thesis treats Robinson's novels as vivid and ethical thick descriptions of grief and griever consciousness. It reads her work within and against the critical context of recent grief scholarship across a variety of disciplines in order to challenge prevailing wisdom and to position her fiction as a critical and highly legitimate source of emotional epistemology on loss. It concludes that her revisionist approach to human suffering provides a profound and productive intervention in a field troubled by the rationalization of human experience, and confused by both its uncritical secular scientific legacy and the early twenty-first-century search for a secular ethics.

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Preface

This thesis is about the experience denoted in the English language by the word grief, a word widely used (alongside bereavement and mourning) to signify the human response when someone (or something) known or loved dies or is lost. My principal focus is the loss incurred by death and the vehicle for my exploration of this topic is the fictional oeuvre of American writer Marilynne Robinson.

Consequently, although this is a work of literary criticism, the novels of Robinson and the topic of grief are equally weighted in my thinking. Although her fiction operates within the tradition of literary realism, mainly I treat Robinson's four novels metaphorically. I situate my analyses of her work in, and against, the academic traditions of studying grief across a range of disciplines, traditions which have neglected the fact that grief is itself a metaphor.

I take it throughout that death is commonplace and thus that grief – however it might manifest itself – is an everyday or ordinary phenomenon. I also take it for granted that grief, like, for example, love, exists in the human realm, such that anything abstract can be said to exist and, as these things are duly divided up in the Western, post-Enlightenment world, that grief is principally an emotional phenomenon. Given that almost every person will experience bereavement in life, it is also a core assumption of this thesis that the ways in which grief is understood (and indeed might be understood differently) have something approaching “universal” applicability and relevance. My primary interest, however, is not in grief as “an” emotion or, when understood more broadly, in any of the constituent emotions of grief, but in the idea of grief as a human experience from which (and about which) much knowledge can be gained. I therefore treat grief and Robinson's novels philosophically to the extent that they create knowledge about bereavement. My overarching aim and central research question throughout this thesis has been to consider what can be learned about grief as the metaphor designated to the experiential response to the losses of bereavement from Robinson's fictional representations of grief and grievers. More precisely, I have asked how her depictions of grief can be refigured as vivid and ethical descriptions from which mainstream bereavement scholarship and everyday bereaved people can benefit. In the writing of this thesis, I have consistently asked myself how, as a consequence of the close scrutiny of Robinson's fiction, grief – the word and the experience – might be fruitfully reconsidered and re-imagined.

What is the problem?

A reconsideration of grief is necessary because, in the contemporary moment, academic bereavement scholarship is in a confused state. In light of this, my thesis undertakes to respond to four problems, all refracted through the lens of Robinson's work. Problem one is that grief as a topic of research is a twentieth-century phenomenon and that research has been conducted almost exclusively in the psy- and cognate disciplines: predominantly psychology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry, mainly in the United States and the United Kingdom. With the exception of psychoanalysis, these disciplines are now deemed scientific, so grief has become a topic of science relying on largely scientific method for the production of knowledge in the intellectual and clinical institutions of the Western academy and Western medicine. Despite late twentieth-century interventions from other disciplines (principally the social sciences of sociology and thanatology – the study of death and dying also known as Death Studies – and also, with a different emphasis, in literary and cultural criticism), the psy- and cognate disciplines still dominate knowledge production and thus scientism dominates claims to truth in the field.¹

Problem number two is an offshoot of this. A narrow conception of grief has emerged from the history of psy- academic and clinical scholarship. The emphasis of such research has, by dint of the preoccupations of these spheres, been abnormality. Thus, though based on ill-defined norms, the focus has been on the assessment, measurement and alleviation of what are considered to be abnormal or pathological reactions to bereavement. The result is a reductive conception of grief that presumes it is an experience that is amenable to comparison and measurement, occurs in time, ends and, if it persists or remains absent, can be treated and recovered from like an illness. Although researchers disagree on the extent to which this narrow view prevails inside academia and in clinical settings, there is no doubt that it continues to be the prevailing construction outside these domains.

¹ I use the term scientism here after the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* which defines it as the 'excessive belief in the power of scientific knowledge and techniques, or in the applicability of the methods of physical science to other fields, esp. human behaviour and the social sciences.', *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: On Historical Principles*, 5th edn (Oxford: OUP, 2002), p.2699, hereafter cited as *SOED*.

Problem number three regards literary criticism. Grief in literary and cultural criticism tends to be considered philosophically, rather than clinically, and scholarship in this sphere has over-relied on psychoanalysis and critical theory after poststructuralism for the development of knowledge. This evolution is specific to certain sectors of the humanities and, in the context of grief study, continues but lacks substantive critique. This is a recent intellectual tradition which reflects the normalization of assumptions of secularization and anti-humanism and is a critical position which assumes that human experiences occur in a secularized, material reality.

Claims for interdisciplinarity in grief scholarship are exaggerated to the extent that a majority of work is non-dialogic (except, sometimes, across cognate spheres). In particular, very little of the bereavement research undertaken in the psy- and social scientific disciplines has impinged on literary criticism and literary critical research (and literary texts) are rarely if ever referred to in mainstream bereavement literature.² The absence of a genuine cross-fertilization of ideas; the parallel but narrow channeling of knowledge products about grief that are specific to literary criticism; and the paucity of literary critical responses to intimate bereavement which are not influenced by psychoanalysis or its theoretical knowledge products collectively form problem number three.

Problem number four is that none of the conceptual categories or bodies of knowledge available in the above contexts is considered to accurately reflect what phenomenologists call the “lived experience” of ordinary or ‘intimate grief’.³ It is this, over and above the other problems I have sketched, which is the intellectual and ethical driver of this thesis. For this reason, within the limits permissible in a work of academic literary criticism, I refer where I can to bereavement and grief as everyday experiences and occasionally cite sources (mainly journalism, memoir, dictionaries and encyclopedias) that are not academic. I also mostly avoid the use of the word mourning because of the etymological shift it has experienced as a

² For a minor exception to this in psychiatric literature see Colin Murray Parkes ‘Grief: Lessons from the Past, Visions for the Future’, *Death Studies*, 26.5, (2002), 367-385, in which the author uses literary history to trace responses to bereavement. For the only literary critic to draw extensively on psychological models of bereavement, see the work of Harold K. Bush Jr., notably *Continuing Bonds with the Dead: Parental Grief and Nineteenth-century Authors* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016).

³ Intimate grief is the phrase of literary critic Jahan Ramazani used in his ‘Afterword’ to *Modernism and Mourning* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), ed. by. Patricia Rae, p.290.

consequence of the role of psychoanalysis in Western grief scholarship, a tradition I move away from.

The gap in existing scholarship and my contribution

Problems one and two, and to a lesser extent problem four, have repeatedly prompted calls for intervention from and by intellectuals and clinicians, but the problems persist and therefore warrant further review. Problem three is my own observation and to my knowledge there is no work currently which responds to the issues it raises by focusing on the epistemological reach of fiction or the novels of one writer to review thinking about bereavement in literary studies. In response to the complex situation outlined above, I posit my readings of Marilynne Robinson's fiction as a valid, critical and emotional epistemological intervention into the contemporary discourse on grief and, simultaneously, offer my interpretations of Robinson's novels as an interjection into the nascent field of 'Robinson Studies' in which bereavement and grief are under-explored.

Where contemporary theories of grief are overwhelmingly twentieth-century, scientific, materialist and secular, the influences on Robinson's poetics are largely pre-twentieth century, religious, metaphysical and philosophically humanist. Her prodigious Christian, humanist, ethical and aesthetic vision affords her literary poetics a profound texture and complexity, but also unusual epistemological reach for a contemporary writer, not least because it circumnavigates the limits of the contemporary secular and scientific modes of thought which have dominated the study of grief. This thesis argues that the expansive vision that Robinson's fiction provides offers a 'thick description' of grief that is far in excess of, and, due to the limits of contemporary academic method, still unfortunately unavailable to, the secular and (social) scientific research disciplines in which grief is typically studied.⁴ Robinson does not promulgate a theistic vision of grief and nor does this thesis. Nor do I attempt to re-theorize the grief experience. Rather, I scrutinize Robinson's aesthetic practices and argue that her poetics draw on old religious, literary and philosophical language and narrative traditions to better describe and thus dignify understanding of the individual and social human experience of grief in the contemporary moment. Robinson presents human experiences of loss as sacred. By setting bereavement apart in this way, her vision of grief expands

⁴ Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture' in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London: Fontana Press, 1993 [1973]), pp.3-32 (p.5).

comprehension of the experience beyond current limits, in particular the idea of grief as a pathology. I offer up readings of her fiction to contribute both to the ongoing destabilization of the persistent scientism of theories of grief (including the impulse to theorize bereavement) and the expansion of the contemporary Western poetics of loss by arguing that Robinson's fiction radically complicates and deepens the contemporary discourse on human suffering.

Originality

The originality of this project, like the complexity of the context in which it is written, has a number of aspects. At time of writing, no monograph exists on all four of Robinson's novels, nor does a book-length project on the depiction of grief and grievers in her work. Similarly, I know of no other book length project on bereavement and grief which focuses on the literary work of one author; nor any project of this length which attempts to draw on knowledge about grief from the broadest range of disciplines possible within the confines of a doctoral thesis. In addition to this, and as I have said, there is a shortage of literary critical work on grief which self-consciously and substantively critiques the existing culture of literary criticism on bereavement and grief. This project does this by refusing certain of the central assumptions that literary critics of loss tend to abide by. As such, in addition to the above elements of originality, my methodology can be said to be original to the extent that it attempts to operate outside the critical and theoretical trends that dominate literary criticism of loss.

Methodology and chapter structure

Predominantly, my methodology is mixed. I aim to find a synthesis between the methods of my own discipline and those of the disciplines where grief is more commonly studied in order to produce credible knowledge with cross-disciplinary applicability. I have arranged the thesis in four self-contained chapters but, given the amorphous qualities of grief and the connectedness of Robinson's novels there are, inevitably, overlaps. These occur in the manifestations of grief explored and the links and continuities between prevailing ideas about grief, but also in my approaches to Robinson's fluid narrative strategies as she uses them across all four fiction works.

In the body of the thesis, Chapters Two to Four, I examine Robinson's aesthetic practices, primarily her language, poetics, narrative strategies and her use of

metaphor to present the argument that legitimate and ethical knowledge about grief can be generated by literary art and, specifically, is generated by Robinson's art. I make the case for literature to intervene in the psy- and social scientific discussions about grief and for the knowledge generated to productively expand the discourse. With regards to the picture of grief that her novels present, and while remaining analytical and forming a coherent argument, my aim in these chapters is not so much explanatory but descriptive. My intention is to use this descriptive impulse, and the resulting 'thick descriptions', to re-imagine grief as a far more spacious category than has been afforded by the explanatory and/or theoretical approaches that have been used across grief scholarship up to this point.

My first chapter is more philosophical in approach; it is also introductory. Embedded within the chapter are the core findings of my literature reviews which focus on the dominant trends in scholarship on grief in the psy- and social scientific disciplines and in literary and cultural criticism. My intention is not to provide a detailed chronology of grief scholarship – excellent histories, summaries and reviews already exist. Nor can I hope to provide cross-cultural comparisons with nations outside northern Europe, the United States and Australia. In part this is due to the scale of a thesis, but is largely because the problematic theories of grief have been generated in an Anglo-American context and it is these which I wish to outline and respond to. My focus is, therefore, the problems with/in grief scholarship (proving the assertions I have made here) and the reasons why Robinson's fictions in particular can be read to address some of these problems. Of the 'myths' which prevail in the psy- disciplines, I foreground in this chapter my focus on redressing three areas of thought, each shaping the arguments of my remaining chapters.⁵ These are: the expression and epistemological validity of the felt or lived experience of grief; grief and the experience of time; and grief and sociality. It is also in this chapter that I outline the ways in which I depart from late twentieth and early twenty-first century literary critical trends in my analyses of Robinson's novels and I position Robinson as a literary artist and a producer of culture in the contemporary moment. I situate my reading of her fictions against

⁵ The word 'myth' has been used by researchers to describe prevailing assumptions about grief since the publication of Camille Wortman and Roxanne Silver's essay 'The Myths of Coping with Loss', *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 57.3, (June 1989), 349-357. That these assumptions are considered to be myths has not influenced the everyday domain.

the backdrop created by the critical reception of her fiction and non-fiction, note the ways in which she offers a timely/untimely alternative to dominant modes of thought and, especially important given the everyday nature of grief, consider her role as a public intellectual. This supports my argument that her work *in particular* presents a timely intervention into the contemporary discourse on grief.

Chapters Two, Three and Four are guided and therefore shaped by the ongoing need to redress the myths which prevail about grief and thus each opens with a short to medium-length section which further contextualizes my thematic focus within contemporary bereavement scholarship. Chapter Two challenges the myth that grief is something to “move on” from and, implicit within that, the idea that the subjective experience of dwelling in or on the pain of bereavement is psychologically unhealthy and of limited epistemological value. I focus on the use of first-person narration in Robinson’s first two novels – *Housekeeping* (1980) and *Gilead* (2004) – to present the argument that the experience of grief is a rich source of knowledge production and a vital aspect of consciousness rather than, as has popularly been conceived, a stage or phase of a process. Drawing in particular on ideas from feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar and literary critic Kathleen Woodward, I argue that grief when articulated in the first-person is a privileged source of emotional epistemology. The chapter also draws on cultural historian Svetlana Boym’s idea of ‘reflective nostalgia’ to facilitate a reading of the critical reflexivity inherent in Robinson’s allusive poetics and the reflexive nostalgia of her narrators as vehicles for a capacious and emotionally textured vision of grief.⁶

Chapter Three is similarly interested in temporality and grief, but the chief concern of this chapter is to contribute to the destabilization of the myth that grief is a teleology and that the time of grief has a quantifiable end. In this chapter I look at time in the metaphorical terms of space, considering Robinson’s representations of house, homelessness and domestic act or ritual in *Housekeeping* and in *Home* (2008). Working beyond what I consider to be limited definitions of both the domestic and the feminist to interpretations which are more critically open, I turn to the terminology and some of the modes of thought from the fields of social and cultural anthropology, spatial and cultural geography, ritual studies and

⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p.xviii.

phenomenology. I posit that in expressing the performative function of the home, Robinson's domestic spaces and the everyday actions performed therein are ritualistic and metaphoric enactments of the space and time of grief. I argue that her metaphorical renderings of grief as a 'timespace' that works to rhythms other than and far in excess of modernity's clock-time challenges any notion of a temporal limit on grief, and in particular the idea that prolonged grief is pathological.⁷

Chapter Four challenges the idea that grief is mostly an individual, private and thus asocial phenomenon. It joins others in arguing that a core cultural product of modernity in the West – specifically normalizing psychology – has seen the extraction of grief from the social realm and thus a denial of the sociality of grief. Looking to Robinson's four novels as interconnected transfictions, I argue that she re-socializes grief and, across and beyond the boundaries of her innovatively interlinked novels, offers up a microcosmic vision of a human community for which an ethical response to loss is a social one and an imperative.⁸ I also draw in this chapter on the work of contemporary theologians to argue that Robinson's fictions both use and function as parables, a performative narrative strategy which extends the social dimension of grief outward to implicate her readers in her ethical and humanist vision of suffering and loss.

The thesis concludes that Robinson's dense metaphorical rendering of loss provides an expansive re-envisioning of grief while simultaneously demonstrating the profundity of bereavement as a deeply ordinary sanctity.

⁷ Jon May and Nigel Thrift eds., *Timespace: Geographies of Temporalities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p.1.

⁸ I use the terms transfictional / transfictionality after Richard Saint Gelais to mean a 'branch of intertextuality' whereby two or more texts share elements such as characters or fictional worlds, but one which, by the nature of the open-ended relationship between the texts, 'puts into question the closure of texts', "Transfictionality" in D. Herman, M. Jahn and M.L Ryan, eds. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), pp.612-613, (p.612).

It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings.
Sigmund Freud¹

Grief takes as many forms as there are grieving people.
Brenda Mallon²

Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it.
Joan Didion³

Chapter One - Introduction: The Problems with Grief

In the title essay of her 2012 collection, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, Marilynne Robinson summarized her view of a century that has seen a change in how we treat experiences of suffering. She wrote that in the Victorian era of her grandparents, 'mourning, melancholy, regret, and loneliness' were considered to be 'high sentiments as they were for the psalmist and for Sophocles, for the Anglo-Saxon poets and for Shakespeare', but that in 'modern culture' these emotions are now seen as 'pathologies' identified variously as 'alienation and inauthenticity' or 'maladjustment and depression'.⁴ In an earlier essay from her first collection *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, she called this phenomenon the 'medicalization of our sorrows'.⁵ Robinson was not referring to the evolution in perceptions of grief in either of these essays, though she might well have been; instead, she was exploring – as she often does – competing modes of knowledge formation and the ways in which thinkers in the West have come to privilege certain ways of knowing and states of being over others. Her observations are part of a bigger argument she often makes that shifts in thinking in the western context have diminished how humans see themselves in what, for Robinson, has become a 'rigidly simple account of life in the world'.⁶

The evolution described by Robinson can be seen to be part of a phenomenon that psychologist James Davies, has called the 'gradual rationalisation of suffering'; an evolution that he argues describes a change in attitudes in the West

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. by D. McClintock (London: Penguin, 2004), p.2.

² Brenda Mallon, *Dying, Death and Grief: Working with Adult Bereavement* (London: Sage, 2008), p.4.

³ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2005), p.188

⁴ Marilynne Robinson, 'When I Was a Child I Read Books', *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (London: Virago, 2012), pp.85-94, (p.89).

⁵ Marilynne Robinson, 'Facing Reality', *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 1998), pp.76-86, (p.84).

⁶ Robinson, 'Facing Reality', *Death of Adam*, p.76.

to all forms of 'human discontent'.⁷ In his book *The Importance of Suffering: The Value and Meaning of Emotional Discontent*, Davies argues that 'when assessing the twentieth century', a 'negative vision of suffering has largely eclipsed the positive vision which prevailed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' and which held that from 'affliction there can be derived some unexpected gain, new perspective or beneficial alteration'.⁸ He argues that from this 'negative vision', by contrast, 'little of value can come of suffering at all' and it is 'thus something to be either swiftly anaesthetised or wholly eliminated' from human experience.⁹ According to Davies, the 'shift towards the negative vision has significantly altered how we now perceive, manage and experience the more fallow seasons of our emotional lives'.¹⁰ Ironically, this is a view which has 'gained ascendancy' with 'increasing rapidity' since the 1990s, a period during which grief scholars have been concerned about reductive tendencies in grief scholarship.¹¹

The evolution of knowledge about grief, and the ways in which that knowledge has been gained, are an ongoing challenge for researchers who study bereavement in the Western context. In 1996, shortly after a smattering of articles had emerged to critique the evolution of grief theories up to that point, two publications were released almost simultaneously. One, *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, was an edited collection by American psychologists Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman and Steven L. Nickman; the second, 'A New Model of Grief: Bereavement and Biography' was an article by a British sociologist, Tony Walter. The word 'new' in the title of each work referred to the critical position that the writers of both publications took, a position that, in both cases, explicitly challenged the long established view that on the death of a loved one, a process of disconnection occurs between the dead and the bereaved, and that this disconnection is a measure of healthy or resolved grief. By contrast, both of the studies, which were based largely on qualitative methodologies, found that maintaining, or 'continuing' connections with the dead was 'normal'.¹²

⁷ James Davies, *The Importance of Suffering: The Value and Meaning of Emotional Discontent* (London: Routledge, 2012), p.52 and p.51.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.52.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.58.

¹² Dennis Klass, 'Preface' to *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, ed. by Klass, Phyllis Silverman and Steven L. Nickman (London: Taylor and Francis, 1996), p.xvii and xviii.

In his preface, Dennis Klass explained that over the course of their studies into bereavement – especially in conversation with the bereaved – the authors were repeatedly ‘observing phenomena that could not be accounted for within the models of grief that most of their ‘colleagues were using’.¹³ In their introduction, Klass and Silverman narrowed this model down to a specific ‘model of grief in general use’ that they (and Walter) called the ‘dominant model’.¹⁴ The dominant model to which both texts referred is a method of understanding bereavement which emerged from theory-led, non-empirical, psychoanalytic studies in the early twentieth-century, but which was developed and refined between the wars and thereafter in the empirical, medical specialties of British and American psychiatry and in the discipline of clinical psychology. The origins and core assumptions embedded within this model stem from language and conceptual categories first set out by Sigmund Freud in his 1917 essay, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’.

It is widely held that grief has only been a topic of academic study in the West since the publication of Freud’s article, an essay repeatedly deemed ‘seminal’ to the study of grief and the ‘locus classicus’ of all grief scholarship.¹⁵ Researchers from psychology, medicine, psychiatry, nursing, counseling and therapy, anthropology, sociology, social work, history and literary and cultural criticism all chart the origins of grief scholarship to Freud’s work.¹⁶ There are many ironies to

¹³ Ibid., p.xviii.

¹⁴ Klass and Silverman, ‘Introduction: What’s the Problem?’, *Continuing Bonds*, p.4 and Tony Walter, ‘A New Model of Grief: Bereavement and Biography’, *Mortality*, 1 (1996), pp.7-25, (p.7).

¹⁵ The word ‘seminal’ is taken here from both Kathleen Woodward, ‘Freud and Barthes: Theorizing Mourning, Sustaining Grief’, *Discourse* (A Special Issue on the Emotions), 13.1 (1990-1991), 93-101, (p.93) and George Bonanno and Stacey Kaltman, ‘Toward an Integrative Perspective on Bereavement’, *Psychological Bulletin*, 125.6 (November 1999), 760-776, (p.760). The phrase ‘locus classicus’ is taken from Catherine E. Foote and Arthur W. Frank, ‘Foucault and Therapy: The Disciplining of Grief’ in *Reading Foucault for Social Work* ed. by A. S. Chambon, A. Irving and Laura Epstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp.157-187, (p.157).

¹⁶ Almost all articles on grief in the psychological and cognate disciplines and in the social sciences contextualize their work with a short, twentieth-century history of its scholarship that references Freud. Longer historical or critical surveys and literature reviews are included in the following works: *Continuing Bonds*, ed. by Klass, Silverman and Nickman; John Archer, *The Nature of Grief: The Evolution and Psychology of Reactions to Loss* (London: Routledge, 1999); Tony Walter, *On Bereavement: The Culture of Grief* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999); *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century’s End*, ed. by P. Homans (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Neil Small, ‘Theories of Grief: A Critical Review’ in *Grief, Mourning and the Death Ritual* ed. by Jenny Hockey, Jeanne Katz and Neil Small (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001), pp.19-48; Colin Murray Parkes, ‘A Historical Overview of the Scientific Study of Bereavement’ in *The Handbook of Bereavement Research: Consequence, Coping, and Care* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2001) ed. by M. Stroebe, R.O. Hansson, W. Stroebe and H. Schut, pp.25-45 (cited hereafter as *Handbook of Bereavement* (2001) to distinguish it from the first and third handbooks published in 1993 and 2008); Ruth Davies, ‘New Understandings of Parental Grief: Literature Review’, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 46.5, 2004, 501-513; Lauren J. Breen and Moira O’Connor, ‘The Fundamental

this. One of these is that Freud's primary interest was melancholia and not mourning, but that in 'Mourning and Melancholia', he explored the experience or idea of loss in humans by using mourning as an 'analogy' to more closely examine the phenomenon of melancholia (depression).¹⁷ According to Freud's essay, which drew on (though did not cite) received wisdom at the time of writing, the human response to the loss through death (mourning) is a teleological process that takes time and 'work', has both 'normal' and abnormal manifestations, and that results, when successful, in a 'withdrawal of cathectic energy', that is 'severance' or detachment from the dead, and an end to suffering.¹⁸ If unsuccessful, according to Freud, grief manifests in ways that are 'pathological', manifestations which resemble melancholia.¹⁹ These assumptions were part of a philosophically speculative set of ideas put forward by Freud which relied, he openly admitted, on 'conjecture'.²⁰ Despite Freud's awareness of the limitations of his ideas, they have remained fundamental to conceptions of grief ever since, and continue to form the basis of the dominant model and many of the ways bereavement and grief have been re-conceptualized over time.

Indisputably, Freud's conceptualization remains what Clifford Geertz (after Susanne Langer) calls a '*grand idée*', one which 'burst onto the intellectual landscape with a tremendous force' to become the 'conceptual center-point around which a comprehensive system of analysis' of bereavement has been built.²¹ In 1965, anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer wrote in his study *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain*, that 'much of the later work' on bereavement in psychoanalytic, psychiatric and sociological studies 'is in the nature of exegesis on this text'.²² Arguably, this is still the case. For many, it is this tradition that is held

Paradox in the Grief Literature: A Critical Reflection', *Omega*, 55.3 (2007), 199-218; Jean W. Rothaupt and Kent Becker 'A Literature Review of Western Bereavement Theory: From Decathecting to Continuing Bonds', *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, Vol.15, No.1, (January 2007), 6-15; and Leeat Granek, 'Grief as Pathology: The Evolution of Grief Theory in Psychology From Freud to the Present', *History of Psychology*, 13.1 (2010), 46-73.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, (London: Vintage [The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis], 2001), ed. and trans. by J. Strachey, Original publication date 1917 [1915], pp.237-258, (p.247).

¹⁸ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p.255 and p.243.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.250.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.255.

²¹ Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, p.3.

²² Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (London: Cresset Press, 1965 [repr.1987]), p.118.

responsible for the rationalized approach to, and understanding of, bereavement. This is not surprising given that, according to sociologist David Clark's 1996 argument, until the 'closing decades of the twentieth century', the 'entire intellectual and clinical paradigm [of] experiences of loss, grief and mourning were fixed within a predominantly psychological set of understandings and interventions' that had emerged from this early work of Freud.²³ The 1990s saw a surge of critical engagement with the problem of the Freudian psychological model of grief. The first flush of originality of the ideas put forward by Klass, Silverman, Nickman and Walters has passed now, but their findings (and other important ideas that emerged at that time) have not become part of received wisdom. Rather, though critical grief scholarship continues – particularly in the cross-disciplinary field of Death Studies – there is little uniformity of approach or outcome in the work of scholars of bereavement.²⁴ This too has been noted. In 1999, clinical psychologists George Bonanno and Stacey Kaltman declared the end of the century bereavement studies to be in a state of 'considerable conceptual and empirical ferment'.²⁵ In 2001, evolutionary psychologist John Archer described a 'theoretical vacuum' at the heart of Western bereavement scholarship and as recently as 2007, family therapists Jeanne W. Rothaupt and Kent Becker concluded that 'the theoretical foundations of bereavement' were still 'in a state of flux'.²⁶

²³ David Clark, Series Editor, 'Foreword' to Tony Walter, *On Bereavement*, p.ix – my emphasis.

²⁴ The term 'critical grief scholarship' is my own. The scholars to whom I refer when I use this, or related phrases, are a disparate group of researchers from a broad range of disciplines. Their work has emerged over the course of the last thirty years, but most often within the confines of, rather than across, the boundaries of academic disciplines. Thus, these researchers do not always refer to each other's work and do not identify as a group, though some of them – particularly in psychology and sociology – now describe themselves as part of a broad intellectual collective using the umbrella terms thanatology or Death Studies. For the earliest examples of work from this group, see Wortman and Silver, 'The Myths of Coping with Loss' and Woodward, 'Freud and Barthes'. For the key writers and works which emerged in the middle-nineties, and in addition to those already cited, see in particular, Archer, *Nature of Grief* and Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) and *On Bereavement*. More recent researchers/research that I include in this category are: literary critic Laura E. Tanner, especially her book *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), psychologists Breen and O'Connor, and their article 'The Fundamental Paradox', psychologist Leeat Granek and her literature review 'Grief as Pathology' and the multiple works of poet, essayist, journalist and bereavement memoirist Meghan O'Rourke. This is not an exhaustive list.

²⁵ Bonanno and Kaltman, 'Towards an Integrative Perspective on Bereavement', p.760.

²⁶ John Archer, 'Broad and Narrow Perspectives in Grief Theory: Comment On Bonanno and Kaltman (1999)', *Psychological Bulletin*, 127.4 (2001), 554-560, (p.555) and Rothaupt and Becker 'A Literature Review of Western Bereavement Theory', p.13.

Sociologist Tony Walter and psychologist Leeat Granek are amongst those critical grief scholars who, since the 1990s, have continued to trace the shape of the twentieth-century Freudian and post-Freudian influence on grief in their work. In his 1996 essay 'A New Model of Grief', Walter wrote that where grief was once considered 'a condition of the human spirit or soul', the 'Victorian celebration of the intense emotionality of grief' has 'given way' in the West, 'to a modernist and medical concern to return' the bereaved 'individual as rapidly as possible to efficient and autonomous functioning'.²⁷ Walter described his work, which challenged this idea, as part of a 'revolution' in the study of grief, one which included academics and the bereaved in reformulating understanding about bereavement.²⁸ But Leeat Granek's 2010 essay, 'Grief as Pathology: The Evolution of Grief Theory in Psychology From Freud to the Present', strongly suggests that the 'modernist and medical' approach to grief that emerged from Freud's work has not gone away, and that, if the revolution in grief studies has occurred, it has not overturned dominant formulations of the suffering associated with bereavement either in various parts of academia or in the domain of the everyday.

Granek argues that to a great extent the problem with the evolution of thought about grief is a consequence of the conceptualization of grief by the psychological disciplines. She draws attention to the schism that has emerged between grief in the everyday domain and grief as what she terms an 'object worthy of scientific study'.²⁹ She writes that grief 'as a psychological concept and grieving as a reaction to the loss of someone who has died' can, after just a century of research, now be understood to be 'different entities'.³⁰ The former, she argues, is something, that has 'always existed in some form', elsewhere arguing (alongside others) that it is 'widely considered to be a universal phenomenon'.³¹ However, grief as an 'object worthy of study' is, she insists, a 'modern, psychological conception', an 'early 20th century invention' born out of the evolution of the 'psy-disciplines'—psychology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry.³² With the exception of psychoanalysis, these disciplines are now, though have not always been deemed,

²⁷ Walter, 'New Model', p.8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.8.

²⁹ Granek, 'Grief as Pathology', p.46.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.46.

³¹ Granek, 'Grief as Pathology', p.47 and 'Mourning Sickness: The politicizations of grief', *Review of General Psychology*, 18.2 (June 2014), 61-68, p.61.

³² Granek, 'Grief as pathology', p.46 and p.66.

'scientific' and thus grief has become both an object and a product of the methods of science.³³ Understood in these terms, and echoing Robinson, Granek writes that, 'grief is slowly morphing from a difficult, but necessary condition of living, into a psychological disorder that can be observed, diagnosed, and treated'.³⁴

Granek's essay came out shortly before the 2012 publication of the fifth edition of the American psychiatric publication the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (the *DSM-5*) around which there was significant controversy about whether acute manifestations of 'complicated' or 'pathological' grief, that is grief that is considered to deviate from the norm, would be recognized as disorders.³⁵ A contentious term in itself, complicated grief is widely used to refer to bereavement experiences that, according to Stroebe *et al* are 'chronic', 'prolonged', [d]elayed, inhibited or absent'.³⁶ Normal grief, however, remains undefined.

Normal grief

In 1924, one of Freud's acolytes, Karl Abraham, published the influential essay, 'A Short Study of the Development of the Libido, viewed in the Light of Mental Disorders'. Like Freud, his work was speculative and exploratory, clearly conceding empirical weakness. Abraham expressed the intention to 'prepare the way for a systematic inquiry into the pathological processes of melancholia and into the phenomena of mourning' since 'the psychology of melancholia and of mourning' were not 'yet sufficiently understood'.³⁷ Abraham stressed the 'shortcomings' of earlier work and the 'superficial[ity]' of what was then known about the 'normal mourner'.³⁸ Abraham, like Freud, was interested in new ways of theorizing melancholia and repeatedly admitted that 'how exactly the process of

³³ The distinction 'scientific' to describe the method and specialism of psychological bereavement research is frequently used. I use it here citing Granek, 'Grief as Pathology', p.46 and Parkes, 'Grief: Lessons', p.367.

³⁴ Granek, 'Grief as Pathology', p.66.

³⁵ For discussion of the evolution of the term 'complicated' to describe grief, see in particular, Walter, 'What is Complicated Grief? A Social Constructionist Perspective', *Omega*, 52.1, [Special issue on Complicated Grief], (2005-2006), 71-79. For an example of typical usage, see Stroebe *et al* in the section 'Normal and Complicated Grief' in 'Introduction' to *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice: Advances in Theory and Intervention* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008), p.6., cited hereafter as *Handbook of Bereavement* (2008).

³⁶ Stroebe *et al*, *Handbook of Bereavement* (2008), p.7.

³⁷ Karl Abraham, 'A Short Study of the Development of the Libido, Viewed in the Light of Mental Disorders' in *The Selected Papers of Karl Abraham* ed. by Douglas Bryan and Alix Strachey (London: L&V Woolf, 1927), pp.418-501, (p.434).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.418 and p.435.

mourning is effected in the normal mind we do not at present know', prefacing his work with the caveat that 'psychoanalysis has thrown no light on that mental state in healthy people' in what he termed the 'til now obscure subject'.³⁹ In their 1993 essay 'Pathological Grief Reactions', Warwick Middleton *et al* wrote that not only was there still a 'lack of operationalized criteria for pathological grief, but that the field was 'still trying to validate and operationalize the construct of "normal" grief'.⁴⁰ In the introduction to the 2008 *Handbook of Bereavement: Advances in Theory and Intervention*, editors Margaret Stroebe *et al* explained that researchers are 'still generally hesitant to define *normal* grief'.⁴¹

The hesitancy (or inability) to define normal grief, yet the ongoing clinical and scholarly emphasis on complicated or pathological deviations from that norm run to the core of most bereavement research. Granek's essay argues that, unlike early psychoanalysts, the 'majority of psychologists researching grief today are entirely empirical in their orientation'.⁴² She insists that the 'current' situation continues to rely on a 'conceptualization of grief within the disease model', and she maintains that 'the belief that grief is intrinsically traumatic and causally pathogenic is generally accepted among psychologists who study grief today'.⁴³ Caroline Valentine, a British sociologist who conducted a similar survey in 2006, argues that the 'inadequacy' of contemporary perspectives on bereavement are a result of the knowledge in the sphere being, overwhelmingly, the product of 'normalizing psychology'.⁴⁴ According to Davies, the shift towards a rationalized suffering has seen the replacement of 'spiritual, moral or philosophical' means by which knowledge was formed about suffering prior to the twentieth-century, with 'biological, behavioural, political' and 'psychiatric' methods of understanding and intervention.⁴⁵ He stresses the role, in particular of 'biomedicine', whereby the treatment of tensions caused by 'the demands of daily living' are increasingly 'biologically explained and pharmacologically treated'.⁴⁶ This phenomenon, he

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.435.

⁴⁰ Warwick Middleton, Beverley Raphael, Nada Martinek, and Vivienne Misso, 'Pathological Grief Reactions', in *Handbook of Bereavement: Theory, Research, Intervention* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), ed. by M. Stroebe, W. Stroebe, and R. O. Hansson, pp.44-61, (p.44), cited hereafter as *Handbook of Bereavement* (1993).

⁴¹ Stroebe *et al*, *Handbook of Bereavement* (2008), p.6 – italics in the original.

⁴² Granek, 'Grief as Pathology', p.65.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.46 and p.66.

⁴⁴ Christine Valentine, 'Academic Constructions of Bereavement', *Mortality*, 11.1 (February 2006), 57-78, (p.57 and p.59).

⁴⁵ Davies, *Importance of Suffering*, p.52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.52.

explains, has 'spread medical treatment into areas it was never designed to go'.⁴⁷ Indubitably, bereavement is one such area.

The domination of the psy-disciplines

The body of academic literature on grief and mourning is vast, but has long been contentious.⁴⁸ Much of the contention regards whether or not research is empirical or non-empirical. John Archer has written that as early as 1984, the rarely referenced Shackleton had found that much bereavement scholarship was 'logically incoherent and lacking in empirical support'.⁴⁹ Similarly, Robert Neimeyer and Nancy Hogan have argued that 'although the experience of bereavement has often been studied it has not often been studied well'.⁵⁰ Research was dominated up to WWII by early psychoanalysis in the work of Freud and his followers Abraham, Helene Deutsch and Melanie Klein, and latterly by psychiatry and clinical psychology in Britain and the United States, notably in the highly influential mid-war work of American psychiatrist Erich Lindemann and the post-war work of British psychiatrists John Bowlby and Colin Murray Parkes. Although the study of grief has never substantively been the province of the natural sciences, it took shape – as Granek and others have argued – in disciplines which adopted many of the modes of science. Early literature was produced by researchers in fields that were in the ascendant in the early twentieth-century, notably, as Steven Ward explains, the 'new' science of psychology.⁵¹ In *Modernizing the Mind: Psychological Knowledge and the Remaking of Society*, Ward explains that psychology was called 'new' to 'demarcate the discipline from mental and moral philosophy', to 'denote the discipline's new emphasis on scientific procedures and experimental methodology' and to make psychology as 'scientific and rigorous as

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.52.

⁴⁸ For an idea of the quantity of academic literature available on grief, see Robert A. Neimeyer, 'Research On Grief and Bereavement: Evolution and Revolution' (an Introduction to the special issue of *Death Studies*), 28, (2004), 489-490, in which he writes that, 'the interdisciplinary field of thanatology' alone yielded 'a literature of over 4,000 publications' in the twenty years up to 2004, p.489. Thanatology as Neimeyer uses the term does not routinely include work by literary or cultural critics.

⁴⁹ Archer, *Nature of Grief*, p.22. These are the words of John Archer paraphrasing the findings of C.H. Shackleton, 'The Psychology of Grief: A Review' in *Advances in Behaviour Research and Therapy* 6 (1984), 153-205.

⁵⁰ Robert Neimeyer and Nancy Hogan, 'Quantitative or qualitative? Measurement issues in the study of grief', in M.S. Stroebe, R.O. Hansson, W. Stroebe, & H. Schut eds., *Handbook of Bereavement Research*: (2001), pp.89-118, (p.110).

⁵¹ Steven Ward, *Modernizing the Mind: Psychological Knowledge and the Remaking of Society* (Westport, CT: Praeger/Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), p.34.

the natural sciences'.⁵² Researchers, particularly early psychiatrists, thus installed the language, practices and methods of the natural, or 'hard' sciences as authoritative in research on grief.⁵³

American psychiatry developed in parallel with the emergence and ascendance of a presumptive secularization, biological determinism and diagnostic disease categories which foregrounded conceptions of abnormal grief as a disease with a teleology, and which made way (much later) for the potential inclusion of bereavement reactions in the *DSM*.⁵⁴ Historian of psychiatry, Edward Shorter, argues that it was at precisely the same time that psychoanalysts Deutsch and Klein were writing, in the lead up to WWII, that America became the 'world epicenter of psychiatry' and, critically, that 'psychoanalysis *took over* the profession'.⁵⁵ Shorter argues that psychoanalysis influenced American psychiatry in a number of ways and led to a situation in which 'in the mind of the public, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis became virtually synonymous' right up to the 1960s.⁵⁶ The mutual interdependence of psychiatry and psychoanalysis informed the study of bereavement while simultaneously blurring issues of empiricism and non-empiricism.

Erich Lindemann's foundational 1944 essay *Symptomatology and the Management of Acute Grief* made the first academic contribution to the more 'scientific' domain of grief within psychiatry. An American psychiatrist who 'relied heavily on analytic concepts', Lindemann's essay is widely recognized as the first 'empirical study of bereaved patients', in which he adopted the analytic categories of psychoanalysts Freud, Abraham, Deutsch and Klein, transforming them into assertive, scientific, medical – and critically empirical – findings.⁵⁷ Although he only referenced the work of analysts and analytically-minded-psychiatrists, and his empiricism has been widely criticized in recent years for significant 'methodological defects', Lindemann can be seen to have influenced the

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.34 – my emphasis. For other arguments that the psy-disciplines adopted the methods and practices of the natural sciences in order to gain prestige, see Edward Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry: From the Era of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac* (New York: Wiley, 1997) on psychiatry and Leeat Granek, 'Grief as Pathology' on psychoanalysis.

⁵³ Granek, 'Grief as Pathology', p.57.

⁵⁴ For discussion of the intersection of these approaches and the history of the evolution of the *DSM*, see in particular Granek, 'Grief as Pathology' and Shorter, *History of Psychiatry*.

⁵⁵ Shorter, p.160 – my emphasis.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.146.

⁵⁷ Middleton *et al* in *Handbook of Bereavement* (1993), p.46 and Granek, 'Grief as Pathology', p.58.

descriptive terms and the epistemological modes of the dominant grief tradition as much, if not more, than Freud.⁵⁸ This is discernable in a scientific shift in expression, an urgency of tone impelled by an increase of casualties of war, and an emphasis on empiricism to be found in his work.

Freud had stressed the limitations of his research emphasizing that it was 'limited to a small number of cases', that he wished to 'drop all claim to general validity' for his conclusions and that 'the empirical material' upon which study was founded was 'insufficient' for his needs.⁵⁹ Lindemann, by contrast, staked the scientific legitimacy of his research on its study cohort of 101 bereaved people.⁶⁰ Where Freud recognized empirical weakness, Lindemann's essay is notable for the absence of any professional hesitancy, for its assertive and alarmist scientific tone and lexicon and for the adoption of an empirical methodology more commonly found in the natural sciences, a methodology unavailable to Freud.⁶¹ Analyses of the influence of Lindemann's contribution to the discourse on grief almost completely disregard the origins of his adoption of a lexicon and conceptual framework that developed within the non-empirical realm of psychoanalysis.

Lindemann's article marks the moment in the scholarship at which versions of grief became diagnosable, within the disease model, as a disorder with a systematic list of normal/abnormal symptoms. For Lindemann, 'Acute' or 'Morbid Grief' was a 'syndrome' with a clear symptomatology that included: '(1) somatic distress, (2) preoccupation with the image of the deceased, (3) guilt, (4) hostile reactions, and (5) loss of patterns of conduct'.⁶² It also included a sixth characteristic that he described as being shown by patients 'who border on pathological reactions' that is 'the appearance of traits of the deceased in the behavior of the bereaved, especially symptoms shown during the last illness, or behavior which may have

⁵⁸ Lindemann's footnotes reference Freud, Abraham, Deutsch and Klein as well as a number of other Harvard psychiatrists influenced by psychoanalysis. See Erich Lindemann, 'The Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 6, (1944), 141-148, reproduced in *Death, Dying and Bereavement: Major Themes in Health and Social Care* Vol. IV, ed. by Kenneth Doka (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp.103-115. The phrase 'methodological defects' comes from Archer, *Nature of Grief*, p.17. For an earlier critique of Lindemann's methodology see Middleton *et al*, 'Pathological Grief Reactions' who write that his work was dependent on a study cohort that was 'not representative of the population at large', in *Handbook of Bereavement* (1993), p.46. Others to have commented on Lindemann's faulty methodology include: Klass *et al*, *Continuing Bonds* and Ruth Davies, 'New Understandings'.

⁵⁹ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p.255, p.243 and p.250.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.243.

⁶¹ For the absence of empiricism in Freud, see Archer, *Nature of Grief*, p.25

⁶² Lindemann, p.105.

been shown at the time of the tragedy'.⁶³ Lindemann transformed Freud's description of the experience of grief into the phrase 'grief work', stating that the target, 'emancipation from the bondage to the deceased, readjustment to the environment in which the deceased is missing, and the formation of new relationships', was dependent upon the 'success' of the bereaved person's grief work.⁶⁴ He also normalized, after Abraham and Deutsch, the word 'process' to describe the experience.⁶⁵ His vocabulary suggests the internalization of the idea that maintaining any connection with the dead is unhealthy, but is also a process that can succeed or fail. Lindemann also argued that psychiatric professionals '*should*' be involved in the management of grief leading the way to a culture of grief interventions at every level from 'expert psychiatric help' (at a premium during the war) to 'auxiliary workers' (the forerunners of professional bereavement counselors).⁶⁶ Lindemann specifically demarcated grief and its treatment as the domain of medical professionals, as opposed to the church and the community, emphasizing a greater and more urgent need, and thus role, for secular, new-scientific interventions in individual reactions to loss over and above religious, social or communal means of merely offering 'comfort'.⁶⁷

Stage theories

Much of the post-war work on bereavement was influenced by what are collectively known as 'stage theories', based on the assumption that grief moves or processes through a series of stages towards a point of resolution. This idea stems from the work of influential British psychiatrists John Bowlby and his student Colin Murray Parkes, who is still practising as a psychiatrist and writing about grief today. Stage theories are largely psychiatric constructions that emerged in the 1960s and have dominated conceptions of grief ever since. Although Small and Archer date the earliest of these to the work of Averill who, in 1968, identified 'shock, despair and recovery' as the stages of grief, the work of Bowlby and Parkes is regarded, clinically, as the origin of this way of conceptualizing responses to bereavement.⁶⁸ Stemming from Bowlby's 1961 *Processes of Grief*, in which he identified three phases of bereavement, a clinical study of widows he

⁶³ Ibid., p.106.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.106.

⁶⁵ Helene Deutsch, 'Absence of Grief', *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 6, (1937), 12-22, (p.12) and Lindemann, 'Symptomatology', p.106.

⁶⁶ Lindemann, p.114.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.114.

⁶⁸ Small, p.30 and Archer, *Nature of Grief*, p.22.

conducted with Parkes in 1970 outlined four: numbing; yearning and searching; disorganization and despair; and finally, a greater or lesser degree of reorganization including letting go of the deceased.⁶⁹ Parkes later referred to these stages as 'clinical pictures which blend into and replace each other' arguing that it is 'only after the stage of disorganization that recovery occurs'.⁷⁰

Described by literary critic Tammy Clewell as the 'single most popular understanding of mourning in contemporary culture' and anecdotally, by far the most famous and influential of the stage theories remains the 'five-stage' theory outlined by Swiss psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her now best-selling 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*.⁷¹ Influenced by Bowlby, Kubler-Ross evolved the five-stage theory as an explanatory method for understanding the experience of dying that has popularly been misapplied to the experiences of the bereaved. This misreading persists despite repeated assertions in the literature that her work was 'never a study of grief and bereavement'.⁷² Allan Kellehear writes that although Kubler-Ross clearly expressed the 'heuristic' quality of her stages, her cycle is considered to have been 'publicly caricatured beyond recognition' and to have given birth to 'a whole industry of mythmaking' in which the non-linear phased experiences of the dying that she outlined have come to stand for the linear experiences of the bereaved.⁷³ Collectively, the impact of stage theories on lay understandings of bereavement and grief cannot be overestimated or adequately measured.

Primarily, grief is now studied in the clinical spheres of psychiatric medicine, clinical psychology, nursing, psychotherapy, counseling and thanatology / Death Studies. Consequently, due to the privileging of scientific method in these disciplines, a form of scientism has dominated scholarship. The social sciences,

⁶⁹ See John Bowlby and Colin M. Parkes, 'Separation and loss within the family' in E.J. Anthony ed. *The Child in his family*, (New York: Wiley, 1970), 197-216.

⁷⁰ Colin Murray Parkes, in Parkes and H. Prigerson, *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*, 4th 3dn, (London, Penguin, 2010), p.7.

⁷¹ Tammy Clewell, *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.20.

⁷² Allan Kellehear, 'Introduction' to *On Death and Dying: What the Dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p.viii.

⁷³ Ibid., p.ix and p.vii. For variations on the stage theory, see Harvard psychiatrist J. William Worden's 'task theory' outlined in J. William Worden, *Grief counseling and grief therapy* (London and New York: Tavistock, 1982) and the more fluid 'dual-process' or 'oscillation' model in Margaret Stroebe and Henk Shut, 'The dual-process model of coping with bereavement: rationale and description', *Death Studies* 23 (1999), 197-224.

particularly sociology, were born out of a parallel scientific intellectual tradition. The 'invention' of late nineteenth-century philosopher August Comte, sociology was a product of Comte's 'Positivist' philosophy, and according to J.D. Peel, was a 'single, unified vision of knowledge and society' which aimed both for 'a blueprint of a new social order' and a 'developmental epistemology of science'.⁷⁴ Comte's vision sought to replace theism as a source of revealed knowledge with scientific method, and metaphysical speculation with a secular 'religion' he called the 'religion of humanity'.⁷⁵ According to Martin Ryder, Comte's philosophy, 'criticized ungrounded speculations about phenomena that cannot be directly encountered by proper observation, analysis, and experiment'.⁷⁶ According to sociologist Jorge Larrain 'one of the features of positivism is its postulate that scientific knowledge is the paradigm of *valid* knowledge'.⁷⁷ The work of more recent critics such as Walter and Granek strongly suggests that valid knowledge about bereavement is still only considered to be generated in scientific, scientific or positivist contexts.

For example, in the 2008 *Handbook of Bereavement*, authors Stroebe *et al* stress that their aim is a 'synthesis of scientific knowledge about the phenomena and manifestations of bereavement from a standpoint that emphasizes theoretical approaches and scientific method'.⁷⁸ Methodologically, they refer to 'empirical test' and 'statistical techniques' in the development of understanding of bereavement; they also position Freud as the first person to provide a 'systematic analysis of bereavement' and argue that the 'range of symptoms' identified by Lindemann are 'still today reflected in assessments of bereaved persons'.⁷⁹ Grief they define as a 'primarily emotional (affective) reaction'; and though they stress that it is 'a normal, natural reaction to loss', they simultaneously describe it as a 'complex syndrome' with a 'variety of symptoms'.⁸⁰ Despite two to three decades of contributions to the grief discourse from researchers critical of scientism/positivism and of the dominant model, including those in psychology, sociology and literary and cultural criticism, grief, is still largely, if not wholly, conceived of as a 'psychological concept', as a 'knowledge product' of the psy-complex, and is thus still viewed

⁷⁴ J.D. Peel, 'Comte, Auguste (1798-1857)', *The Social Science Encyclopedia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), ed. by A. and J Kuper, p.120.

⁷⁵ Peel, p.120.

⁷⁶ Martin Ryder, 'Scientism' in *Encyclopedia of Science, Technology, and Ethics* ed. by Carl Mitchum (Detroit: Thompson and Gale, 2005), pp.1735-1736.

⁷⁷ Jorge Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), p.197 – my emphasis.

⁷⁸ Stroebe *et al*, *Handbook of Bereavement* (2008), p.xiii.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.7-9.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.5.

largely through a positivist scientific or social scientific lens.⁸¹

What has happened to grief?

One major consequence of this emphasis in scholarship is that grief and particularly its partner word mourning have undergone a shift in meaning. Grief is usually the word used to describe what is widely considered to be a 'universal phenomenon'; that is, a 'universal human response' to death, an experience with varied manifestations depending on culture, society and time, but visible in some form or another across 'all studied human cultures'.⁸² Author Hilary Mantel writes that, whatever it is, it is 'as common as the air we breathe'.⁸³ The word comes from the old French, *grever* meaning 'to burden' and, as the dictionary puts it, is supposed to signify something of the 'intense sorrow' which can be 'caused by somebody's death'.⁸⁴ According to *Roget's Thesaurus*, its synonyms include the nouns suffering, heartache, sadness, woe, wretchedness, misery, passion and desolation; the adjectives disconsolate, sick-at-heart, sad; and the verbs agonize and lament.⁸⁵ Grief is a profound phenomenon, then, but because death is commonplace, grief possesses a profundity that can and is, by many, legitimately considered to be a feature of the ordinary or 'everyday' of human lives.⁸⁶

Grief is also an old word, nearly 800 years old. In the 2009 *Encyclopedia of Death and Human Experience*, David Balk gives some insight into the English etymology

⁸¹ Granek, 'Grief as Pathology', p.46

⁸² Granek, 'Mourning Sickness', p.61 and Peter Holmans ed. *Symbolic Loss*, p.2. For arguments that grief as a 'response to someone who has died' warrants the term 'universal' (bearing in mind cultural variations), see Archer, *Nature of Loss*, Dennis Klass, 'Developing a Cross-Cultural Model of Grief: The State of the Field', *Omega: the Journal of Death and Dying*, 39, 1999, 153-176; Sandra Gilbert, *Death's door: Modern dying and the ways we grieve* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); Murray Parkes, 'Historical Overview' in the *Handbook of Bereavement* (2001); J.L.Genevro, T. Marshall and T. Miller, 'Report on bereavement and grief research' by the American Center for the Advancement of Health, *Death Studies* 28.6 (2004), 491-575; Patricia Jalland, *Australian Ways of Death: A Social and Cultural History 1840-1918* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002) and Paul Rosenblatt, 'Grief Across Cultures: A Review and Research Agenda' in *Handbook of Bereavement* (2008), pp.207-222.

⁸³ Hilary Mantel, 'Hilary Mantel on Grief', *Guardian*, 27 December 2015

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/27/hilary-mantel-rereading-cs-lewis-a-grief-observed> [accessed 23rd June 2016], (para. 2).

⁸⁴ From the entry for 'grief', *Pocket Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th edn ed. by M. Waite (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.400.

⁸⁵ From entry for 'grief' [*personal emotion*] 824-824, *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* (150th anniversary edition), ed. by George Davidson (London: Penguin, 2002), pp.467-468.

⁸⁶ I use the word 'everyday' here after Granek, 'Grief as Pathology', p.66 and Meghan O'Rourke who uses it in her grief memoir *The Long Goodbye: A Memoir* (London: Virago, 2012), p.14. It is also a term favoured by sociologist and leading bereavement scholar Jenny Hockey who is influenced by the field of phenomenology. See in particular the introduction to *The Matter of Death: Space, Place and Materiality* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) ed. by J. Hockey, C. Komaromy and K. Woodthorpe, pp.1-18.

of the word grief and its partner words bereavement and mourning which are older still. He writes:

The word *bereavement* is the noun derived from the verb *bereave*, an Old English word that first appeared in 888 C.E. in King Alfred's translation of *The Consolations of Philosophy*. Since around the year 1650 the term *bereft* has referred to loss of immaterial possessions such as life and hope, whereas *bereaved* denotes a loss of a significant other such as a relative through death. The term *bereavement* is used to denote a condition of being bereaved or deprived.

Grief has multiple meanings, all of which deal with the subject of hardship, suffering, injury, discomfort, mental pain, and sorrow. The earliest citations for grief as some form of hardship or suffering are found in Middle English used in the year 1225; grief in the sense of sorrow as a result of loss or personal tragedy first appeared in Middle English in 1350.

The word *mourning*, derived from the verb *mourn*, first appeared in the same Old English manuscript in which *bereave* was used. To mourn is to express one's grief, to lament someone's death, to experience sorrow, grief, or regret.⁸⁷

From Balk's entry it is possible to discern how the everyday and popular shorthand definitions have emerged out of this long history of usage: bereavement is considered to be the loss of a 'significant other', grief is the feeling or range of feelings experienced in response to that loss, and mourning is the outward expression of those feelings. Despite the near-universal acceptance of this shorthand in lay and in academic contexts, this distillation is, as Walter puts it, an 'over- neat formulation'.⁸⁸ In large part, this is due to what sociologist Neil Small calls the 'intellectual history' of grief scholarship, a tradition which – in a distortion of Freud – has privileged intellectual focus on the category of mourning over grief. This intellectual tradition has been described by psychologist Robert Marrone as 'unfortunate'.⁸⁹ It is also a tradition that has stripped the word grief of its 'multiple meanings'.

Both of the words grief and mourning have contracted in meaning, but mourning in particular has experienced a complex etymological shift. To a large extent, this is historical accident. James Strachey, the General Editor and early translator of Freud's work, wrote in the first footnote to his translation of 'Mourning and

⁸⁷ David Balk, 'Bereavement, Grief, and Mourning' in *Encyclopedia of Death and Human Experience*, Vol. I, ed. by C.D. Bryant and D. L. Peck, (London: Sage, 2009), pp.101-103, (p.101 – italics in the original).

⁸⁸ Walter, *On Bereavement*, p.xv.

⁸⁹ Small, p.29 and Robert Marrone, 'Dying, Mourning, And Spirituality: A Psychological Perspective', *Death Studies*, 23.6, (September 1999), 495-519, (p.495).

Melancholia' (*Trauer und Melancholie*), that 'the German *Trauer*, like the English 'mourning', can mean both the affect of grief and its outward manifestation'.⁹⁰ Strachey's editorial decision was that 'the word [*trauer* be] rendered 'mourning' rather than grief in Freud's essay.⁹¹ Parkes has since described this as a case of grief being 'inaccurately translated', but it is a quirk of history that subsequently gave the word 'mourning' special psychoanalytic status, a status that is still only recognized – when recognized – in minority intellectual contexts.⁹² It is the special status of the word mourning as Freud articulated it in his early essay that was imported into the psychiatric tradition of bereavement that emerged between the wars; thus even though the word grief started to be used by psychoanalysts and psychiatrists – notably Deutsch who coined the phrase 'absent grief', and Lindemann who first described 'acute grief' within the disease model – it was the intellectual history of the word mourning to which they and their work referred.

This slippage is also in evidence in the contradictions that ripple through information sources about bereavement. The terms grief and mourning (and less commonly bereavement and grief) are very often conflated or used 'interchangeably'; but within the same disciplines that dominate the study of grief, this goes largely unnoticed or, if noticed, is un-critiqued.⁹³ Balk's history shows the (common) relationship drawn between the feelings of grief and the expression of those feelings in mourning. 'Grief', an abstract noun, he says, has 'multiple meanings', something which naturally connotes range and variety, but mourning in

⁹⁰ See footnote 1, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p.243.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.243.

⁹² Parkes, 'Grief: Lessons', p.370.

⁹³ Granek, 'Grief as Pathology', p.47. The authors of the 2004 'Report on bereavement and grief research' by the American Center for the Advancement of Health, Genevra *et al*, argue that 'distinctions between bereavement and grief have been inconsistently maintained in research'; consequently, they 'use both terms', p.498. Granek's study is a good example of an article in which the author acknowledges the slippage between the terms grief and mourning and qualifies her usage, but does not unpack the problem. She explains that they are 'frequently used as synonyms' p.47. Instead of critiquing the lack of distinction, she favours using the terms 'interchangeably' but defines her usage, explaining that they *both* 'refer to the emotional reaction to the loss of a loved one that can include sadness, longing sorrow, despair and anguish', p.47. Sociologist Neil Small and literary critic Laura E. Tanner also acknowledge and, to a limited extent, interrogate the fluid boundary between the terms grief and mourning. In *Lost Bodies*, Tanner, like Granek, acknowledges that the terms are used interchangeably and explains her own usage. In 'Theories of Grief', Neil Small acknowledges the slippage between the terms and notes that John Bowlby suggested a shift in usage of the terms to better reflect the psychoanalytic origin and evolving meaning of the term mourning in particular, (p.27). For close analysis of the use of both terms, see Kathleen Woodward's 'Grief-Work in Contemporary American Cultural Criticism: Psychoanalytic Theory of Mourning and Discourses of the Emotions: From Freud to Kristeva', *Discourse, (Special Issue: The Emotions, Gender, and the Politics of Subjectivity)*, 15.2 (1992-1993), 94-112. Woodward is the only writer I have come across who investigates the issue of definition more closely.

Balk's entry is a verb: it is grief's verb, that is the demonstration of grief. This view is widely held: as Jeffrey Kaufman puts it in the *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*, mourning is considered to be the active or performative manifestation of grief, the 'expression', 'communication' or 'exhibition of grief', such as crying or the wearing of black.⁹⁴ But according to Kaufman, mourning is also the '*psychological* response to death'.⁹⁵ In this (contemporary) definition, mourning is externally expressive of internal psychology, but also constitutes the internal 'psychological' response to loss. What then, is grief?

On the topic of grief and time, Kauffman writes:

The literature also recognizes the sense in which, in normal grief, there may be no closure, though the implications of open-ended mourning for how we conceptualize mourning, for example, how norms of adaptation differ, *have not been examined*.⁹⁶

This entry simultaneously asserts, though does not define, a 'normal grief', notes a natural longevity as a facet of this norm and acknowledges ignorance of how that longevity might play out. In the same entry (indeed the following paragraph), Kaufman notes that mourning is 'normally described as occurring in stages or phases' and that 'in the final phase, grief is put to rest'.⁹⁷ The contradiction is clear: normal grief might never end, but normal mourning – a phased process – puts grief 'to rest'. With similar incongruity, in the entry on 'grief, complicated' psychotherapists, Ruth Malkinson and Eliezer Witzum state:

Traditional approaches originating from medical models based their definitions on intensity, duration and detachment from the deceased. Although there is support for the notion of decrease in intensity of reactions with time, *there is not such support for the assumption that grief is time limited and its outcomes are detachment from the deceased*. On the contrary, *grief is seen as a life-long process*.⁹⁸

Not only do the writers date tradition only back as far as recent medical models, but again, grief is normalized as 'life-long', while elsewhere in the same entry,

⁹⁴ Jeffrey Kaufman, 'mourning' in Glennys Howarth and Oliver Leaman, eds., *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp.310-314, (p.311).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.311.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.312 – my emphasis.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.312.

⁹⁸ Ruth Malkinson and Eliexer Witzum, 'grief, complicated' in *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*, ed. by Howarth and Leaman, p.219 – my emphasis.

grief's teleology is emphasized with the description of a 'final phase of reorganization or grief resolution'. There is clearly confusion here, not least because the terms grief and mourning are conflated and/or used interchangeably within as well as across these encyclopedia entries. This linguistic, and therefore implicitly experiential, distinction between what are ultimately two metaphorical terms is under-scrutinized, but, in fact, it is a confusion of the words that is central to the scholarship of grief across disciplines. The expansiveness and flexibility of both categories, but especially of grief, have been lost to contemporary definition because denotations of both these words, most particularly in the scholarly realm, have contracted to reflect the parallel shrinkage in the psychological discourse that dictates the referents for the terms.

In the psy- and cognate disciplines, grief is now the favoured term, yet the history of scholarship, again based on Freud's essay, shows that the synonymous use of the terms disguises the direct influence of psychoanalysis on the evolution of twentieth-century meanings for grief in psychiatry and latterly nursing, counseling and clinical psychology. These are not just harmless semantics. Because it has a clinical and intellectual history, the word mourning (or the use of word grief in the psy- context that stems from the scholarship of mourning) now has a set of scholarly denotations which, whether recognized or not in academic or everyday usage, provide a rigid architecture for both scholarly and lay connotations when either term is used. The word mourning has become misunderstood, over-used and over-determined. Grief, by contrast, is radically under-described.

The grief myths and the view from the layperson

Scholarship since the late 1980s – both empirical and non-empirical – has repeatedly demonstrated that the assumptions underpinning the dominant model are, in fact, 'myths'.⁹⁹ In their 1989 article, *The Myths of Coping with Loss*,

⁹⁹ For the first empirical studies to disprove the core 'myths' of the dominant grief paradigm, see Wortman and Silver, 'The Myths of Coping with Loss', and Wortman and Silver, 'The Myths of Coping with Loss Revisited' in *Handbook of Bereavement* (2001). It is outside the remit of this thesis to engage explicitly or in detail with pre-twentieth century theories of grief, instead I take the twentieth-century models as my starting point because they can be read as both source and mirror of the process of rationalization. For more detailed studies of pre-twentieth century models of grief and mourning see Phillippe Aries, *Western Attitudes Towards Death and Dying* (Baltimore, US: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Julie Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain 1870-1914*, Vol.6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Dana Luciano *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007). For anthropological and psychological work on pre-twentieth-century grief see Metcalf, P. and Huntington, R. *Celebrations of death: The anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, 2nd edn

psychologists Camille Wortman and Roxanne Silver outlined the 'five assumptions [...] prevalent in the grief literature' at that time that had solidified into what they termed 'clinical lore'.¹⁰⁰ The influence of pre-war theories on the myths they identified is clear. So too are the preoccupations of the post-war and late twentieth-century psychiatric variations on stage theories. The central grief myths were identified as:

the expectation that depression is inevitable following loss; that distress is necessary, and failure to experience it is indicative of pathology; that it is necessary to "work through" or process a loss; and that recovery and resolution are to be expected following loss.¹⁰¹

In 2001, Wortman and Silver followed up their first study with a second, reiterating that their earlier work had found 'no support for any of the assumptions [...] examined'.¹⁰² Using the terms and methods appropriate to their discipline, this follow-up article drew on 'methodologically rigorous studies' and effectively drew the same conclusion, with detailed analysis of prevailing views compared with updated empirical evidence.¹⁰³ By 2007, a full twenty-eight years after the publication of Wortman and Silver's first article (and ninety years after Freud), when a significant body of critical grief scholarship was well established, Australian psychologists Lauren Breen and Moira O'Connor published 'The Fundamental Paradox in the Grief Literature: A Critical Reflection'. Breen and O'Connor wrote that *still*, 'our understandings of grief are based on a number of assumptions' which are incorrect.¹⁰⁴ These they argued, are:

a) grief follows a relatively distinct pattern; b) grief is short-term and finite; c) grief is a quasi-linear process characterized by stages/phases/tasks/processes of shock, yearning, and recovery; d) the grief process needs to be "worked through"; e) for people bereaved through illness, the work of grief begins in anticipation of the death; f) meaning in

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Paul Rosenblatt, *Cross-Cultural Variation in the Experience, Expression and Understanding of Grief* (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 1993) and *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures* ed. by C.M. Parkes, P., Laungani, and B. Young (New York and London: Routledge, 1997). For an early psychological analysis which took a different approach to Freud, see the chapter 'Laws of Sorrows' in A.F. Shand, *The Foundations of Character* (London: Macmillan, 1914/1920). For discussion of ancient, medieval and Renaissance traditions of melancholia that might have informed Freud's views, see in particular S.W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

¹⁰⁰ Wortman and Silver, 'Myths', p.349.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.349.

¹⁰² Wortman and Silver, 'Myths Revisited', p.406.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.407 – my emphasis.

¹⁰⁴ Breen and O'Connor, 'Fundamental Paradox', p.200.

and/or positives gained from the death must be found; g) grief culminates in the detachment from the deceased loved one; and h) the continuation of grief is abnormal, even pathological.¹⁰⁵

As with the 'myths' identified by Wortman and Silver, the influence of Freud and Lindemann's studies on these assumptions is clear, in particular in the language that is used. Breen and O'Connor argue that there continues to be 'uncritical acceptance' of these basic and 'erroneous assumptions' about bereavement and grief.¹⁰⁶ One ironic consequence of this is that while certain of the academic literature might show many scholars to have "moved on" from the dominant model and indeed, in the words of Parkes, that 'few authorities at work in the field believe in the "myths" as stated by the critics', the 'dominant discourse' maintains the status of 'the prevailing construction of grief' to be 'endorsed by laypersons, mass media, and many service providers'.¹⁰⁷

The sources of 'laypersons', including the personal accounts of the bereaved, regularly provide non-empirical evidence that the 'myths' fail to reflect and often actively undermine the felt or lived experience of those who grieve. For example, there is a growing literature of memoir, journalism and cross-over personal/literary/academic writing on the topic of bereavement now in the popular domain which repeatedly dispels the myths, and, increasingly and directly challenges the professional grief discourse as inappropriate.¹⁰⁸ Texts of these types also index the relative lack of impact of academic shifts in thinking about grief. In 2006, poet and literary critic Sandra M. Gilbert produced a heteroglossic text called *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* in which she explained the experience of writing her book. Bereaved herself, and both an

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp.200-201.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.200.

¹⁰⁷ Breen and O'Connor, 'Fundamental Paradox', p.202 and Parkes and Prigerson, *Bereavement: Studies*, p.xiii.

¹⁰⁸ Literary/scholarly grief memoirs include *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961) by novelist and Christian theologian C.S. Lewis; Roland Barthes' journal recorded daily after the death of his mother, *Mourning Diary* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2010); *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008) in which English novelist Julian Barnes anticipates his own death and *Levels of Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013) in which he writes about grief at the death of his wife. Poet and Literature professor Sandra Gilbert's book *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (London: W.W. Norton and Co, 2006) is also in this cross-over realm intended for greater accessibility to a wider reading public, as is American novelist Joan Didion's grief memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2005) which is a touchstone for much recent commentary on the experience of grief. More recent memoirs include Meghan O'Rourke, *The Long Goodbye: A Memoir* (London: Virago, 2012), and British academic Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk* (London: Vintage, 2014). This list is far from exhaustive.

elegist and an academic, she was intellectually interested in literary articulations of bereavement. She wrote that what had started out as a purely academic project turned into a bereaved woman's 'protest against what' she came to realize, in the act of writing, 'were a set of social and intellectual commandments "forbidding mourning"'.¹⁰⁹ Gilbert explained that she felt 'driven to claim' her grief and 'almost defiantly to name its particulars' when she realized she was grieving in a moment in time during which 'death was in some sense unspeakable and grief – or at least the expression of grief – was at best an embarrassment, at worst a social solecism or a scandal'.¹¹⁰ In 2009, literary critic and bereavement scholar Kathleen Woodward revealed that turning to the 'professional literature' and research on loss when she was bereaved, she found that 'virtually nothing clarified' the 'extreme confusion' of her grief.¹¹¹ She explained that she and others, including novelist and grief memoirist Joan Didion, found the academic literature 'peculiarly inapt – *unfeeling*'.¹¹² In 2012, poet Meghan O'Rourke commented on the 'boom in memoirs about loss' (including her own) arguing that they demonstrated a 'need to share experience' in an age in which she argued, like Gilbert, that grief is 'strangely taboo' and in which Western culture has 'let go of the ceremonious language that once bridged the stark boundary between inner sorrow and outer function'.¹¹³ In 2013, O'Rourke co-authored an article for *Slate* magazine with Leeat Granek in which they reported on the afore-mentioned *DSM* controversy, arguing that a number of American psychiatrists that year had 'spearheaded a movement to include ongoing grief as a disorder' in the impending *DSM-5*.¹¹⁴ Granek and O'Rourke explained that 'more than 10,000 mental health professionals, concerned about the credibility of the science behind several proposed additions to the manual' signed a petition calling for an independent review of the *DSM-5* in protest against categorizing prolonged grief as a mental

¹⁰⁹ Gilbert, *Death's Door*, p.xix. Gilbert's own surprise at the intrusion of emotions into her own academic realm is evidence of the problem with how academia considers academic work to be non- or un-emotional. In the sphere of grief scholarship this is a palpable problem.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.xix.

¹¹¹ Kathleen Woodward, 'Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), p.1-2.

¹¹² Woodward, *Statistical Panic*, p.2.

¹¹³ Meghan O'Rourke, 'Grief – the great universal' in *Guardian*

<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/26/grief-death-universal>> [accessed 7 February 2016], (para. 7). The phrase 'strangely taboo' is taken from O'Rourke's memoir, *Long Goodbye*, p.13.

¹¹⁴ Leeat Granek and Meghan O'Rourke, 'Is Mourning Madness? The Wrong-headed movement to classify grief as a mental disorder', *Slate Magazine*, <http://www.slate.com/articles/life/grieving/2012/03/complicated_grief_and_the_dsm_the_wrongheaded_movement_to_list_mourning_as_a_mental_disorder.html> [accessed 21 August 2013], (para. 3).

disorder.¹¹⁵ In October 2015, British journalist Kiran Sidhu published an article in *The Guardian* newspaper about her ongoing experience of grief nine-months after her mother's death. Sidhu explained that she found she was expected to “move on” with such ‘bewildering haste’ that her only choice was to ‘conceal her sorrow’, like a ‘dirty little secret’, the full details of which she only felt able to share in late-night, online bereavement forums.¹¹⁶

Reports such as these are common. They repeatedly suggest that the ‘everyday’ domain of grief has, to a great extent, been simultaneously influenced and delimited by the ‘intellectual history’ of majority grief scholarship.¹¹⁷ Thus, in spite of the assertion that some researchers perceive their work and scholarship as a whole to have “moved on”, a significant enough body of academic work in the psy-disciplines and abundant accounts of bereaved ‘laypersons’, still lean on, or are negatively influenced by, the ‘prevailing construction’ of grief and the ‘erroneous assumptions’ that underpin it. Following Granek and many others, I argue that this problem continues to warrant significant further review.

The situation in literary criticism and the problem with theory

One reason to turn to the work of Marilynne Robinson then, is that her fiction and non-fiction present a significant philosophical challenge to the grief myths and to the dominant discourse that literary critic Laura E. Tanner has described as the ‘mysteriously smooth narrative’ of grief offered by the post-Freudian, ‘scientific’ model.¹¹⁸ Robinson’s writing challenges this ‘narrative’ wholesale and illuminates the aesthetic realm as one where alternative valid ethical articulations of loss can be found. This thesis therefore offers up Robinson’s work in recognition that, as critics like Walter, Granek, and Tanner have found, there is a discrepancy between the ‘smooth’ theoretical and teleological ‘scientific’ grief narrative and the ragged, open-endedness of lived expressions of grief as they are described by people who have experienced the loss of bereavement and as they are depicted in art. However, although in presenting Robinson’s novels as grief narratives I read them to collectively challenge prevailing psychological myths, it is not only the psy- and

¹¹⁵ Ibid., (para. 3).

¹¹⁶ Kiran Sidhu, ‘A Dirty Secret Called Grief’, *The Guardian*, 15 October 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/10/a-dirty-secret-called-grief>> [accessed 2 March 2016], (para. 2).

¹¹⁷ Small, p.29.

¹¹⁸ Tanner, *Lost Bodies*, p.94.

cognate disciplines that have forged a dominant model of grief. Within the fields of literary criticism and cultural studies there is a different but related, and also problematic, tradition of conceptualizing loss and grief.

Commenting on the twentieth-century tradition, Neil Small has argued that:

The death of someone close to us exists at the brink of the crisis of modernity. We are not in control, we do not understand. Our sense of self, our relations with others, even the way we experience time is challenged. [...] The modernist discourse of grief and bereavement risks the charge of hubris because it offers a route map to impose a meaning that is from there not here, that is theirs not yours. That many of those we encounter at this point do not seek to impose their meaning is a tribute to their recognition of the poetics of loss rather than the logic of theories of loss.¹¹⁹

In Small's analysis, contemporary scholarship on grief (confined in his review to the research conducted in the psy- and cognate disciplines and in sociology) has relied too heavily on 'the logic of theories of loss' and, indeed, on a 'logic particular to disciplinarity', to create a 'top-down construction of knowledge and truth' about grief.¹²⁰ He argues that 'theoretical self-consciousness is rare' amongst academics, particularly in the psy-complex, and that one outcome of this is that a 'reductive and mechanistic' approach, both to grief and to humans, continues to apply a 'scientific' measure' in a domain that he argues is 'not amenable to measurement'. Small insists that there is 'a need to leave such approaches behind'.¹²¹

Small's emphasis on poetics would imply that literary studies has a special role to play in revitalizing understanding of grief beyond the limits of 'reductive and mechanistic' approaches. However, the literary critical study of bereavement has its own intellectual traditions, traditions which reveal other manifestations of philosophically complex, but ultimately (and perhaps surprisingly) reductive thought. An initial survey of literary and cultural criticism which specifically focuses on grief over the last three decades reveals that these intellectual spheres have also too easily privileged the 'logic of theories of loss' in their studies while simultaneously demonstrating a notable and surprising absence of 'theoretical self-awareness' of this tendency. In particular, this critical culture relies on the

¹¹⁹ Small, p.42.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p.36 and p.37.

¹²¹ Ibid., p.37 and p.39.

fusion of a variety of intellectual traditions in which psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity (particularly those of Freud and his followers) and the theories of radical leftist Continental or poststructuralist philosophers (particularly those of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and most especially Jacques Derrida) have been both over-determined and widely accepted as authoritative in knowledge production about loss.

These critical traditions – the psychoanalytic and the French philosophical – have themselves overlapped and do not easily disentangle. Also, they have run in parallel (and latterly intersected) with another in literary and cultural studies, that is the preponderance of interpretations of literature as what in 1988 Robert Alter described as ‘ultimately an arm of politics’, or what he described in 2010 as the ‘focus’ in literary studies on ‘ideological considerations’.¹²² In both instances, Alter refers to a dominant trend in the study of literature that has followed in another Continental philosophical tradition, that is the post-Marxist and Althusserian historical materialist theory of ideology. Although rarely directly cited now, this tradition of seeing literary texts as products of ideological forces (and thus complicit in the narrative of subjectification propounded by dominant culture) or – more likely for leftist academics – as vehicles for counterhegemonic and thus liberatory politics, continues to pervade most contemporary literary critical work on loss. According to Alter, this approach has ‘dominated the academy for several decades’ resulting in the ongoing pursuit by literary scholars of ‘political agendas’ which include tackling injustices related to:

race, class, gender identity, sexual practices, the critique of colonialism, the excoriation of consumerism and the evils of late capitalism and globalization.¹²³

In scholarship influenced by this strong trend, it is possible to discern a broad impulse on the part of intellectuals to alleviate forms of suffering deemed to be avoidable because ideological (and unjust) in origin. In discussions of grief in literature (more commonly known by literary and cultural critics as mourning or loss), critical practices that have evolved in response to – and often fused – the

¹²²Robert Alter, ‘The Difference of Literature’, *Poetics Today*, 9.3, Aspects of Literary Theory, (1988), 573-591, (p.575) and Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), p.22.

¹²³ Alter, *Pen of Iron*, p.21.

underlying assumptions of the post-Freudian ideas about subjectivity and the post-Marxist ideas about culture and society are the intellectual traditions which dominate. With regards to discussions of grief, this phenomenon continues to thrive in various forms and, once again, is under-critiqued when it comes to the study of bereavement.

As psychologists, sociologists and thanatologists have called for an 'expanded' discourse to develop understanding about grief, literary critics have also requested an expanded conversation and have made appeals for a language more fitting to the experience.¹²⁴ Amongst them, Jahan Ramazani has argued that the 'complex experience' of bereavement deserves a more 'resonant yet credible vocabulary' than that which exists; Tammy Clewell has made calls for the language and priorities of bereavement scholarship to better reflect a more 'vital relationship to loss', and Kathleen Woodward has repeatedly requested a 'more expressive vocabulary for grief' than that afforded by Freudian psychoanalysis, and a scholarship which might provide a better 'description of the phenomenology of grief'.¹²⁵ But, as Clewell noted in 2004, the majority of 'literary critics working in a range of historical periods and genres have persisted in using the Freudian model, though in refined form, to evaluate narrative representations of death, loss, and bereavement'.¹²⁶ Ramazani, Clewell and Woodward are amongst this group. One consequence of this critical tendency is that the range of possible descriptions and vocabulary to emerge from research in this sphere has its limits. Clewell refers to a range of work over a number of decades during which both classical psychoanalysis (in the Freudian tradition) and the revisionist psychoanalysis of, amongst others, Melanie Klein, Maria Torok and Nicholas Abraham, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva have all strongly influenced how literary critics have approached the topic of grief. As a result of this scholarly bias, mourning, rather than grief, is inevitably the preferred term, indeed, a 'theory of mourning' has

¹²⁴ The word 'expanded' is used by Neil Small, p.42, but refers to his summaries of the work of Klass *et al* in *Continuing Bonds*; Marguerite Stroebe, Robert O. Hansson and Wolfgang Stroebe in 'Contemporary Themes and Controversies in Bereavement Research' in *Handbook of Bereavement* (1993); and Walter, 'New Model'.

¹²⁵ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1994), p.ix; Tammy Clewell, *Mourning*, p.4, Woodward first made the call for a discourse on grief that was 'more expressive than that provided by psychoanalysis' in her article 'Freud and Barthes', p.94; she refers to it again and enlarges on it in *Statistical Panic*, p.3.

¹²⁶ Tammy Clewell, 'Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss', *Journal of American Psychoanalytic Association* 52.1 (Winter 2004), 43-67, (p.48).

emerged which dominates the sphere and which has shifted the emphasis away from individual experiences or expressions of grief as they have been discussed in other disciplines, toward a more theoretical approach to the fundamental role of loss in human and cultural psychic formation.¹²⁷

In literary and cultural criticism, Freud's writing is treated philosophically rather than (proto) scientifically and 'Mourning and Melancholia' is also, often, the touchstone text, though many critics engage dialogically with the whole of Freud's corpus and his intellectual legacy in the work of subsequent and varied psychoanalysts. Critics in this sphere tend not to look to Freud and his successors (just) for articulations of grief as a lived experience, rather they use his ideas to produce philosophies of human responses to a broader category of loss. Work in this tradition privileges psychoanalysis as a source of understanding about how self or subject-hood is formed from the primary experiences of loss in infancy – that is, for example, separation from the mother. It is here, in a child's first confrontations with loss (that might be a death but is more likely a separation) that the human subject (in Freudian terms the ego) is considered to 'take shape'.¹²⁸ In this light, loss is considered to be constitutive of subjectivity and is defined as much by this 'primal work of mourning' as by the ramifications of subsequent losses, such as later bereavements.¹²⁹

Melanie Klein's work, in particular her 1940 essay 'Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States', argued that it was in fact these early experiences of loss which defined all subsequent experiences. Klein responded to Freud by making the 'close connection' between his descriptions of 'normal mourning' and what she termed 'early processes of the mind'.¹³⁰ In the early formation of her object relations theory, Klein outlined the links between a baby's experience of being weaned from the mother's breast as a form of mourning accompanied by 'depressive feelings'.¹³¹ Klein described this experience in the medicalized psychoanalytic lexicon of the time, calling the experience (after Freud) a 'neurosis'

¹²⁷ Rae, ed., *Modernism and Mourning*, p.15. Rae uses this phrase without qualification, using the definite article to introduce it.

¹²⁸ Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Post-War Germany* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1990), p.20.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.21.

¹³⁰ Melanie Klein, 'Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 21 (1940), 125-153, (p.126).

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p.126.

that is 'psychotic in content' and arguing that in any subsequent experience of 'normal mourning early psychotic anxieties are reactivated'.¹³²

Although Klein's pathologizing lexicon has been criticized by some for contributing to the idea of grief as an illness, she is as often defended by literary critics for normalizing loss (mourning) in the formation of human subjectivity.¹³³ Although those in the psy-disciplines and thanatology tend not to explore his later works, Freud too continued to explore both mourning and melancholia as constitutive of and indeed inevitable aspects of ego-formation.¹³⁴ This later work of Freud's and that of Klein's has been of significant ongoing critical interest to literary and cultural critics. It is also widely recognized that Klein's and Freud's ideas influenced Lindemann, British bereavement psychiatrist Bowlby (and the development of his attachment theories), and – along with the work of other psychoanalysts – late twentieth-century Continental philosophy. It is the internalization of psychoanalytic ideas as authoritative about loss that have most influenced literary and cultural critics. This marks the philosophical bent of literary criticism which purports to be about grief.

Of the vast range of work that has explored manifestations of theories of mourning in the humanities, two major strands stand out. That is, the tradition which has continued to engage dialogically with psychoanalysis itself, and that which has tended to explore philosophies of loss after the influence of Continental or poststructuralist philosophies. In fact, work in both traditions overlaps as often as not and both traditions – especially latterly – seek frameworks for a secular ethics of loss. These ethical approaches are often inspired in particular by the work of Michel Foucault (student of Althusser) with regards to the politicized interplay of knowledge and power in the critique of modernity, and by Derrida's exploration of ethics and mourning.¹³⁵ Both traditions tend towards making sense of experiences

¹³² Ibid., p.129 and 135. Klein refers the reader here to Freud's description of 'neurosis in childhood as not the exception but the rule' in his book *Die Frage der Laienanalyse* (Leipzig/Wien/Zurich: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1926), p.26.

¹³³ For a critique of Klein's lexicon, see Granek 'Grief as Pathology'; for a defence of Klein see Woodward, 'Grief-work'.

¹³⁴ See in particular Freud's 'The Ego and the Id' (1923) and *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxieties* (1926). For detailed analysis of the evolution of Freud's mourning theory as a coherent theory, see Clewell, 'Mourning Beyond Melancholia'.

¹³⁵ For studies of bereavement influenced directly by Foucault see Foote and Franke 'Foucault and Therapy: The Disciplining of Grief' in *Reading Foucault for Social Work* ed. by A. S. Chambon, A. Irving and Laura Epstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 157-187 and Luciano, *Arranging Grief*.

of loss that are conceived of as uniquely modern. This last impulse has resulted in the fusion of psychoanalysis and poststructuralism with post-Marxist knowledge formations, all of which are inherently twentieth-century. Thus, where the psy-disciplines tend towards dehistoricizing and individualizing experiences of the loss of bereavement and forming universal 'models' from their theories; literary and cultural critics have tended towards positioning individual expressions of grief (in literature or other cultural products such as film, architectural and other memorial monuments), against a backdrop of the depredations of modernity most evident in what are often considered to be uniquely late modern catastrophes.¹³⁶ The result, as Kathleen Woodward puts it in her essay 'Grief-Work in contemporary American Cultural Criticism', is that what 'we may call private grief' is explicitly (and almost without exception) linked by these critics to the 'larger social and political context'.¹³⁷

For example, Patricia Rae opens her book, *Modernism and Mourning* with the statement that:

cataclysmic and grief-producing world events marking the last decades of the twentieth-century and the turn to the twenty-first – the AIDS epidemic, racially motivated genocide, terrorist attacks, retaliatory war, even the untimely death of a princess have ignited widespread public and academic interest in how we mourn.¹³⁸

Literary and cultural critics often contextualize their studies in this way, especially literary modernists (for whom mourning is a major critical preoccupation). Focusing as they do on literary output during and between the two world wars, they respond specifically to what Clewell calls 'a range of cataclysmic social events, including the slaughter of war, modernization of culture, and the disappearance of God and tradition'.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ I am thinking here of work that responds to the production of aesthetic objects as monuments to loss such as photography as explored by Roland Barthes in his text about the death of his mother *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill, 1981), First World War Memorials as explored by Jay Winter in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War and European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); the AIDS Memorial Quilt explored by many including Cindy Ruskin in *The Quilt: Stories from the NAMES project* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1988); and artwork about September 11 for example that by Olu Oguibe explored by Tanner in *Lost Bodies*.

¹³⁷ Woodward, 'Grief-Work', p.101.

¹³⁸ Rae, *Modernist Mourning*, p.13.

¹³⁹ Clewell, *Mourning*, p.1.

If not modernist in emphasis, literary and cultural critics often specify the nature of death itself in late modern terms. For example, Jahan Ramazani's landmark 1994 work, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, argues that 'modern death and bereavement' has a particular 'astringency' and Sarah Henstra's 2009 *The Counter-Memorial Impulse in Twentieth-Century English Fiction* argues that literature of this era is notable for its engagement with the particular 'horrors and heavy losses' of the age.¹⁴⁰ Similar impulses have been described by literary critic, philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. In her 1989 book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, she argued that the acute suffering that comes with loss is 'the drama of our time, a drama that imprints the malady of death at the heart of the psychic experience of most of us'.¹⁴¹ Literary critics who have written about grief and mourning in the last three decades, modernist or otherwise, have done so, very often, from beneath a perceived shadow of a uniquely late-modern 'malady of death'. One major consequence of this in literary and cultural criticism is that everyday individual and intimate experiences of bereavement are often viewed as synecdoches for either deeply interior, primal and formative losses, or expansively political and global types of loss. Another is that grief is often understood in relation to a contemporary context deemed uniquely catastrophic, uniquely modern and specifically Godless.

Freud's atheism was explicit in his work and directly influenced his 'secular-scientific' mode of enquiry.¹⁴² According to Donald Pease, he is amongst the century's 'self-avowedly atheistic' and 'intractably secular' thinkers.¹⁴³ Derrida, whose philosophy disallowed such clear identifications, described himself as having given a 'number of signs' as a 'non-believer in god' and thus rather than asserting atheism, declared on a number of occasions that he could 'rightly pass for an atheist'.¹⁴⁴ Authors of critical work inspired by Freud and Derrida also

¹⁴⁰ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p.ix and Sarah Henstra, *The Counter-Memorial Impulse in 20th Century English Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.1.

¹⁴¹ Julia Kristeva, *The Black Sun: Melancholia and Depression* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p.238.

¹⁴² For Freud's famous declaration of atheism see the conversation recounted by Jung in which he describes the 'sexual theory' as a need for a 'dogma' an 'unshakeable bulwark' against the 'black tide of mud [...] of occultism', in Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* trans. by R. and C. Winston, ed. by A. Jaffe, (New York: Pantheon, 1973), p.149-150.

¹⁴³ Donald Pease, 'The Laicization of American Literary Studies', *Contemporary Literature*, 53.1 (Spring 2012), p.187.

¹⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida 'On 'Atheism' and 'Belief'' from the conference 'Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments', Toronto, 23-26 November 2002, *You Tube* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3fScS2cnB0>> [accessed 1 November 2016].

demonstrate forms of intractable secularism and commonly preface their works with cursory references to the limits of religion as an explanatory frame within which to comprehend death. These references are rarely thorough. For example, Ramazani stresses, without qualification, that for ‘many of us, religious rituals are no longer adequate to the complexities of mourning for the dead’.¹⁴⁵ More recently, Henstra prefaces her book with a similarly sweeping declaration that:

fewer of us can rely on religious formulations of death as passage into paradise, and more than ever before, death equals the ultimate limit to human understanding. We are obsessed with it because, in a secularized, sanitized western world, death confounds us.¹⁴⁶

These writers speak to the evolution of what Patricia Rae calls, uncritically, ‘secularized modernity’.¹⁴⁷ They, like Rae, do not problematize their uncritical acceptance of the phenomenon of secularization, a phenomenon that sociologists call ‘secularization theory’; rather, literary critics of grief appear to accept secularization as fact.¹⁴⁸ According to leading proponent of secularization theory, Steve Bruce, secularization is the product of:

processes of rationalization released by modernization [...] that is, by the establishment of, first, a capitalist, then an industrial socio-economic order.¹⁴⁹

The assumptions of secularization theory are now regularly contested. For instance, Jonathan Clark argues that Bruce follows a tautological formula within which the concepts ‘secularization’ and ‘modernization’ are always presented in a ‘symbiotic relationship’.¹⁵⁰ According to Clark, the ‘circularity of the argument’ is such that ‘sociologists, philosophers and others who still make use of the idea of

¹⁴⁵ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p.ix.

¹⁴⁶ Henstra, p.3.

¹⁴⁷ Rae uses the phrase ‘secularized modernity’ uncritically in a footnote in *Modernism and Mourning*, p.42.

¹⁴⁸ Secularization theory is a commonly used critical term across the social sciences. For detailed explication of the theory, by a leading proponent of the thesis, see Steve Bruce, *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford: OUP, 1992) and Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: OUP 2002). For criticisms of the theory as articulated by Bruce see Peter L. Berger, ‘The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview’ in Berger ed. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington DC; The Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999) and J.C.D. Clark, ‘Historiographical Reviews: Secularization and Modernization: The Failure of a ‘Grand Narrative’ in *The Historical Journal*, 55:1 (2012), 161-194.

¹⁴⁹ Bruce, *God is Dead*, p.9.

¹⁵⁰ Clark, p.193 and 194.

secularization treat it as integral to the notion of modernization'.¹⁵¹ Indeed, he writes that 'standard dictionaries of ideas largely define secularization in terms of modernization, and modernization in terms of secularization'.¹⁵² The result, according to Clark, is that within Bruce's model of understanding, an 'end point, a secularized present, seem[s] assured' when in fact this is far from obvious.¹⁵³ Ramazani, Henstra and Rae do not discuss secularization theory, but, like the majority of literary critics in general, tend to present their theories of loss – formed in the largely secularized academy – as operating in an apparently secularized present. Thus, the introductions to their works move swiftly past references to the perceived limitations of religion, to consider instead secular ethical modes of considering death and its outcomes. Legitimate on its own terms, this reflects a worldview which is, simultaneously, a manifestation of what philosopher Charles Taylor calls 'unthought of secularization'.¹⁵⁴ According to Taylor, the 'unthought operative' holds that religion is either straightforwardly 'false', 'increasingly irrelevant', 'based on' problematic forms of 'authority', or a combination of all three; it is, he argues, an operative that is especially 'strong' amongst 'intellectuals and academics'.¹⁵⁵ Pease calls the literary critical mode a form of 'critical secularism', however, in ways which resemble the positivist inheritance in the psy- and social scientific domains, literary criticism of loss can be seen to be informed by Taylor's unthought operative of secularization, a phenomenon which in fact *uncritically* pervades majority literary critical practice.¹⁵⁶

The explicit atheism, or secular imperative, of literary critics is rarely outlined or delineated in their work, but rather (as in the scientism of twentieth-century psy- and social scientific traditions) is assumed. Thus, while a search for a secular ethics is at the heart of literary critical modes of approaching loss, literary critics tend to exclude the term secular from their work. In pursuing ethical responses to loss, literary and cultural critics most often engage dialogically either with the secular materialism of psychoanalysis, the philosophies of Derrida and his

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p.174.

¹⁵² Ibid., p.174.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p.166.

¹⁵⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p.428.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., pp.428-429.

¹⁵⁶ Pease, p.174.

contemporaries, or they look to progressive politics.¹⁵⁷ Often they apply all three. The 1985 work of Peter Sacks, *English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* falls into the first category. Sacks, whose work focused mostly on poetry written prior to the twentieth century, argued that the aim of elegy was similar to 'the work of mourning', as articulated by Freud, that is, 'to repair the mourner's damaged narcissism'.¹⁵⁸ Sacks' argument was, like Freud's classic formulation, one of a mourning that was resolved by substitution whereby the mourner found compensation or consolation in other relationships, God, and even, at times, in elegy itself.

Since Sacks, and especially after Ramazani, most literary and cultural critics have moved well away from any idea of a grief that operates within consolatory or compensatory schema either in a simplified interpretation of Freud's early essay or, in the perceived limitations of religious faith. Like critical grief scholars in other disciplines, they resist the idea of a resolution for grief as they (more explicitly than colleagues in the psy-complex) resist the ideas of God or heaven as illusions of compensation.¹⁵⁹ In this vein, and insistent that bereavement cannot be consoled or compensated for, Ramazani has argued that not only are religious models inappropriate, but that psychology, though useful at elucidating 'structures' of bereavement, 'leaves us in want of a mourning discourse more subtle and vivid'; one that is capable of capturing the 'moral doubt, metaphysical skepticisms, and emotional tangles that beset the modern experience of mourning'.¹⁶⁰ His work challenges Sacks' (and Freud's early) ideas of healthy and or successful mourning as 'inadequate'.¹⁶¹ However, instead of moving away from Freud, Ramazani's book 'recast[s]' his terms, arguing that modern elegists 'resist consolation', proposing instead a type of non-consolatory mourning category that he has described as 'melancholic mourning'.¹⁶² Ramazani shades this as the 'difference

¹⁵⁷ The word 'progressive' is something of a catch-all term for the leftist emphasis of most literary critical work on loss. It is used by both Rae, *Modernism and Mourning*, p.13 and Clewell, *Mourning Modernism, Postmodernism*, p.2. For a more radical leftist approach described by its editors as 'volatile potentiality and future militancies', see *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), ed. by D.L. Eng and D. Kazanjian.

¹⁵⁸ Peter Sacks, *English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985), p.10.

¹⁵⁹ For a rare and detailed discussion of Christian consolation literature and an original approach to Freud's own ideas of 'reality-testing' in relation to the 'forward-moving flow of time' as a secular version of the 'end-directed' emphasis on Christian consolation, see Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief*, pp.12-18.

¹⁶⁰ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p.ix-x.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.xi.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p.xi.

between modes of mourning: the normative (i.e., restitutive, idealizing) and the melancholic (violent, recalcitrant).¹⁶³ Translating the psychological category of Freud's normal mourning to the cultural category of that which is 'normative' (i.e. repressive, restrictive or 'schematic'), Ramazani's work focuses on melancholia as what he deems to be a far more appropriate metaphor for modern suffering because it allows him to describe a form of mourning that is 'unresolved, violent, and ambivalent'.¹⁶⁴ At the same time, he draws on language such as normative that keys into the prevailing post-Althusserian and post-Gramscian views of the literary critic as involved in counter-hegemonic reading acts that (always) allies them with progressive, leftist politics.

Ramazani's work can be considered to be part of a movement away from any rigid interpretation of Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' toward a philosophical and theoretical complication of Freud's categories in search of ethical responses to loss. Many scholars in this tradition have focused on the 'naturalization' or 'depathologising' of melancholia as fundamental to human experience and subject formation; others focus on articulations of resistant or non-consolatory mourning as ethical imperatives.¹⁶⁵ This latter strand of criticism has resulted in the development of a range of adjectives which attempt to capture the difficulty and complexity of mourning specifically as distinct from ideas of consolation or compensation. These include: 'anti-compensatory', 'anti-consolatory', 'unmournable', 'unrecognized', 'unsanctioned', 'resistant' and 'impossible'.¹⁶⁶ Resistant and impossible mourning are categories of Derridean thought which have been particularly influential.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p.xi.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p.4.

¹⁶⁵ Rae, *Modernism and Mourning*, p.16. For melancholia as paradoxical and creative see in particular, Kristeva's *Black Sun*; for the 'capaciousness' of melancholia see Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, p.3.

¹⁶⁶ For use and exploration of 'anti-consolatory' mourning see in particular Clewell, *Mourning*, in which Clewell emphasises this approach as 'at once thoroughly political and deeply ethical', p.11; for the phrase 'anticompensatory mourning' see Ramazani's 'Afterword' to Rae's *Modernism and Mourning*, pp.286-95; Henstra uses the word 'unmournable' in the introduction to *Counter-Memorial Impulse*; for a text that uses consolatory ideas but complex forms of mourning, see Vanderlyn R. Pine, *Unrecognized and Unsanctioned Grief: The Nature and Consoling of Unacknowledged Loss* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Pub. Ltd., 1990); the terms 'resistant' and 'impossible' recur in the work of Jacques Derrida and his followers, see in particular, Derrida *Mémoires: for Paul de Man*, trans. by C. Lindsey, J. Culler, and E. Cadava (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), and for one application which fuses psychoanalysis and Derrida's concept, see Roger Luckhurst, "Impossible Mourning" in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Michèle Roberts' *Daughters of the House*, *Critique*, XXXVII.4 (Summer 1996), 243-260.

According to Clewell, 'no one has raised the possibility for an ethics of mourning more insightfully than Jacques Derrida'.¹⁶⁷ Certainly, the writings of Derrida, when collected and viewed retrospectively can be seen to have been preoccupied with the inexpressibility of the experience of loss and mourning. For Derrida an ethical mourning is that which 'fails'.¹⁶⁸ In *Mémoires: for Paul de Man*, he wrote:

Is the most distressing, or even the most deadly infidelity that of a *possible mourning* which would interiorize within us the image, idol, or ideal of the other who is dead and lives only in us? Or is it that of the impossible mourning, which, leaving the other to his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove, either refuses to take or is incapable of taking the other within oneself, as in that tomb or vault of some narcissism?¹⁶⁹

Derrida's philosophy forms part of a body of work that Eric Santner describes as generating the 'postmodern rhetoric of mourning' that prevailed between the 1960s and the 1990s, but which is still highly influential in literary criticism of loss and the contemporary theory or theories of mourning.¹⁷⁰ This rhetoric, according to Santner, was ultimately defined by a 'metaphorics of loss and impoverishment'.¹⁷¹ According to Santner, the linguistic emphasis of textual analysis by philosophers such as Jacques Lacan, Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Paul De Man and others constituted an influential body of work which (not dissimilar to Kristeva's 'malady of death'):

views the figure of the mourner-survivor as a kind of arch-trope not just for what it means to be a citizen of postwar or postmodern society but, more radically, for what it means to be a member of a linguistic community. To be a speaking subject is to have already assumed one's fundamental vocation as a survivor of fundamental losses.¹⁷²

In her 2009 book, *Mourning, Modernism and Postmodernism*, Clewell articulates this emphasis as having resulted in those philosophers broadly categorized as

¹⁶⁷ Tammy Clewell, 'Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, the Great War, and Modernist Mourning', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50.1 (Spring 2004), 197-223, (p.207).

¹⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires: For Paul De Man*, p.3. For Derrida's work on mourning see in particular, 'Fors', *The Georgia Review*, 31.1-2, 64-116 written in response to Abraham and Torok's reappraisal of Freud. See also *The Specters of Marx: the state of the debt the work of mourning and the new international*. (London: Routledge, 1994); 'By Force of Mourning', trans. by P-A. Brault and M. Naas, *Critical Inquiry*, 22 (1996), 171-92 and *The Work of Mourning*. eds. Brault, P. and Naas, M. (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) in which Derrida's eulogies for his dead friends are published.

¹⁶⁹ Derrida, *Mémoires*, p.6.

¹⁷⁰ Santner, p.7.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p.7.

¹⁷² Ibid., p.9.

poststructuralists ‘fetishizing [...] an absence that cannot be mourned’.¹⁷³ Although Clewell and Rae follow in this tradition, defending Derridean ethics in particular against the general denunciations of nihilism levelled at poststructuralism, Santner and others have questioned the bearing that such ethics have on emotional reality. He argues that this type of philosophy ‘is ahistorical, aridly abstract, lacking in an emotional connection to lived experience’.¹⁷⁴ More recently, in her 2003 book, *The Ends of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film*, Alessia Ricciardi attacks in particular the ‘cynical nihilism’ of Lacan’s revision of Freud’s theories of mourning such that ‘loss in the Lacanian system looks like a transcendental principle or absence’.¹⁷⁵ Ricciardi argues that the twentieth century failed to develop an adequate ‘hermeneutics of loss’ and (echoing the Weberian language of secularization) has argued for the ‘reenchantment of mourning’, positing an ethically imperative ‘reexamination’ after ‘mourning’s devaluation under the regime of postmodern detachment’.¹⁷⁶ Ricciardi, like Clewell, Rae and American philosopher Judith Butler constitute part of the (now) dominant group of literary and cultural critics who see their work as engaged in the pursuit of comprehending and reclaiming ‘the ethical and political significance of loss’.¹⁷⁷

Within this discourse, the ethical response to the loss of another human being (still most often described by these literary and cultural critics, within post-Hegelian tradition as “the Other”) is in political action, which names that loss or tries to prevent suffering incurred by future losses. Although bereavements might be the starting point for such analyses, they are more commonly analyses of global catastrophes and collective tragedies. Rae documents the rise of a ‘resistant strain of mourning’ in which the normative aspects of Freud’s grief work are extrapolated far beyond the workings of the individual psyche to the broader spheres of culture, nation, state, control and power.¹⁷⁸ Mourning in this context is revealed not as an emotional or a psychic expression *per se* but as a performative action or set of actions that the mourner can, indeed sometimes must, choose and or refuse to

¹⁷³ Clewell, *Mourning*, p.9.

¹⁷⁴ Santner, p.110. In his 2004 book, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), William Watkin’s reinterpretation, via Durkheim, argues that ‘the trope of authentic emotion is a lie’, p.39. Watkin’s work embodies a degree of abstraction and emotional detachment of the type Santner strongly criticized.

¹⁷⁵ Alessia Ricciardi, *The Ends of Mourning: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Film* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003), pp.6-7.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4., p.8, p.11 and p.8.

¹⁷⁷ Rae, *Modernism and Mourning*, p.14 and p.13.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.18.

choose in order to resist hegemonic influence. As such, mourning is considered by many contemporary literary critics and theorists to be a potentially potent form of political act and an ethical statement on death. This train of thought influenced early Queer activists Douglas Crimp and Michael Moon and their work on the impact of the AIDS epidemic. They posited respectively the categories of 'militant sadness' and 'chronic melancholia' as a means by which to appropriately unsettle the political status quo.¹⁷⁹ It is also explored in the work of political theorists in the collection *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* by David Eng and David Kazanjian and in the work of British literary critic William Watkin in his 2004 *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (one of the few prolonged studies of loss in fiction). Most famously, the politicization of grief is explored by philosopher and political theorist Judith Butler, in particular in her post 9/11 psychoanalytic writings on war, mourning and the 'grievable' and 'ungrievable' dead.¹⁸⁰

In all of the above cases, the category of intimate grief has been subsumed into larger (or merely different) narratives of loss. This has had a number of outcomes and reveals a number of assumptions that have pervaded literary studies, particularly when it comes to explorations of the lived experience of grief. Celia Britton argues that Marxism and psychoanalysis have afforded twentieth-century literary and cultural critics a philosophical language and schema that allows for 'a genuinely materialist theory of subjectivity', one which is non-religious and thus deemed more appropriate to scholarship in a 'secular age'.¹⁸¹ Britton also points out that these intellectual approaches are specifically 'anti-humanist' in that they originated to 'challenge the idealist conception of the subject' historically propounded by classical philosophies of metaphysics and or religion, and in what have become pejoratively known, in the modern era, as "liberal humanist" traditions.¹⁸² In addition to the assumptions of secularization and the wholesale

¹⁷⁹ Douglas Crimp, 'Mourning and Militancy', *October*, Vol.51 (Winter 1989), pp.3-18 and Moon, 'Memorial Rags' in *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature* ed. by G.E. Haggerty and B. Zimmerman (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995), pp.233-240.

¹⁸⁰ See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004) and in particular the 'Introduction' to *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009).

¹⁸¹ Celia Britton, 'Structuralist and Post Structuralist Psychoanalytic and Marxist Theories' in 'From Formalism to PostStructuralism', *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), ed. by Raman Selden, p.197-252, (p.197).

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 197. For discussion of liberal humanism as pejorative, see entries for "liberal humanism" in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 5th edn, ed. by J.A. Cuddon and M.A.R. Habib (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) and *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*, ed. by J. Wolfreys, R. Robbins and K. Womack (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

politicization of ethical responses to loss, various 'post-' or 'anti-humanist' materialist critical positions are therefore also privileged by these approaches.¹⁸³ Again, these critical positions are not always stated; but are, rather, assumed.¹⁸⁴

In this context, the political agenda of challenging the various ethno- and/or phallo-centrism of dominant western thought means that literary critics of loss actively resist generalizing about human experiences in favour of privileging the vast array of human differences. One manifestation of this approach is an interest in the cultural construction of emotions, a view which has resulted in some quarters as a critique of the "authenticity" of emotions as ungeneralizable (say across groups distinguished by ethnic, class, gender, racial, national, sexual and other difference) and, by some literary critics of loss, as merely doubtful. For example, both Sarah Henstra and William Watkin in their recent work on mourning and fiction are skeptical about ideas of authenticity. Watkin, in his pursuit of a 'new ethical antihumanism' devotes a whole chapter to the cultural construction of emotions and argues that 'the actual emotions felt at the time of loss are themselves inauthentic' because the 'western cultural model of emotion' is, in fact, a 'cultural imposition of recent times'.¹⁸⁵ Similarly, in defining the postmodern qualities of the fictional texts that she explores in her book, Henstra cites Aleda Assman in arguing that in her chosen novels 'notions like objective truth, human values, and personal integrity' are problematic because they serve 'structures of power'.¹⁸⁶ Such assertions take certain forms of antihumanism to their logical, politicized (yet deconstructive) conclusion and privilege the ideological interpretation of literature over and above other ideas about how literature or ethics might operate.

The privileging of antihumanism (after Althusser), the destabilization of fixed meanings with regard to what might be considered generalizeable human experiences, and the proliferation of leftist critical positions that privilege (ethnic, class, gender, racial, national, sexual and other) differences rather than similarities

¹⁸³ Patricia Rae, 'Review of *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* by William Watkin', *Modernism/modernity*, 13.2 (April 2006), 405-407, (p.405) and Patricia Rae, *Modernism and Mourning*, p.42. In *On Mourning*, Watkin describes the 'general poetics of mourning' that he subscribes to as the outcome of the philosophies that are 'anti-humanist' and includes philosophers Lacan, Levinas, Lyotard, Kristeva and Derrida in that category, p.2 and p.14.

¹⁸⁴ For a critic who states his 'anti-humanism' see Watkin; for a critic who reflects similar values but does not describe herself as antihumanist, see Henstra.

¹⁸⁵ William Watkin, *On Mourning*, p.14 and p.39.

¹⁸⁶ Henstra, p.15 citing Aleda Assman 'The Sun at Midnight': The Concept of Counter-Memory and its Changes in L. Toker, *Commitment in Reflections: Essays in Literature and Moral Philosophy* (New York: Garland, 1994), p.241.

between human groups has resulted in rendering humanism and knowledge products derived via humanist means as also taboo in the field of literary criticism. Since poststructuralism, any approach to human experience that might draw on and emphasize the general and the particular of shared human experience (and thus might be called humanism) has become associated with conservatism and oppressive power structures that might exclude society's less powerful. Thus humanism, like religion, has become inadmissible in the counterhegemonic critical positions of most leftist literary critics.

It is perhaps in part because of the privileging of secular antihumanist thought that the Freudian lexicon continues to dominate literary study.¹⁸⁷ Although many have challenged Freud, the ongoing over-use of his terms reveals over-reliance on knowledge products derived from psychoanalysis. It is extremely unusual to find scholarship on grief in literature that does not take a politicized and secular approach to ethics and that does not privilege the uncritical use of psychoanalytic language and Freudian and or Derridean phrasing when discussing loss.¹⁸⁸ Similarly, it is almost unprecedented to find literary criticism that approaches grief, particularly in fiction, outside the trends outlined above or to find work which intersects with the knowledge forms of bereavement scholars from the psy- or social scientific realms. The over-determination of psychoanalytic and poststructuralist 'theories of loss' have underpinned these trends which simultaneously carry with them the legacy of their own dominant traditions of secular, materialist and antihumanist thought. Consequently, rather than 'recognise the poetics of loss' specific to bereavement, literary critics tend to amplify and magnify the role of different but equally problematic 'theories of loss' to those critiqued by Small. The most frequent outcome of this in literary critical scholarship is that work which might on the one hand do valuable secular, materialist, ethical and political work, simultaneously, obscures and under-describes experiences of ordinary 'everyday' and 'intimate grief' on the other.

¹⁸⁷ Rae argues that a 'profound and multifaceted challenge to Freud's model' but persists in using Freudian terminology such as 'work of mourning' uncritically, *Modernism and Mourning*, p.23. For a defense of Freud as humanist, in the secular sense, see Davies, *Importance of Suffering*.

¹⁸⁸ Henstra is a typical case. For some of the very few exceptions to this, see Harold K. Bush Jr. "'Broken Idols": Mark Twain's Elegies for Susy and a Critique of Freudian Grief Theory', *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 57.2 (September 2002), 237-268; Dana Luciano's Foucauldian approach in *Arranging Grief* and Laura E. Tanner's phenomenological readings of grief in *Lost Bodies*.

Literary criticism and the phenomenon of the turns

Within the social sciences and the humanities, notably since the 1990s, shifts or trends in thinking have been increasingly described using the word “turn”, a tendency which has significant bearing on scholarship on grief. The manifestation of late twentieth-century ‘turns’, in particular toward ethics, affect and religion seem to suggest that, if certain modes of scholarship hadn’t completely run their course by the 1990s, they needed reviewing. Amid accusations that the ‘deconstructivism, poststructuralist and textualist guise’ of literary and cultural critics was ‘indifferent or oblivious to ‘what goes on in the real world’, literary critics began to explore ways out of the ‘political and ethical paralysis’ that poststructuralism in particular seemed to have imposed, hence, in part, the shift toward identity politics.¹⁸⁹ Yet the agitated torsions that the ongoing repetition of the word “turn” invokes appears also to reflect an anxiety about the positivist substructures beneath methods of meaning-making privileged by academic scholarship. This is particularly relevant when it comes to knowledge production about grief.

According to Roger Luckhurst, the ‘ethical turn’ emerged in the early 1990s as a response to the radical scepticism and ‘ethical paralysis’ of poststructuralist theories.¹⁹⁰ It resulted, initially, in the psychoanalytic work of trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Ruth Leys and an increased sense of ‘ethical responsibility’ for, and in, their work on specifically traumatic suffering.¹⁹¹ Informed by psychoanalysis, it was, and remains, a secular material mode of enquiry.

According to philosophers Marguerite La Caze and Henry Martyn Lloyd, the ‘affective turn’ emerged at around the same time, in the ‘mid-1990s [...] in the humanities and social sciences’ and was also a response to a ‘preoccupation with theory’.¹⁹² La Caze and Lloyd argue that this ‘turn’ was ‘away from [...] theory’ and ‘can be understood as a willingness to return to questions of readers’ affective

¹⁸⁹ Stef Craps, ‘Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in a Global Age’, *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. by G. Buelens, S. Durrant, and R. Eaglestone (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp.45-61, (p.45) and Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.10.

¹⁹⁰ Roger Luckhurst, ‘Mixing memory and desire: psychoanalysis, psychology, and trauma theory’ in *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. by Patricia Waugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.497-507, (p.503).

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.503.

¹⁹² Marguerite La Caze and Henry Martyn Lloyd, ‘Editor’s Introduction: Philosophy and the ‘Affective Turn’, *Parrhesia*, 13, (2011), 1-13, (p.2).

responses', where 'affect' is understood to mean, broadly (though not uncontentiously), the emotions or 'passions'.¹⁹³ It took the form, they and others have argued, of 'widespread scholarly interest in the emotions and in the importance of aesthetics' and might have been (though has not proven to be) the domain in which intimate grief garnered significant renewed critical attention.¹⁹⁴

The 'religious turn' is considered to be a slightly more recent (and I suggest significantly more fraught) phenomenon, emerging most noticeably, after 9/11, though alluded to by many as a manifesting trend during the 'decade' around 2001.¹⁹⁵ Early reference to the phenomenon is often credited to the observations of literary theorist Stanley Fish who, without using the phrase, outlined the trend in 'One University Under God?'. Fish's article went to the heart of institutionalized atheism and Western academic anxieties about religion, especially in the American context, noting that despite the living legacy of the First Amendment to the American Bill of Rights, even before 9/11 'there was a growing recognition in many sectors that religion as a force motivating action could no longer be sequestered in the private sphere'.¹⁹⁶ This developing awareness, Fish argued, was likely to unsettle academics for whom there is a distinct difference between treating religion as 'an object of study', a 'phenomenon to be analyzed at arm's length' and 'taking religion seriously' as a 'candidate for the truth'.¹⁹⁷ Fish predicted that this would grow into a major issue for intellectuals, and explicitly drew attention to the dominant role of theoretical, political and identitarian modes of knowledge-making in his conclusion. He wrote:

¹⁹³ Ibid., p.2.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p.1 and p.2. See also, Athena Athanasiou, Pothiti Hantzaroula, and Kostas Yannakopoulos. 'Towards a New Epistemology: The "Affective Turn"', *Historiein* 8 (2008), 5-16. Affect is a psychological term, the etymology of which has evolved in psychoanalysis. For discussion of the 'physicalist' (materialist) emphasis of Freud's use of the word see Ruth E. K Stein *Psychoanalytic Theories of Affect* (London: Karnac Books, 1999). For discussion of the possibilities of the turn toward affect in application to bereavement, grief, loss and or mourning see in particular Woodward's introduction to *Statistical Panic* and Henstra's *Counter-Memorial Impulse*. For a list of the areas of literary critical focus in the affective domain that demonstrates the emphasis on theories of materialism after psychoanalysis, see La Caze and Lloyd; for a sustained critique of the biological determinism that underlies much contemporary work on affect, see Ruth Leys, 'The Turn to Affect: A Critique', *Critical Inquiry* 37.3 (Spring 2011), 434-472 and 'Critical Response II: Affect and Intention—A Reply to William Connelly' in *Critical Inquiry*, 37.4 (Summer 2011), 799-805.

¹⁹⁵ Reference to the previous 'decade' is made by Bruce Holsinger in 'Literary History and the Religious Turn: Announcing the New ELN' and William Johnsen in 'The Religious Turn: René Girard' both in *English Language Notes*, 44.1 (Summer 2006), pp.1-3 and pp.4-11.

¹⁹⁶ Stanley Fish, 'One University Under God' first published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* January 7th, 2005 <<http://chronicle.com/article/One-University-Under-God-/45077/>> [accessed 2 March 2016], (para. 5).

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., (para. 18).

When Jacques Derrida died [in 2004] I was called by a reporter who wanted to know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion.¹⁹⁸

In the 2006 edition of *English Language Notes*, William Johnsen wrote, 'It was inevitable that the shame associated with admitting religious belief in the human sciences [*sic*] in midcentury would prepare the ground for the great *succès de scandale* of religious (re)turn at the end of the century'.¹⁹⁹ In his 2006-7 article, 'Religion in the American Mind', Lawrence Buell wrote, 'Is US literary studies in danger of being "left behind" the new curve of religious interest?'.²⁰⁰ Like Luckhurst, La Caze and Lloyd, Buell noted that in the late twentieth century 'it had become standard critical practice to assess religious issues and allegiances as subsidiary to secular concerns, motives and modes of social belonging'.²⁰¹ Buell expressed concern that this had left academics in the humanities in the new millennium, 'seriously underprepared for a world in which it is increasingly obvious that religious convictions can subsume secular interests'.²⁰² Donald Pease argues that the 'intractably secular discourses' and 'identitarian proclivities' of late twentieth century literary criticism has had the effect (and often the specific – positivist – intention) of discrediting 'any meaningful relationship between religious belief and [...] literature' and thus 'relegated the religious imagination to the margins' of literary scholarship.²⁰³ The same impulse has relegated liberal humanist methodology in literary studies – with its universalizing approach to human experience running entirely counter to the politicization of difference at the heart of identity politics – to the same intellectual sidelines. By 2011, Mark Eaton wrote it is 'embarrassing, even redundant, to keep announcing a religious turn' because a 'paradigm shift' has definitively occurred that demonstrates both a 'strong desire and motivation to account for and analyze the complex ways in which religion remains so insistently pertinent to literature and the larger culture alike'.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., (para. 32).

¹⁹⁹ Johnsen, p.4.

²⁰⁰ Lawrence Buell, 'Religion on the American Mind', *American Literary History*, 19.1 (Spring 2007), 32-55, (p.32). First published online on December 8th, 2006.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p.32.

²⁰² Ibid., pp.32-33.

²⁰³ Pease, p.187, p.185 and p.174.

²⁰⁴ Mark Eaton, 'American Literary Supernaturalism', *American Literary History*, 23.4 (Winter 2011), 899-917, (p.901 and p.916).

The phenomenon of these particular ‘turns’ has had little to no demonstrable impact on developing a more genuinely ‘expressive’ or ‘expanded’ scholarship on grief in the academy, nor has it significantly altered academic descriptions of the grief experience; but their existence nevertheless reveals a number of things of import to this study. Principal among these is a palpable and not unironic tension in the humanities. This tension exists between the recent history of the incremental evacuation of ethics, emotions and religiosity from the late modern study of literature and the humanistic (and thus inherently ethical, emotional and traditionally religious) origins of the discipline of the humanities and the history of the art of literature itself. Alessia Ricciardi describes this gap as the ‘fading of a certain humanist conception of the arts’, the hegemonic acceptance of which has, I contend, ‘seriously underprepared’ contemporary literary critics of grief for the host of ethical, emotional and, potentially religious challenges presented by any given human experience or literary expression of bereavement and grief at any time.²⁰⁵ Secondly, although as La Caze and Lloyd say, it is ‘common to talk of “theory” having “passed”’, ‘claims that the “turn” constitutes an “epistemological shift”, are, they say, decidedly ‘hyperbolic’.²⁰⁶ Much scholarship of affect, they insist, is ‘still haunt[ed] by ‘rationalist ghosts’.²⁰⁷ Although La Caze and Lloyd refer here to the influence of the rationalizing effects of the ‘affective turn’; the influence of all of these ‘turns’ on grief study and, if journalism and memoir are to be trusted as sources, on ‘everyday’ experiences of grief is also, clearly hyperbolic. Athanasiou *et al* argue that drawing on ‘some of the most innovative and productive theoretical and epistemological trends’ of the last decades, the ‘affective turn’ has resulted in a ‘cultural moment in which a new economy of emotions is emerging’.²⁰⁸ With regards to descriptions of grief, this does not appear to be the case. Similarly, and demonstrable in scholarship on grief, the age of ‘theory’ also has definitively not passed.

Thirdly, these ‘turns’ suggest that the legacies of positivism have a complicated grip over all academic scholarship, but most pertinently for the aims of this thesis, over the study of literature in the humanities. The overreliance on the ‘logic of theories’ – across the board – and indeed on an academic culture that, according

²⁰⁵ Ricciardi, p.2.

²⁰⁶ La Caze and Lloyd, p.2.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.10.

²⁰⁸ Athanasiou *et al*, p.5.

to Michael S. Roth (after Hayden White), prizes 'professionalization' and the 'pursuit of objectivity' has resulted in a 'stifling conformity' in literary critical grief scholarship.²⁰⁹ For example, what Woodward describes as the 'veritable explosion' of work on the emotions since the dawning of the 'affective turn', shows no palpable signs of properly displacing the grief 'myths' in academic work or in the popular imaginary.²¹⁰ Nor has the ongoing emphasis on psychoanalytic theories as the dominant explanatory method applied to gaining knowledge about the experience of loss academically, had a demonstrable impact on significantly re-centering the place and epistemologies of the subjectively felt emotions at the heart of everyday experiences of bereavement and grief. Similarly, despite particular claims for Derridean, Butlerian (and latterly Levinasian) ethics, scholarship continues to preclude the contributions of other, broader ethical and/or religious structures of knowledge from the specific discourse about human experiences of grief.²¹¹ There has been, then, and there continues to be a strange rationalization of the modes of knowledge production accessed by literary scholars of bereavement and consequently of the language made available to construct meaning around grief, a rationalization that mirrors the 'rationalisation of suffering'.

For nearly three decades then, critical grief scholars in a range of disciplines have challenged the hegemony of Freudian thinking, undermined the dominant model and evaluated and critiqued the grief 'myths', and yet psychology still dominates grief study, psychoanalysis and its legacies continue to dominate literary critical work on loss, the 'myths' of grief persist in the popular imaginary and the experiences of grievers continue to lack adequate reflection in the academic discourse. Sociologist Neil Small has identified the intractability of many of these problems as a 'reflection of the dominant explanatory construct [...] of modernity', whereby a 'modernist world view' has 'shaped theories' and 'determined the form

²⁰⁹ Michael S. Roth, 'All You've Got is History', Foreword to Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th- Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2014), pp.ix-xxiv, (p.x).

²¹⁰ Woodward, *Statistical Panic*, p.235.

²¹¹ Literary critics increasingly look to Judith Butler for a recognition of the humanness (if not humanism) of grief, notably the vulnerability or 'precarity' of humans that Butler has written of post-9/11, see Butler, *Frames of War*, p.32. For critics who follow this line, see Luciano, *Arranging Grief* and Jose Gonzalez 'Ontologies of Interdependence, the Sacred, and Health Care: Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*', *Critique*, 55 (2014), 373-388. For literary criticism that turns to Emmanuel Levinas for a similar emphasis on the human approach to suffering, see R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

in which they' have moved out from their founders'.²¹² In 'Broken Hearts or Broken Bonds: Love and Death in Historical Perspective', Margaret Stroebe *et al* argued that the dominant model reflected 'the chief attributes' of what they call 'cultural modernism' including 'goal directedness, efficiency', 'rationality', and a 'faith in continuous progress'.²¹³ In *Continuing Bonds*, Silverman and Klass argued that 'the model of grief that began with Freud' relies on the continuance of the 'mechanistic view of human functioning'.²¹⁴ They argued that the lingering inheritance of the model qualifies it as 'an artifact of Western modernity' which privileges the primary methods and epistemologies of a 'positivist model of science', including 'quantitative research methods', 'reductionism', 'explanation' and 'empiricism'.²¹⁵ A critique of the scientism of these values has been central to the work of critical grief scholars in psychology and in sociology, but has not overturned the myths to have emerged from, or in some quarters been sustained by, grief scholarship in those fields.²¹⁶ As I have attempted to argue, a different species of positivism can be seen to have influenced the treatment of grief in the modern humanities, notably in literary criticism. Here, the positivist inheritance of post-Marxist secular materialism and the hypertrophic role of psychoanalysis and poststructuralist critical theory as the ongoing sources of 'valid' knowledge about grief, are rarely, if ever, critically examined at all.

Why Robinson?

A consideration of the depiction of grief in the fiction of Marilynne Robinson enables a new investigation into the suffering of grief, its significance as a human experience and its articulation in language and in literary art: an investigation that looks to different modes of understanding and a different language (both for and about grief) than that which has dominated the twentieth-century grief discourse

²¹² Small, p.29. Small and other psychologists and social scientists use the word modernist/modernism differently than the way the word is used in the humanities, particularly the fields of literary modernism and Modernist Studies. In the social sciences it is used in a similar way to how literary critics use 'modernity' as a method of demarcating the values and assumptions of different historical periods. It is akin to the definition of 'modernity' propounded by Rita Felski who uses the term to distinguish between 'traditional societies [...] structured around the omnipresence of divine authority, and a modern secularized universe predicated upon an individuated and self-conscious subjectivity', Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.13.

²¹³ Margaret Stroebe, Mary M. Gergen, Kenneth J. Gergen and Wolfgang Stroebe, 'Broken Hearts or Broken Bonds', *The American Psychological Association*, 47.10 (1992), 1205-1212, p.1206.

²¹⁴ Klass *et al*, p.14.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.14.

²¹⁶ See in particular Klass *et al* *Continuing Bonds*; Walter, 'New Model' and Walter, *On Bereavement*.

either in the psy- and social scientific disciplines, or in mainstream literary and cultural criticism. It also affords an opportunity to reconsider the novel form and associated aesthetic practices as sources of knowledge within this discourse, something that is relatively infrequent. Book-length analyses of the fictional representations of bereavement are relatively uncommon, especially as depicted in the work of one author, but the centrality of death and grief to the storyworlds of Robinson's oeuvre provides the opportunity for a full-length investigation of grief in the novels of one artist. Robinson's role as a non-fiction writer and public speaker whose approach to aesthetics is central to her thought, and often differs considerably from her contemporaries, also facilitates a broader philosophical interpretation of her fiction and the contribution it can be said to make to knowledge about grief.

In parallel with the scholarship on grief, though seldom overlapping, a significant (though still small) body of academic work is growing up in response to Marilynne Robinson's writing. An academic and a recently retired creative writing teacher with a doctoral degree on Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, Robinson is foremost a novelist, although, for a long time, she was known only for her prize-winning first novel, the atmospheric and lyrical *Housekeeping* (1980). In *Housekeeping*, Robinson drew on the influences of her 1950s childhood and the intellectual traditions of the nineteenth-century American Romantics to re-imagine the landscape of rural Idaho and the childhood of her orphaned narrator Ruth Stone. Robinson went on to write a regular review column in *The New York Times* during the 1980s, and later published two lesser-known and idiosyncratic non-fiction works: *Mother Country: Britain, The Welfare State and Nuclear Pollution* (1989), and *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (1998). According to Thomas Gardner, between the publication of *Housekeeping* and *The Death of Adam*, Robinson read 'her way back into the life and culture' that had inspired the writers who influenced *Housekeeping*.²¹⁷ She located these writers within the broader context of their own intellectual and religious heritage, part of an ambitious

²¹⁷ Thomas Gardner, 'Marilynne Robinson, Narrative Calvinist', *Christianity Today*, 25 February 2010 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/february/29.32.html> [accessed 16 November 2016], (para. 4). For discussion of the religious trajectory of Robinson's reading habits see John Hesselink, 'Marilynne Robinson: Calvinian', *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, 1 March 2011, <<http://perspectivesjournal.org/blog/2011/03/01/marilynne-robinson-calvinian/>>. For Robinson's own discussion of the 'forgotten writers mentioned by those writers whose work is still invoked by educated people', see 'A Great Amnesia', *Harper's Magazine* (May 2008), 17-21, (p.17).

historical undertaking she has since described as an attempt to 'piece together' the 'prehistory of the postmodern'.²¹⁸

In *Death of Adam*, Robinson outlined aspects of this heritage as a major influence on her thought. Most striking amongst these were Robinson's declaration of her liberal Protestant Congregationalism, her dismissal of the major thinkers of the twentieth century, her criticisms of contemporary intellectual culture as 'empty and false', and, most famously, and controversially, her reclamation of the theology of Protestant Reformer John Calvin as a product of Renaissance humanism and a producer of humanist thought.²¹⁹ With *Death of Adam*, Robinson strove to position herself as 'contrarian' in both 'method and spirit' to the modes of intellectual discourse of the contemporary era; she established herself as a strident critic of the oversimplification of human experience on, what she called, a 'campaign of revisionism'.²²⁰

Twenty-four years after *Housekeeping*, Robinson surprised readers with the publication of *Gilead* (2004). Another first-person novel, *Gilead* evokes the landscape and history of post-Abolitionist, pre-Civil Rights Iowa through the eyes of a dying Congregationalist preacher, Reverend John Ames, who is writing to his son in 1956. *Gilead* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2005 and in relatively rapid succession, Robinson has gone on to publish its 'partner' works *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014), both of which take place in the same early to mid-century setting, in the same fictional Iowa town exploring the lives of many of the same characters.²²¹ Like *Housekeeping*, these novels have been critically well received, are very widely translated and have quickly become best-selling.²²² Also like

²¹⁸ Robinson, 'A Great Amnesia', p.17. This essay was adapted from a lecture that Robinson gave at Amherst College in 2007 and which is published, in a different form, as 'Waiting to be Remembered', *The Amherst Magazine* (Summer 2007) <https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/magazine/issues/2007_summer/remembered>.

²¹⁹ Robinson, *Death of Adam*, p.2.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1 and p.2.

²²¹ I discuss the range of terms used to describe Robinson's latter three interconnected novels in Chapter Four. I take 'partner' novel from the publicity material for the first international *Marilynne Robinson Symposium* held at Nottingham Trent University on 10 June 2016.

²²² Robinson has won many literary prizes for her work. These include the Hemingway/PEN Foundation award for First fiction for *Housekeeping* in 1981; the 1999 PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvoel Award for the Art of the Essay for her first essay collection *The Death of Adam*; the 2004 National Book Critics Circle Award and the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, both for *Gilead*; the 2008 Orange Prize for *Home* and the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award for *Lila*. Gregory Cowles reports that *Lila* 'entered the hard cover fiction list at No.4' and is her 'fourth book to become a best seller', 'Inside the List', *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, 17 October 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/books/review/inside-the-list.html?_r=0 > [accessed 2 June

Housekeeping, they draw on pre-twentieth-century literary and philosophical precedent.

Robinson's distinction as a writer is frequently and increasingly noted. Sarah Churchwell describes her as 'one of America's most significant writers'; and Lan Samantha Chang recently said, 'You could make the argument that she is the most distinguished writer in the United States right now'.²²³ However, despite wide critical acclaim, the number of academic articles on Robinson's work is still surprisingly small.²²⁴ There are as yet no published monographs on her fiction, and at time of writing, there are only two books of essays on her work, both published by modest academic presses.²²⁵

Always a teacher, essayist and vocal social commentator, since *Gilead* Robinson has acquired a diverse and growing audience, lecturing in bookshops, churches, universities and theological seminaries world-wide. Her lectures and writing cross disciplinary boundaries and explore ideas which interject in theological, historical and philosophical discussions as much, if not more, than debates in literary studies. As Steven J. Van Der Weele puts it, Robinson 'is making it more acceptable for even secular journals to publish discourse about religious and philosophical issues'.²²⁶ Thus, while increasingly considered one of the most

2016], (para.1.). Her other best sellers are *Gilead*, *Home* and *Absence of Mind*. Wyatt Mason reports that Robinson's work has been translated into '30 languages' in his article, 'Saying Grace: The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson', *New York Times*, 1 October 2014, 24-29, (p.26). Jason W. Stevens lists Persian and Arabic amongst these languages in *This World, This Life: New Essays on Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping, Gilead and Home* ed. by Jason W. Stevens (Leiden/Boston: Brill / Rodopi, 2016), p.3.

²²³ Sarah Churchwell, 'Marilynne Robinson's *Lila* – A Great Achievement in US fiction', [review of *Lila*], *Guardian*, 7 November 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/07/marilynne-robinson-lila-great-achievement-contemporary-us-fiction-gilead>> [accessed 1 March 2016], (para. 1) and Lan Samantha Chang in Jeff Charis-Carlson and Zach Berg, 'Marilynne Robinson Retiring From Iowa Writers' Workshop', *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, April 27 2016, <<http://www.press-citizen.com/story/news/education/university-of-iowa/2016/04/27/marilynne-robinson-retiring-iowa-writers-workshop/83591374/>> [accessed 2 June 2016], (para. 2).

²²⁴ This observation has been increasingly made recently, but is rarely analysed. An MLA search on Robinson conducted on 19 August 2016 found 160 returns as compared to a search for her contemporary Toni Morrison on the same date which returned 2643.

²²⁵ Both essay collections have come out in 2016. The first is Stevens, ed., *This Life, This World*. Although published in 2016, this collection does not include essays on *Lila* though it does refer to the novel's publication. The second collection is *The Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson* ed. by Shannon L. Mariotti and Joseph H. Lane Jr. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016).

²²⁶ Steven J. Van Der Weele, 'A Calvinian Curmudgeon', [review of *When I Was a Child*], *Perspective: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, 1 November 2012 <<http://perspectivesjournal.org/blog/2012/11/01/a-calvinian-curmudgeon/>> [accessed 22 October 2015], (para.1). Van Der Weele refers here to *The New York Times*, *Harper's* and *The American Scholar* in particular.

influential fiction writers of this era with an audience she insists is 'largely secular', Van Der Weele argues she is also a 'heavy-hitter' on the religious scene.²²⁷ Typically, Robinson publishes her lectures as essays and thus, in addition to her novels, journalism and contributions to theological texts, she now has a substantial collection of non-fiction to her name.²²⁸ Three essay collections have been published in the last six years alone: *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (2010 – initially delivered as the prestigious Yale Terry Lectures in 2009), *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (2012) and *The Givenness of Things* (2015). A fifth novel and a new collection of essays are, reputedly, in the pipeline.

While academic responses to Robinson's fiction and non-fiction are substantive (though still slow in coming), they are being outpaced by reactions to her art and thought in the popular press and online. She has made countless public appearances to discuss her work and her thoughts on literature, politics, history, theology, religion and contemporary culture. Perhaps the most famous of these is a recent interview with Barack Obama initiated and conducted by the President himself in 2015.²²⁹ She was also recently awarded the Richard C. Holbrooke distinguished achievement award for 'peace, social justice and global understanding'.²³⁰ Recordings of many of these events are available on YouTube and Robinson's retirement from the Iowa Writer's Workshop was hastened, it is

²²⁷ Ibid., (para.1). In a letter to John Hesselink Robinson has said, 'I suspect I may be a Christian apologist for the secular world rather than to it'; see, 'Hesselink and Robinson: An Exchange of Letters,' in *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, 16 March 2001, cited in Hesselink 'Marilynne Robinson: Calvinian', (para. 32).

²²⁸ For Robinson's theological writings see in particular her 'The First and Second Epistles General of Peter' in *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament* (New York: Penguin, 1990) ed. by Alfred Corn, pp.305-316 and her 'Preface' to *John Calvin: Steward of God's Covenant* ed. by J.F. Thornton and S.B. Varenne (London: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 2006). See also 'Metaphysics' in *The Givenness of Things* (London: Virago, 2015), pp.188-208.

²²⁹ Robinson is the first novelist ever to have been interviewed by a sitting President of the United States. For transcripts and recording of the interview, see 'President Obama and Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation in Iowa', *New York Times Review of Books*, November 5, 2015 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/05/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation/>> and 'President Obama and Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation II', *New York Times Review of Books*, November 19, 2015 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/19/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation-2/>>

²³⁰ The Ambassador Richard C. Holbrooke Distinguished Achievement Award is a category of the Dayton Literary Peace Prize Foundation international award named in honor of the US peace negotiator of the 1995 Dayton Accord that marked the end of the war in Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia. See <<http://www.daytonliterarypeaceprize.org>> and <<http://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/dlpp/>>.

said, due to ‘the surge in demand for her words and participation at events around the globe’.²³¹

Although the critical reception to Robinson’s fiction work can be divided into two eras (that between 1980 and 2004 which treated *Housekeeping* as her single novel, and that after the publication of *Gilead*), the slow burn and ‘late apotheosis’ of her career, and the variety of her cultural output, means that her fiction is now often read collectively to form part of what Jennifer L. Holberg argues is a larger ‘project’, one she describes as an ‘artistic mission’.²³² Jason W. Stevens underlines the ‘democratic’ impulse of Robinson’s mission, and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams argues that her latter three novels in particular can be read as a ‘political and ethical project’ of serious ‘moral acuity’ and ‘weight’.²³³ In this, and many other regards, Robinson’s position is unusual for a novelist. She is the quintessence of a public intellectual, but with unlikely and global reach across both secular and religious domains. Not just a major writer of contemporary and popular literature, she is a maker of knowledge and culture, and an influential and international social and cultural critic. It is this phenomenon, as well as the evocations of bereavement in her fiction, which make her work particularly suitable for analysis in relation to knowledge production about grief.

Robinson, critical context, the novels and grief

Scholarship on Robinson’s novels continues to be dominated by work on *Housekeeping*. Responses are wide-ranging, but have tended to focus on clusters of themes and influences. These include: transience, home and domesticity; explorations of family and female subjectivity; Robinson’s reworking of the classic American trope of the frontier; *Housekeeping* as landscape writing and as a feminized novel of the American West; the novel’s ecological and its eco-feminist themes; and her elaborate revivification of American Romanticism influenced by her interest in nineteenth-century canonical writers. Much early criticism of

²³¹ Vanessa Miller, ‘University of Iowa famed author Marilynne Robinson retiring – but not really’, *The Gazette*, May 8 2016 <<http://www.thegazette.com/subject/news/education/higher-education/university-of-iowa-famed-author-marilynne-robinson-retiring-x2014-but-not-really-20160508>> [accessed June 16 2016], (para. 9).

²³² Sarah Churchwell, ‘A Man of Sorrows’, [review of *Home*], *Guardian*, 4 October 2008, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/04/fiction>> [accessed 29 November 2015], (para.1) and Jennifer L. Holberg, “‘The Courage to See It’: Toward an Understanding of Glory, *Christianity and Literature*, 59.2 (Winter 2010), 283-300, (p.283).

²³³ Rowan Williams, ‘Living the Good Life’, [review of *Lila*], *New Statesman*, 10-16 October, 2014, pp.68-70, (p.68)

Housekeeping took strongly politicized critical approaches and much of this work was explicitly feminist and implicitly Marxist.²³⁴ Female narration of a book populated almost exclusively by female characters inspired a readership fascinated and justifiably excited by the potentially liberating articulations of subjecthood made available in particular by Robinson's characterization of Ruth Stone and her aunt Sylvie Fisher whose departure from the family home to a life of transience at the end of the novel is often viewed as a 'lighting out for the territory' akin to that made by the usually male heroes of classic American fiction. Hailed as an 'instant classic', the novel was co-opted as a feminist masterpiece and a 'powerful celebration of women's collective history and memory'.²³⁵ Accordingly, narrator Ruth Stone, was celebrated by some as, a symbol of 'feminist freedom', and a latter-day female Huck Finn.²³⁶ As Thomas Schaub describes it, in the eighties and early nineties, feminist and Marxist critics were 'quick to appropriate the story for the work of social reform'.²³⁷ Gonzalez has since described this body of criticism as 'standard counterhegemonic readings' which assumed that Ruth and Sylvie's flight into transience and turning away from the 'normativity of domesticity' was an affirmation of poststructuralist and feminist views of patriarchal societies.²³⁸ Alongside this trend, and often overlapping, *Housekeeping* also garnered many psychoanalytic critical responses, most of which focus on the modes of (female) subjecthood made available by feminist psychoanalysis.²³⁹

²³⁴ For political readings, see Marcia Aldrich, 'The Poetics of Transience: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *Essays in Literature*, 16 (1989), 127-40, Sian Mile, 'Femme Foetal: The Construction/Destruction of Female Subjectivity in *Housekeeping*, Or Nothing Gained', *Genders* 8 (July 1990), 129-136; Paula Geyh, 'Burning Down the House? Domestic Space and Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *Contemporary Literature* 34.1 (Spring 1993), 103-122; Anne-Marie Mallon, 'Sojourning Women: Homelessness and Transcendence in *Housekeeping*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 30.2 (1989), 95-105, and Martha Ravits, 'Extending the American Range: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *American Literature*, 61.4 (December 1989), 644-666.

²³⁵ Churchwell, 'Marilynne Robinson's Lila', (para. 1) and Dana Heller, *The Feminization of Quest Romance: Radical Departures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p.97 cited in Christine Caver, 'Nothing Left to Lose: *Housekeeping*'s Strange Freedoms', *Contemporary Literature*, 68:1 (March 1996) 111-137, (p.112).

²³⁶ Caver, p.111, and Mark Ford, 'He Tasks me', [review of *Home*], *London Review of Books*, 30.19 (9 October 2008), 19-20, (p.19).

²³⁷ Thomas Schaub, 'Lingering Hopes, Faltering Dreams: Marilynne Robinson and the Politics of Contemporary American Fiction' in *Traditions, Voices, Dreams: The American Novel since the 1960s* ed. by M.J. Friedman and B. Siegel (Newark: Delaware University Press, 1995) pp.298-321 and pp.308-9.

²³⁸ Gonzalez, p.375.

²³⁹ Examples include Phyllis Lassner, 'Escaping the Mirror of Sameness: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*' in *Mother Puzzles: Daughters and Mothers in Contemporary American Literature* ed. by M. Pearlman (New York: Greenwood, 1989) and Jean Wyatt's chapter, 'Housekeeping: The Impossible Poetry of the Preoedipal' in *Reconstructing Desire: The Role of the Unconscious in Women's Reading and Writing* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), pp.83-99.

Assertive political and or psychoanalytic readings of the novel have dwindled, (though have not disappeared), in part, perhaps, because of growing awareness that Robinson's writing frustrates as much as it supports such interpretations.²⁴⁰

In the emerging body of criticism on her more recent novels, emphasis is often placed specifically on Robinson's religious themes. Critics have responded especially to the characterization of the Congregationalist Reverend John Ames and narration in *Gilead* and in particular to Robinson's reclamation of Calvinism and reinvigoration of the novel as a form of theology.²⁴¹ There is also now a growing body of work that interrogates her examination of American abolitionist history in *Gilead* and *Home* and the position that the novels hold as cultural criticism of America's historical and ongoing racism.²⁴² Relatively speaking, *Home* has garnered very little criticism of its own, though is often read alongside *Gilead*, and there is, as yet, only one piece of published literary criticism on *Lila*.²⁴³

²⁴⁰ For readers who named their frustrations with *Housekeeping*, see especially Mile, 'Femme Foetal' and Kaivola, 'The Pleasures and Perils of Merging'. For an article which outlines why Robinson's novel might frustrate political and other categories, see William Burke, 'Border Crossings in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 37.4 (Winter 1991), 716-724. For more recent psychoanalytic readings see Meyerowitz and a paper delivered by Andrew Cuning at the recent Marilynne Robinson Symposium entitled "'We remain unknown to ourselves': The Theologising of Freud in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*' paper delivered at Marilynne Robinson Symposium, Nottingham Trent University, 10 June 2016. For recent engagement with a more wide-ranging sense of how politics operates in Robinson's work see the essays collected in *This Life, This World* ed. by Stevens and *The Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson* ed. by Mariotti and Lane.

²⁴¹ For interpretations of religion in *Gilead*, see in particular the special issue of *Christianity and Literature* 59.2 (2010) dedicated to Robinson. See also Elizabeth A. Ellis, 'Race, Religion and Sentimentalism in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*' in *The Sentimental Mode: Essays in Literature, Film and Television*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014) ed. by, J. A Williamson, J. Larson and A. Reed, pp.175-189; Andrew Brower Latz, 'Creation in the Fiction of Marilynne Robinson', *Literature & Theology*, 25.3 (2010), 283-296 and Christopher Leise, "'That Little Incandescence'": Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*', *Studies in the Novel*, 41.3 (2009), 348-367.

²⁴² For detailed analyses of Robinson's exploration of abolitionism and American racism see in particular the journalism and interviews of Sarah Churchwell, especially, 'A Man of Sorrows', 'Balm in Gilead', interview on *Encounter*, ABC Radio <<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/encounter/the-balm-in-gilead/3103770>> [accessed 24 June 2014] and 'Lila: A Great Achievement'. For other criticism that engages with Robinson's critique of the history of civil rights in the United States see Phillips, 'Fiction in Review', *The Yale Review*, 97.2 (April 2009), 158-175 on *Home* and Lisa Marie Bailey, 'Fraught with Fire: Race and Theology in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*', *Christianity and Literature*, 59.2 (Winter 2010), 265-280. For a critique of Robinson's anti-racism as selective in its interpretation of Christian abolitionist history, see Christopher Douglas 'Christian Multiculturalism and Unlearned History in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*', *Novel* 44.3 (2011): 333-353 and Yumi Park, "'Jack Boughton has a wife and child": Generative Blackness in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*', in Stevens ed., *This Life, This World*, pp.212-236.

²⁴³ For the only academic article on *Lila*, see Mel Piehl, 'Predestination and Love in Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*', *The Cresset*, LXXVIII. 3 (Lent 2015), 27-31 <http://thecresset.org/2015/Lent/Piehl_L15.html>. Critics most often treat *Home* in tandem with *Gilead*. For criticism that approaches it as a stand-alone novel, see Holberg, 'The Courage to See it', Siobhan Phillips' extended review in 'Fiction in Review' and Laura E. Tanner, 'Uncomfortable

In comparison with these other spheres of interest, literary critical examinations of Robinson's depictions of loss and especially grief are relatively few. Despite Schaub's assertion that *Housekeeping* is a novel about 'a young girl's grief' and Laura Callanan's recent assertion that it is about 'a grieving family', analyses of Robinson's depictions of grief in *Housekeeping* are rare.²⁴⁴ Most critics of Robinson's *Housekeeping* touch on the topic of loss in some way (it is hard not to), but surprisingly, only a very small number have more fully engaged with the centrality of family deaths and the direct impact of bereavement in this and Robinson's other novels.²⁴⁵ Of these, only Rael Meyerowitz, Laura E. Tanner, Paul Tyndall and Fred Ribkoff, and Sarah Petit specifically examine grief and or mourning in Robinson's novels.²⁴⁶ All of these are what might be described as secular materialist readings, in which the authors sidestep the strong influence of religious and humanistic literary traditions on Robinson's writing and focus instead on psychoanalytic/psychological ideas of interiority or, in Tanner's case, phenomenological ideas of embodiment. Tanner, who has explored grief in both *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, conducts readings inspired by the philosophy of

Furniture: Inhabiting Domestic and Narrative Space in Marilynne Robinson's *Home*', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 7.1 (March 2013), 35-53.

²⁴⁴ Schaub, 'Lingering Hopes', p.309 and Laura Callanan, 'Traumatic Endings: Politics, Feminism, and Narrative Resolution in Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *Women's Studies: An inter-disciplinary journal*, 45 (2016), 251-262, (p.252).

²⁴⁵ For a psychoanalytic trauma reading of *Housekeeping* as a novel about abandonment in the social realist tradition see Caver, 'Nothing left to lose'; for examination of the novel as a 'suicide' text alongside the religious writings of Simone Weil, see Katy Ryan, 'Horizons of Grace: Marilynne Robinson and Simone Weil', *Philosophy and Literature*, 29 (2005), 349-364. For broader engagement with loss in *Housekeeping* see Martha Ravits, 'Extending the American Range: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *American Literature*, 61.4 (December 1989), 644-666 and Sinead McDermott, 'Future-Perfect: Gender, Nostalgia, and The Not Yet Presented in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 13:3 (2004), 259-270. Only Tanner specifically examines bereavement in *Gilead*, but for readings of death and suffering in *Gilead*, see Katherine Doig, 'The Text as Cadaver' in *Death in Literature* ed. by O. Hakola, and S. Kivistö, (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), pp.47-62; Sharon Jebb Smith, 'Serious Literature: 'Sullen We Lie Here Now' in *Visions and Revisions: The Word and the Text* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), ed. by R. Kojecký and A. Tate, pp.15-28 and Haein Park, 'The Face of the Other: Suffering, Kenosis, and a Hermeneutics of Love in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison and Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*', *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, 66. 2 (Spring 2014), pp.103-118.

²⁴⁶ For readings of grief and or mourning in *Housekeeping*, see Rael Meyerowitz, "'Ruthlessness Gives Way To Ruth": Mothering and Mourning in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *Psychoanalytic Review*, 87.2 (April 2000), 189-226; Laura E. Tanner, 'Images of Grief in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp.92-106; Paul Tyndall and Fred Ribkoff, 'Loss, Longing and the Optative Mode in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*: On the Spiritual Value of Ruth's Wandering Narrative', *Renascence*, 66.2 (Spring 2014), 87-102. For readings of grief in *Gilead*, see Laura E. Tanner, "'Looking back from the grave": Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*', *Contemporary Literature*, XLVIII.2 (2007), 228-252. For the only reading of grief in *Home*, see Susan Petit, 'Mourning Glory: Grief and Grieving in Robinson's *Home*', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 51.1 (2016), 88-106.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty that focus on the body, sensory experience, and in her latter article, the findings of cognitive science and neurobiology for her readings of bereavement. Of the other critics listed, Meyerowitz conducts a psychoanalytic reading informed by the work of D.W. Winnicott and, in the case of Tyndall and Ribkoff and Petit, their readings of grief are conducted uncritically within the usual terms of dominant psychological models (though with no reference to research in the psy-disciplines).

Robinson and grief

Although her novels are not typically read as grief narratives, and only a minority of scholarship has focused on this aspect of her work, the private terrain of death and grief can be said to dominate the storyworlds of all of Robinson's fiction. Each novel repeatedly attends to individual, family and community experiences of bereavement and concomitant loss. In this way, it can be argued that grief is, in fact, structurally constitutive of diegesis and character/narrator formation in Robinson's fiction. It is also thematized and guides her narratologies. Robinson's first two novels are autodiegetic narratives, depicting grief from the vantage point of the bereaved and thus, in the words of Jeffrey Gonzalez, they position the 'suffering figure' as narrator.²⁴⁷ *Housekeeping* explores the life of narrator Ruth Stone and her sister Lucille after the drowning of their grandfather, the suicide of their mother and the death of their grandmother. The novel takes place in the year of the grandmother's death, the year that the girls' itinerant aunt Sylvie takes over their care, which ends with Ruth joining Sylvie in a life of transience and Lucille leaving home for a more settled domestic life. *Gilead* takes the form of a long diary-like letter written from the dying Reverend John Ames to his young son, Robert, the child of Ames' late and unexpected marriage to a younger woman called Lila. Grieving the loss of his new family in advance of his impending death, Ames also grieves the loss of the first wife and child – Louisa and Rebecca – who died forty years previously. *Home* and *Lila* are third person narratives focalized by central female characters. In *Home*, Glory and her dying father (Ames' best friend) Presbyterian Reverend Robert Boughton still grieve the death of the child that Prodigal Son Jack fathered illegitimately and abandoned when he was a teen, and the twenty-year absence of Jack that the birth of the baby caused. Jack too is a 'suffering figure' whose anguish is central to his family and to the narratives of both

²⁴⁷ Gonzalez, p.375.

Home and *Gilead*. Jack's suffering is life-long, but is presented in the diegetic present of the novels as a form of inexhaustible grief at his forced separation from his African American common-law wife Della and their child Robert. *Lila* shifts backward in narrative time from its partner novels, and depicts the early life of Lila Ames (née Dahl), Reverend Ames' young second wife, up to and including her marriage to Ames and the birth of their son Robert (to whom *Gilead* is addressed). The novel is focalized by Lila who, abandoned early by her birth parents, is rescued by, and later violently bereaved of, her adoptive itinerant mother Doll before she meets and marries Ames.

It is possible to read all of Robinson's novels as directly and collectively concerned with the narratological challenge of representing human experiences of grief and the scarcity of readings of grief in Robinson's novels seems an oversight given the centrality of bereavement to diegesis in her fiction. Her novels offer an opportunity to consider the 'poetics of loss' in considerable detail, but her intellectual and aesthetic influences resist the logic or the ready application of prevailing contemporary 'theories of loss'. Instead, they invite alternative approaches both to her fiction and, from the philosophies put forward by her fiction, to the ways in which grief might be more broadly understood beyond the pages of the novels.

The timely untimeliness of Marilynne Robinson: her methodology

In 1986 Elizabeth Meese wrote that 'it is Marilynne Robinson's fate to tell a different story from most contemporary writers'.²⁴⁸ Thirty years later, this still appears to be the case. Critics almost always refer in some way to the difference between Robinson and her contemporaries. In early criticism of *Housekeeping* this often focused on her interest in the literary modes of nineteenth-century writers, her exclusion of male characters and her resistance to putting political limits on art. More recently, interpretations of what makes Robinson different tend to zoom in on her religious influences and in particular her humanist reclamation of Calvinism. Critics usually emphasise all of these qualities as forms of anachrony most evident in her style. Robinson's writing has repeatedly been described as 'unfashionable'

²⁴⁸ Elizabeth A. Meese, 'A World of Women: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*' in *Crossing the Double Cross: The Practise of Feminist Criticism* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p.57.

or 'old-fashioned'.²⁴⁹ James Wood labels Robinson's religious sensibility 'archaic' and her turn of phrase 'antiquarian'; writer Ali Smith notes that Robinson's novels feel like they are 'written in a gone time' and Bob Thompson labels hers as a form of 'distinctly pre-modern writing'.²⁵⁰ Similarly, readers of her non-fiction work describe hers as a 'counter-cultural voice' that is 'unfashionably fierce' and 'almost anachronistically stern'.²⁵¹ As *The Nation* puts it, hers are 'contemporary novels that are not set in a contemporary climate'.²⁵² To some extent, this is due to the mid-century settings of Robinson's novels and her considerations, particularly in her latter three novels, of American history; but the qualities of Robinson's anachronism – of influence, aesthetics and ethics – can arguably be credited to the complexity and reach of her nuanced and unusual Christian humanist imagination as it intersects with her idiosyncratic approach to a revisionist form of intellectualism.

Holberg describes Robinson's artistic mission as 'deeply embedded' in a 'rich Christian theology'.²⁵³ This is demonstrably true. In *Death of Adam*, Robinson articulates her mainline, liberal Protestantism as the act of 'living out' a 'religious/ethical/aesthetic/intellectual tradition' that she finds 'essentially compelling'.²⁵⁴ Her poetics are charged by her unremitting commitment to the ethical obligations and radical humanism of the reformed Protestant tradition as

²⁴⁹ See Anthony Domestico, 'Blessings in Disguise: The Unfashionable Genius of Marilynne Robinson', *Commonweal*, 141.18, 3 November 2014, <<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blessings-disguise> > and Mark Lawson, *Front Row – The American Authors Collection* [interview with Marilynne Robinson], Tue 5 April 2005, aired 19:15 BBC Radio 4 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0065n5m#synopsis>> [accessed 22 July 2010].

²⁵⁰ James Wood, 'Gilead: Acts of Devotion', [review of *Gilead*], *New York Times Book Review*, 28 November 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/28/books/review/28COVERWOOD.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1411988587-h3O6xXz7Q1o1vMwAhzy2Ug&pagewanted=print&position=>, [accessed 31 March 2016], (para.4) and 'The Homecoming: The Prodigal Son Returns in Marilynne Robinson's Third Novel', [review of *Home*], *New Yorker* <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/09/08/the-homecoming>> [accessed 31 March 2016], (para. 6); Ali Smith, 'The Damaged Heart of America', [review of *Gilead*], *Guardian*, Saturday 16 April 2005, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/apr/16/fiction.alismith>>, [accessed 31 March 2016], (para.6); Bob Thompson, 'At Home With the Past: In Life and in her Novels, Marilynne Robinson Looks Back to Find Meaning', [review of *Home*], *The Washington Post* <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/19/AR2008101902106_pf.html> [accessed 31 March 2016], (para. 36).

²⁵¹ Van Der Weele, 'A Calvinian Curmudgeon', (para. 9) Wood, 'The Homecoming', (para. 5) and Meghan O'Rourke, 'A Moralism of the Midwest', *The New York Times Magazine*, October 24 2004 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/24/magazine/24ROBINSON.html?_r=0>, [accessed 31 March 2016], (para. 6).

²⁵² 'A Conversation with Marilynne Robinson', *The Nation*, 7 January 2015, <<https://www.thenation.com/article/conversation-marilynne-robinson/>>, [accessed 16 November 2015], (para. 4).

²⁵³ Holberg, p.283.

²⁵⁴ Marilynne Robinson, 'The Tyranny of Petty Coercion', *Death of Adam*, pp.255-263, (p.262).

she re-reads it, aspects of American and Western culture that she argues have been forgotten both by academics and by Western culture at large, but which she deems might legitimately and substantively contribute to the expansion of the knowledge were they to be “remembered”. But Robinson’s vision expands beyond the religious.

In *Absence of Mind*, Robinson makes the strongest of her many arguments against the intellectual legacy of positivism.²⁵⁵ She writes that one outcome of its primacy is that ‘positivism’ is assumed to be ‘correct in excluding from the model of reality whatever science is (or was) not competent to verify or falsify’.²⁵⁶ It was, she continues, ‘intended to banish the language of metaphysics as meaningless, and it supplied in its place a systematically reductionist conceptual vocabulary’, but, she argues, ‘the classical and humanist traditions’ that have also been so ‘deeply influential in Western thought are just as effectively excluded by these variously determinist and reductionist models of human nature and motivation’.²⁵⁷ These impulses, she argues, have yielded a ‘conception of humanity that is itself very limited,’ resulting not only in a ‘truncated model of human being’, but also in ‘a modern conversation’ that is itself ‘truncated’.²⁵⁸ Robinson has said that her revisionist and recuperative approach to history is not conducted to ‘suggest that the past was better than the present’, but to insist that ‘whatever in the past happens to have been of significance or value ought to be held in memory, insofar as that is possible’.²⁵⁹ She suggests that the ‘complexities’ of the past should be ‘scrupulously preserved’ in order that they ‘can give us guidance’.²⁶⁰ For her, the complexities – most particularly the complexity of human experience – is manifest in the ‘historical data’ that is human culture; that is art, literature, music and religious and historical document as well as, and as much as, science. In *Absence of Mind* she describes this ‘data’ as ‘the record we have made of our tenure on this planet’, up to and including, but by no means most evident or, for her, most noteworthy in, the last century or in the history of science as distinct from the rest of culture. Her project then, in part at least, is determined to excavate the aspects

²⁵⁵ For discussion of positivism in Robinson’s work see also ‘Humanism’, ‘Givenness’, ‘Proofs’ and ‘Limitation’ in *Givenness of Things*, pp.3-16, pp.73-91, pp.141-156 and pp.258-272.

²⁵⁶ Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010), pp.xii-xiii.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.xiii.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.x, p.xiv and p.xv.

²⁵⁹ Robinson, *Death of Adam*, p.4, p.2 and p.5.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.4, p.2 and p.5.

of human data which resist any and all attempts to truncate human thought and human experience.

With specific relevance to the human experience of grief, Robinson's religious ethic and her writing revolve around, and indeed submit to, a species of humanism that is influenced by, but not easily reducible to her Christianity. As literary critic Emily Holman puts it, 'although [...] intensely theistic', Robinson's 'conception of the human' is one which 'can be assented to without religious belief'.²⁶¹

According to Robinson, it is inflected as much by classical and pre-Christian traditions as by the broad Renaissance humanist tradition into which she inserts her interpretation of Calvin's Reformed Protestantism and the Romanticism of her favoured nineteenth-century intellectual forebears.²⁶² Famously 'protean' as a term, the humanist aspect of Robinson's thought has been described by Schaub as 'old humanism' and, more recently by Anna Hadfield and Roger Berkowitz in their essay 'The Romance of the Self' in the *Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson*, as a type of 'existential humanism' based on a 'distinctly aesthetic dimension' which insists that 'religion and ethics' are part of the human world' as language, art, and science are.²⁶³ According to Hadfield and Berkowitz, this type of humanism 'acknowledges the intrinsic worth and infinite complexity of human beings' and privileges the 'mind' over the 'brain' and the 'self' as opposed to the 'subject'.²⁶⁴ In *The Givenness of Things* Robinson qualifies this herself by describing all human cultural output as the 'works of the human mind', arguing that the 'old humanists', took these works as 'proof' of the 'human mind', its 'brilliance' and its 'exceptionalism'.²⁶⁵ Robinson's ethical approach to the human, and the revived 'liberalism' which supports it, while – like her religiosity – unfashionable amongst her peers, are central tenets of her 'project'.²⁶⁶

²⁶¹ Emily Holman, 'Marilynne Robinson and the Project of Writing', presentation delivered at the symposium 'Marilynne Robinson Outside the Box', Rothermere American Institute, Oxford, 10 May 2016.

²⁶² For Robinson's defence of classical and humanist traditions that are not specifically Christian see her 'Introduction' to *Absence of Mind* and her essay 'Humanism' in *Givenness of Things*.

²⁶³ I borrow the word 'protean' here from Alan Bullock, *The Humanist Tradition in the West* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985), p.8; Schaub, 'an interview', *Contemporary Literature*, XXXV.2 (1994), 231-51, (p.243) and Anna Hadfield and Roger Berkowitz, 'The Romance of the Self: Marilynne Robinson's Existential Humanism' in Mariotti and Lane, *Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson*, pp.253-272, (p.256).

²⁶⁴ Hadfield and Berkowitz, p.268.

²⁶⁵ Robinson, 'Humanism' in *Givenness of Things*, p.10.

²⁶⁶ For reference to how 'progressive liberalism' is 'distasteful to many leftists' in the 'intellectual sphere', see Gonzalez, 'Ontologies of Interdependence', p.373. Robinson's liberal stance positions her to the left of the evangelical religious right in the United States and to the right of leftist

In his book, *Marxism and Literature*, cultural historian Raymond Williams explored manifestations of cultural change in terms of what he called the 'dominant', the 'residual' and the 'emergent'.²⁶⁷ He intended these terms to capture the 'internal dynamic relations' of the 'historically varied and variable elements' that occur always within culture and which it is necessary to bear in mind with any "epochal analysis".²⁶⁸ For Williams, the 'dominant' is that which has 'effectively seized' the 'ruling definition of the social' and by 'emergent', he refers to 'new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship [that] are continually being created'.²⁶⁹ The genuinely 'archaic', he argues, is that in culture which is 'wholly recognised as an element of the past', but the 'residual' is that which 'has been effectively formed in the past, but [...] is still active in the cultural process' and thus is 'as an effective element of the present'.²⁷⁰ Thus, he explains:

certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation.

Neil Small has described this in another way, arguing that a central irony of modern grief scholarship is that the experience of grief in fact 'open[s] up fissures in the modern'.²⁷¹ He writes:

The modern exists as a layer on top of other ways of making sense of experience; for example, fate, faith and so on. Once fissures appear in the veneer of the modern we are allowed glimpses of the underlying residual belief systems, many of which are pre-modern.²⁷²

Williams' idea of the residual is, I contend, equivalent to Neil Small's 'layer' beneath the modern, the aspects of the once dominant that have left distinct

academics across the west. For a critique of her liberal position see 'Interview with I. John Hesselink', *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* <<http://perspectivesjournal.org/blog/2007/10/16/interview-with-i-john-hesselink/>>. For Robinson's own discussions of liberalism, including her reclamation of the term, see in particular, the essays 'Puritans and Prigs' and 'The Tyranny of Petty Coercion' in *Death of Adam*, pp.150-173 and pp.255-263; and 'Open Wide Thy Hand: Moses and the Origins of American Liberalism' in *When I Was a Child*, pp.59-84.

²⁶⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.121.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.121.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.123.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.122.

²⁷¹ Small, p.21.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p.40.

residues. Paul Elie has described Robinson as an ‘outsider artist’ because of her anachrony, but Robinson disputes the ‘outsider’ tag, suggesting rather that she is ‘not really outside the culture’, but ‘just has another entry into it’.²⁷³ Robinson’s writing offers a means by which to access residual belief systems which peep out from behind the veneer of the (post)modern, ones which not only underly the contemporary moment, but which clearly might still be of use to it. Her aesthetic project, its manifestation in the literary poetics of her fiction and in the revitalization of religiosity, liberalism and humanism can be read not just to ‘reveal’ the ‘fissures in the veneer of the modern’ that Small writes of, but to productively identify those ‘fissures’ as Robinson’s ‘religious/ethical/aesthetic/intellectual’ home. In this way, they remain ‘effective elements of the present’ and as such are a highly legitimate epistemological mode.

While contentious to some, and highly unusual in the secular academy, Robinson’s liberal and humanist religiosity is, in Williams’ terms of broader culture, both residual and active. Expansive and complex, Robinson repeatedly defines her religious ethic in terms which are accessible to both religious and secular audiences, focusing on her exalted view of human beings and human experience. Despite the religious turn, this too is part of her difference and is unusual in the intellectual realm. To a great extent, these qualities make her philosophies potentially anathema to the prevailing late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century modes of enquiry in the psy-complex, the social sciences and in literary and cultural criticism, modes which I have pointed out are largely secular, materialist, post or anti-humanist and, in the context of identity politics, predicated on the imperative of politicized versions of human difference rather than human generality. The risk of her approach is universalism, that is, taking her ‘limited’ vantage point and generalizing about humans in ways which have long been deemed politically problematic.²⁷⁴ However, in common with many scholars of grief, Robinson’s project is defined by a defense of human complexity. Her

²⁷³ Paul Elie and Marilynne Robinson, ‘Marilynne Robinson: The Resurrection of the Ordinary’ – ‘A Literary Conversation between the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of ‘Gilead’ and ‘Home’ Dr. Marilynne Robinson, and fellow author Paul Elie, Senior Editor at Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux’, Held at the Riggs Library, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, & World Affairs, Georgetown University, Washington DC, 6th April 2009, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6t5qvpFhHEQ>> [accessed 12 June 2015].

²⁷⁴ Robinson describes her own vision as ‘very limited’ in Scott Hozzee, ‘A World of Beautiful Souls: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson’, *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, 16 May 2005, <<http://perspectivesjournal.org/blog/2005/05/16/a-world-of-beautiful-souls-an-interview-with-marilynne-robinson/>> [accessed 30 June 2015], (para.2).

resistance to the ‘truncated model of human being’ that she argues has emerged from positivist legacies across much of contemporary intellectual culture is simultaneously a commitment to complex modes of thought that might better reflect human experience in the most sophisticated sense.²⁷⁵ It is specifically Robinson’s conception of the human, in tandem with the unusual depth, complexity and anachrony of her literary style, that makes her fiction such an apposite resource for a review of grief.

Emotions as knowledge – my methodology

Between 1990 and 1993, literary critic Kathleen Woodward wrote two influential articles on psychoanalysis, grief and literature. To date this remains some of the only literary criticism to articulate a genuine ‘disappointment’ in Freud’s early writing on mourning.²⁷⁶ In the first of these articles, ‘Freud and Barthes: Theorizing Mourning, Sustaining Grief’, Woodward outlined her criticisms of the Freudian grief model, stating that her dissatisfaction lay in the absence of an ‘expressive’ discourse on grief which properly described and reflected the ‘affective dimension’ of grief as it was ‘experience[d]’ rather than how it had been theorized up to that point.²⁷⁷

In the second of Woodward’s articles, ‘Grief-Work in Contemporary American Cultural Criticism’, Woodward continued her critique of the curious absencing of the ‘affective dimension’ by Freud within a broader consideration of feminist psychoanalytic theories of mourning and within her own defense of the epistemology of the emotions. She expanded her criticism of Freud’s restrictive binary opposition, drawing attention to the problematic emphasis on ‘the necessary end of grief’ being ‘the telos of mourning’, arguing, alongside others, to ‘sanction’ not ‘censure’ a ‘sustainable grief’.²⁷⁸ Noting that the goal of Freudian analysis is ‘not so much to give affect voice – a subtle vocabulary, a rich poetics – as to purge it once it has been remembered’, Woodward highlighted that the nature of a pre- and post-bereavement “reality” within the Freudian and post-

²⁷⁵ Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, p.xiv and x.

²⁷⁶ Woodward, K. ‘Freud and Barthes’, p.94.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.94 – my emphasis.

²⁷⁸ Woodward, ‘Grief-Work’, p.100. Others who argue for some form of sustained grief include the male writers who form the subject of Woodward’s essay: Eric Santner, Mitchell Breitweiser, Phillip Fisher and Douglas Crimp; but also Tammy Clewell, Laura E. Tanner and Sarah Brophy in *Witnessing AIDS: Writing, Testimony, and the Work of Mourning* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004).

Freudian paradigm, was one without the emotions of suffering in which there were no 'attachments' to the dead.²⁷⁹

Moving beyond 'Mourning and Melancholia', Woodward's second essay also presented a startling feminist re-reading of the 'hysterics' in Freud's *Studies on Hysteria* as, in fact, bereaved women. By so doing, Woodward drew attention to the historical occlusion of the emotions of grief (or as Freud and his followers put it, mourning's 'affect') in the study of these women, in favour of his focus on sexual trauma and repressed sexual desire. By 'overlook[ing] bereavement or loss as a contributing, if not primary, cause of [...] distress' for these women and his 'predominantly negative view of the emotions in his early work with hysterical women', Freud, she argued, missed the opportunity for a better understanding of the grief experience.²⁸⁰ His focus on the open 'mental apparatus – not the emotional apparatus' – she argued, normalized the positivist paradigm inherent in his mourning theory, which meant that, for both melancholia and mourning, ultimately 'affect itself must die' along with the dead.²⁸¹ Woodward argued that 'Freud's fundamental view of the emotions in general as pathogenic and as excitations to be calmed' meant that 'grief in particular' is 'something to be given up in the normal course of things'.²⁸² She argued for a 'new economy of the emotions' in work on grief and mourning.²⁸³

Woodward has since reframed her perception of Freud's economy of the emotions within a broader epistemological imbalance. In her 2009 book, *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions* she writes:

I didn't understand then what now seems so self-evident that it doesn't even require elaboration: that reason and emotion have long been constructed as antinomies in Western culture, with reason exalted as the preferred term, figured as masculine, and emotion denigrated as feminine [...]. I reproached Freud for not offering us (*me*) a more expressive vocabulary for grief. I still wish he had [...but] Freud is not interested in offering a poetics of the emotions but rather theorizing our psychic processes.²⁸⁴

²⁷⁹ Woodward, 'Grief-Work', p.94 and Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p.244 – 'attachments' is Freud's word.

²⁸⁰ Woodward, 'Grief-Work', p.96.

²⁸¹ Ibid., p.94 and 96.

²⁸² Ibid., 'Grief-Work', p.100.

²⁸³ Ibid., 'Grief-Work', p.111

²⁸⁴ Woodward, *Statistical Panic*, p.2-3.

The evacuation of a 'poetics of the emotions' from the scholarship on bereavement and grief continues to be a palpable absence. Similarly, opportunities for a better understanding of grief keep being missed. Woodward's early essays demonstrate a clear attempt to move beyond the linguistic limitations of a grief discourse held in suspension between the binary poles of mourning and melancholia, and, consistent with feminist thought at the time of writing and with much critical grief thought since, she explicitly linked the affective or emotional discourse with the experiential and epistemological, determined to 'dignify' the lived experience of grief.²⁸⁵ However, despite the proliferation of work on the emotions in the last twenty years, little of this can be seen to have significantly altered the terms of the literary critical discourse on bereavement, grief and mourning.²⁸⁶ Woodward's early work on grief remains original. It might have triggered a feminist strain of grief scholarship, though it did not. Of those who have followed her, few depart from psychoanalytic models and Woodward herself has returned to psychoanalysis in subsequent work. Thus it is that as psychoanalytic language and conceptions often continue to dictate the terms of the discourse, arguably, grief and grievers, remain, in many senses, un-dignified.

Alison Jaggar's philosophical work on the emotions illuminates why this might be so. Jaggar's landmark 1989 essay 'Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology' argues that "the emotions" are another victim of positivism; in it she argues that the 'positivist epistemological model' is one which, has, [w]ithin the Western philosophical tradition', not just viewed emotions negatively, but which has 'usually [...] considered emotions as potentially or actually *subversive* of knowledge'.²⁸⁷ Jaggar contends that the ontological exclusion of emotions from the evolution of Western empiricism has excluded them from 'the paradigm of genuine knowledge'.²⁸⁸ Locating her thinking against the backdrop of Western philosophical tradition, she argues that, 'with a few notable exceptions' knowledge-makers position 'reason rather than emotions [...] as the indispensable faculty for acquiring knowledge'.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ Woodward, 'Grief-Work', p.107.

²⁸⁶ Woodward, *Statistical Panic*, p.235.

²⁸⁷ Jaggar, Alison M. 'Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology', *Gender/body/knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (1989): pp.145-171, (p.145 – my emphasis).

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.146.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.145.

For some time now, literary and cultural critics have been exploring the inarticulable realm of the emotions in their treatment of 'affect'.²⁹⁰ Yet, as I have already intimated, the 'new epistemology' of the study of affect, rarely acknowledges or critiques the origins of the key term in much the same way that literary critics overlook the psychoanalytic legacy of the term mourning. Instead, scholars of affect have continued to theorize in ways which ironically evade emotions as an epistemology. For instance, Lee Spinks distinguishes affect as, in fact, 'not a personal feeling' to be confused with emotion, but rather a series of 'inhuman or pre-subjective forces and intensities'.²⁹¹ Brian Massumi describes affect as nonsignifying, a nonconscious 'intensity' that is precisely 'not about empathy or emotive identification' but, as Leys paraphrases it, 'disconnected from the subjective, signifying, functional-meaning axis to which the more familiar categories of emotion belong'.²⁹² Scholars in this tradition are influenced in particular by male academics Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and Massumi and, in addition to drawing on the philosophies of Spinoza, now privilege the 'brain sciences' and the biological 'sciences of emotion'.²⁹³ Despite resisting accusations that their work is 'too reductive', Ruth Leys argues that this group, who claim only to 'borrow from science to make a difference in the humanities', in fact share the view that affect is 'independent of signification and meaning'.²⁹⁴ The old form of positivism that influenced the Freudian use of the term affect and these new forms of positivism and scientific materialism within philosophy and literary criticism that draw on the fields of cognitive science, theory of mind and the "new" science of neuroscience are manifestations of the same reductive, rationalist impulse.

Returning to Jaggar's work is thus doubly important. Her work highlights both the hegemony of positivism which can be read to focalize the post-Freudian, secular materialist grip on contemporary grief discourses, but also the 'myth of the dispassionate observer' that not only continues to elevate the professionals of the psy-complex, but also over-estimates the role of the professional and objective

²⁹⁰ Woodward, *Statistical Panic*, p.235.

²⁹¹ Lee Spinks, 'Thinking the Post-Human: Literature, Affect, and the Politics of Style,' *Textual Practice* 15.1 (2001), 23-46, (p.24).

²⁹² Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p.28 and Ruth Leys, 'The Turn to Affect: A Critique', *Critical Inquiry*, 37.3 (Spring 2011), 434-472, (p.441).

²⁹³ Leys, 'The Turn to Affect', p.434.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.443.

literary critic in the production of knowledge about emotion.²⁹⁵ Jaggar offers a broader philosophical framework than the positivist; one that echoes what Robinson calls the 'larger frame of meaning' that is available beyond the limited constraints of scientific and / or limited appreciations of rationalist knowledge.²⁹⁶ Beyond the still radical suggestion of a Western epistemology that actually incorporates emotions, Jaggar's now vintage (though regrettably minority) philosophy of the epistemology of the emotions, permits a more expansive approach to grief and a richer reading of Robinson's 'poetics of loss' than contemporary theories of affect.

As part of her sketched epistemology, Jaggar presents a conceptual category that enables the potential of an initial reconsideration of grief, via its twentieth-century figuration as an 'outlaw emotion'.²⁹⁷ 'Outlaw emotions', for Jaggar, are those that are 'conventionally unacceptable' and are 'distinguished by their incompatibility with the dominant conception and values'.²⁹⁸ They are also the emotions borne by groups that Jaggar terms 'subordinated individuals', which in her essay includes women and people of colour.²⁹⁹ I contend that the problematic contemporary meanings of grief and mourning – including the prolonged, the complex, the absent, abnormal and pathological as well as the resistant, the non-consolatory, the melancholic and even the "normal", all now fall clearly into this category of outlawed emotions.

Jaggar writes that:

the most obvious way in which feminist and other outlaw emotions can help in developing alternatives to prevailing conceptions of reality is by motivating new investigations [...but] outlaw emotions may also enable us to perceive the world differently from its portrayal in conventional descriptions.³⁰⁰

Methodologically, then, Woodward's early work – after Jaggar and within the feminist tradition – can be said to have called for a new 'investigation' into aesthetic and ethical practices of grief, the emotionality of which has continued to

²⁹⁵ Jaggar, p.159 and p.154.

²⁹⁶ Marilynne Robinson, 'Freedom of Thought', *When I Was a Child*, pp.3-18, (p.16).

²⁹⁷ Jaggar, p.160.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.160 and 162.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.160.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.161.

be both obscured and devalued by the epistemological norms of positivism in psychological and literary critical grief descriptions. A consideration of the ways in which Marilynne Robinson's work permits the reader to 'perceive' the griever's 'world differently' can be viewed as (another) new investigation. For Robinson's characters, grief is not measurable in positivist terms. It is not something that ends, nor can it easily be categorized as a state or a phase so much as a vital facet of consciousness and of being. There is no analgesia and no place for *analgia* in Robinson's novels. Instead, the suffering caused by death is, to borrow terms Robinson has used about fiction, an 'occasion for exploring consciousness'.³⁰¹ Critically, too, grief as it manifests as a range of emotions and experiences and perceptions in Robinson's fiction is never outlawed in the sense that it is presented always as innately human, indeed it is her preoccupation to strain the very limits of language to attempt to 'dignify' its complex, humane articulation.

Inevitably and critically, Jaggar's work outlines the ideological imperative behind the obscuring of emotions from 'positivist and neopositivist construals'.³⁰² She argues against the myth of the 'dispassionate enquirer' and 'empirical testability' as the hallmarks of knowledge within post-Enlightenment positivist knowledge formation and argues instead for a re-reading of the 'epistemological justification' that has been read to 'vindicat[e] the silencing of those, especially women, who are defined culturally as the *bearers* of emotion'; those who are consequently 'perceived as more "subjective," biased, and irrational'.³⁰³ In fact, she argues cogently that the cultural disadvantage of silencing the bearers of emotion lends 'epistemological privilege' to the 'perspective on reality available from the[ir] experience'.³⁰⁴ They are, she insists, 'more likely to incorporate the reliable appraisals of situations'.³⁰⁵ Of the testimonials I cited earlier in my introduction, each is evidence that the bereaved in contemporary culture are the bearers of grief as a now 'outlaw emotion'. It is the epistemological privilege afforded by their perspectives which informs the ethics behind this project and my reconsideration of grief.

³⁰¹ Robinson, 'Introduction' to *The Awakening and Collected Short Stories* by Kate Chopin (New York: Bantam, 1988, repr. 2003), p.ix.

³⁰² Jaggar, p.148.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.158, p.146 and 158.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.162.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.162.

A feminist approach to the emotional realm, inspired by Jaggar's essay, underwrites this thesis in order that an emotional epistemology of grief – in this case the grief of albeit fictional, men and women – might be elevated in status. Methodologically, in my remaining chapters, I present Robinson's fictional depictions of grief and grievers as a set of 'thick descriptions' (a term I borrow from American anthropologist Clifford Geertz who in turn borrowed it from British philosopher Gilbert Ryle). Somewhat ironically, Geertz used the phrase in his 1972 essay 'Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture' to justify the place of anthropology as a 'science'.³⁰⁶ In justifying the 'interpretive activity' of the ethnographer, he explained that they do not just consider the objects of "phenomenalistic" observation' – what Ryle called 'thin descriptions' – but the palimpsest of 'piled up structures of inference and implication' that constitute any expression of culture; in other words the 'structures of signification' he calls 'thick description' that require the social anthropologist's interpretation for any meaningful set of meanings to be made.³⁰⁷ Geertz likened the anthropologist's engagement with 'a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures' to the literary critic 'trying to read' a 'manuscript'.³⁰⁸ I import his metaphor not to justify my actual acts of literary criticism (for which I hope justification is not necessary) and obviously not to justify the findings of this thesis as 'science', but rather as a helpful way to comprehend my analyses of the 'manuscripts' of knowledge embedded in Robinson's fictions and thus, to convey something of what Elizabeth Meese has called the 'textual thickness' of Robinson's writing.³⁰⁹

In moving away from the dominant theories and epistemologies of the grief discourses, I endeavour also to move away from the traditional explanatory impulse of the academic, and to embrace, instead, this (thick) descriptive impulse, which, in the words of psychologist Todd Dubose, is a non-empirical and non-hierarchical methodology that 'remains phenomenologically horizontal and open'.³¹⁰ In a recent essay, Robinson wrote:

³⁰⁶ Geertz, 'Thick Description' in *Interpretation of Cultures*, p.5.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.9, p.6, p.7 and p.9.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.10.

³⁰⁹ Meese, p.63.

³¹⁰ Todd Dubose, 'Abyss-mal Consolation: Soul pain and soul care from an existential-phenomenological perspective', an unpublished paper delivered at 'The Soul Conference' organized by the Centre for Theology and Philosophy – University of Nottingham, delivered at St Anne's College, Oxford University, June 2014, p.4.

The word 'explain' is typically used in scientific contexts as a synonym for the much more tentative word 'describe'. It is a triumph of science to have, in some degree, described the electron, and preposterous to suggest it has been explained.³¹¹

Given the substantial failures and hubris of the explanatory impulses of the late modern grief discourses (including what Small calls 'modernist model-building' about grief), it seems apposite to attempt a different, more tentative approach to gain greater understanding and deeper descriptions of the experience of 'intimate grief'.³¹² I thus offer 'thick description' as my overarching methodology, but the idea of emotional epistemology as a tool with which to texture my descriptions.

This project does not aim to re-theorize grief. Nor, does it aim to offer up Robinson's dense poetics as a new model of loss or the revision of an old one. Specifically, it is not my intention to position Robinson's work as representative of another (re)turn: a Christian humanist counter-narrative about loss to challenge the apparent failure of the grand narratives of psychoanalysis, poststructuralism or secularization to have emerged in and dominated scholarship on grief in the twentieth-century in the West. I am not interested in the resurrection of the Christian religion, for example, as another 'explanatory mode'; rather, I am interested in the extent to which an analysis of Robinson's poetics reveals 'fissures' in the modern that, if Small is to be believed, have been there all along and which, if examined carefully as a legitimate and critical part of the present, reveal methods of expression and articulation – linguistic and aesthetic – that are better suited to – though ultimately also and inevitably inadequate to – the task of expressing the multiple meanings of grief in the albeit fictional human communities about which she writes. It is these linguistic and aesthetic measures of experience, measures that emerged from Western humanistic and religious traditions but which the intellectual community has largely removed from the grief discourse – that are my focus. And it is the terms which these poetic and aesthetic strategies make available to the broader conversation on grief that is my interest. Thus, I put forward Robinson's oeuvre as a form of cultural criticism, a religious, humanist and aesthetic mediation into a – largely secular, anti-humanist and persistently scientific culture of scholarship which, despite the honourable

³¹¹ Marilynne Robinson, 'Theology', *Givenness of Things*, pp.209-225, (p.222).

³¹² Small, p.20.

intentions of any individual scholar, remains hindered by methods and epistemologies that are inappropriate to the study of grief because they attempt to 'explain' rather than 'describe' the grief experience. This approach has significant critical and epistemological validity as well as intellectual and analytical rigor. Firstly, it responds to an identified lack, that of a descriptive phenomenology, both confirmed and lamented by, amongst others, Kathleen Woodward.³¹³ Secondly, it responds to a recognized and problematic presence, that is the 'distorted [...] descriptions' of grief named as such by psychologist John Archer which persist to the 'detriment of the development of understanding about grief'.³¹⁴ Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, by layering up 'thick descriptions' as the structure of my original contribution to knowledge, I offer an approach that, I hope, resists the hubris of trying to be authoritative on grief.

Woodward argues that the constructedness of art does not diminish but rather enhances the validity of texts as vehicles for what Raymond Williams calls the 'specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships'.³¹⁵ Understood this way, literary texts become examples of what Williams calls 'practical consciousness of a present kind'.³¹⁶ In *Statistical Panic* Woodward argues for 'understanding our emotional experience *through* literature'.³¹⁷ Following Williams, she unapologetically privileges the literary because, she argues, in literature there is 'a certain form or way of knowing, one that brings together feeling and thought and does not separate them'.³¹⁸ According to Woodward, this reveals the 'epistemological edge of emotion that, in a dialectical relation to thought, can serve to disclose the structures of the world in which we are situated'.³¹⁹ Woodward, argues that they are 'structures that embody forms of feeling' in which 'feeling and thought are not divided from each other'.³²⁰ My method for 'thickly' describing Robinson's poetics follows these thinkers in articulating the ways in which her fiction articulates grief as a prismatic manifestation of what Woodward calls 'forms of feeling' and 'forms of apprehension' that are embodied within Williams' concept

³¹³ Woodward, *Statistical Panic*, p.3.

³¹⁴ Archer, *Nature of Grief*, p.26.

³¹⁵ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p.132.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.132.

³¹⁷ Woodward, *Statistical Panic*, p.3

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.12.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12 and p.13.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.11

of 'practical consciousness'.³²¹ Practical consciousness, for Williams, is consciousness that 'is *being lived*, and not only what is thought is being lived'.³²² He presents this in direct contrast to what he describes as the prevailing tendency to present 'human cultural activity' in the 'past tense', converting 'experience' into 'finished products'.³²³ Williams describes these finished products as 'fixed' or 'finished forms' which present a barrier to the present continuous experience of practical consciousness within his concept of 'structures of feeling'.³²⁴ Robinson's evocations of bereavement resist the idea of finished forms.

The rest of this thesis explores the ways in which Robinson's revisionist, recuperative artistic mission can be traced through the self-consciously nostalgic and rich poetics of all four of her novels as a means by which to make deeper meaning of the experience of bereavement. My focus is how the constructedness of her narrative art enables a profound engagement with the rich and inexhaustible 'life of the mourner' and with grief as it is being lived in her novels, bearing witness to what Woodward (paraphrasing Williams) describes as 'the intangible texture and force – the *presence*, which is [...] the form of life itself'.³²⁵ Robinson's repeated literary mappings of the 'practical consciousness' of bereaved people are complex, expansive and themselves thickly descriptive. My argument is that Robinson's work contributes to the destabilization of modernist and or positivist paradigms of grief and suffering, even those experimental paradigms forged by other literary critics, by opening up to, reflecting on and engaging with ways of understanding the long history and culture of inevitable human suffering that pre-dates the twentieth century in the West and that leans on different wisdoms and lexical structures than psychoanalysis, psychiatry or critical theory. Specifically, however, I read Robinson's work as exploring the articulation of what Bernard Beatty calls the paradoxical yet 'radical singularity' of grief.³²⁶ I do this in parallel with examining some of the 'multiple meanings' embedded in the history of the term as defined by Balk, and, to use Woodward's word, the 'textures' of grief in the practical consciousness of bereaved and or grieving people articulated in

³²¹ Ibid., p.11

³²² Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p.131

³²³ Ibid., p.128.

³²⁴ Ibid., p.128.

³²⁵ Woodward, *Statistical Panic*, p.11.

³²⁶ Bernard Beatty, 'The Paradox of Grief', unpublished paper delivered at *Grief. Language. Art.* Conference, Liverpool University, July 8-10, 2014.

Robinson's art.³²⁷ By so doing, I argue for the emancipation of meaning of grief (both word and experience) such that it be fundamentally reconsidered in a richer, deeper and more humane light and that it be accepted, rather than categorized, in its complexity.

³²⁷ Woodward, *Statistical Panic*, p.5.

Starting at *Gilgamesh* and reading forward, I find no evidence that consciousness has ever been a comfortable experience.
Marilynne Robinson¹

Chapter Two

Grief in the first-person: autodiegetic narration, dwelling in *–algia*, and the ‘felt experience’ of bereavement in *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*

It remains a major irony of grief scholarship that when Freud wrote ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, he had yet to experience bereavement. It is well documented, however, that he was bereaved after the publication of his landmark essay in ways that he reputedly found devastating. According to Silverman and Klass, Freud did not ‘give theoretical form’ to these ‘feelings’ in his intellectual work, but rather expressed his emotional reactions in personal letters.² Since the 1990s, researchers have often pointed to the discrepancies between Freud’s evolving psychoanalytic theories and his apparently contradictory personal experiences of grief. Gorer argues that Freud ‘had been so free of bereavement’ at the point at which he wrote ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ that ‘it seems improbable that he relied much on introspection or self-analysis’ to inform his ‘observations of normal mourning’.³ Small notes the epistemological gap between the emotional and the rational intellectual, arguing that ‘Freud as a person experienced things that as a psychoanalytic writer he could not allow into his paradigm’.⁴ This gap between the objective and the subjective is another of Small’s fissures in the modern, one that critical grief scholars have repeatedly noticed, but which authoritative knowledge building about bereavement has failed to adequately accommodate.⁵

¹ Marilynne Robinson, ‘Writer’s and the Nostalgic Fallacy’, *New York Times Book Review*, 13 October 1985 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1985/10/13/books/writers-and-the-nostalgic-fallacy.html?pagewanted=all>>, [accessed 4 September 2014], (para. 7).

² Silverman and Klass, ‘Introduction’, *Continuing Bonds*, p.7. For a reading of Freud that argues he did adjust his view of mourning in his theoretical work, see Clewell, ‘Mourning Beyond Melancholia’.

³ Gorer, p.119.

⁴ Small, p.26.

⁵ For bereavement research which mentions Freud’s letters as in some way undermining his metapsychology see: Klass *et al*, *Continuing Bonds*, Ruth Davies, ‘New Understandings’, Rothaupt and Becker, ‘Literature Review’ and Brenda Mallon, *Dying, Death and Grief: Working with Adult Bereavement* (London: Sage, 2008). For those who consider Freud to have been misread see Klass *et al*, Foote and Franke, ‘Foucault and Therapy’, Small, ‘Theories of Grief’, Clewell, ‘Mourning Beyond Melancholia’ and Granek, ‘Grief as Pathology’. For discussions of the gap between Freud’s professional scientific writings and his personal writing about bereavement see: Klass *et al*, Woodward ‘Grief-work’, and Rothaupt and Becker, ‘Literature Review’.

Ironically, but perhaps inevitably, Freud's personal descriptions of the suffering of grief resisted the terms of a normal mourning that his early essay had outlined, the same terms which persist in the grief myths. Specifically, Freud depicted his own losses not as processual or teleological, but as ones from which he would not recover. After the death of his daughter, Sophie, Freud wrote:

Since I am profoundly irreligious there is no one I can accuse, and I know there is nowhere to which any complaint could be addressed. [...] Quite deep down I can trace the feeling of a deep narcissistic hurt that is not to be healed. My wife and Annerl are terribly shaken in a more human way.⁶

In another letter written eight years after the publication of 'Mourning and Melancholia', on the death of his four-year-old grandson Heinerle, he wrote 'I don't think I have ever experienced such grief [...] fundamentally everything has lost its meaning for me'.⁷ According to biographer Ernest Jones, Freud reported that the death of his grandson was the 'only occasion in his life when Freud was known to shed tears' and that the bereavement was 'different from any of the others he had suffered'.⁸ Those, Jones writes, 'had brought about sheer pain, but this one had killed something in him for good' and later Freud reported that he 'had never been able to get fond of anyone since [...] he had found the blow quite unbearable'.⁹ Some years later, Freud generalized more broadly from these bereavements and wrote, again in a letter:

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually, this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.¹⁰

Freud's letters allude here to a different 'felt' reality to the 'reality' he theorized in 'Mourning and Melancholia', the one which the myths have maintained. Reality in his essay was something that he asserted needed 'testing' in order for the 'work that mourning performs' to occur successfully.¹¹ In the mode of understanding

⁶ Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 3 (New York: Basic Books, 1957), p.20.

⁷ Letter from Freud to Kata and Lajos Levy, 11 June 1923, *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by Tania and James Stein, ed. by Ernst L. Freud, (New York: Basic, 1960), p.344.

⁸ Jones, p.92.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.92.

¹⁰ Letter to Ludwig Binswanger, 12 April 1929 in E.L. Freud ed., *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, p.386.

¹¹ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p.244.

outlined in his essay, 'reality testing' relies on 'efforts to detach the libido' which ultimately proves that 'the loved object no longer exists'; the result being that 'all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object' and the ego be left 'free and uninhibited again'.¹² The felt reality Freud described in his letters was 'something else' and needed neither testing nor proof.¹³

Amongst those who have pointed out this contradiction, Woodward's early work on grief criticized the 'clinical tone' and 'ungainly and pseudo-scientific figuration of pain' in his essay, arguing that it 'does not seem sufficiently informed by an understanding of the *experience* of mourning'.¹⁴ More recently she has written that, in hoping for a more expressive account of grief, she found herself 'wishing from Freud something that wasn't in his temperament or professional passion to give'.¹⁵ Silverman and Klass have noted that while his 'theory took on a life of its own', his 'writing about his own experience with grief was not integrated' fully into subsequent 'psychoanalytic thought', particularly as it influenced psychology and psychiatry.¹⁶ The added consequence of this, they argue, is that the 'post-Freudian paradigm for understanding grief has maintained the idea that the primary goal of grieving is to cut the bond with the deceased so that new attachments can be formed', a rationalized reality divorced from Freud's own experience.¹⁷

Neil Small comments on the phenomenon of the elision of Freud's more 'subjective' texts.¹⁸ He argues that Freud's 'selective use of the data available to him' and the view of many critical grief scholars that there was a 'difference between Freud's theories and his own experience of grief' are all part of the 'modernist world view' that elevates certain texts to the status of 'truth' above others and that shapes 'theories and determine[s] the form in which they move out from their founders'.¹⁹ Although they have been closely and deeply examined by many, particularly literary critics, Freud's later writings, letters and feelings about

¹² Ibid., p.244, p.257 and p.245.

¹³ Freud's concept of 'reality-testing' figures repeatedly in the contemporary grief discourse. For discussion of this figure for the grief experience, see in particular the grief memoir of Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Woodward's *Statistical Panic*.

¹⁴ Woodward, 'Freud and Barthes', p.96 – my emphasis.

¹⁵ Woodward, *Statistical Panic*, p.2-3.

¹⁶ Klass *et al*, p.7.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.7.

¹⁸ Small, p.24.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.29

bereavement are generally elided from the clinical history of the study of grief, and from conceptions of how grief can be experienced. Consequently, his subjective, lived experience of bereavement – an experience which challenges the assumptions of his own conception of ‘normal mourning’, the models which emerged from that conception, and the norm which prevails – are deemed non-authoritative within the prevailing grief narrative in both the psy- and lay domains.²⁰

Bereavement scholarship focuses on process, temporality and teleology, binding conceptions of loss to what Laura E. Tanner calls the ‘cultural injunction to move *through* grief’ in accordance with the ‘tireless march towards mental health’.²¹ The compulsion to move out of or away from pain toward an apparently pain-free and “mentally healthier” state of post-bereavement is one residual effect of the evacuation of lived experiences from prevailing models of grief. So too is the relentless forward motion of the so-called “process” of the grief experience towards its mythical end point. This chapter specifically responds to these two problems, each of which reflects a stubborn assumption that the (often, though not exclusively, painful) emotions of grief – and the experience that they render – are not important or valuable in and of themselves and thus are not to be dwelt on.²² These problems function to deny what Woodward calls the ‘rich [...] emotional life’ of the bereaved person.²³ Simultaneously, the emphasis on futurity inherent in the ‘tireless march’ neglects the experiential realm of these emotions as, and how, they are felt in any of the present tenses.

Grief, ‘felt experience’ and reflective nostalgia

Robinson has remarked that, for her, ‘there is no objective reality more powerful than experiential reality’; she has also argued that ‘there are structures of meaning that do not align themselves with reason’.²⁴ Throughout her non-fiction, she refers

²⁰ For examination of Freud’s later writings as informing a more coherent theory of mourning, see Clewell, ‘Mourning Beyond Melancholia’.

²¹ Laura E. Tanner, *Lost Bodies*, p.13 and p.93.

²² I deliberately borrow the terms here from James Davies’ title, *The Importance of Suffering: The Value and Meaning of Emotional Discontent*.

²³ Woodward, ‘Grief-work’, p.97.

²⁴ Robinson in ‘Interview with Marilynne Robinson’ in Thomas Gardner, *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.47-69, (p.49) and Robinson, ‘Cosmology’ in *When I Was a Child*, pp.183-202, (p.193).

to this realm of reality as ‘felt experience’.²⁵ In a recent essay, literary critic Carolyn Allen argues that this category is a ‘hermeneutic’ which captures Robinson’s ‘thinking on emotion’; it is also one which simultaneously manages to bypass the controversies of contemporary theories of mind and affect.²⁶ As a descriptor, it manages to privilege the emotional realm and first-person experience, without falling into the trap of binarism, materialism or biological determinism inherent in the subtraction of emotion from knowledge-making, and the abstraction and separation of emotion and reason critiqued by Woodward and Jaggar, but persistent in medical and academic projects.²⁷ Although ‘felt experience’ is a category informed by Robinson’s prodigious religious imagination, it is not inherently religious; nor does it privilege any particular emotion or make distinctions between the emotional, religious or intellectual realms. In her 2006 interview with Tom Montgomery Fate, she fleshed out this view, asserting, ‘I don’t accept the division between [...] components of consciousness. [...] The way in which we have defined rationality and intellectualism is very narrow’.²⁸ What the category does do, however, is draw on the ‘rapturous humanism’ at the heart of her vision of Calvinism filtered through the inherently democratic impulse of Robinson’s New England Congregationalism.²⁹ Consequently, it is a category that Robinson’s faith not only allows her to dignify with the adjective ‘miraculous’, but one which speaks to the immeasurable realm of human emotional life; one of epistemological value to those interested in knowledge about grief.³⁰

Robinson has repeatedly asserted that the ‘language of contemporary experience’ is responsible for ‘simpler and simpler models of reality’ which in turn work to produce an ‘anthropology of modern humanity’ that functions as ‘a hermeneutics of condescension’.³¹ The ‘language of contemporary experience’, she has insisted, is no measure of the depth and complexity of actual ‘experience – lived,

²⁵ See in particular ‘Thinking Again’ in *Absence of Mind* for the phrase ‘felt experience of thought’, p.114 and ‘Freedom of Thought’ in *When I Was a Child* for the phrase ‘the felt experience of life’, p.8.

²⁶ Carolyn Allen, ‘The Privilege of Loneliness, the Kindness of Home: “Felt Experience” in the writing of Marilynne Robinson’, in Stevens, ed., *This Life, This World*, pp.190-211, (p.190).

²⁷ For Robinson’s extended critique of the reductive qualities of contemporary theory of mind, see *Absence of Mind*. For a critique of the biological reductionism of contemporary affect theory which reflects a similar mind-set, see Leys, ‘The Turn to Affect’.

²⁸ Robinson in Tom Montgomery Fate, ‘Seeing the Holy’ [interview], *Sojourners Magazine* (June 2006), <<https://sojo.net/magazine/june-2006/seeing-holy>> [accessed 16 September 2016], (para. 15).

²⁹ Robinson, ‘Preface’ to Thornton and Varenne eds., *John Calvin*, p.xvii.

³⁰ Robinson, ‘Freedom of Thought’, *When I Was a Child*, pp.3-18, (p.8).

³¹ Robinson in Schaub, ‘an Interview’, p.236 and Robinson, ‘On Human Nature’, *Absence of Mind*, pp.1-30, (p.14).

felt experience'.³² Thus, rather than emphasizing the future, Robinson, her fiction and in particular her stylistics have a tendency to look back to older forms of expressing meaning. In her article, 'Future-Perfect: Gender, Nostalgia, and The Not Yet Presented in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', Sinead McDermott has described the poetics of *Housekeeping* as forged by a 'backward glance' and Meghan O'Rourke describes Robinson's aesthetic vision as more broadly based on 'looking back – making it old'.³³ This approach was behind Robinson's (now famous) reinvigoration of nineteenth-century metaphoric traditions of Emerson, Melville, Thoreau, Dickinson, Whitman and Poe in *Housekeeping*.³⁴

Robinson has explained that her style and language choices are always part of an intentional intellectual, aesthetic and ethical stratagem which keys into her excavation of this, and other, strands of intellectual history. She has said:

When I wrote *Housekeeping* [...] I made a world remote enough to allow me to choose and control the language out of which the story was to be made. It was a shift forced on me by the intractability of the language of contemporary experience - which must not be confused with contemporary experience itself. The language of present experience is so charged with judgment and allusion and intonation that it cannot be put to any new use or forced along any unaccustomed path. The story it wants to tell I do not want to tell.³⁵

She added:

If you subscribe to the language that is ordinarily used [...], people think that you're taking in whole chunks of assumption along with the language that you use. There's no way to *refresh* things within that. So you have to *fall way back* and try by whatever means available to signal, I don't accept these assumptions, I'm trying to look at things in another way. That's a very hard signal to send.³⁶

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, cultural historian Svetlana Boym has articulated a corollary impulse to look back as one of a number of critically nostalgic 'tendencies' that are 'ways of giving shape and meaning to longing'.³⁷ These are

³² Schaub, 'an interview', p.236.

³³ Sinead McDermott, 'Future-Perfect: Gender, Nostalgia, and The Not Yet Presented in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 13:3 (2004), 259-270, (p.260).

³⁴ Robinson in Tace Hedrick, 'On Influence and Appropriation' [interview], *The Iowa Review*, 22.1 (Winter 1992), 1-7, (p.1).

³⁵ Marilynne Robinson, 'Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy', (para. 12).

³⁶ Robinson in Schaub, 'an Interview', p.236 – my emphasis.

³⁷ Boym, p.41.

part of a non-teleological tradition she calls the *off-modern*, a 'tradition of critical reflection on the modern condition' which actively 'incorporates' modes of retrospection and reflection such as nostalgia'.³⁸ She identifies two of these tendencies as 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia. She writes:

Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective thrives on *algia* (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately [...]. Restorative does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt.³⁹

Reflective nostalgia is a retrospective impulse and a way of thinking which incorporates, indeed 'thrives upon' the felt experience of *algia* (pain or longing), while simultaneously calling into doubt the 'truth' of other, more assertive modes of knowing. McDermott has argued that this nostalgic tendency informs Robinson's poetics in *Housekeeping*, but there is significant scope to argue that it shapes form, method and theme in all of Robinson's novels and particularly influences her use of autodiegesis as a method of writing bereavement.

Boym writes that:

Re-flection suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis. The focus here is not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and passage of time.⁴⁰

A new flexibility – re-flection – is what is lacking from the positivist grief discourse and methodologies applied to the study of grief. It is also what Robinson seems to be articulating as the aesthetic and ethical imperative of her art when she argues that her approach to language incorporates a desire 'to refresh things' by 'falling way back'.

According to Boym, reflective nostalgia is, itself, 'a form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future'.⁴¹ Viewed through the lens of re-flection, Robinson's textured and

³⁸ Ibid., pp.xvi-xvii.

³⁹ Ibid., p.xviii.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.49.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.55.

critically nostalgic poetics of autodiegesis offer an opportunity to refresh the etymology of grief as well as deepen understanding of her novels. In concordance with Walter, Klass *et al*, Small, Breen and O'Connor, Granek, and O'Rourke, it is Woodward's view that grief is 'inexhaustible', that it is 'interminable' and that the rich inner life of the bereaved person is of great emotional and intellectual value.⁴² Understood this way, grief is formative rather than subversive of knowledge and is a 'felt experience' worth pondering.

Reflecting on bereavement: *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*

The tendency toward reflective nostalgia operates on (at least) three levels in Robinson's use of autodiegesis in *Housekeeping* and in *Gilead*. Firstly, Robinson 're-flexes' (to adapt Boym's term) her own critical nostalgia for pre- and early modern as well as nineteenth-century forms of literary expression. Borrowing narrative techniques from, amongst other sources, the Bible, Calvinist theology, Puritan writing and American Romanticism, Robinson is able to actively circumvent many of the assumptions about human experiences which have problematically dominated the study of grief in the West in both the modern and the postmodern eras. She fuses narrative structures, forms and metaphorical modes which evolved (albeit implicitly) within these traditions, both to more accurately depict the felt realm and more specifically to privilege first-person expressions of consciousness and interiority. Consequently, she re-instantiates the 'intense emotionality of grief' that was historically revered as a vividly present-tense experience, using the 'older vocabulary' of some of the oldest literary traditions.⁴³ The fusion of these narrative traditions facilitates a deep articulation of the 'felt experience' of grief as 'forms of feeling' and 'forms of apprehension' which are densely textured. It also serves both to 'dignify' loss and human consciousness and, as Robinson has argued of fiction, to recognize the 'highest order of complexity' and 'ultimate significance' of human experiences in relation to death.⁴⁴

Secondly, and in part because she reinvigorates the literary, religious and aesthetic methodologies of these traditions, Robinson creates two grieving narrative voices which are *themselves* both reflective and nostalgic, whose

⁴² Woodward, *Statistical Panic*, p.219, 'Freud and Barthes', p.96 and 'Grief-work', p.97. Woodward's use of the word 'inexhaustible' is used here after J.B. Pontalis.

⁴³ Walter, 'New Model', p.8 and Robinson, 'Freedom of Thought', *When I Was a Child*, p.10.

⁴⁴ Robinson, 'Introduction' to *The Awakening*, pp.viii-ix

narratives are structured around the often prolonged 'backward glance' to what they have lost. By avoiding contemporary ideas about loss, Robinson is able more fully to depict the grief experience non-pathologically as one in which her characters dwell endlessly and reflectively in *algia* for their dead. Robinson dignifies these representations while simultaneously pointing a way forward to a refreshed understanding of grief. In both novels, she presents the felt experience of grief as her narrators experience it, using deaths to orientate her exploration of the rich inner lives of Ruth Stone and Reverend John Ames. She elevates the experience of grief to one of 'high sentiment' in large part because she depicts it in the first-person.⁴⁵ Thus, Robinson's autodiegetic novels repeatedly portray the inner life of her bereaved narrators as the 'practical consciousness' of grief that is 'of a present kind'. In this way, grief is figured as what Raymond Williams might describe as the 'this, here, now, alive, active, 'subjective'; it is a 'living presence' right to the end of each novel thereby privileging the experiential realm of being in, rather than moving on from grief.⁴⁶

The elevation of individual felt experience in this aesthetic context thus offers a radically different epistemology of bereavement and grief to that which dominates contemporary knowledge production, one which privileges both emotionality and retrospection; one which reinjects old words and narrative practices with re-newed meaning. There is also a tertiary level of reflective nostalgia at work in Robinson's first-person novels: Robinson works to thematize, even characterize, the painful aspects of nostalgia itself as a profound dimension of bereavement *a fortiori*. This critical layering of nostalgia and reflection means that as the emotionally textured narrative voices shape the breadth and depth of each novel, so Robinson's representations expansively and expressively lend breadth and depth to both the radical singularity and the multiple meanings of grief in a contemporary Western setting.

Structuring grief: allusion, the revitalization of spiritual autobiography and the novel form in *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*

Robinson foregrounds intimate loss and bereavement in all of her novels but in *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* the grief experience is expressed through the subtle and complex character-narration of the bereaved narrators Ruth Stone and the

⁴⁵ Robinson, 'When I Was a Child', *When I Was a Child*, p.89.

⁴⁶ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p.128

Reverend John Ames. Both characters share long family histories of loss and their bereavements are many. Ruth's mother committed suicide by driving her car into the lake by the old family home in Ruth's early childhood. This is the same lake in which her grandfather Edmund died in a train accident before Ruth was born. Reverend John Ames is himself dying and, at 76, is writing a long letter to the 6-year-old son he will soon be bereaved of and who will be bereaved of him. The novel documents the 'loving grief' Ames experiences as he writes (G 118). Bereaved of a young wife and child in his early twenties, he narrates in anticipation of his imminent death and grieves again, this time for the loss of the late young family, Lila and Robert, he never expected to have, and in particular, another child he won't live to see grow up.

The structures of her autodiegetic novels informs the thickness of Robinson's descriptions of these 'suffering figures'. Critics often comment on the ways in which Robinson's novels negotiate surface simplicity with complex narratology, usually emphasizing linguistic style. Her prose, for example, has been described as 'crystalline', 'simple', 'clean and plain and beautiful'; but as Churchwell puts it, Robinson's poetics are only ever 'deceptively simple'.⁴⁷ In large part this is due to the immensity of Robinson's allusive imagination; that which, in another context, Robert Alter describes as a writer's dialogical engagement with a literary culture's 'own earlier strata'.⁴⁸ Meese describes the effect of this 'textual thickness' as a 'pentimento'.⁴⁹ In her essay on *Housekeeping*, 'A World of Women', Meese writes that the 'text's action' is 'built up by layering and accretion – a piling up', but it is not just action within the novel which develops in layers, the same is true of Robinson's characterization and her poetics whereby she piles up the narrative strategies of one tradition after another in order find a 'language adequate' to the felt 'experience' of her narrators.⁵⁰ One result of this complexity is a highly nuanced reading experience. Another is structural. It results in a form of novel in which the reader might struggle to find a plot. In interview, Robinson has said that

⁴⁷ Jack Hanson, 'The Attempt to See', [review of *Lila*], *No Comment*, 1 November 2014 <<http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/the-attempt-to-see/>> [accessed 2 November 2016], (para. 7); Tessa Hadley, 'An Attic Full of Sermons', [review of *Gilead*], *London Review of Books*, 27.8, April 2005 <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n08/tessa-hadley/an-attic-full-of-sermons> > [accessed 2 July 2016], (para.3) and Joan Acocella, 'A Note of the Miraculous', [review of *Gilead*], *New York Review*, LII. 10 (9 June 2005), 14-15, (p.14) and Churchwell, 'Prodigal in the Heartland', *TLS*, p.21.

⁴⁸ Alter, *Pen of Iron*, p.4. For an Emersonian reading of this 'textual accumulation', see Tace Hedrick, "'The Perimeters of Our Wandering Are Nowhere": Breaching the Domestic in *Housekeeping*', *Critique* 40.2 (Winter 1999), 137-151, (p.138).

⁴⁹ Meese, p.63.

⁵⁰ Meese, p.62 and Robinson in Pinsker, *Conversations*, p.125.

her interest in character has been considered by some to be ‘to the detriment of plot’; ‘Plot’, she says is ‘not a word I use’ adding, some ‘people think it’s not a concept I *have*’.⁵¹ Consequently, neither *Housekeeping* nor *Gilead* is a plot-led novel in the sense that neither is structured around what Robinson has called the ‘and then and then and then’ model of a book.⁵² Rather, each novel is a series of cyclical and often repetitious reflections, thoughts and memories, in both cases generated by and from the bereavements of the central characters.

To the extent that *Housekeeping* has a storyline, it is, as Sam Sacks puts it, ‘unadorned’.⁵³ The novel is often read as a *bildungsroman* “about” the early years of the life of Ruth Stone in which adult Ruth narrates the formative events in the story of her life starting with the deaths. Shortly before her mother Helen kills herself, she deposits Ruth and her younger sister Lucille on the porch of the family home where they are entrusted to the care of their elderly widowed grandmother Sylvia. Five years later, Sylvia also dies. All of this occurs in the first chapter, and the body of *Housekeeping* (Chapters Two to Eight of an eleven-chapter book) spans the year after the grandmother’s death; the same year in which various aunts look after Ruth and Lucille.⁵⁴ Ruth’s itinerant Aunt Sylvie Fisher is the last of these female relatives who, after years as a transient, replies to a newspaper advertisement written by Ruth and Lucille’s two great aunts. After Sylvie returns to Fingerbone to care for the girls in the old family home, her unconventional modes of housekeeping are narrated in such a way as to appear to result ultimately in the disintegration of what remains of the family and of the house. The novel culminates with Lucille leaving home to live with a teacher and Ruth and Sylvie crossing the infamous bridge across Lake Fingerbone to become permanent transients. Although it is from adult transience that Ruth’s narrates, the qualities of this ultimately metaphysical narrative position remain unclear until the novel’s end,

⁵¹ Painter, ‘Further Thoughts on a Prodigal Son Who Cannot Come Home, on Loneliness and Grace: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson’, *Christianity and Literature*, 58.3 (2009), 485-492, (p.492) and Robinson in Thompson, ‘At Home with the Past’, (para. 17).

⁵² Robinson used this phrase to describe the logic of the structure of *Housekeeping* in interview with Schaub, ‘an Interview’, p.242. I use it here also to encompass the structuring of *Gilead*.

⁵³ Sam Sacks, ‘Second Glance: Marilynne Robinson’s Psalms and Prophecy’, *Open Letters Monthly: An Arts and Literature Review* (1 December 2007)

<<http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/december-robinson/>> [accessed 22 June 2016], (para. 3).

⁵⁴ Robinson recently revealed that her manuscript of *Housekeeping* did not have chapters, but that her publishers insisted that she put them in. It was the success of *Housekeeping* that enabled Robinson to avoid the use of chapter sections in all three of her remaining novels – a form of writing she prefers. From notes taken from Robinson ‘Interview with Marilynne Robinson’, [interview at *Lila* book launch], Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, 12 November 2014.

thus maintaining the illusion throughout most of the novel that it is socially realistic and has something of a conventional narrative arc.

Gilead also appears to have a superficially simple narrative form in that it is epistolary. Ames is last in a long line of Congregationalist preachers in the small, mid-western town of Gilead, Iowa. His letter attempts, experientially, to explicate the meaning of his life in light of the prospect of losing his wife and young child. At the surface level of narrative, it is his child's 'begats' (G 10). But Robinson depicts Ames' experience of grief as thickened not only by paralleling the past and future losses of two wives and two young children, but by the emphasis she places on the lives (and deaths) of the narrator's father and grandfather. Both also preachers called John Ames, the elder an abolitionist from the north who travelled to the Midwest to prevent the spread of slavery, Robinson contrives it that the lives of these men span a very specific century of American history, that between the origins of the American Civil War (in the violent skirmishes known as Bloody Kansas) and the origins of the Civil Rights Movement. Writing between 1956 and 1957, but depicting meaningful memories and family chronicles from the preceding hundred years, Ames' narrative portrays his own intimate losses in non-linear form against a backdrop of acute suffering to which he, his father and his grandfather have all borne witness.

In the relative absence of narrative linearity, Robinson instead clusters reflections around key events in both novels. In *Housekeeping* these return again and again to Grandfather Edmund's death and Helen's suicide, but are pinned to an apparently linear timeline by Sylvie's arrival, the girls' different responses to her eccentric methods of housekeeping, and the increasingly ritualistic qualities of Ruth and Sylvie's outings and behaviours towards the point at which they cross the bridge at the end of the novel. Ruth's reflections are influenced also by the death of the grandmother at the beginning of Chapter Two and Lucille's silent departure from the family home in Chapter Seven. Much of Ames' narrative is formed as recollection of, and reflection on, meaningful moments from his childhood in attempt to convey their significance to his son. Although, like *Housekeeping*, *Gilead* follows the temporal structure of the year in which it is written, it has no chapter breaks and is organized around short sections presented as un-dated diary entries using direct address. These are sometimes as short as a single sentence though may extend over a few pages. Many of these fragments

are embedded reiterations of thoughts and memories that Ames has already presented, often, like Ruth, focalizing a past he wasn't privy to, or (unlike Ruth) a future he anticipates in heaven. In the latter half of *Gilead*, Ames' feelings and narrative focus start to cohere around his reactions to the return to Gilead of the errant adult son of his best friend, Reverend Robert Boughton who is also dying. Many of Ames' thoughts explore the threat he feels at the return of John – Jack – Ames Boughton, his problematic namesake and godson, a man he mistakenly fears will replace him after death in the lives of his wife and child.

To a great extent, the non-linearity of the reading experience with *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* is a result of the ways in which Robinson reinvigorates the tradition of the spiritual autobiography in both novels, though this is not immediately obvious given the density of her allusion. Robinson's use of allusion is well documented. Judie Newman has written that *Housekeeping* in particular 'sounds an intertextual note' and Thomas Schaub describes it as a 'cobbled text'.⁵⁵ Typically, commentators on Robinson's use of allusion in *Housekeeping* emphasize her debt to American Romanticism. Ravits argues that Robinson 'consciously sets' her first novel 'against the great texts of the American tradition' including Melville's *Moby Dick*, Thoreau's *Walden*, Poe's poetry and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* and many of Dickinson's poems.⁵⁶ That Robinson 'steeps' the work in the 'textual traditions' of these writers, she argues, enacts a form of 'self-definition through literary influence' which privileges her nineteenth-century 'stylistic and philosophical inheritance'.⁵⁷ Sarah Hartshorne, who explores the influence of Thoreau and folk art on the novel, argues that the effect of Robinson's intertextual mode is that she has 'revised, reinvented, and feminized the "traditional" canon of American literature'.⁵⁸ Hedrick argues that the "'influence" of precursor texts is so strong in *Housekeeping* as to be overwhelming'.⁵⁹ Others, particularly since the publication of *Gilead*, have started to explore the biblical and theological influences on the novel. Andrew Bower Latz writes that *Housekeeping* 'works with the creation poem of Genesis' first chapters [and...] the flood narrative'; and many

⁵⁵ Judie Newman, 'Solitary Sojourners in Nature: Revisionary Transcendentalism in Alison Lurie's *Love and Friendship* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*' in *The Insular Dream: Obsession and Resistance*, ed. by Kristaan Versluys (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1995), 303-323, (p.315) and Schaub, 'Lingering Hopes', p.308.

⁵⁶ Ravits, pp.644-645.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp.644-645.

⁵⁸ Sarah Hartshorne, 'Lake Fingerbone and Walden Pond: A Commentary on Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *MLA* 20.3 (1990), 50-57, (p.50).

⁵⁹ Hedrick, "'The Perimeters of Our Wandering Are Nowhere"', p.138.

have remarked on the novel's intertextuality with the Old Testament Book of Ruth.⁶⁰

Of the critics to explore intertextuality in *Housekeeping*, Maria Holmgren Troy is one of the few to have made explicit that the writers within the Romantic tradition for whom Robinson continues to so vocally express admiration were themselves 'looking back' at the 'Puritans and their ways of reading the world'.⁶¹ In her essay, 'In the First Person and in the House: The House Chronotope in Four Works by American Women Writers', Troy explains that these writers actively 'drew on and reinvented a Puritan heritage', a Calvinist tradition that Robinson – in the years since the publication of *Housekeeping* – has famously become increasingly interested in reclaiming.⁶² Although Robinson has expressed her indebtedness to the 'meditative aesthetic and religious preoccupations' of those traditions and has cited, amongst others, the influence of late Calvinist theologian Jonathan Edwards on her first novel, excluding Troy, few have explored the influence of specifically Puritan writing traditions on *Housekeeping*.⁶³

In the case of *Gilead*, the explicit religiosity and self-conscious learnedness of the Calvinist Reverend Ames, often makes intertextuality – specifically with religious texts – a more apparent mode. Casting her narrator as a scholarly preacher, Robinson is able to thematize a re-flexive and vividly felt intellectualism. Regularly, Ames himself signals his citations to his reader with the aim of educating his son. Mostly, these are bible references and or biblical structures, but Ames also frequently refers to other writers in other, more companionable ways: 'That's Calvin', he says and will 'take down the institutes'; or, (amongst many others) he refers to the words and voices of Protestant theologian Karl Barth, humanist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and the Romantic and Metaphysical poets Samuel Coleridge, John Donne and George Herbert (*G* 141, 237). As to the subtler allusions, critics have examined Robinson's re-workings of biblical parable in

⁶⁰ For discussion of the influence of The Book of Ruth – an influence Robinson insists was unconscious, see in particular the interview Hedrick, 'On Influence'. For important though cursory examination of the ways in which the Old Testament figure influences Ruth's characterization see Ravits and McDermott, 'Future-Perfect'.

⁶¹ Maria Holmgren Troy, 'In the First Person and in the House: The House Chronotope in Four Works by American Women Writers', (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Uppsala, Sweden, 1999), p.44.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁶³ Robinson in 'Talking About American Fiction', a group interview conducted by Russell Banks, Marilynne Robinson, Robert Stone, David Rieff moderated by Robert Boyers, *Salmagundi* 93 (Winter 1992), 61-77, (p.62).

Gilead and its partner novel *Home*; the Calvinist influences on the novel, including late Puritan sermon culture; some of the novel's Emersonian resonances, Shakespeare's *King Lear* and even the influence of twentieth-century writers and texts such as Scott Fitzgerald, Faulkner and the 1940s publication *Ladies Home Journal*.⁶⁴ Only Christopher Leise and Thomas Gardner, however, have explored the Calvinist influence of Puritan spiritual autobiography on Robinson's second novel. Yet it is the narrative strategies and forms of this heritage which fundamentally shape the architecture of both *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*.

The structure of spiritual autobiography undergirds both novels, shaping the depiction of grief. Despite ancient Christian precedent in the writings of St. Augustine, Robinson draws on the techniques of spiritual autobiography that evolved particularly within the Protestant tradition in the early seventeenth century. Originating in England during and after the Reformation, the tradition of spiritual autobiography developed in new forms in New England, drawing on the earliest experiences of Puritans' arriving in the New World. According to Owen C. Watkins:

Puritan autobiographies were the product of a Puritan conviction that the highest art a man could practice was the art of living, that the only masterpiece worthy of the name was to be achieved in the most complex and difficult of all forms of creative endeavor: a human life.⁶⁵

Correspondingly, according to Watkins, Puritans believed in the 'esteem' given to 'expository works'.⁶⁶ Such works were prose testimonies of what Sacvan

⁶⁴ See Painter, 'Further Thoughts' and 'Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction'. *Christianity and Literature* 59. 2 (2010), 321-340. For exploration of the thematic interplay of Calvinist thought and Robinson's fiction see Thomas Gardner, 'Narrative Calvinist'; for the links in Robinson's fiction with Jonathan Edwards, see Betty Mensch, 'Jonathan Edwards, *Gilead*, And The Problem Of "Tradition" [review of *Gilead*], *Journal of Law & Religion* 21.1 (2005), 221-241; For a critique of the ways in which Robinson adapts Calvinist and Puritan codes to conform with twenty-first century humanist mores, see Todd Shy, 'Religion and Marilynne Robinson', *Salmagundi* 155-156 (2007), 251-264; and Christie Maloyed, 'Death of Jeremiah? Marilynne Robinson and Covenant Theology', *Academia.edu* <https://www.academia.edu/10463107/Death_of_Jeremiah_Marilynne_Robinson_and_Covenant_Theology>. Churchwell often refers to the intertextuality of Robinson's novels. See in particular her review of *Gilead*, 'A Prodigal in the Heartland' and her recent lecture on *King Lear* and the *Ladies Home Journal* as 'intertexts' with *Gilead* as part of the 'Roundtable Discussion on Marilynne Robinson' at the Marilynne Robinson Symposium, Nottingham Trent University, 10 June 2016, <<https://robinsonsymposium.wordpress.com>>.

⁶⁵ Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography* (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1972), p.1.

⁶⁶ Watkins, p.1.

Bercovitch, in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, calls the 'soul's journey'.⁶⁷ Thomas Gardner, citing Robinson, has described each of her first-person novels as an attempt to follow this journey, focusing on 'the passage of a soul "through the vale of its making or destruction"' in accordance with Calvin's (and Robinson's) elevated view of the human and the human soul.⁶⁸ By drawing on this tradition, Robinson not only revitalizes (by fictionalizing) the complex literary form that inspired the early forms of the novel, but re-instantiates the soul as 'a metaphor for the inner life', a metaphor that Sam Sacks argues contemporary secular modernity (specifically neo-atheism) has 'left us bereft of'.⁶⁹

In his article, "'That Little Incandescence": Reading The Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*', Christopher Leise posits that *Gilead*'s form of autobiography as 'vehicle for working through some of [Ames'] most complicated personal difficulties with this world and the next' is 'precisely the mode of spiritual autobiography' valued by seventeenth and eighteenth-century Puritans on both sides of the Atlantic.⁷⁰ Typically, Leise argues, all spiritual autobiographies were a 'vehicle for the transmission of spiritual belief', but unlike spiritual biography (or Catholic hagiography), most concerned with holding up the Christian life as 'exemplar fide', the autobiography was an exemplar of Christian behavior in a 'more quotidian, everyman sense'.⁷¹

In *The Puritan Experience*, Watkins emphasizes the quotidian exemplar to be found in spiritual narratives and their narrators. He writes:

Spiritual autobiographies, with few exceptions, were not written because the writers thought *their* lives 'exemplary' [...] but because, as Thomas Goodwin pointed out, "That God pardon'd such a Man in such a Condition, is often brought home unto another Man in the same Condition."⁷²

⁶⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), p.8. Although Bercovitch points out that the concept of the soul's journey was a 'Christian commonplace', he notes its distinction within Puritan culture.

⁶⁸ Gardner, 'Narrative Calvinist', (para.7).

⁶⁹ Sam Sacks, 'From the Archives: A Certain Perturbation' [review of *Absence of Mind*], *Open Letters Monthly: An Arts and Literature Review* 1 July 2010 <<http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/a-certain-perturbation/>> [accessed 6 September 2016], (para. 4).

⁷⁰ Leise, p.352.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.352.

⁷² Watkins, p.2 citing Thomas Goodwin, *Works*, 1704, Vol. V, p.xii – my emphasis.

According to Watkins, the reflexive interiority and ‘diligent self-examination’ of such narratives had Pauline precedent in Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians to ‘Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith’ (2 Cor. 13:5).⁷³ Within this context, individual, deeply interior, “everyman” accounts of religious felt experience had special status. Similarly, Watkins explains that they emphatically elevated the reflections of the individual (writing) self in relation to God, to the extent that they were based on the central Protestant belief that there was no intermediary between God and man. He explains:

God was consistent in his dealings with men throughout history, but since he called everyone *individually*, each saw some aspect of His glory that was hidden from others.⁷⁴

It is from this tradition of depicting individual felt expression that Robinson draws.

Spiritual autobiography and the felt expression of grief

According to Patricia Caldwell, the particular nuances of a writing style that New England Puritans developed (in striking contra-distinction to English Puritans) was in response to the need to find ways of expressing the deeply emotional experiences of the ‘struggling soul’ in the New World.⁷⁵ In her book, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of Narrative Expression*, Caldwell examines the oral conversion accounts that were required for entry into the Puritan church and which are said to have influenced written autobiographical accounts. Within this tradition, she describes the challenges posed by oral and written articulation of emotions as the ‘problem of expression’.⁷⁶ More often than not, she explains, the problem was how to express feelings of ‘sorrow’, a problem she argues the early Puritans solved by developing a unique set of highly expressive and largely metaphorical narrative practices.⁷⁷ Troy argues that Robinson’s use of autodiegetic narration in *Housekeeping* also ‘refers back to American Puritan autobiographies’ and ‘conversion narratives’.⁷⁸ She argues that Robinson employs the ‘generic conventions’ of these traditions ‘on many textual levels’, and, like

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.2 – my emphasis.

⁷⁵ Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of Narrative Expression*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.168.

⁷⁶ ‘The Problem of Expression’ is the title of Caldwell’s fourth chapter, pp.135-162.

⁷⁷ Caldwell, p.167.

⁷⁸ Troy, p.46 – my emphasis.

Caldwell, specifically gives context for the ways these conventions developed in relation to expressions of bereavement and of loss.⁷⁹

According to Bercovitch, Puritan spiritual autobiography found a 'biographical precedent in the early Christian funeral orations'.⁸⁰ Troy's survey links these to the classical traditions of expressing self, person-hood and loss in the form of the Greek encomium. She explains that the encomium (from the Greek *egkōmion* meaning 'eulogy'), was 'a form of public funeral and memorial speech' and a form of expression that Mikhail Bakhtin has explored as the 'predecessor of more modern autobiographical and biographical genres'.⁸¹ Troy explains how the structure of the encomium came to influence the shape of subsequent (auto)biographical writing forms. She writes:

The form of the encomium is actually responsible for the split traditionally found in biographies into *praxeis* (chronology), a chronological reiteration of important events in a person's life, and *ethos* (meaning), the timeless meaning of this life.⁸²

Such biographies relied, by definition, on the biographical subject already being dead. Michael Holquist explains how the structure of the encomium was adapted to influence the structure of *autobiographical* as well as biographical narratives, the writers of which were, by definition, alive. He writes:

In later times this division which the Greeks formally marked between the time and the meaning of a life was eroded, and attempts were made with increasing urgency to conflate the two. However, the source of authority to which the Greeks had always appealed – the death of the subject, the stasis at the end point of his life's chronological sequence – remained unchanged. Such an arrangement would seem to preclude autobiographies for obvious reasons, but St. Augustine in his Confessions found a structural solution in conversion experience: he told his life before conversion as a temporally sequential narrative that ceases on the day when he hears the voice of God in a Roman garden, after that point in his twenty-first year he gives no more chronology, but an unplotted meditation on the mystery of time. The authority to interpret his life still derives from death, in this case the death of the subject he was before his conversion *and* his birth as the subject who writes the autobiography.⁸³

⁷⁹ Troy, p.46.

⁸⁰ Bercovitch, p.6.

⁸¹ Troy, p.46 and p.47. See also *SOED*, p.821.

⁸² Troy, p.47.

⁸³ Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p.136 – italics in the original.

Both *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* are structured around the death of the narrator. In *Housekeeping*, Ruth's conversion is marked as the last in a long series of rites that end when she follows Sylvie across the bridge out of Fingerbone and into transience. In the newspaper article that Sylvie keeps pinned to her coat after the crossing it says, 'LAKE CLAIMS TWO' and Ruth announces ambiguously, 'we are dead' (HK 213 and 217). In terms of the novel's structure and the genre of conversion narrative throughout literary and religious history, this death marks a threshold: from this point on (the last pages of the book), Ruth narrates in the present tense revealing the place of her conversion to be a perpetual state of transience. While the early part of the novel maintains the illusion of a certain temporal sequence, focusing on the childhood and adolescence of the girls and the year of Sylvie's care, as Ruth nears conversion the novel becomes increasingly meditative and unplotted, focusing more on 'timeless meaning' than *praxeis*, with an emphasis on a timeless continuous present. In fact, both of Robinson's autodiegetic novels privilege *ethos* over *praxeis*, a feature of the narratives which Robinson manages in both cases with the novel-length slow reveal of each narrator's conversion.

In *Gilead*, conversion and death converge in the form of Ames' anticipated actual death implicit in the act of stopping writing at novel's end and in the final lines of the novel, 'And then I'll sleep' (G 282).⁸⁴ Also, however, in anticipation of death, Ames experiences the metaphorical "death" of a self who has never been reconciled to the emotional difficulties presented by Jack Boughton. Ames' conversion occurs near the novel's end when the fraught experience of his personal struggles elides with Jack's own in Robinson's epiphanic ending. As Robinson reveals that Jack is a grieving father too and has a black wife and child, Ames realizes the extent of his un-Christian attitude towards Jack. The result is a fusion of emotional reactions. Ames converts what he calls his 'discreditable' emotions: the anger, shame, 'covetise' and vexation that have long dominated his feelings toward Jack into a new and fatherly compassion towards Jack's own suffering (G 161 and 152). So close to death, Ames is reborn into a profound humility and a new depth of felt experience which fuses his own grief with a recognition of Jack's losses and Ames' collusion in the racist structures that continue to keep Jack apart from his family, in perpetual suffering.

⁸⁴ For discussion of the importation of this line from *King Lear*, see Sarah Churchwell, 'A Place to Call Home' and her Roundtable contribution at the Marilynne Robinson Symposium, June 2016.

Looking back and forth in grief: the spiritual autobiographer as reflexive griever in *Gilead*

Despite the recent emphasis on socio-political readings of *Gilead*, Robinson's apparently realistic (and temporally specific) evocation of a dying preacher in 1956 also reveals itself to be a metaphoric rendering of intimate grief. Reverend John Ames is a learned Congregationalist minister who has lived most of his life alone in the parsonage at the edge of town. His life has been dominated by loneliness and solitary reflection. Now dying, his 'heart is failing' and age, physical frailty and the writing act itself further separate him from the world he narrates (G 4). The emotional imperative of this anticipatory grief gives the novel its explicitly pious narrative aim and its primary shape, the letter form of a traditional Puritan spiritual autobiography intended to be read posthumously. Leise points out that the epistolary form was a 'rarified' form of the spiritual autobiography favoured in particular by Protestant parents of Puritan New England writing to their children when contemplating their own 'imminent demise'.⁸⁵ Famous examples of such letters included the Protestant autobiographies of Puritan "saints" such as Anne Bradstreet, Thomas Shepard and later, Cotton Mather. Robinson reinvigorates this form with *Gilead* in order to thematize a particular type of reflexivity.

The novel depicts the felt reality of living, dying and grieving, an evocation that is influenced and textured by the epistolary form. Ames' experience of dying and leaving his young family is thickened by layers of bereavement, including the deaths of his father and grandfather, but also his first wife and child. In his twenties, Ames married his childhood sweetheart Louisa who died giving birth to their child, Rebecca. Ames has since spent the majority of his adult life grieving the loss of this first family. He describes this forty-year period as 'dark years' that seem like a 'long bitter prayer' (G 22), repeatedly making reference to that lonely era as his 'own dark time' (G 50). He makes the protracted nature of his grief explicit by describing it as 'that strange interval, which was most of my life' (G 45). The act of writing in old age to his 6-year-old living child, repeatedly triggers memories of, and recurring reflections on this long dead family.

⁸⁵ Leise, p.352.

Ames' narration has a communicative emotional imperative and profound moral responsibility, shaped by a long backward glance to a life and a past he wishes (and feels morally obliged) to share with his son, at the same time as an intense anticipation of a future time on earth which he will not, in material terms at least, inhabit. His narrative is burdened, then, with the weight and unexpected urgency of religious and paternal responsibility to record significant historical and spiritual truths for the child his young son Robert currently is, and the adult reader he will become. In this, his narrative echoes the serious and emotionally charged concerns of spiritual autobiographers such as Bradstreet and Shepard in particular, whose narratives were intended, as Leise points out, to be 'models of self-discovery and religious practice', but which also had 'an obviously useful didactic function' for their children.⁸⁶ Leise argues that such autobiographies were 'missives of torment and flight, loss and lament' and 'affliction and loss' in which the autobiographers outlined their 'foibles and failings' marked by striking and pious modesty, a modesty that is echoed in *Gilead*.⁸⁷

The episodic nature of *Gilead* is highly distinct. To replicate the qualities of spiritual autobiography, Robinson uses a form of intercalation in *Gilead*, whereby the 'acts of narration are inserted into the flow of experience' to both characterize and thematize reflexivity.⁸⁸ The novel is at once a letter and a series of diary entries, part prayer, part homily, but the apparently loose construction also resembles the wandering mind of an old man. Critics often comment on this aspect of the novel's style: for Joan Acocella the text 'meanders' and for Christopher Leise it has the distinctive quality of appearing to be 'somewhat directionless'.⁸⁹ This non-linear method of intercalation enables Robinson to communicate the fleeting, changing vitality of Ames' practical consciousness, allowing her/Ames to blend *praxeis* and *ethos* throughout and to texture 'fiction as thought'.⁹⁰ It is a technique which allows a slow seepage of information at the same time as privileging the felt realm. Ames' narrative flickers back and forth between 'feeling as thought' and 'thought as feeling' slowly revealing him to be variously philosophical, introspective, optimistic, humble, didactic, self-critical,

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.352.

⁸⁷ Leise, pp.352-353.

⁸⁸ Monica Fludernik, 'Time in Narrative' in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. by D. Herman, M. Jahn and M-L. Ryan (New York and Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2005), p.610.

⁸⁹ Acocella, 'A Note of the Miraculous', p.16 and Leise, p.348.

⁹⁰ Robinson in interview with Thessaly La Force, 'A Teacher and Her Student', 18 July 2013, *Vice*, 20.6 <<http://www.vice.com/read/a-teacher-and-her-student-000571-v20n6>> [accessed 22 June 2016], (para.19).

transcendent, anxious, contradictory, ambivalent and helpless. The intercalated form also allows Robinson to present Ames' exploration of the prospect of his own death and the impact of his cumulative griefs in the "real time" of the storyworld he depicts and thus demonstrate the grief experience to the reader as Ames' experiences it, rather than afterwards as she does in *Housekeeping*. The combination of delayed revelation, intercalation and the structure of spiritual autobiography allows Robinson to break into the chronology of her narrative –and the expanse of Ames' life and afterlife – at will. Similarly, casting her narrator as a dying, bookish preacher, Robinson is able to thematize the nostalgia of the reflective writing act and with it the inherent difficulties of 'the problem of expression' experienced by spiritual autobiographers struggling with the pain of loss.

Ames' writerly intention is clear, to forge *ethos* from *praxeis* by leaving his son something of himself – and the meaning of his life – after his death. He writes:

I am trying to tell you things I might never have thought to tell you if I had brought you up by myself, father and son, in the usual companionable way. When things are taking their ordinary course, it is hard to remember what matters. There are so many things you would never think to tell anyone. And I believe they may be the things that mean most to you, and that even your own child would have to know in order to know you well at all. (G 116)

The expression of 'what matters' to Ames is the epistemological aim of his project, but the passage of his soul is one that, as Gardner puts it, is marked by 'halts and recoveries'.⁹¹ Simultaneously, Robinson conveys the emotional difficulty of Ames' challenge by externalizing the exertions of the writing act. As such, she draws attention to the specific difficulties inherent in finding language to texture human consciousness at the same time as drawing attention to a 'practical consciousness' in the act of its own, creative, emergence.

Ames self-consciously wrestles with the form his writing will take. He frequently alludes to the difficulty of this narrative challenge, punctuating the epistolary record of poignant memories, spiritual observations, formal yet intimate confessions and quotidian details with regular narratorial interruptions. Repeatedly, he draws attention to the writerly act and to the inexactitude of the word. Echoing

⁹¹ Gardner, 'Narrative Calvinist', (para. 6).

Robinson's intention to pattern the "mind", Ames insists that he doesn't want to write how he speaks or how he writes his sermons, but 'how [he...] think[s]', yet he knows that a lifetime of sermon-writing will inevitably inflect his prose with the 'pulpitish' (G 33). He works hard to sound 'wise, the way a father should be' (G 63) and to produce 'a reasonably candid testament to [his] better self' but at the same time he repeatedly and self-consciously records his awareness that he must seem 'just an old man struggling with the difficulty of understanding what it is he's struggling with' (G 230). In his desire to communicate profoundly and honestly with his implied reader Robert, Ames often tells the reader explicitly what he is 'trying to tell' his son, while remaining cognizant of the gap between language and experience. He insists to his son 'you must not judge what I know by what I find words for' (G 116 and 130). His self-consciousness that, in grief, age, illness and even folly 'trying to describe [...] what [he] has never before put into words', results in a record of the process and pitfalls of his own writing and grieving that at times make him 'weary in the struggle' (G 51).

To tackle this Robinson often presents Ames' felt realm stylistically rather than via external expressions. For example, the gravity of his task is reinforced by the ways in which Ames (like Puritan spiritual autobiographers before him) draws on biblical structures as much as biblical reference. Robinson has herself written of the 'special well of meaning' that any fiction writer draws on when, consciously or unconsciously, alluding to the Bible.⁹² She has written:

Whatever state of belief of a writer, such resonances have meaning that is more than ornamental, since they acknowledge complexity of experience of a kind that is the substance of fiction.⁹³

She argues that the influence is such because the text isn't just part of long religious tradition, but because it is part of a long and 'powerful literary tradition' that emerged out of a cluster of texts fascinated by ordinary human lives, a fascination that persists in fiction.⁹⁴ In *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible*, Robert Alter argues that this influence in contemporary fiction is often stylistic in a way that is invisible to a secular reader. Yet, he argues, the 'powerful

⁹² Robinson, 'The Book of Books: What Literature Owes the Bible', *New York Times*, 22 December 2011 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/25/books/review/the-book-of-books-what-literature-owes-the-bible.html>>, [accessed 22 June 2016], (para. 1).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, (para. 1).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, (para.1)

afterlife of the Bible in the prose style of American fiction' is often the 'vehicle of a particular vision of reality', creating a 'strong prose' that would not have existed otherwise and which, in a plethora of ways, always engages into dialogue with the history of a text 'hewn from deep quarries of moral and spiritual experience'.⁹⁵ In the opening pages of *Gilead*, Robinson uses the biblical structure of parataxis to present Ames' felt reality in parallel with the facts of his situation and the moral and spiritual challenge it will go on to pose.

In the first paragraphs of the novel, Ames outlines his narrative position as a dying man; his tone is serious but his prose is clear. The paratactic pattern echoes the 1611 edition of the canonical King James Version of the Bible, the translation from which most early American Puritans drew their influence. The novel opens:

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. I told you you might have a very different life from mine, and from the life you've had with me, and that would be a wonderful thing, there are many ways to live a good life. And you said, Mama already told me that. And then you said, Don't laugh! Because you thought I was laughing at you. You reached up and put your fingers on my lips and gave that look I never in my life saw on any other face besides your mother's. It's a kind of furious pride, very passionate and stern. I'm always a little surprised to find my eyebrows unsinged after I've suffered one of those looks. I will miss them.

It seems ridiculous to suppose the dead miss anything. If you're a grown man when you read this – it is my intention of this letter that you will read it then – I'll have been gone a long time. I'll know most of what there is to know about being dead, but I'll probably keep it to myself. That seems to be the way of things. (*G* 3-4)

The use of parataxis and the repetition of primary verbs here, particularly 'said', appears to present the facts of Ames' death to his son without emotional flourish. It is typical of what Robert Alter calls the 'resolute simplicity' of the style of the King James Version of the Old Testament in which parataxis is most commonly used to depict or 'report [...] events'.⁹⁶ At the very least, this style lends the opening passage gravitas, the 'weight and solemnity' that Alter argues influences all such

⁹⁵ Alter, *Pen of Iron*, p.4, p.5 and p.7.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.150 and p.151.

stylistic repetitions.⁹⁷ Unlike the source text, however, Ames' opening resembles more the Puritan autobiography in that it also gestures towards the emotionality, introspection and ambivalence of Ames' narrative. The direct address, the references to physical touch and the short sentence, 'I will miss them', gesture toward the depth of felt experience behind the narrative. James Wood describes parataxis as a type of 'stony reticence' or 'withholding writing' whereby meaning is to be gleaned between the 'gaps' in verses of the bible or even 'between the clauses of a single verse'.⁹⁸ It is here, he posits, that the 'realism' of the biblical text is created.⁹⁹ Thus it is as much in the gaps between clauses that Robinson depicts aspects of Ames' felt reality.¹⁰⁰ Although formally 'analogous to the way biblical narrative represents the constituent actions in a chain of events', Alter argues that Robinson's use of parataxis puts the burden on the reader to work out the multiple, ramified, and sometimes ambiguous possibilities of connection among the elements reported'.¹⁰¹ These possibilities are always forged in *Gilead* by Ames' lens on death and by association his anticipatory experience of grief.

The second page of the novel continues to avoid subordination. Ames writes:

I don't know how many times people have asked me what death is like, sometimes when they were only an hour or two from finding out for themselves. [...] I used to say it was like going home. We have no home in this world, I used to say, and then I'd walk back up the road to this old place and make myself a pot of coffee and a fried-egg sandwich and listen to the radio, when I got one, in the dark as often as not. Do you remember this parsonage? [...] I grew up in parsonages. [...] And when I thought about it in those days, which wasn't too often, I thought this was the worst of them all, the draftiest and the dreariest. [...] I didn't feel very much at home in the world, that was a fact. Now I do.

And now they say my heart is failing. (G 4)

The accumulation of Ames' statements and interrogative stretches the paratactic form such that the gap between the final two clauses emphatically captures the fraught emotional reality of his situation and the impending loss of all that he has finally gained.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.13.

⁹⁸ Wood, 'Robert Alter and the King James Bible', *The Fun Stuff* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013), pp.128-142, (p.130).

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.130.

¹⁰⁰ Alter, *Pen of Iron*, p.163.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp.167-168.

***Gilead* and 'is-ness': grief and the dilation of narrative time**

The opening passage of *Gilead* also hints at the fluid temporality of the text; the single present tense sentence at its centre, 'It seems ridiculous to suppose the dead miss anything', not only summing up the tensile emotionality of Ames' situation, but operating as a fulcrum for a reflection on the encounter with his son the night before and the 'long time' of his anticipated state of being dead in the future. In this, the opening section mirrors the special temporality that intercalation lends the text of *Gilead* as a whole. In Ames, Robinson constructs a narrative voice and consciousness formed by careful attention to loss, one whose unwavering Christian faith in the afterlife enables him not only to dwell on his losses, pondering their pain, but to look both back and forth in grief. As Leise puts it, *Gilead* is an 'epistle' that has the 'strange effect both of looking back as well as looking forward.'¹⁰² As such, the text is by nature, non-teleological and exploratory in Boym's sense of the word *off-modern*. His text is at once synchronic - incorporating the private reveries at the time of writing - and diachronic, always inflected by the reflective urgency of history and the proleptically imagined wants and needs of his implied, but always deferred, reader, his one-day adult son. It is also thronged with Ames' range of feelings about leaving his child. Moving diachronically between multiple histories, the present and the future, pondering pain is the source of great sadness but also much of what makes him vividly appreciate life in the present tense.

Gilead, like early spiritual autobiographies such as Bradstreet's and Shepard's, is a 'meditation on death'; but a critical difference between *Gilead* and these narratives and *Gilead* and *Housekeeping* is that *Gilead* is structured around expressions of delight in life that Ames constantly interleaves with his sorrow at the loss of it.¹⁰³ Where, as Leise puts it, 'affliction and loss are Bradstreet's most salient concerns' and 'loss and lament' is Shepard's, Reverend Ames is very often "surprised by joy".¹⁰⁴ Moments of joy are both source and topic of much of Ames' reflective dwelling; they are also the ultimate means by which Robinson extends the diegetic present and thus the felt experience of bereavement, defying the 'cultural injunction to move through grief'.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Leise, p.348.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.354.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.354.

¹⁰⁵ Tanner, *Lost Bodies*, p.13.

Self-conscious of time passing, the dying Ames describes one of the intimate 'pleasures' of 'these days' being that he 'notice[s] them all, minute by minute' (G 106). At times, anticipatory grief and the present continuous state of dying produce repeated present tense alertness to the parallel present continuous state of being. Jeffrey Hart calls this 'concentration of mind' and sensory alertness a form of 'is-ness'.¹⁰⁶ Sometimes this takes the forms of simple present exclamations such as, 'I love the prairie!' and, 'I love this town' or 'I don't want to be old and I certainly don't want to be dead.' (G 281-282 and 161). At other times, Robinson slows Ames' life (and his experience of grief) down – beyond the frames usually available in the present tense – to show what it is like to be in it. This quality of narration has been described by Wood as the novel's 'processional pace'.¹⁰⁷ Tanner calls it 'slow-time' a 'prolonged present' that is 'shadowed by the consciousness of loss'.¹⁰⁸ In her article, 'Looking back from the grave: Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*', Tanner explores the dilation of narrative time in the novel as a way in which 'dying shapes the sensory and psychological dynamics' of Ames' perception and as such 'traps him in the collapsing space between perception and representation'.¹⁰⁹ While Tanner draws detailed attention to what Geri Berg and Sally Gadow call the 'rich density' of this version of temporality, she also argues that Ames' position is ultimately 'diminished' to the role of 'observer rather than participant' by the temporal positioning of his dying consciousness.¹¹⁰ When read as part of Robinson's own reflective nostalgia, however, the rich density of Ames' heightened perception can be said to offer a 'wide opening of experience' of the type that Gardner attributes to Robinson's use of metaphor; one that is akin to, though not reducible to religious experience.¹¹¹

Sometimes, intercalation slips and it is his sorrow that is most in evidence. This often occurs when he moves, seemingly unconsciously, between past, present

¹⁰⁶ Jeffrey Hart, 'Now a Masterpiece - *Gilead*: A Novel', [review of *Gilead*], *National Review*, 20 May 2005 <<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/214503/now-masterpiece-jeffrey-hart>> [accessed 18 May 2013], (para.9).

¹⁰⁷ Wood, 'Acts of Devotion', (para. 10).

¹⁰⁸ Tanner, "'Looking back'", p.242.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.228.

¹¹⁰ Geri Berg and Sally Gadow, 'Towards More Human Meanings of Age: Ideals and Images from Philosophy and Art', *Aging and the Elderly: Humanistic Perspectives in Gerontology* e. by S.F. Spicker, K.M. Woodward, and D.D Van Tassel (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1978), pp 83-92, (p.85), cited in Tanner, "'Looking back'", p.233.

¹¹¹ Gardner, 'Enlarging Loneliness', *A Door Ajar*, p.57.

and future tenses. Early on he blends present with the present perfect (thereby making a present tense assumption about an imagined past event) when he says, 'I regret very deeply the hard times I know you and your mother must have gone through' (G 5). Later, watching his son blowing bubbles with his mother and their cat in the garden, Ames notes:

Some of the bubbles drifted up through the branches, even above the trees. You two were too intent on the cat to see the celestial consequences of your worldly endeavors. [...] Your mother *is* wearing her blue dress and you *are* wearing your red shirt and you *were* kneeling on the ground together with Soapy between and that effulgence of bubbles rising and so much laughter. (G 10 – my emphasis)¹¹²

As he moves back and forth between past, present and past tense again, Ames' narrative position hovers on the threshold of synchronic and diachronic time. Intercalation, by definition, lacks the teleology of other narrative forms (including here the actual death of the narrator). Ames' little tense slips thus replicate the expression and repeated iteration of the open-endedness of loss by emphasizing being in, rather than moving through, or out of, grief.

Sometimes, Ames emphasizes futurity, his powers of anticipation forged by detachment. In part this is due to his illness and his aging, both of which relegate him to the outskirts of his house (his study, the porch) and make him more of an observer than a participant in the activities of his wife and child, but this detachment is also a meditative quality of Ames as religious, thinking man. Theorizing the ways that fiction writers narrativize both the present and the past, Mark Currie writes that, the novelist's usual decision to present the 'present' of a novel to the reader in past tense, and thus as a version of the past, means that '[n]arrative is understood in retrospection more readily than it is understood in anticipation.' He explains:

[...] anticipation, or a mode of being which experiences the present as the object of a *future memory*, has one of its fictional correlatives in the structural retrospect of the novel, but it can also be related to the question of prolepsis, or the kind of fictional flash forward that conjoins a 'present' moment to a future one.¹¹³

¹¹² I am indebted to Tanner for an explication of this moment in her article, "Looking Back". Tanner's was a starting point for my analysis; the observations about intercalation are my own.

¹¹³ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 2007), p.6 - my emphasis.

In her depiction of Ames' consciousness, Robinson makes extensive use of little moments that 'flash forward' and the abstraction that Currie calls 'future memory'. In *Housekeeping*, the reader must wait until the final revelation of Ruth's adult framing space to experience the illumination of all that has gone before as the 'structural retrospect' of a grieving woman. In *Gilead*, however, Ames' intercalated narration is constructed from and defined by his anticipatory mode of being, that is the anticipation of his death, his son's life after his death and his own afterlife. As she does with Ruth in *Housekeeping*, Robinson lends Ames a form of omniscience as he anticipates becoming "extra" to his own diegesis, although this narrative space (the imagined afterlife) is embedded and interleaved within his diegetic present. Part of this compounds the marginality he has always felt as a consequence of his long years of grief and loneliness. Again, and as a consequence, tense-shifts reveal this peripherality. He writes:

I feel a kind of loving grief for you as you read this, because I do not know you, and because you have grown up fatherless, you poor child, lying on your belly now in the sun with Soapy asleep on the small of your back. (G 118)

Robinson here interweaves Ames' own present tense in narrated time, 'I feel...you lying on your belly now', with the future of his implied reader Robert's "reader time" in present perfect, 'you *have grown up*'. This locates Ames meta- and proleptically as narrator in an imagined, yet vividly felt, place he occupies only in faith. His future memories are constructed metaphysically in the future time his child will read his text and Robinson's tense use repeatedly affirms his own anticipated existence after death.

At times this future is highly fraught and the emotions of grief manifest for Ames as acute personal crisis. These usually crystallize around Jack Boughton. The return of Jack midway through the novel, causes Ames to become anxious, and preoccupied with a fraught jealousy and familial protectiveness somewhere in death that his imagination has already taken him. Delivering his sermon one Sunday, he observes Jack sitting next to Lila and young Robert in church. The scene gives him the opportunity to voice a strange proleptic retrospection fuelled emotionally by the fear of death and Ames' helplessness to the possible threats it may pose his young family. He is vexed by his inability to trust Jack. He writes:

The truth is, as I stood there in the pulpit, looking down on the three of you, you looked to me like a handsome young family, and my evil old heart rose within me, the old covetise I have mentioned elsewhere came over me, and *I felt the way I used to feel* when the beauty of other lives was a misery and an offense to me. And *I felt* as if I were *looking back from the grave*. (G 160 – my emphasis)

Tanner writes of this explicitly imagined moment of ‘felt’ experience and ‘looking back’ as a means by which Robinson ‘shapes the somatosensory experience of the novel’s protagonist in the narrative present’ as a ‘powerful unveiling of how dying shapes the sensory and psychological dynamics of human perception.’¹¹⁴ Tanner links age and perception with evolutions in cognitive science and neurobiology. Reconsidered in terms of Boym’s reflective nostalgia, Ames’ moment of ‘looking back’ can be read to shape the stylistics and emotions of the novel as a whole. The narrative positioning in this scene – Ames outside and looking down at his family from the pulpit – facilitates a means by which Ames, present, but anticipatorily absent, actually experiences the pain of loss as if he were already dead. This is a feeling Ames is familiar with, it marks a looping return to something he ‘used to feel’, that is the ‘misery’ of envy and ‘offense’ that was fuelled for most of his adult life by the early deaths of his first family. The sharp and immediate pangs of loss and fear and envy are feelings he knows and now feels again, feelings of ‘desolation’ and formations of grief even (or especially) in death.

Ames also finds significant compensation for his suffering in this futurity. Despite experiencing inevitable anguish, anticipation is a source of Ames’ joy in his son and the paradoxical optimism of his grief in faith. The narrative framework created by Ames’ total Christian conviction enables him to frequently lean on prolepsis to confidently locate himself in the future, in the afterlife that in his imaginings is merely ‘the splendours of the world [...] multipl[ied] by two’ (G 167). Again, present tense declarations denote this and assert his future existence: ‘I pray all the time. I did while I lived, and I do now, too, if that is how things are in the next life’ (G 5). His Christian distinction between the corporeal and the spiritual does not prevent him embodying his dead spirit with the physicality of a strong father for his son. For Ames, the ‘imagination of heaven [...] is one of the best pleasures of this world’ and is made physical in his imaginings as ‘a perpetual, vigorous

¹¹⁴ Tanner, “Looking back”, p.228.

adulthood' (G 189). This certainty enables Ames to explain his future as a (meta)physical presence in his son's future life:

While you read this I am imperishable, somehow more alive than I have ever been, in the strength of my youth, with dear ones beside me. You read the dreams of an anxious, fuddled old man, and I live in a light better than any dream of mine. (G 60-61)

These proleptic projections of Ames enable him, in text, to confidently imagine a continued and expanded family life beyond the grave.

Anticipatory grief permits for anticipatory emotions of pride and hope in his son and joy at the prospect of reuniting with long-dead Louisa and Rebecca. This takes textual form in a blending of analepsis and prolepsis via the merging of past and future memory. Robinson structurally parallels recollections of Louisa in childhood and an imagined adult Rebecca with observations of Lila and an imagined older Robert. He sees Robert playing catch and pictures Louisa 'skipping rope' (G 116), or remembers the first time world-weary Lila 'walked into church' and imagines his dead baby Rebecca at 51, 'coming back from a place where everything is known (G 22-23). The compensations of anticipation culminate towards the end of the novel when Ames imagines Robert as an 'old man [...]'; the 'first twinge of arthritis in your knee', he says, will prompt in Ames as much 'tenderness' as the first 'loose tooth' (G 239). This final projection enables Ames to poignantly prolong his son's life as he faces and regrets the sad foreshortening of his own.

'Dailiness': grief and the miracle of the earthly everyday

Another distinct feature of Ames's narrative is that he focuses on tiny details of the quotidian, a phenomenon that Wood calls 'dailiness'.¹¹⁵ Churchwell calls these moments that 'explode with meaning'; and Leise calls them 'tableaus' [*sic*] or 'vignettes' that constitute minute 'scenes of miracles'.¹¹⁶ What each critic refers to here are little scenes that occur throughout the novel during which Ames's observations and recollections open out into a prismatic collection of reflections, episodes and images only tangentially linked by topic that can go on for many pages. Although other critics have lent these moments profound secular meaning,

¹¹⁵ Wood, 'Acts of Devotion', (para. 4).

¹¹⁶ Churchwell, 'Balm in Gilead' and Leise, p.349.

Leise contextualizes them as ‘moments of intense perception’ that are ‘steeped’ in the Calvinist religious tradition that Robinson is intent on reclaiming.¹¹⁷ Through them, he argues, Robinson produces a ‘radical, but legitimate rereading of the Calvinism after Puritanism: one that finds the beauty of the world not simply as an *a fortiori* argument for the beauty of God’s afterlife, but as an experience of the divine itself.’¹¹⁸ They are used by Robinson as ‘a vehicle to an experience of the divine that is immediate and immanent: an experience that stops short of knowing through reason and is content with simply living the experience of the miraculous in the everyday.’¹¹⁹ For Leise, Robinson’s Calvinism is ‘dynamic’ and responds as much to the eighteenth-century theology of New England Calvinist theologian, Jonathan Edwards as it does to Calvin.¹²⁰ Leise argues that by emphasizing the ‘earthly’ rather than the ‘transcendent’ qualities of experience stressed by Shepard and Bradstreet’s narratives; Robinson ‘injects the older form’ of spiritual autobiography with a ‘new purpose’, inspired by the ecstatic mysticism revealed in Edwards’ view of ‘natural phenomena’.¹²¹ As such, the earthly becomes ‘the site of God made manifest’ and Ames lives his experience of the miraculous as it is integrated into and is made manifest in his experience of bereavement.¹²²

These earthly tableaux or ‘scenes of miracles’ proliferate in the novel and are perhaps the single most distinctive quality of Ames’ narration. They are nearly always generated from an inciting memory that he is dying. More often than not, Ames finds something of joy and celebration in his observations of the material world that he is so deeply reluctant to leave. Sometimes the scenes of miracle are intimate and quotidian. One such example occurs in a section from the early part of the novel when Ames notices that Lila and Robert are returning to the house with flowers. He realizes and infers (thought doesn’t state) that they have been up to the graveyard, to get Robert ‘a little used to the place’ (G 58). One of the flowers is a honeysuckle and the reverie opens outwards into an intimate description of Ames playing with his son and sucking and tooting on the flower. He starts to reminisce about honeysuckle from his childhood and then begins to reflect on ‘the way the light felt that afternoon’ (G 59). This observation takes him, over the

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.350.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.351.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.351.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.351.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p.352.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p.352.

course of a page, to ‘the shimmer of light on a child’s hair, in the sunlight’, which takes him to his own boy’s ‘straight’, ‘dark’ hair and finally to the simple fact of his child’s ‘existence’ and that ‘little incandescence’ of his humanity (G 60). The small scene of domestic ‘dailiness’ takes Ames from the visible, tangible materiality of the taste and smell of a honeysuckle bloom plucked from a graveyard to the ‘perfection’, in Ames eyes, of the miraculous fact of his son’s being.

In other instances, the tableaux function typologically. The ancient Christian hermeneutic of typology, in the words of Smith, Stout and Mankima, is a ‘biblical discipline of detecting parallels between Old Testament persons and events (types) and their New Testament counterparts or fulfilments (anti-types)’.¹²³ Typically Christological – that is concerned with the existence and prefiguration of Christ – John Calvin, and later Jonathan Edwards, propounded a more expansive typological vision that incorporated the natural world and everyday phenomena. In *The Institutes*, Calvin wrote:

Since the perfection of blessedness consists in the knowledge of God (cf John 17:3), he has been pleased, in order that none might be excluded from the means of obtaining felicity, not only to deposit in our minds that seed of religion of which we have already spoken, but so *to manifest his perfections in the whole structure of the universe, and daily place himself in our view, that we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold him*¹²⁴

In his 1725 essay ‘Beauty of the World’, Jonathan Edwards writes, echoing Calvin in a neo-Platonic vein:

The beauty of the world consists wholly of sweet mutual consents, either within itself, or with the Supreme Being. As to the corporal world, though there are many other sorts of consents, yet the sweetest and most charming beauty of it is its resemblance of spiritual beauties. The reason is that spiritual beauties are infinitely the greatest, and bodies being but the shadows of beings, they must be so much the more charming as they shadow forth spiritual beauties. This beauty is peculiar to natural things, it surpassing the art of man.¹²⁵

¹²³ John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema eds., *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p.xii.

¹²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge, ed. by Anthony Uyl (Woodstock, ON., Canada: Devoted Publishing, 2016), Chapter IV, p.26.

¹²⁵ Jonathan Edwards, ‘The Beauty of the World’ in Smith *et al*, pp.14-15, (p.14).

Robinson and Ames are both explicit about the influence of Calvin and Jonathan Edwards on their thinking.¹²⁶ Smith *et al* have written that Edwards' theology demonstrates an 'ecstatic view of the material world and nature that reflects ' a 'mystical side' to his thought.¹²⁷ They add that Edwards' relationship to the natural world became influential in his creation of 'an expanded typology beyond the confines of Scripture into nature, history, and human experience, thereby anticipating the Transcendentalists of nineteenth-century New England' for whom this expansive typology was a vivid hermeneutic.¹²⁸ In her essay 'Psalm Eight', Robinson echoes this thought. She declares:

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 the miracle is here, among us.¹²⁹

This form of earthly yet mystical typology – this seeing – emerges as fundamental to Robinson's narratology in *Gilead*, fundamental to Ames' vision of life in light of death.

In particular, Robinson uses it as a means by which to convey the meaning of fatherhood and loss as Ames faces losing his son. The earthly tableaux are used by Robinson as a means not of telling reader Robert what his father means, but of showing him. Thus, they function as moments of revelation: attempting to reveal to the child the meaningfulness of the experiences as they were revealed to the father Ames by his father. I give but one example: Ames' preoccupation with the memory of a journey he took to Kansas as a child with his father to find the grave of the elder John Ames, the grandfather. The 'desert wanderings' as he calls them, recur as a source of emotional, ethical and spiritual significance to Ames throughout the novel. They stand as a reference point for the lengths his father went to for his difficult, dead grandfather; the meaningfulness of the old, forgotten grave of the elder Reverend Ames, and, for the inarticulable qualities of the relationship between father and son that Ames' so wishes to communicate to his child in light of his death. The 'earthly' materiality of the journey and of the grave

¹²⁶ For one of her many references to the influence of Edwards' thought, see the introduction to *When I Was a Child*. Ames references both Calvin and Edwards repeatedly throughout *Gilead*.

¹²⁷ Smith *et al*, p.xiii.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.xiii.

¹²⁹ Marilynne Robinson, 'Psalm Eight', *Death of Adam*, pp.227-244, (p.243).

itself is emphatic in Ames' evocation, not least because it occurs in 1892 during one of the state's infamous droughts. He focuses always on the 'terrible' road, the 'baked' 'ruts', the 'dust' and the meager sources of water and food, the 'parched and sun-stricken' graves, 'just outlined with stones' (G 12-15). Father and son eventually find the grave amongst the 'dead brown grass' and tend to it with seed from their 'own garden', steadfastly 'putting things to rights' to alleviate something of Ames' father's grief and guilt (G 15). In the moment during which Ames' father says a prayer over the grave, narrator Ames describes his young self, restless and tired, looking 'around a little' and witnessing the following:

At first I thought I saw the sun setting in the east; I knew where east was, because the sun was just over the horizon when we got there that morning. Then I realized that what I saw was a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it, as if there were palpable currents of light passing back and forth, or as if great taut skeins of light suspended between them. (G 16)

In order to alert his father to the vision in front of him, young Ames kisses his praying father's hand, bringing the scene, quite literally, back to the material world. Ames' memory of this scene vibrates with significance, coming as it does at the end of their long and difficult pilgrimage. And the apparently 'godforsaken' place of his grandfather's grave is made 'beautiful' (G 11 and 17). He returns to this moment and the journey home later as a source of inexpressible emotion and depth between father and son, demonstrating the reflexive relationship he has with the recurring natural image as well as with his memory of his own dead father. He expresses the limits of language first, saying 'I can't tell you, though, how I felt', and then persists in building the rest of the memory as an extended simile to convey something of its meaning. The memory has the appearance of description, but is structured around the image of a dream which functions analogically and typologically to demonstrate how, rather than what, Ames felt at that time. He writes:

I can't tell you, though, how I felt, walking along beside him that night, along that rutted road, through that empty world – what a sweet strength I felt, in him, and in myself, and all around us. I am glad I didn't understand, because I have rarely felt joy like that, and assurance. It was like having one of those dreams where you're filled with some extravagant feeling you might never have in life, it doesn't matter what it is, even guilt or dread, and you learn from it what an amazing instrument you are, so to speak, what a

power you have to experience beyond anything you might ever actually need. Who would have thought that the moon could dazzle and flame like that? Despite what he said, I could see that my father was a little shaken. He had to stop and wipe his eyes. (G 55-56)

Thomas Gardner argues that Ames' determination to describe 'what matters' to his son comes from the emotional urgency behind the impulse that what Ames 'wants to tell his son is what his soul has made' of the events of his life.¹³⁰ According to Leise, Ames' reflection on the experience of witnessing the moon and the sun in the sky above the grandfather's grave is an example of Robinson's use of 'the physical world as signifier' and as such an example of what Robinson has described as the 'better model' of Calvinism, one that 'is lost in the current reduction ad absurdum of a complex tradition' but one which is 'rapturous' in its 'humanism'.¹³¹ This rapturous humanism affords an illustration of the metaphysical reach of the emotions of grief in the most earthly of moments. It is made available in Robinson's nostalgic metaphorical depictions and is an elevated vision of the soul as the human inner life, whatever state it is deemed to be in.

Ruth as spiritual autobiographer: the figuration of the 'brokenness within' in *Housekeeping*

As an evocation of grief, the phenomenon of combining slow revelation with the privileging of ethos over praxeis is particularly impactful in *Housekeeping*. Ruth Stone's "death", figured as material absence, is arguably Robinson's metaphor for interminable grief. The revelation of her metaphysical narrative space in *Housekeeping's* last pages comes retrospectively to undermine aspects of the novel's chronology and any claims it has on social realism, privileging entirely the *ethos* of Ruth's life in loss. The deaths of Edmund, Helen and Sylvia and the separation from Lucille reveal themselves over the course of the novel to have generated the emotional force behind almost all of Ruth's reflections. The revelation of Ruth's narrative position provides a retrospective lens on the experiences described within the novel, revealing them to be endless metaphorical attempts to express the emotional texture of her own sense of these losses. It is this retrospective, exploratory and interrogative mode to which, I think, Robinson refers when she says that *Housekeeping* is a novel which 'realises its subject' in

¹³⁰ Gardner, 'Narrative Calvinist', (para. 6.).

¹³¹ Leise, p.359 and Robinson 'Puritans and Prigs', *Death of Adam*, pp.150-173, (p.171).

the sense that it is 'able to say at the end things that would not have made sense at the beginning'.¹³²

In delaying the revelation of Ruth's conversion in *Housekeeping*, Robinson makes the delay the point, giving over the entirety of the novel to her exploration of the texture of Ruth's consciousness. Robinson has said, 'As I understand her, Ruth has lost many things and in effect creates a complete reality out of the things she has lost'.¹³³ In an interesting echo of Freud's language, Robinson says that it is Ruth's 'own experience' that is the 'test of all reality' in *Housekeeping*, thus actively privileging first person experience.¹³⁴ The temporality of Ruth's grief is not, then, chronological or processual, but, something else, 'the force behind' which, she comes to reveal, is a present-continuous 'mourning that will not be comforted' (*HK* 192). The result, in terms of the novel form, is what Jean Wyatt calls a 'reverse bildung' during which Ruth's spiritual and emotional education, as well as her evocation as griever, occurs in inverse proportion to her physical dissolution figured as transience.¹³⁵

The slow reveal of what Schaub describes as Ruth's 'loyal and relentless mourning' means that Ruth's grieving consciousness accretes meaning as the patterns and quirks of her narration gather emotional intensity.¹³⁶ Critics usually discuss the complexity of Ruth's narration in terms of voice. Caver describes her as 'dual-voiced' because of the contrast between Ruth the character and Ruth the narrator.¹³⁷ Survivor of multiple tragedies, the character, Ruth the child, is diegetically 'quiet' (*HK* 37). Unprepossessing and often spoken for by her sister Lucille or later Sylvie, her actual voice, such as it is, is revealed only in tiny bits of dialogue or reported speech mostly limited to monosyllabic utterances of the kind that mark her out as awkward, shy and – not unironically – inarticulate. Rosaria Champagne describes her as a 'speechless narrator' and indeed, by the end of the novel she is vocally all but silent, speaking 'only to Sylvie' (*HK* 183).¹³⁸ However, the Ruth telling the story is an adult transient with an interior voice that is

¹³² Schaub 'an interview', p.242. Robinson does not name this narrative process as the depiction of grief.

¹³³ Robinson in Gardner, 'Interview', *A Door Ajar*, p.59 – my emphasis.

¹³⁴ Robinson in Pinsker, *Conversations*, p.126.

¹³⁵ Wyatt, '*Housekeeping*: The Impossible Poetry of the Preoedipal', p.82.

¹³⁶ Schaub, 'Lingering Hopes', p.319

¹³⁷ Caver, p.116.

¹³⁸ Rosaria Champagne, 'Women's History and *Housekeeping*: Memory, Representation and Reinscription', *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 20.3-4 (1992), 321-329, (p.326).

lyrical, homiletic and loud. This detached and otherworldly voice is, as Kirkby puts it, the voice of 'the last pages of the book'.¹³⁹ Ravits describes it as 'speaking from another dimension', Schaub 'another realm that haunts the reader's world'.¹⁴⁰ Some critics interpret the discrepancy between both voices as a form of unreliable narration.¹⁴¹ But the potency and metaphorical power of Ruth's narration is not reducible to the relationship between these two voices if they are understood, as Caver describes them, as the 'all-but-absent public one and the lyrical private one'.¹⁴² Indeed, it is obfuscatory to describe Ruth's narrative voice as voice, since Robinson's attempt is to narrate the patterns of Ruth's mind with all of the sensory, emotional and intellectual capacities she brings to bear on narrating the complexity of her felt experience. As Ravits puts it, Ruth's 'sphere of concern opens inwards'.¹⁴³ In her book *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, Amy Hungerford argues that the 'basic assumption' behind the narrative strategies of all of Robinson's novels is that 'ordinary people have rich and complicated interior lives, that embody a silent discourse of thought that, if we knew its voice, would astonish us'.¹⁴⁴ Robinson has described the narrative exercise of articulating this silent discourse as one which acknowledges the 'difference between looking at someone with an intact surface and looking at the same consciousness with that surface lifted away'.¹⁴⁵

The complex rendering of Ruth's consciousness is thickened via Robinson's additional layers of allusion. Sam Sacks has argued that:

Robinson's writing initially requires special care and attention from the reader. It can only be glancingly apprehended on first view because the mind needs to prepare for its allusive form of expression.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁹ Kirkby, p.106.

¹⁴⁰ Kirkby p.106 and Schaub, 'Lingering Hopes', p.314.

¹⁴¹ For comment on narratorial reliability in *Housekeeping* see, Caver and Joan Acocella, 'A Note on the miraculous'. For Robinson's view see her interview with American cultural critic Michael Silverblatt in which Robinson suggests that 'all narrators are unreliable', interview Part I by Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm. National Public Radio, KCRW, Santa Monica, 17 March 2005* <<http://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm>> [accessed 5 December 2014].

¹⁴² Caver, p.115.

¹⁴³ Ravits, p.646-647.

¹⁴⁴ Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), p.113.

¹⁴⁵ Robinson in Pinsker, *Conversations*, p.120.

¹⁴⁶ Sam Sacks, 'Second Glance', (para.3).

This form of expression is what gives form to Ruth's felt reality. For Schaub, who reads the novel firmly within the Romantic tradition, it is specifically emotion that is the organizing principle of Ruth's interior life, an emotion that renders Ruth an outsider. Her extravagant position allows (and becomes) an extended metaphor for her textured evocation of the emotions of grief. Schaub writes:

Ruth's voice is the representation of a self that transcends history – or stands outside of – (or is meant to be such) [...] Robinson's novel is the representation of a passion – and "emotion" – whose logic separates Ruth from society.¹⁴⁷

For Schaub this 'emotional logic' – this passion – is grief. As the exterior voice of Ruth the character diminishes to be replaced by material absence, the interior voice of Ruth as narrator expands to reveal her voluminous emotional presence in the attempted articulation of this passion.¹⁴⁸ However, the emotional urgency of the experience – and Robinson's narratological efforts – also enact what Hungerford calls 'a Protestant understanding of inner life' and echo and invoke what Caldwell describes as a similar quality of emotional urgency that can be found in early American conversion narratives.¹⁴⁹

Caldwell argues that the 'morphology of conversion', a schema of steps required of the convert carried over from the English church to rhetorically shape the conversion experience in America, proved inapplicable to the emotions of the New England Puritan. Hence, the New English convert sought and created 'an expansive, imaginative vocabulary, a lexicon of images, a dramatic vehicle' more appropriate to the weight of their emotional experiences to solve the 'problem of expression'.¹⁵⁰ Caldwell writes that in this context emotions, 'were almost never directly or simply expressed', but were marked by internalization that was 'vitalized' via metaphor.¹⁵¹ Misread in literary critical tradition as part of the implicitly non-metaphorical Puritan 'plain style', Caldwell and others have argued that behind the 'flat tone' of these texts were emotional and intellectual internalizations she calls the 'brokenness within' which revealed complex rhetorical

¹⁴⁷ Schaub, 'Lingering Hopes', p.304.

¹⁴⁸ Caver, p.115.

¹⁴⁹ Hungerford, p.113.

¹⁵⁰ Caldwell, p.164 and 168 and p.135. The "morphology of conversion" is a phrase coined by Edmund S. Morgan in *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.167.

and metaphorical structures, forms of expression invented to articulate the painful emotions of the narrators.¹⁵² Robinson does something very similar for Ruth and her grief.

Ruth's dramatic vehicle is a penetrating complex of recurrent metaphorical words and images. Much of it is imagery generated from the formative deaths of her grandparents and mother, though some are more abstract figures for her loss. These include the recurrent imagery of bones, funereal imagery of graves and burials and imaginings of her dead mother's body that include cold hands, wet hair and teeth, as well as repeated visions of the figure of a woman with her head to one side. They also include vehicles of the deaths themselves: notably trains, the lake and water, all of which come to function as figures for her grief. Rosaria Rubenstein notes that all of Ruth's images 'gather meaning' as the novel progresses, mirroring what she calls Ruth's 'gradual comprehension of memory, time, and death'.¹⁵³ As Gardner puts it, Ruth 'keeps returning to' the deaths 'reconfiguring their elements in an attempt to think through her condition'.¹⁵⁴ It is the act of reconfiguration that is both interrogatory and reflexive. Only as Ruth's exploratory and reflective thoughts 'circle [...] and loop[...]' do they gather an emotional urgency and intensity that opens up in the gap that develops between the self and events Ruth presents before conversion and the narrative self that has found voice and made meaning after crossing the bridge.¹⁵⁵

At the beginning of the novel, *Housekeeping* opens crisply, with a swift two-sentence report of the novel's narrator and her female lineage, the density of which might only be 'glancingly apprehended'. Robinson writes:

My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher. (HK 3)

¹⁵² For work which long perpetuated the idea that Puritan writing style was plain, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind* (Boston: The Harvard University Press, 1983). For a detailed explanation of his impactful de-bunking of the myth of the "plain style" as non-metaphorical, see in particular the 2011 edition of Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*.

¹⁵³ Rosaria Rubenstein, *Boundaries of the Self* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p.211.

¹⁵⁴ Gardner, 'Enlarging Loneliness', *A Door Ajar*, p.32.

¹⁵⁵ Gardner, 'Narrative Calvinist', (para. 3).

Shortly afterwards, Ruth describes the formative deaths of her grandfather and her mother. Delivered using simple metaphors, these are narrated with modest understatement. The train on which her grandfather Edmund dies simply slides 'into the water like a weasel [...] off a rock' (HK 6) and shortly afterwards, her mother's suicide is described lyrically, but quickly, as a 'sail[...]ing]' from the top of a cliff into the 'blackest depth of the lake' (HK 22-23). This efficiency of delivery is reinforced when Ruth describes the death of her grandmother at the opening of Chapter Two in the compressed phrase of just two words, Sylvia 'eschewed awakening' (HK 29). A typical *bildungsroman* might position these deaths at the opening of a novel in order that they become part of the narrator's past, and a reader might well be persuaded that this chronological delivery is the last word on Ruth's bereavements and on her origins. In fact, Ruth's lexicon reveals that these deaths define everything that follows.

Although we learn by novel's end that Ruth is metaphorically 'dead', when re-read, the opening line of the novel vividly asserts in the present tense that she is alive, but it is an announcement that vitalizes her as bereaved outsider. The otherwise unassuming interpolation: 'My name is Ruth' (HK 3), pronounces her allusively as an echo of other first person sufferers through literary history. Her phrasing echoes Poe's mysteriously haunting, dead/un-dead Arthur Gordon Pym and Melville's introduction to *Moby Dick* 'Call me Ishmael', invoking in particular Ishmael's outsider state (both in *Moby Dick* and in the Old Testament).¹⁵⁶ Her name alone is thick. It alludes to ancient griever, and loyal female follower to Naomi from the Old Testament Book of Ruth, a biblical character known for her loyalty, her wandering and her grief. Ravits notes that the name Ruth in fact 'means sorrow or pity'.¹⁵⁷ Robinson herself understands the name to connote 'grief and compassion and also vulnerability'.¹⁵⁸ Similarly, although her descriptions in this section are swift and may be only glancingly apprehended, Ruth's name and exical ticks belie a deeper impact and a proleptic glimpse of the depth of her felt experience only to be appreciated at the end of the novel when grief subsumes all else. In the novel's chronological opening, and in the passages

¹⁵⁶ Most critics hear 'Call me Ishmael' in the novel's opening line, and Robinson has said she was thinking of *Moby Dick* when she wrote it, but Hedrick notices the echo with Poe's, 'My name is Arthur Gordon Pym'. The link with the Book of Ruth, Robinson has insisted, was more a 'lurking' presence than a conscious allusion. For discussion of these and other influences, see Hedrick, 'On Influence', p.2 and p.6.

¹⁵⁷ Ravits, p.649.

¹⁵⁸ Robinson in Hedrick, 'On Influence', p.2.

immediately afterward, for example, Ruth's feelings are gestured toward by tell-tale words from her metaphorical emotional lexicon. She describes her grandfather's first house as, a 'grave', and explains in those opening sentences that parent figures have either 'died', 'escaped' or 'fled' (*HK* 3 and 22). The meanings of these words require embedding in Ruth's repetitious lexicon to fully connote.

Ruth's quietness can be viewed as similarly dense. Her vocal silence is a form of expression, that is, of the 'brokenness within', a condition that Robinson also vitalizes using Ruth's idiosyncratic vocabulary. Marked by repeated bereavements, Ruth's family forebears are, like Ruth, repeatedly described using the unassuming adjectives 'quiet', 'still', 'calm' and 'silent'. Caver comments on this lexis. She reads the actual silence as 'trauma-induced [linguistic] paralysis' at the 'unspeakable center of their quiet lives' and argues that these words reveal a 'disturbing [...] secrecy and silence' linked to the buried trauma at the heart of the family.¹⁵⁹ However, Caver's reading underestimates the metaphoric reach and narrative volume of Ruth's inner voice, not least the religiosity and meditative qualities this language suggests. Ignoring Robinson's literary traditions, Caver under-reads the potency of silence as metaphor for, rather than a sign of, 'brokenness within', carrier of the numinous within the religious tradition that Robinson's novel so clearly invokes. By contrast, critic Tessa Hadley points out that these words and images in the novel are 'luminous with a surplus of meaning'.¹⁶⁰ They are, in Caldwell's meaning of the word, 'vitalized' because of their repetition, a repetition that Champagne argues is the textual enactment of the 'unresolved tension between preservation and loss'.¹⁶¹

Early on, these words are used to describe Ruth's mother and aunts after her grandfather's death, but they resurface repeatedly to describe the rest of the family. 'Quiet', for example, initially connotes the apparently 'perfect serenity' experienced by Sylvia Foster and her daughters after grandfather Edmund's death (*HK* 13). Theirs is described as a 'perfect quiet' that had 'settled into their house after the death of their father' and is associated with the stillness after the shock of the death; the word is repeatedly twinned with the words 'calm' and 'still' (*HK* 15).

¹⁵⁹ Caver, p.120.

¹⁶⁰ Tessa Hadley, 'An Attic Full of Sermons', (para. 3).

¹⁶¹ Champagne, p.325.

Focalized through Sylvia, the departure of her bereaved daughters is the index of her own recurrent sense of abandonment and sorrow, a feeling that, especially when magnified through the eyes of Ruth, is a longstanding expression of bereavement. Ruth says:

One year my grandmother had three quiet daughters and the next year the house was empty. (*HK* 15)

The next pages of the novel evoke one of Ruth's early imaginings of an experience from her grandmother's point of view, one of the many which, when re-read, throng with imagery of death. Sylvia hangs the washing out in her 'widow's black' and the sheets dance like the 'cerements' of a corpse; Ruth imagines her grandmother meditating on the 'stemmy flowers' her husband would bring her from his walks in the woods, and how they 'would die', but also on the 'flesh of perished animals' and the wind 'sour with stale snow and death and pine pitch and wildflowers' (*HK* 16-17). The reverie (which is Ruth's not Sylvia's) progresses over two further pages during which time the signification of the word 'quiet' shifts. Now bereft of husband and daughters, the grandmother 'does not wish to be spoken to' and is described as experiencing a type of 'sharp loneliness' with which she is familiar (*HK* 18). The grandmother's attention turns to the 'serious and inward' faces of her now absent daughters and, focusing on this 'calm inwardness' in her memory figured via Ruth's imagination, she too becomes 'quiet and aloof and watchful', all metaphors for a sorrow in Sylvia that critics rarely comment on (*HK* 19).

Paired with the word 'wait', the word 'quiet' is also used repeatedly to modify Ruth's reaction to her mother's death. Before Helen kills herself, she leaves Ruth and her sister Lucille on the porch of their grandmother's house and tells them to 'wait quietly' (*HK* 20). In the experience of being quiet and 'waiting' for her mother to return, Robinson gestates the particularly reflective and nostalgic qualities of Ruth's narrative voice and bereaved consciousness. Repeated countless times in the novel, the verb 'wait' is both active and stative and its modifier 'quiet' suggests, superficially, the kind of good behaviour that might result in a mother's return. As such, quiet waiting is the most striking quality of Ruth's own grief and the present-continuous, passively active, expression of her experience of grieving. It is one of the multiple stylistic methods by which Robinson externalizes Ruth's loss. We see

it in her lake-side vigils, her visits to the woods, her social interactions where others, usually Lucille or Sylvie, speak for her, the scene in the boat waiting for the train to pass, even the ritualistic scene where Sylvie hides in the valley and Ruth helplessly waits for her to come back. In 'Horizons of Grace: Marilynne Robinson and Simone Weil', Katy Ryan describes Ruth's waiting as a 'pained suspension'.¹⁶² She makes the etymological link between the English word and the French verb form 'attendre', which means both to wait and to attend, arguing that Ruth's waiting develops her powers of 'spiritual attention'.¹⁶³ Thus Ruth's grief emerges from quietness as a form of meditation, the kind of meditation inherent to Boym's concept of a 'reflective nostalgia' and inherent in all religious traditions, but entirely counter to a contemporary pressure for a griever to move on, to process, to express and to forget.

Ryan notes that in suffering is the '*inevitability* of waiting, the practice of attention and the necessity of detachment'.¹⁶⁴ She does not mean here the detachment of the Freudian libido, but the quality of detachment associated with ancient meditative and religious practices, in Weil's case of the Hindu *Baghavad Gita* and Buddhist thought of Lao-Tse. In interview, Robinson has evoked these and other religious traditions to try to describe Ruth's reflexive, meditative consciousness. She has said that Ruth draws on an 'old, old tradition', arguing that it is what 'every prophet in the bible does', it's the 'monastic tradition', it is what 'Buddhist monks do'.¹⁶⁵ Read within these ancient traditions of responding to suffering, Robinson argues that it is 'incredibly pedestrian' to imagine Ruth's impulses and reflections have to be 'constrained' within highly contemporary ideas of 'well-being'.¹⁶⁶ The 'passive activity' of paying attention – embodied in Ruth's quiet waiting – is accompanied by 'watching', another of Ruth's repeated verbs and a privileged sense for Robinson (*HK* 130). She tells the reader that she and Lucille, 'spent our lives watching and listening with the constant sharp attention of children lost in the dark' (*HK* 130), a description of her quiet, nostalgic attentiveness to her life in relation to the loss of her mother.

¹⁶² Ryan, 'Horizons of Grace', p.351- my emphasis.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.352.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.350.

¹⁶⁵ Robinson in Schaub, 'an interview', p.243.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.243.

But neither waiting nor looking backwards stops when Sylvie and Ruth leave Fingerbone and Ruth enters adult transience. Reflective and quiet waiting is not, therefore, just a quality of her childhood, but a palpable quality of her efforts at articulating the ethos of her adulthood, and indeed, given the limits of the novel form, all of her life. After leaving Fingerbone, the description of Sylvie and Ruth is that they 'are dead' (*HK* 217 – my emphasis) and they (and Robinson's narration) transition, as I have said, into an implicitly permanent present tense. Ruth declares 'We are nowhere [...] We pause nowhere [...], the perimeters of our wandering are nowhere' (*HK* 219). The words 'wandering' and 'drifting' replace 'waiting' as Robinson's descriptors of Ruth's present continuous state of being, evocation of her practical consciousness and metaphors for her felt experience and her soul (*HK* 219 and 210). Metaphysical as it is, absence in Ruth's framing narrative space has a 'strong smell of lake water' (*HK* 218), reminding the reader that her consciousness here – too, and most especially since it is from this space that she narrates – is forged by her grief for her lost mother.

In a 1992 interview, Hedrick challenged Robinson to explain the poignant nostalgia of the ending of her novel when Sylvie and Ruth leave Fingerbone to become transients. Revealing the extent to which he was influenced by the politicized views of *Housekeeping* typical of his era of reception, Hedrick described the tone of this ending as 'perverse' arguing that 'if Ruth and Sylvie are really rejecting the socially hegemonic' as was commonly believed in readings of the time, then it seems 'paradoxical that they should betray such nostalgia for it also'.¹⁶⁷ He noted in this a difference between Robinson's writing and that of Twain, Melville, Poe and others whose narrative shape and texture she had said she was emulating. Engaging with her nostalgia, but puzzled by the emotion it conveys, Hedrick said:

Ruth and Sylvie *look back to* Lucille with some wonder, some concern, some question. I don't know that Huck gives Tom or Aunt Polly much of a thought, and I have the sense that Pym and Peters [...] are little concerned with the world they first knew. But Ruth still feels sisterly toward Lucille.¹⁶⁸

Robinson's answer locates Ruth's vision not just as sisterly (as if, curiously, she would be expected to feel otherwise), but as indicative of the particular emotional

¹⁶⁷ Hedrick, 'On Influence', p.7–my emphasis.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.7 – my emphasis.

and nostalgic qualities of loss as Ruth experiences them, a form of emotional epistemology. She responded:

No question [...] it might be the difference to some extent between – I never use language like this – but between male and female narrative [...] Perhaps it's more inevitable for female consciousness, as we have been acculturated at any rate, to *regret*, to *feel the loveliness of what is being put aside*.¹⁶⁹

The oddness of this intellectual exchange with Hedrick doesn't just reveal the limits of politicized interpretation, it acknowledges, indeed enacts, the evacuation of emotional logic from the realm of knowledge building. It reveals Robinson, famously resistant to ideological labels, as a writer prepared to admit that she is culturally defined as a 'bearer of emotions' that Hedrick has been trained not to notice, in order to demonstrate that absence in Hedrick's reading as a lack. What Hedrick misses in his misapprehension of *Housekeeping* is that a grief that incorporates regret is a sophisticated emotional epistemology textured by nostalgia. The last pages of the novel, the section that Hedrick describes as 'perverse', do not find resolution for Ruth's grief nor disconnect her from her dead; instead they are consumed with her present and future conditional longing for her sister merged with the imagery of waiting associated with the loss of their mother. She writes:

I pass again and again behind my grandmother's house, and never get off at the station [...] I would like to see the people who live there. Seeing them would expel poor Lucille, who has, in my mind, waited there in a fury of righteousness, cleansing and polishing, all these years. (*HK* 217)

Caught in the loop of Ruth's repetitive re-flexion, Ruth's depiction holds Lucille too in the past perfect – the verb form 'has [...] waited' implying the endless continuation of that wait and the boundless, non-teleological possibilities it affords. Lucille's vigorous present continuous modes of housekeeping – 'cleansing and polishing, all these years' – vividly and actively suggest her limitless felt presence in Ruth's consciousness. Excluding models of pathology, this is a manifestation of bereavement that is absent from contemporary Western death and grief practices. Yet Ruth's vision holds her sister imaginatively and vitally with her in a place of

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p.7 – my emphasis.

spiritual attention to loss revealing that Ruth ponders pain forever in the present continuous, reflecting in *-algia* for her sister, her mother and her home.

Ruth and the Romantics

Of the many 'lost voices' that Robinson's fiction recalls, some have been under-explored.¹⁷⁰ These include those which enhance a reading of the text's evocation of sorrow, amongst them a range of 'biblical locutions' drawn from the Old Testament, a dark interpretation of Emerson's philosophical idealism, Ruth's own version of the typological Doctrine of Correspondence, and allusion to the poetry of Poe and Dickinson.¹⁷¹ In a 1999 interview with Thomas Gardner, Robinson described the special nineteenth-century manifestation of individualism and expression in American literature that inspired her novel. She explained it in terms of the humanistic and aesthetic challenge that writers of that era posed themselves in order to adequately articulate human consciousness and perception. The determination to honour such representations, she explained, was due to:

[t]he individualism of the culture, in the sense that the individual sensorium was [still] assumed to be a sort of sacred place and to be a sufficient revelation of whatever there was to be understood.¹⁷²

Robinson explained that there was in the 'intellectual culture' of that time something 'that was yielding the use of language and use of perception at very high levels of sophistication' in order to articulate this sensorium and the sanctity of each individual human.¹⁷³ Influenced by the philosophies of Emerson, this intellectual culture, as she has said elsewhere, continued to support 'a very humane imagination of the content of other people's souls' based on God's and the individual's regard for the content of one's own.¹⁷⁴

In his article 'Transcendentalism and Autobiography: Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau', Brian Harding describes the 'introspective character of the age' in which Emerson was writing as a character that emerged explicitly out of the 'long foreground of Puritan preoccupation with the inner life' and which influenced

¹⁷⁰ Gardner, 'Narrative Calvinist', (para.20).

¹⁷¹ The phrase 'biblical locution' is Alter's, *Pen of Iron*, p.17.

¹⁷² Robinson in Gardner, 'Interview', *A Door Ajar*, pp.47-48 – my emphasis.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.47.

¹⁷⁴ Robinson in Schaub, 'an interview', p.238.

modes of first-person writing.¹⁷⁵ In Emerson's sermons, lectures, journal entries and essays, the infinite sanctity of this character was paramount in part because of the sacred connectedness between souls, what he called 'the common heart', the 'soul of the whole'.¹⁷⁶ It was based on a conception of what Emerson called the soul's 'infinite spiritual estate'.¹⁷⁷ Harding argues that this relied not only on the 'presence of God in man' but, with 'man's "likeness to God"', a view of the human akin to and no doubt influencing Robinson's view of what she calls 'human divinity'.¹⁷⁸

While Harding notes the inherence of self-culture in Emerson's era of 'the first person singular', he also notes that his philosophy did not lend itself to 'the creation of autobiography' in any constrained sense.¹⁷⁹ He refers to Georges Gusdorf whose work suggests that 'an autobiography necessarily imposes "logical coherence and rationalization" on events and experiences that, when lived, had no such clarity of definition'.¹⁸⁰ Within this limited context, Gusdorf writes that the autobiographical 'subject is condemned to substitute endlessly the completely formed for that which is in the process of being formed'.¹⁸¹ Harding notes that by contrast, Emerson's concern was to express the reverse. In Harding's reading, Emerson's writings were concerned with the 'process of being formed' rather than the 'completely formed' based on the assumption that 'the unity he valued was one that existed *ex tempore* rather than 'across time'.¹⁸² This, Harding argues, was in part due to Emerson's own 'lengthy reflections on the theme of change, decay and

¹⁷⁵ Brian Harding, 'Transcendentalism and Autobiography: Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau', *First Person Singular: Studies in American Autobiography* ed. A. Robert Lee (Vision Press: London and New York, 1988), pp.57-71, (p.57 and 58).

¹⁷⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The Over-Soul', *The Portable Emerson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), ed. by C. Bode and M. Cowley, pp.209-227, (p.210).

¹⁷⁷ Harding, p.58, and Emerson from Emerson's Sermon on the theme of 'Trust Yourself', *Young Emerson Speaks: Unpublished Discourses on Many Subjects* ed. by Arthur C. McGiffert, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938), p.100.

¹⁷⁸ Harding, p.58. The phrase 'Likeness to God' is Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing's from his sermon of the same name delivered in 1828.

¹⁷⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman *et al* (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960-1982) Vol. III, p.70 and Harding, p.59. Harding cites Thoreau's *Walden* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, two expansive first-person forms, to illustrate the complexity and expansive expressions of selfhood. He might also have cited *Moby Dick* and the first-person poems of Emily Dickinson as exemplars of the 'first person singular'. All of these are first person works that Robinson repeatedly invokes as influential.

¹⁸⁰ Harding, p.59.

¹⁸¹ Georges Gusdorf, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography; in James Olney ed. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, 1980), pp.28-48, (p.41).

¹⁸² Harding p.59 citing Georges Gusdorf, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography; in James Olney ed. *Autobiography: Essays theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980), pp.28-48.

death', but also depended on the quality of expression Harding links to James Olney's definition of the *bios* in autobiography as life as 'passing moments of awareness'.¹⁸³ Olney argues when consciousness is understood this way, a far greater variety of literary forms can be understood as autobiography if 'a legitimate definition of life – real life' is consciousness with its 'now and now and now immediacy', a corollary of the 'this, here, now, alive, active, 'subjective' of Williams' 'practical consciousness'.¹⁸⁴

Lake Fingerbone has often been read as an allusion to Thoreau's *Walden Pond*, but never to Edgar Allan Poe's sorrowful poem 'The Lake'.¹⁸⁵ Similarly, close readings of Emersonian and Dickinsonian imagery in *Housekeeping*, are comparatively few.¹⁸⁶ A reconsideration of Lake Fingerbone allows for a reconsideration of their influence on *Housekeeping* as a novel of bereavement. The synaesthetic vehicle of waves which recurs throughout the novel gives an aquatic analogue for the impact of the never-decreasing ripples of the deaths in the lake at the novel's start.

At the beginning of the novel Ruth describes the family grief as 'wave and wave of shock' that '[t]roubled the very medium of their lives' (*HK* 15). She also presents the shock waves as reabsorbed and replaced with 'still[ness]', 'calm' and 'perfect quiet' that descends on the family after Edmund dies (*HK* 15). She describes the train accident as a 'disaster that had fallen out of sight' asserting that 'the dear ordinary had healed as seamlessly as an image on water' (*HK* 15). Her emphasis on 'sight', 'calm' and the 'image on water' don't just evoke the dramatic (though unwitnessed and thus re-envisioned) spectacle of Edmund and Helen's deaths in the lake, they gesture towards the Emersonian and neo-Platonic framework that Robinson uses increasingly in the novel to indicate that appearance for Ruth does not constitute reality and in fact that the noumenal has far greater meaning for her than the phenomenal. That which is 'out of sight' is no less real, for Ruth, than that which is visible. The image on water can be broken as quickly as it healed. The use of 'shock' in the description of Edmund's death blurs quickly with the death of

¹⁸³ Harding, p.59.

¹⁸⁴ James Olney, 'Some Versions of Memory/Some versions of *Bios*: The Ontology of Autobiography', in Olney (ed.) *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, pp.238-242, (p.239).

¹⁸⁵ See in particular, Hartshorne, 'Lake Fingerbone and Walden Pond'.

¹⁸⁶ For the three most detailed articles on Robinson's Emersonian and Dickinsonian influences, see Hedrick, "The perimeters of our wandering" Ravits, and Gardner, 'Enlarging Loneliness'.

her mother in the same place – the lake – but the emotional impact only starts to resonate much later.

Chapter Seven ends with confirmation that Lucille has left the family home for good. From this point forwards, imagery and reflective meditation dominate chronology and Ruth's version of events accrue density and complex signification. Ruth's conception of the noumenal expands as her attachment to the phenomenal diminishes and her evocation as griever occurs in inverse proportion to her physical dissolution figured as transience. Chapter Eight begins (after Lucille departs) with a series of rites that Ruth undertakes with Sylvie in her ritual initiation into a life of transience. During one of these rites, Ruth and Sylvie stand in a boat below the bridge that traverses the lake in which both women have lost a parent. '[Q]uietly', as always, they are 'waiting', this time 'for the 9:52' train to pass overhead (*HK* 165 and 166). As the train crosses, Ruth describes the effect it has on Sylvie:

The whole long bridge was as quick and tense as vertebrae, singing with one alarm. [...Sylvie] folded her arms on her knees and buried her face, and she swayed and swayed and swayed. [...] shock banged and pounded in every joint [...] I smelled hot, foul, black oil and heard the gnash of wheels along the rails. It was a very long train. (*HK* 167)

With the word train again returns the word 'shock' and with it, the violent depiction of its banging, pounding and gnashing re-flexes Ruth's earlier, gentler description of her grandfather's death. Sylvie's physical reaction alone connotes her own traumatic grief as she crouches and sways, a grief, like Sylvia's, that is absent from criticism of the novel.¹⁸⁷ She starts to reminisce about the night of her father's death, and in what initially seems to be one of her vacant non-sequiturs notes that '*the* train must be just about under us here' (*HK* 168 – my emphasis). The length of the train alone is suggestive of the length of *the* train's ongoing impact on Sylvie, but where for Sylvie all trains are a link to the train that killed her father, for Ruth, as the boat 'wallowed and water spilled in over our feet' (*HK* 167), shock waves repeatedly carry the shock and the haunting water of the lake where her mother also died.

¹⁸⁷ For examination of Sylvie and Sylvia as grievers see Chapter Three.

This moment is one of many in the novel where the lake extends its boundaries, lake water a pervasive medium invading space beyond its limits ultimately finding echo in all water and all reflective surfaces. Ravits argues that '[t]o Ruth all generations, everything that lives and dies, seem to converge in the lake'.¹⁸⁸ But the lake doesn't just carry her dead she increasingly sees the world through its shifting waters, the waves gathering momentum. In the opening Chapter of his most famous essay and Romantic/Transcendentalist manifesto, *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson declared his philosophical concept of nature to be at the heart of his revisionist spiritual philosophy. Inspired by European Romanticism, mysticism, neo-Platonism and Calvinism, Emerson's philosophy domesticated perceptions of nature for an American, post-Puritan context. He writes:

Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature [...] Let us demand our own works and laws and worship [...] Let us interrogate the great apparition, that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature? [...] to a sound judgement, the most abstract truth is the most practical. Whenever a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence.¹⁸⁹

The interrogation of the great apparition of nature, for Ruth, is every encounter with the lake – real or imaginary. It is as though Robinson's 'season', during which the novel focuses on Ruth's developing relationship with Sylvie (whose name, from *Sylvanus*, Latin for 'woodland deity' is synecdoche for wooded, pastoral and nature), is an Emersonian embosoming of a profound kind.¹⁹⁰ Despite this clear invocation of Emersonian thought, however, there is little 'peace' to be found for Ruth in the lake. Hers is a 'darker' nature more like Poe's 'lone lake' in which 'Death' is a 'poisonous wave', its 'gulf a fitting grave'.¹⁹¹ The shifting waters give lie to any notion of emotional stability suggested by the nurturing verb 'embosoming', but in Robinson's hands, Emerson's imagery is far from *unemotional*. There is no denying that the 'floods of life stream around and through' Ruth, nor that the 'powers they supply' result in 'actions proportioned to nature'. It is just that these actions and this nature connote emotions of suffering

¹⁸⁸ Ravits, p.649.

¹⁸⁹ Emerson, 'Nature' in Bode and Cowley, *Portable Emerson*, pp.7-50, (p.7).

¹⁹⁰ See *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd edn, ed. by A. Stevenson (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), p.1802., cited hereafter as *ODE*.

¹⁹¹ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Lake', *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1970), p.101.

rather than those of exaltation or optimism that are more typically associated with Emerson's philosophy.

Emerson's essay outlines the symbolism inherent in his version of the Christian Doctrine of Correspondence (a Transcendentalist doctrine influenced by the mystic theology of Emmanuel Swedenborg and Calvinist typology).¹⁹² Linking nature as he sees it, to language, he lists the ways in which 'Nature is the vehicle of thought'.¹⁹³ He writes:

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of the spirit.¹⁹⁴

He adds:

It is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact.¹⁹⁵

Robinson spins out Ruth's perceptions as a limit case for this idea whereby her reality is emblematic, symbolical of the 'Nature' that surrounds her which, in this instance, though not exhaustively, takes the form of waves of water from the lake that killed her mother.¹⁹⁶ Robinson also, like Emerson, privileges Ruth's sense of sight, lending the emphatic visuality of Ruth's perception spiritual authority as creative of her own experience, just as Emerson elsewhere exhorts: 'The eye is the best of artists'.¹⁹⁷ As Ravits puts it, Ruth 'sees *feelingly*', and makes an 'art' out of 'weaving the sense of grief' into the images of her 'perception'.¹⁹⁸

Emerson's style was famously described by F.O. Matthiessen as working in the 'optative mood'.¹⁹⁹ From the Greek 'relating to or denoting a mood of verbs in Greek and certain other languages, expressing a wish, equivalent in meaning to

¹⁹² The term 'correspondence' was coined by Swedenborg in his *Arcana Coelestia* (1749–1756), but the idea predates him and his Swedish Lutheran influences and is manifest in other Reformed Protestant traditions. See *The Encyclopedia of Transcendentalism: The Essential Guide to the Lives and Works of Transcendentalist Writers* ed. by T. Wayne (New York: Facts on File, 2006).

¹⁹³ Emerson, 'Nature' in Bode and Cowley, *Portable Emerson*, p.19.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.19.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.19.

¹⁹⁶ Other examples include snow, frost, woods and dens, the symbolism of which I explore in Chapter Three.

¹⁹⁷ Emerson, 'Nature' in Bode and Cowley, *Portable Emerson*, p.13.

¹⁹⁸ Ravits, p.647 and 651.

¹⁹⁹ F. O Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1941 repr. 1968), p.3. Matthiessen took the phrase from Emerson's 1842 essay, 'The Transcendentalist'.

English *let's* or *if only*, 'optative' as applied to Emerson has largely come to mean optimistic.²⁰⁰ In Robinson's hands, though, both the typological Doctrine of Correspondence and the 'optative mood' for Ruth invoke the sombre, yearning tone of Emerson's later essay, *Experience*, as much as the ringing exhortations of *Nature*. Emerson wrote *Experience* in 1842, two years after the death of his young son, Waldo. Although it is often viewed as a limit case for his own philosophical idealism, the essay stands out in Emerson's oeuvre for its melancholic brooding, and its somber representation of grief.²⁰¹ Here he writes of a different, gloomier perception, arguing that 'Grief too will make us idealists'.²⁰² In *Nature*, Emerson had written that 'nature is not always tricked in holiday attire', that sometimes it is 'overspread with melancholy'; but that 'Nature always wears the colors of the spirit'.²⁰³ In 'Experience', this spirit is written out as shadowy, sleepy, dark and lost. This, it seems, is where Robinson finds the feeling tone for the genesis of Ruth's own philosophical idealism (and much of her imagery), whereby the felt reality of her experiential losses has a haunting quality. Emerson opens 'Experience' with a doubting question:

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none [...] Sleep lingers all our lifetime, about our eyes; as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree. All things swim and glimmer [...] Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again.²⁰⁴

Ruth's narrative becomes a depiction of this 'ghostlike' gliding. Emerson presents his grief as an impenetrable numbing, the loss of 'no more' than a 'beautiful estate'; he states that it is 'shallow', going onto state, 'I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature'.²⁰⁵ In his perception, in *Experience*, loss is the 'summer rain' and 'we the Para coats that shed every drop'; suffering, he writes, becomes 'evanescence and lubricity'.²⁰⁶ In Ruth's perception, evanescence is inverted to its opposite, grief does not disappear but reappears, it does not evanesce so much as coalesce around key symbolical

²⁰⁰ *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 12th edn, ed. by A. Stevenson and M. Waite (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.1000.

²⁰¹ For detailed analysis of *Experience* as a grief text see Sharon Cameron 'Representing Grief: Emerson's Experience' in *Representations* 15 (Summer 1986), 15-41 and 'Coda: Everyday Grief' in Dana Luciano *Arranging Grief*, pp.261-268.

²⁰² Emerson, 'Experience' in Bode and Cowley, *Portable Emerson*, pp.266-290, (p.269).

²⁰³ Emerson, 'Nature' in Bode and Cowley, *Portable Emerson*, p.11.

²⁰⁴ Emerson, 'Experience' in Bode and Cowley, *Portable Emerson*, pp.266-267.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.268 and p.269.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.269.

moments and images. Grief is perpetually capable of resurgence in Ruth's experience. All things do 'swim and glimmer', as much in sight as out of sight. She explains:

If I could see my mother, it would not have to be her eyes, her hair. I would not need to touch her sleeve. There was no more the stoop of her high shoulders. The lake had taken that, I knew. It was a very long time since the dark had swum her hair, and there was nothing more to dream of, but often she almost slipped through any door I saw from the side of my eye, and it was she, and not changed, and not perished. She was a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished. (*HK* pp.159-60)

Ruth's use here of the word 'perished', one she repeats often in the novel, is another 'biblicism' (echoing Job 18:17, Jeremiah 10:11 and Micah 7:2), a grave echo of what Alter calls the 'moral gravity' and 'cosmic perspective' of the Old Testament.²⁰⁷ By the last chapters of the novel, the waves that Ruth described as having 'fallen out of sight' in Chapter One, reassert their presence finally in Ruth's epiphanic vision of life without her mother, Lucille and now the family house. By the end of Chapter Nine, Robinson has completed her introduction of another inciting incident of loss: the Sheriff visits Sylvie and Ruth to explain that their situation at home is no longer tenable and that Ruth will have to go into care. With the repetition of the image of shock waves at this point, Ruth reconfigures her family's losses yet again, this time further biblicising her experience, equating it with God's reaction to the death of Abel at the hands of Cain. This recurrence, coming as it does in one of what Schaub calls Ruth's 'homiletic revelations' towards the end of the novel, fully re-flexes her first description of the shock as past-tense 'spent' (*HK* 15).²⁰⁸

Instead of the simple past, Ruth describes the shock in the future tense: a 'shock' that '*will spend* itself in waves', implying its ongoing ripple effect on the future 'lived presence' of her consciousness (*HK* 193). Through re-flection and reiteration, the 'shock waves' gather force, and crest connoting and carrying the suffering. They are at once topic, tenor and vehicle of Ruth's experience, but also, to quote McDermott, through them Ruth is able to look back in time reflectively, thronged with nostalgia and dwelling on pain, to generate a 'counter-history of loss and

²⁰⁷ Alter, *Pen of Iron*, p.14. Alter explores the use of the word in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

²⁰⁸ Schaub, 'Lingering Hopes', p.315

mourning, that includes the transient dead as well as Ruth's mother and grandfather'.²⁰⁹ Robinson reworks Ruth's situation yet again.

Chapter Ten begins:

Cain murdered Abel, and blood cried out from the earth; the house fell on Job's children, and a voice was induced or provoked into speaking from a whirlwind; and Rachel mourned for her children; and King David for Absalom. (*HK* 192)

Ruth's narrative voice here joins a community of Old Testament grieving voices, of those who have lost family throughout biblical history. According to Bercovitch, the Puritans did just this, extending the traditional Christian hermeneutic of 'scriptural typology' to comprehend themselves.²¹⁰ Caldwell argues that this included a 'preference' for references to Old Testament figures, not only because the Puritans thought of themselves as 're-enacting the pilgrimage of the ancient Israelites', but because the Old Testament figures in Old Testament books' and the "minor" prophetic books" were 'intensely emotional, visionary, symbolical books'.²¹¹ Here narrators focused on the 'more sorrowful aspects of the Jewish experience', identifying specifically with the 'Jews' suffering'.²¹² Such 'Bible images', are metaphorical figures; Caldwell explains that they 'can be the speaker's feelings – and her tears'.²¹³ By listing Ruth's loss amongst many that go back to the biblical 'first' (the 'expulsion'), Robinson uses typology in the manner of a Puritan saint but to solve the problem of expressing her own experience. Also typical of Puritan writings was the rendering of experience not just in light of the bible, but as if looking through it.

Caldwell writes that the 'emotional urgency' of the American Puritan experience sometimes had the effect of 'narrow[ing] the distance between speaker' and Biblical 'text'.²¹⁴ She adds that this 'tendency to bring real life into the closest possible touch with Scripture' affected 'even very simple associations of the two realms', but that the 'more emotionally charged the subject matter, the more such

²⁰⁹ McDermott, 'Future-Perfect', pp.265-266.

²¹⁰ Bercovitch, p.xiii and xii.

²¹¹ Caldwell, pp.171-2.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p.172 – my emphasis.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p.170.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.169.

blurring of the boundaries occurs'.²¹⁵ Effectively, she explains, 'the New England Puritan [...] finding his new world confusing, disappointing, or amorphous, [...] assimilates himself into the Bible world and outlook, dwells there imaginatively, sees through its windows'.²¹⁶ This is true of Ruth's typology. Not only is she looking (after Emerson) through lake water, she looks outwards (like the Puritans) through the bible. The emotional urgency of her own losses become startlingly clear as she blurs her experience with that of Cain's and of God's. She uses Old Testament sufferers to describe her shock waves as God himself must have felt them, reflecting – sympathetically – on how painful that must have been. Extending the metaphor with a revelatory vision dense with the persistent imagery that has been gathering meaning up to this point, her vision reaches a crescendo that is as shocking and synaesthetic as it is lyrical. She says:

Cain killed Abel, and the blood cried out from the ground – a story so sad that even God took notice of it [...] In the newness of the world God had not Himself realized the ramifications of certain of his laws, for example, that *shock will spend itself in waves*; that our *images* will *mimic* every gesture, and that *shattered* they will multiply and *mimic* every gesture ten, a hundred, or a thousand times. Cain, the *image* of God, gave the simple earth of the field a voice and a sorrow, and God Himself heard the voice, and grieved for the sorrow, so Cain was a creator, in the *image* of his Creator. God *troubled the waters* where *He saw His face*, and Cain became his children and their children and theirs, through a thousand generations, and all of them *transients*, and wherever they went everyone remembered that there had been a second creation, that the earth ran with blood and sang with sorrow. And *let* God purge this wicked sadness away with a *flood*, and let the *waters* recede to *pools* and *ponds* and *ditches* and *let* every one of them *mirror heaven*. Still, they *taste* a bit of *blood and hair*. One cannot cup one's hand and drink from the *rim of any lake* without remembering that *mothers have drowned* in it, lifting their children toward the air [...] I cannot *taste a cup of water* but I recall that the *eye of the lake is my grandfather's*, and that the *lake's heavy, blind, encumbering waters composed my mother's limbs and weighed her garments and stopped her breath and stopped her sight*. There is remembrance and communion, altogether human and unhallowed.

(HK 192-194 – my emphases)

Cain is Ruth's antecedent, the first transient and lifelong griever of his brother's death; but the lake is at once Fingerbone, site of multiple deaths singing out with sorrow, and the biblical Flood of Genesis: God's apparently purging deluge. It embodies 'the terror' of Poe's 'lone lake', but is also 'any lake', so expansive are

²¹⁵ Ibid., p.174 and p.175.

²¹⁶ Ibid., p.178.

the encumbering waters of Ruth's loss.²¹⁷ Ruth's emphasis on shattered images, mimesis, the eye and sight are Emersonian, but Emerson in the sombrest tones of his grief essay 'Experience'. Emerson's optative exhortations 'let' can be seen here also to echo God's commands in Genesis; but then give way to Ruth's pained emotional reality. The water is an overwhelming natural symbol of the spiritual fact of Ruth's losses, but here Ruth's description of God having purged Cain's sorrowful legacy with the flood waters merges with her perception of Lake Fingerbone into a distillation of her own experience of grief and sorrow that then re-emerges as transcendent and, though unhallowed, altogether human.

The end of *Housekeeping* is a devastating depiction of the suffering of loss. Ravits describes it as 'disturbing to many readers' and Caver actively yearns for a different ending to the lives of 'outsiders' like Ruth.²¹⁸ The metaphoric significance of these particular outsiders (Sylvie and Ruth), and their emotions, has been under-read, in part, by not perceiving their metaphoric positioning in or as grief. A reading of this type is no less devastating, but elevates and dignifies the qualities of the experience of loss. The last metaphoric place of Ruth's rhetorical absence and anguish gives form to a reflexive, 'nostalgic subjectivity' that McDermott suggests stubbornly refuses 'futuraity' in favour of 'meditating on loss and longing'.²¹⁹ As Schaub states, Ruth's self 'transcends history – or stands outside of (or is meant to be such)'.²²⁰ Robinson thus offers a depth to felt experience, one which privileges the individuality of its unique articulation, but which Robinson's evocation strongly suggests can and should be universalized in its sanctity as the experience of a human. Robinson's depiction articulates a space for the outsider emotions of all who experience grief (not just women) by forcing Ruth (and Sylvie) outside the norms and codes and limits of social and literal articulation into transcendent expansive humanity. Ironically, this expansive space, takes the form of metaphors of diminishment and absence, metaphors she borrows from Emily Dickinson.

From her place of immateriality, Ruth's reflective narration transfigures her own pain, in light of her mother's transfiguration by death. The transcendent qualities

²¹⁷ Poe, 'The Lake', p.101.

²¹⁸ Ravits, p.663 and Caver, p.133. Caver's sympathy for Ruth takes the late twentieth-century social realist form of identification with Ruth whom she likens to an abused and bullied schoolchild.

²¹⁹ McDermott, 'Future-Perfect', p.265.

²²⁰ Schaub, 'Lingering Hopes', p.304.

of Ruth's experience of loss owe a debt to the forms of consciousness made available by the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Ravits touches on the effect of Dickinson on the specifically female qualities of the grief experience evoked in the novel, echoing Robinson's interview with Hedrick and women's long historical role as emotional load-bearers. She argues that in 'drawing' an 'explicit connection between female experience and bereavement', Robinson's aesthetic 'vision is allied' to that of Dickinson and intrinsically to her representations of loss. Ravits explains that for Dickinson, bereavement was both 'primary and formative', citing the lines:

A loss of something ever felt I – / The first that I could recollect / Bereft I
was – '221

Although Ravits does not refer to it directly, the speaker of this poem describes herself in youth as 'a Mourner' who 'walked among the children', her grief innate to her self.²²² This feeling is inherent not just to the child at the opening of the poem, but to the adult voice of the following stanzas: '*Elder, Today, a session Wiser.../ still softly searching / for my Delinquent palaces*', a pre-echo of adult Ruth.²²³ Softly searching could easily be argued to be analogous for quiet wandering and watching and the etymology of 'delinquent' – from the Latin verb *delinquere*, from *de-* 'away' + *linquere* 'to leave' – invokes Ruth's extra-vagant diegetic and narrative position.²²⁴ Amy Hungerford says that 'analogy' is *Housekeeping's* 'relentless figurative mode.'²²⁵ In his essay, 'Enlarging Loneliness: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', Dickinson scholar Thomas Gardner argues that Robinson's own 'tentative, cascading analogies' actually form themselves from 'within the terms of a Dickinson analogy', one which depicts the child and adult perception of Ruth.²²⁶ He argues that the 'display of "consciousness" in action' found in nineteenth-century work and which plays out in *Housekeeping*, is very particularly to be found in Dickinson's poetry.²²⁷ According to Robert Weisbuch,

²²¹ Emily Dickinson, 'A loss of something ever felt I–', [959], *Emily Dickinson: The Complete Poems* ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1975), p.448, cited in Ravits, p.651.

²²² Ravits only quotes a line from the poem. For the full poem see above citation, pp.448-449.

²²³ Dickinson, 'A loss of something', p.449 - my emphasis.

²²⁴ *SOED*, p.633. Ravits does not make this argument.

²²⁵ Hungerford, p.120.

²²⁶ Gardner, 'Enlarging Loneliness', *A Door Ajar*, p.31 – my emphasis.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.23. I find Gardner's phrase 'consciousness in action' to be analogous to Raymond Williams' phrase 'practical consciousness of a present kind', despite the difference in cultural context.

Dickinson's analogies reach for the 'ungraspable', but are 'not mimetic'; instead they are 'illustratory, chosen, temporary'.²²⁸

It is typical of Ruth's melancholic 'optative' narration to speculate on what might have been, re-envisioning key scenarios. Ruth's speculative 'if only' is marked throughout the novel by an analogical mode of conditionality indicated by her consistent use of modifiers such as 'might', 'say' or 'imagine'. She uses these to preface her reflections on events that she could not have witnessed, but which her imagination repeatedly revisits. Gardner's essay delineates how Ruth is 'abandoned into a new terrain' of understanding and exquisite loneliness, a new terrain only possible via exploring metaphor's 'insufficiency' in this way.²²⁹ He focuses on the evocation of loneliness very early in the novel in Ruth's imaginings about her grandmother. It is possible, however, to develop his reading such that loneliness is one of the inherent qualities of Ruth's textured emotional landscape of loss, deepening the expansiveness of her detailed depiction of grief across the entirety of the novel, but evoked most strongly – realized most fully – in the novel's epiphanic ending.

In the final section of the novel, Ruth starts to describe her memory of her mother in the fullest detail as part of a tentative, speculative analogy in which she imagines Helen *not* having killed herself the day she left Ruth and Lucille on the porch. She starts:

Imagine that my mother had come back that Sunday, *say* in the evening, and that she had kissed our hair and that all the necessary business of reconciliation had been transacted between her and my grandmother, and that we had sat down to supper, and Lucille and I had grown restless listening to stories about people we did not know, and had gone out to play on the chill grass in the strange, deep yard, hoping our mother would notice how late it was, and hoping she would not. *Say* we had driven home the whole night long, Lucille and I asleep on the back seat, cramped and aware of the chilly air that whistled through the inch of the open window, diluting my mother's perfume and the smoke of her cigarettes. (HK 195-6 – my emphases)

This speculation cascades over two more pages detailing for the first time in the novel, things about her mother that earlier narration has suggested Ruth had

²²⁸ Robert Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p.175 and 16.

²²⁹ Gardner, 'Enlarging Loneliness', *A Door Ajar*, p.26 and 30.

forgotten or in fact never knew. Ruth's analogies re-envision her mother, testing the possible, and by so doing, like Dickinson before her, she 'elevate[s] experience' making her world 'strange and new again'.²³⁰ The exploration meanders but pushes her understanding of her mother's death until it arrives at the following 'new articulation':

We would have laughed and felt abandoned and aggrieved, never knowing that she had gone all the way to the edge of the lake to rest her head and close her eyes, and had come back again for our sakes. *She would have* remained untransfigured. *We would never have known* that her calm was as slight as the skin on water, and that her calm sustained her as a coin can float on still water. *We would have known nothing* of the nature and reach of her sorrow *if she had come back.* (HK 198 – my emphases)

Ruth's use of the conditional 'would have' enables her to reimagine the situation of her mother's drive to Fingerbone hypothetically. Only in speculating on this does Ruth find her way to comprehending the 'reach and nature' of her mother's sorrow. By reaching to articulate this, Ruth finds another metaphorical structure in which to express her own. Helen is reimaged in visionary terms, the language echoing that in Matthew 17 on Christ's transfiguration and Robinson (and Ruth) return again to the word 'calm' (and the image on water) to denote appearance. Here the slightness of their mother's calm belies the depths beneath and the discrepancy between appearance and reality becomes a measure of Helen's fragility. The particularity of their mother's life is made knowable – and given meaning – in the fact of her death via the Dickinsonian analogic speculation of Ruth's present continuous final state.

Ruth's realization makes manifest the experience of revelation made available to her by her reflective perception. Towards the end of the novel, Ruth figures her ultimate material absence as the 'sad and outcast state of revelation' that she and Sylvie come to occupy as she approaches conversion to transience as life in grief (HK 184). This is critical to Robinson's unsentimental depiction of loss. The state of revealed knowledge is a cumulative invocation of the nineteenth-century writers so fascinated with what Robinson calls 'exploratory' or 'interrogatory' forms of metaphor.²³¹ Robinson re-presents an insistent version of the self-reliance

²³⁰ Weisbuch, p.68.

²³¹ Robinson in Gardner, 'Interview', *A Door Ajar*, p.48 and Robinson in 'Introduction', *Awakening*, p.viii.

propounded by Emerson (and lived out by Thoreau), which throngs the text, but a version thick with loneliness, regret, longing and the 'loveliness' of what is lost. The metaphysicality of this state of Ruth's being and knowing, that which Sian Mile dismisses as 'ideological impalpability' has literary – and transcendental – precedent as highly meaningful.²³² It comes in the form of what Robinson calls the 'stripping down to the essence of perception' that Emerson described as the 'transparent eyeball'.²³³ This metaphor allowed Emerson to privilege a state of consciousness that he described as 'a perfect exhilaration', a state of being during which he declared 'I am nothing. I see all'.²³⁴ This metaphor is reframed by Robinson in the articulation of consciousness in *Housekeeping* as the recurring image of the 'unaccompanied soul', something she has argued also invokes the modesty and 'obscurity' of the narrative voice in Melville's *Moby Dick* and countless other minor, everyday human figures throughout literary and biblical history.²³⁵ Understood in this context, in which the narrator and his voice is disarmingly lowly, Ruth is an 'almost-disappearing' narrator like Ishmael or, like many of the narrators of Dickinson's poems. One such voice, Gardner suggests, is the 'disappearingly small' speaker in the poem 'Further in Summer than the Birds'.²³⁶ This quality of existential minimalism is something Robinson gestures towards in her essay Psalm Eight:

In my childhood, when the presence of God seemed everywhere and I seemed to myself a mote of exception, improbable as a flaw in the sun, the very sweetness of the experience lay in that stinging thought – not me, not like me, not mine.²³⁷

The 'not me' here is Emerson's 'NOT ME'.²³⁸ Again in *Nature*, Emerson established a philosophical context for this idea. He wrote:

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under the name, NATURE.²³⁹

²³² Sian Mile, 'Femme Foetal', p.129.

²³³ Emerson, 'Nature' in Bode and Cowley, *Portable Emerson*, p.10 and p.11.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

²³⁵ Robinson in Gardner, 'Interview', *A Door Ajar*, p.55.

²³⁶ Gardner, 'Interview', *A Door Ajar*, p.55.

²³⁷ Robinson, 'Psalm Eight', *Death of Adam*, p.230.

²³⁸ Emerson, 'Nature' in Bode and Cowley, *Portable Emerson*, p.8.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.8.

In this context, Emerson's 'ME', and, I venture, Robinson's, is the 'soul' – the inner world—and the NOT ME is everything else: that which Ruth perceives outside of herself in the physical and metaphysical landscape, but mirroring back to her 'ME' her own revelations of meaning. Ruth is not the only 'unaccompanied soul' in *Housekeeping*, indeed the phrase is used rather to describe Sylvia and Edmund in Ruth's early ruminations; but the novel *is* the charting of her 'almost-disappearing' voice and, in its depiction of her material absence, it charts her becoming 'disappearingly small'. Hers is the 'perception' stripped down, all the better to 'see' the meaning of her loss. Ruth's 'ME' at novel's end is unhampered by the body, her ghostly presence referring to food and drink as 'ceremonies of sustenance, of nurturing' that are of little relevance to her (*HK* 214). Her narration is constructed from Robinson's determination to reconstruct the circumstances, structures and variants of metaphor she perceives in the work of her antecedents to get to a place where, as for Ames, there is a 'wide opening of experience' – an expansiveness.²⁴⁰ For Ruth, this is a place marked by loneliness, loss and isolation, but it is an experience of vast expanse and expressiveness, an experience that might be described as grief and that Robinson privileges by locating it within the venerable cultures of religiosity and metaphysics of the Romantics and their Puritan and mystic antecedents which privileged whatever it was that defined the passage of the human soul.

Where perhaps Robinson departs from Emerson's conceptions, is that she posits the emotions as central to the experience of the soul. For Emerson, the highest human faculty was 'Reason', albeit a post-Enlightenment Romantic interpretation of reason infused by the felt realm of the spirit. In Robinson's framework, she has argued that the 'I stripped to its marrow', recognizes the 'fierce humanness of feeling, the character of feeling'.²⁴¹ This, her novel suggests, is something fully deserving of reverence and which shares the intention that Robinson has credited to Kate Chopin as a Romantic writer writing about death, that is, of practising the 'broadest possible extension of sympathy'.²⁴² For Robinson, perception stripped down to a place where being is reduced to the essence of what is felt is a form of 'disciplined receptivity' that means not, 'I am a victim, but 'I have extraordinary

²⁴⁰ Gardner, 'Enlarging Loneliness', *A Door Ajar*, p.57.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.69.

²⁴² Robinson adds that this mode of extended sympathy offers a 'higher order of feminism' than one which always takes 'conflict between individualist women and social expectations as its primary subject', 'Introduction', *Awakening*, p.x.

courage', and 'I have *privileged* apprehension'; an idea which correlates with Jaggar's ideas of the 'epistemological privilege' of emotions as constitutive of felt reality equal to, indeed inseparable from thoughts.²⁴³ By connecting these two thinkers, in light of Woodward's work on the emotions of grief, it is possible to view Ruth's narrative voice as the constructed reality formed by, and metaphorical of, 'outlaw emotions' that, as Jaggar has suggested, 'enable us to perceive the world differently from its portrayal in conventional descriptions'.²⁴⁴ Ruth is Robinson's experimental, bereaved and 'famished I'.²⁴⁵ In the articulation of her narrative voice, Robinson lays bare her declared 'fealty' to these very particular antecedents by reconstructing methods of metaphor that she interprets as their shared respect for the validity of human experience.²⁴⁶ This includes a particular respect for human vulnerability and for the 'absolute relationship between [human] defenselessness and everything that's impressive about [humans]'.²⁴⁷ Understood this way, Ruth's 'disappearance', her conversion, her emblematic "death" and her ethereal voice, are definitively *meaningful* expressions of bereavement, because they are metaphors for expansive experiences of the 'fierce humanness of feeling' that Robinson considers deserving of the utmost regard.

²⁴³ Gardner, p.69 and Jaggar, p.162.

²⁴⁴ Jaggar, p.161.

²⁴⁵ Gardner, 'Enlarging Loneliness', *A Door Ajar*, p.69

²⁴⁶ Robinson in Gardner, 'Enlarging Loneliness', *A Door Ajar*, p.55.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.68-69.

Modernity comes in as many versions as there are thinkers or journalists, yet all its definitions point, in one way or another, to the passage of time.
Bruno Latour¹

This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room.
Virginia Woolf²

I don't take up a story and follow it as if it were a road...I go into it, and move back and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while. It's more like a house.
Alice Munro³

Chapter Three – 'Homeless at home': grief as sacred timespace in *Housekeeping and Home*

Grief and time

Of all facets of the twentieth-century history of grief, the time it takes to grieve or mourn is one of the most dominant and problematic positivist constructions used to define abnormality. Though entangled with the ideas of teleology and process explored in Chapter Two, the myths about time and grief appear to have emerged not from Freud, who described the experience as one which took 'a great expense of time and cathectic energy', but from his successors, notably his student Helene Deutsch, and American psychiatrist Erich Lindemann.⁴ In her 1937 article 'Absence of Grief', Deutsch continued in the Freudian tradition, but made the relationship between mourning and measurable time more explicit. In part this was because of her emphasis on the absence of grief as pathology; in part, it was due to her language use and her emphasis on grief as a teleology. Noticeable from Deutsch's article are facets of ideological shaping of the discipline including the disappearance of any of the professional hesitancy shown by her predecessors Freud and Abraham. Where Freud and Abraham regularly reiterated the limits and constraints of their findings, Deutsch used the imperative and italics to assert, with no empirical evidence, that the 'process of mourning as reaction to the real loss of a loved person *must be carried to completion*'.⁵

¹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Boston, Harvard University Press, 1993), p.10.

² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989), p.74.

³ Alice Munro, 'What is Real?', *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, ed. by T. Roberts, M. Moser, D. LePan, J. Gaunce and L. Buzzard (Peterborough, ON.: Broadview Press, 2011), pp.266-269, (p.267).

⁴ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p.245.

⁵ Deutsch, 'Absence of Grief', p.12 – italics in the original. For discussion of the amount of evidence available to Deutsch, see Granek, 'Grief as Pathology'.

It was Lindemann who identified a specific and measurable time frame for a normal grieving process and thus the abnormality of prolonged grief expressions, arguing that the optimum time for a psychiatric grief intervention was 'eight to ten interviews'.⁶ In the 2006 special issue of *Omega* dedicated to what is now termed 'complicated' or 'pathological grief', Tony Walter explains that, despite protestations from psychiatrists at this oversimplification, "complicated" effectively continues to mean grief that is 'too intense, too long, and impairs functioning'.⁷ He argues that although leading psychiatrists (in this instance Yale psychiatrists Holly Prigerson and Selby Jacobs) 'deny that complicated grief is just chronic, i.e. over-prolonged', in fact, based on their 'delineation', this is 'precisely' what it is'.⁸ He explains that the psychiatric criteria on which pathology is assessed is as follows:

intrusive thoughts about the deceased, yearning for the deceased, searching for the deceased, loneliness as a result of the death, feelings of futility about the future, numbness, feeling life is empty, feeling that part of oneself has died, impaired functioning in social, occupations or other important areas.⁹

But while Walter explains that 'many mourners have such experiences', he stresses that what 'qualifies this cluster of experiences as indicative of complicated grief is that they last, at any one time, for more than two months'.¹⁰

The emphasis on the length of time that a grief experience might take has become inseparable from the evolution of bereavement as a psychiatric concern. In the United States in particular, this is inextricable from the evolution of the *DSM*. Edward Shorter points out that the *DSM* has become 'the authoritative guide for world psychiatry in our own time'; it is, according to Gary Greenberg the central consultation document for all psychotherapeutic interventions and 'sits on the shelf of nearly every therapist' in the United States.¹¹ Whether or not a condition is acknowledged by the *DSM* is the decisive factor regarding whether someone

⁶ Lindemann, p.113-114.

⁷ Tony Walter, 'What is Complicated Grief? A Social Constructionist Perspective', *Omega, Special Issue on Complicated Grief*, 52.1 (2005-2006), 71-79, p.75.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.74.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.74. For the original source of this list, see H.G Prigerson and S.C Jacobs, 'Traumatic grief as a distinct disorder' in *Handbook of bereavement research* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press, 2001), pp.613-646. For a specific checklist of criteria, see H.Prigerson, 'Complicated Grief' in *Bereavement Care*, 23.3 (Winter 2004), 38-40.

¹⁰ Walter, 'What is Complicated Grief?', p.74. For the view that a diagnosis of complicated grief should only be made after six rather than two months, see Prigerson, 'Complicated Grief'.

¹¹ Shorter, p.105-6 and Gary Greenberg, *Manufacturing Depression: The Secret History of a Modern Disease* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p.15.

suffering from psychological difficulty in the United States receives health insurance for therapy and / or pharmacological help. With regards to grief, the time it takes to grieve is the means by which it is often assessed as conflating with major depression. Thus grief has come to be a source of consternation and controversy for the psychiatrists who compile the *DSM* since the *DSM III*, published in 1980 and the *DSM IV* published in 1994.

According to Greenberg, in the context of the *DSM*, ‘two months’ continues to be the “magic number”. In his 2010 book, *Manufacturing Depression: The Secret History of a Modern Disease*, Greenberg notes that by the publication of the *DSM-III*, two months was the apparently arbitrary time after which ‘uncomplicated bereavement could become’ and thus be diagnosed and treated as ‘major depressive disorder’.¹² This, he argues, was as a consequence of bereavement psychiatrist Paula Clayton cross-referencing the committee’s diagnostic criteria with her own findings and realizing that ‘grief’ was in fact ‘indistinguishable from depression’.¹³ Clayton alerted the *DSM-III* committee, who, Greenberg argues, created the two month ‘loophole’ without any particular empirical cause.¹⁴ According to the authors of ‘Complicated grief and related bereavement issues for *DSM-5*’, ‘complicated grief’ was excluded from the *DSM-IV* on the grounds of ‘insufficient evidence’ and concerns about the ‘problem of over-diagnosis’.¹⁵ However, a Bereavement Exclusion (BE) was inserted into the revised edition of the *DSM-IV* (the *DSM-IV-TR* published in 2000) to demonstrate professional recognition ‘that depressive symptoms are sometimes normal in recently bereaved individuals’ and to avoid over-diagnosis of grief presenting as Major Depressive Disorder.¹⁶ After the major controversy over bereavement in the lead up to the *DSM-5*, grief was not included in the May 2013 publication of the fifth edition of the *DSM*. Instead, the compromise measure was not to include any forms of Complicated or Prolonged grief in the main body of the book, but to remove the BE

¹² Greenberg, p.247.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.246.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.246.

¹⁵ M.K. Shear *et al*, ‘Review: Complicated grief and related bereavement issues for DSM-5’ in *Depression and Anxiety* 28.2 (February 2011), 103–117, (p.103).

¹⁶ Jerome C. Wakefield and Michael B. First, ‘Validity of the bereavement exclusion to major depression: does the empirical evidence support the proposal to eliminate the exclusion in DSM-5?’, *World Psychiatry*, 11.1 (February 2012), 3-10, (p.1).

and instead include the “condition” ‘Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder’ in the section ‘Conditions for Further Study’.¹⁷

The idea that grief is measurable in time is not specifically a twentieth-century view, nor a unique construction of the West; as Walter points out, ‘every society has norms about the proper and acceptable way to grieve’ and cultures ‘vary on how long grief should last’.¹⁸ But the medical conception of complicated grief as a ‘disorder’, part of which is the temporal designation of chronicity measured as a few months, is a central aspect and specific product of the dominant model.¹⁹ In an interview recounted in Davies’ *Importance of Suffering*, leader of the taskforce who created the *DSM-III*, Dr. Robert Spitzer, concedes that compilers of the *DSM* ‘made estimates of prevalence of mental disorders’ without ‘considering that many of these conditions might be normal reactions’; by emphasizing symptomatology rather than the context and specifics of any given experience of suffering, he concedes that he and his team ‘effectively medicalized much ordinary human sadness’.²⁰ Despite these concessions, the centrality of conceptions of time to versions of abnormality, and a preoccupation with what constitutes abnormality itself (rather than normality), persist.

A number of literary critics have specifically challenged the idea of grief as time-bound and teleological. Amongst them, Woodward’s early work turned to Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* for an evocation of ‘interminable grief’, Ramazani argued that the twentieth-century elegists he studied scorn ‘recovery and transcendence’ and ‘consolation or closure’, and psychoanalytic scholar Tammy Clewell has long argued for an ‘affirmative theory of endless mourning’ arguing, in fact, that Freud’s later work did register the ‘endlessness of normal grieving’.²¹ Sociologists and psychologists have also challenged the use of medical concepts and language when applied to bereavement. Corr writes that correlating grief to a disease implies that bereavement is, effectively, curable. She writes that it:

¹⁷ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – DSM-5* (Arlington, VA, American Psychiatric Association, 2013), p.789.

¹⁸ Walter, ‘What is Complicated Grief?’, p.74.

¹⁹ The word disorder is frequently used to describe complicated grief by psychiatrists, particularly in discussions related to the DSM. I quote here from Prigerson, ‘Complicated Grief’, p.38.

²⁰ Robert Spitzer in conversation with Adam Curtis cited in Davies, *Importance of Suffering*, pp.1-2.

²¹ Woodward, ‘Freud and Barthes’, p.97, Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, pp.4-5 and Tammy Clewell, ‘Mourning Beyond Melancholia’, p.56 and p.43. See also Clewell’s ‘Consolation Refused’ for an analysis of Woolf’s articulation of mourning as endless.

seems to imply that once one is recovered or 'healed' one is essentially unchanged by the experience. [...] recovery, completion and resolution seem to suggest a fixed endpoint for mourning. If such a fixed endpoint did exist, once it was reached one would then be over and done with mourning [...] adaptation seems mainly to imply that one has made the best of a bad situation.²²

Small argues that time – that is the 'construct' of time, 'metanarrative and sequential organizing epitomized' – dominates almost all of the models of bereavement and grief to have emerged in the West in the twentieth-century.²³ But in Small's analysis, the experience of bereavement actually 'fractures the sequential experience of time' and thus makes time-reliant models 'inappropriate'.²⁴ He stresses:

the modernist understanding of time, like the modernist constructions of order and control, does not survive the impact of extreme experiences like bereavement.²⁵

American psychologist Todd Dubose positions his work outside temporal constraints by reconsidering metaphorical and non-temporal approaches to suffering. Dubose works directly with people experiencing extreme kinds of what he calls 'soul pain' (where the soul is 'lived meaning').²⁶ He describes manifestations of such suffering using adjectives which stress them as experiences which neither sufferers nor psychologists can expect to be "able to" alleviate and which thus render time moot. Dubose describes these lived experiences as those which are:

incurable, inevitable, irreparable, unbearable, unpredictable, uncertain, uncontrollable, irreversible, unalterable, unknowing, unrelenting, or irreversible.²⁷

He argues that grief, for some, is one such form of suffering. Dubose is critical of curative 'practices of care' which he argues often do an 'abysmal job in addressing existential or soul pain and can, in fact, often increase it'; arguing instead to let such types of suffering 'have their place as irreducible aspects of anyone's

²² C.A. Corr, C.M. Nabe and D. Corr, *Death and Dying, Life and Living*, 2nd edn (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1997), p.239.

²³ Small, p.39 and 40.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.40.

²⁶ Todd Dubose, 'Abyss-mal Consolation', (p.1).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.1.

existence'.²⁸ In such situations, Dubose offers the method of 'being-with' which he describes in similar ways to Small's emphasis on recognizing the poetics of loss.²⁹ Being-with, he writes, offers:

no certainties or predictions; no probabilities or conclusive prognoses; no manualized algorithms of treatment. It addresses what is immeasurable and invisible. It cures or fixes nothing. [...] it doesn't rest in the comfort of categorizing, classifying, objectifying, or thingifying, particularly in terms of pathologizing someone's suffering.³⁰

Dubose's idea of 'soul-pain' is a category that offers a horizontality and openness to ideas of suffering which does not submit to clock or calendar time. Robinson does something similar, altering conceptions of time in her novels by presenting the experience of bereavement as an irreducible aspect of existence and being-with as a fitting response. This chapter explores the way she does this by spatialising time in relation to loss.

Grief and timespace

Across multiple disciplines, there have emerged in recent decades various ways of theorizing time via its relation to space. Robert T. Tally Jr. argues that the post-war work in literary and cultural studies has seen, 'spatiality [...] become a key concept' in scholarship, 'rivaling if not overtaking time' in critical significance.³¹ Cultural geographers too have, perhaps more obviously, engaged in the 'spatial turn' taking place across the 'wider social sciences and humanities'.³² Jon May and Nigel Thrift and feminist geographer Doreen Massey have identified an 'unhelpful dualism' between the two terms and describe instead an essential interconnectedness between 'the foundational categories of Space *and* Time'.³³ In his essay 'Time:Space', Mike Crang argues that the traditional focus on space in the discipline of geography, has 'tended to regard time as not its province'.³⁴ Crang suggests that it is in fact in the break-down of the binary *between* space

²⁸ Ibid., p.1.

²⁹ Ibid., p.2.

³⁰ Ibid., p.2

³¹ Robert T. Tally Jr., *Spatiality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p.3.

³² Avril Maddrell and James D. Sidaway, eds. *Deathscapes: Spaces for Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), p.1.

³³ May and Thrift eds., *Timespace*, p.1 – my emphasis. For Massey's extended critique of this binary see 'Politics and space/time', *New Left Review* 196 (1992), 65-84 and *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

³⁴ Mike Crang, 'Time:Space' in *Spaces of Geographical Thought: Deconstructing Human Geography's Binaries* ed. by Paul Cloke and Ron Johnston (London: Sage, 2005), pp.199-220, (p.202) – my emphasis.

and time that the creative interconnectedness of both can and should be considered by geographers. Drawing attention to their interrelationship, he argues, means that 'space' can be used to 'free up and pluralize what "time" means' and vice versa.³⁵

Geographers Avril Maddrell and James D Sidaway point out that there is also a 'growing engagement with death, mourning and memorialization within geographical research'.³⁶ Their book *Deathscapes: Spaces for Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance*, shifts the 'spatial lens' to the topic and spatial/temporal representations of death, and refigures the 'places associated with death and dying' and the 'meanings and associations' of these places as metaphors they call 'deathscapes'.³⁷ This critical interest intersects not only with the broader discourse on the twenty-first century 'emotional turn' within geography that has been explored under the umbrella term 'emotional geographies', but also with the critical interest in spatiality and emotionality that can be seen in the fields of social anthropology, sociology and material culture studies which all explore space, time and place in a variety of 'disparate, death-related directions'.³⁸

An exploration of grief in relation to timespace allows for a more expansive approach to bereavement than the strict application of temporality which has been found limited and inapt. In this chapter, I shift focus from the emphatic backward glance and explicit pain of being and dwelling in *algia* to the attention Robinson pays to the actual dwellings in her novels, the focus on home spaces conveyed by the term *nostos* (home). While there is arguably no end to experiences of grief in Robinson's novels, each book takes place in a spatially compact *mise en scène*. Little of the narrative occurs beyond the immediate locale of a single family home in a small fictional town (Fingerbone, Idaho in *Housekeeping* and Gilead, Iowa in *Gilead*, *Home* and *Lila*).³⁹ Noticeably, all of Robinson's novels start and end with

³⁵ Ibid., p.202.

³⁶ Maddrell and Sidaway, p.1.

³⁷ Ibid., p.1 and p.4.

³⁸ Jenny Hockey, Carol Komaromy and Kate Woodthorpe eds. *The Matter of Death: Space, Place and Materiality* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.1. For more on the disciplinary overlap in this field see the introduction to Hockey *et al.* For a description of the 'emotional turn' in geography see J. Davidson, L. Bondi and M. Smith, *Emotional Geographies* (Aldershot, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005). Geographers do not appear to use the term 'affect'.

³⁹ Even in *Lila*, which depicts scenes in flashback to Lila's past on the road and in St Louis, the diegetic present of the novel takes place mainly within the Church and the Ames family house in Gilead.

houses. McDermott writes of *Housekeeping* that the ‘narrative proper [...] begins with Sylvie’s return home’ and ends with Ruth ‘pass[ing] again and again behind’ her grandmother’s house (HK 217).⁴⁰ *Home* tells the story not only of Glory’s return home, but also of her brother Jack, the Prodigal Son, returning in the impossible hope of reconciling with his father and finding a home for his mixed-race family. The novel ends with Glory on the porch, looking at the house as Jack’s son might one day see it, committed to maintaining her father’s house after his death in anticipation of young Robert’s unlikely return. And with the recent publication of *Lila*, it is possible to read Robinson’s fourth novel in partnership with *Gilead* as the detailed evocation of how two people (Ames and Lila) find tentative and ultimately temporary refuge in a house that has long been – and with Ames’ death will again be – defined by loss.

Robinson’s domestic novels

Central to diegesis, the houses of Robinson’s novels, and the temporary shelters, sheds, shacks and barns that speckle the landscape, are also presented as marginal to the towns themselves. In *Housekeeping* and *Home* in particular, the single-family dwellings and temporary shelters take centre-stage but are set apart. The house in *Housekeeping* is considered by Martha Ravits to be the ‘major icon’ of the book, but is ‘at the edge of town, on a little hill’ (HK 5), the family ‘a little apart’ (HK 74).⁴¹ In *Home*, narrative focus ‘rarely venture[s] beyond the porch’ of the ‘virtually uninhabited’ old family house of the dying Reverend Boughton (H 4 and 14). This house, in a state of ‘slight desolation’, cocoons him and his adult children Glory and Jack for the novel’s duration (H 4). It is within – and in relation to – these “home” spaces that Robinson’s characters enact their lives and ritualize loss.

In response to this emphasis on the home, a number of critics have characterized Robinson’s fiction works as ‘essentially domestic novels’.⁴² Given the gendered constructions and history of this narrative form, and the early and second-wave

⁴⁰ McDermott, ‘Future-Perfect’, p.263.

⁴¹ Ravits, p.662.

⁴² Hungerford, p.114. Hungerford uses this phrase particularly to describe *Gilead* and *Home*, but Troy also describes Robinson’s *Housekeeping* as a ‘domestic novel’ p.46. Early reviews of *Lila* have not described Robinson’s fourth novel as ‘domestic’, but events in *Lila* move back and forth between the house she occupies with Reverend Ames (domestic setting of *Gilead*) and her lifetime of *homelessness* up until that point. As such, it might be argued that *Lila* draws on and adapts conventions of the ‘domestic novel’ in similar ways to *Housekeeping*.

feminist imperative to critique the ‘architecture of patriarchy’ built into constructions of both real and representational domestic space, it is inevitable that Robinson’s evocations of houses and versions of “home” have inspired significant feminist interpretation.⁴³ This has been particularly the case for *Housekeeping* and is increasingly so for *Home*.⁴⁴ Early feminist critic of *Housekeeping*, Paula Geyh, in her essay ‘Burning Down the House? Domestic Space and Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*’, interpreted the ‘house’ as ‘the ideology of the patriarchal family made concrete’, the family home a ‘*father-house*’ built by the grandfather to house his wife.⁴⁵ The motif of transience (embodied in the figure of eccentric housekeeper Sylvie and her flight from the house with Ruth) was repeatedly read as a form of ‘escape’ from, and ‘rejection’ of, traditional modes of domesticity symbolized by the grandfather’s house.⁴⁶ More recently, feminist scholars have described the relationship between Glory Boughton – the focalizing consciousness in Robinson’s third novel *Home* – and her decision to remain in her father’s house at the end of the novel as evidence of a ‘disturbing gender politics’.⁴⁷ In designating Robinson’s fiction ‘domestic’, Hungerford and others draw attention to what Tanner (with reference to *Home*) describes as the ‘narrowly confined setting’ of Robinson’s novels.⁴⁸ In Tanner’s reading of *Home*, this narrow focus is inherently gendered. Tanner reads the geography as ultimately ‘uncomfortable’ for both character and reader and as problematically

⁴³ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p.85.

⁴⁴ For a feminist interpretation of *Housekeeping* which focuses particularly on the domestic space as symbolic of patriarchal structures and transience as liberating escape see Paula Geyh, ‘Burning Down the House?’. For feminist readings of the characters of Ruth and Sylvie as emancipated female subjects see Maureen Ryan, *Housekeeping: The Subversive Narrative and the New American Eve* in *South Atlantic Review*, 56 (January 1991), 79-86 and Heller, *The Feminization of the Quest Romance*. For interpretations of *Housekeeping* which are critical of the novel for not being feminist enough, see Mile, ‘Femme Foetal’ and Kaivola, ‘The Pleasures and Perils of Merging’. For readings of *Housekeeping* which acknowledge the feminist history of reception but recognize the limits of this critical framework, see Caver, ‘Nothing Left to Lose’: and Schaub, ‘Lingering Hopes’. For feminist readings of *Home* which focus on domestic space see Laura E. Tanner ‘Uncomfortable Furniture: Inhabiting Domestic and Narrative Space in Marilynne Robinson’s *Home*’ and Phillips ‘Fiction in Review’.

⁴⁵ Geyh, p.109 and p.105.

⁴⁶ Tanner ‘Uncomfortable Furniture’, p.36. Amongst the many reviews of *Home* which comment on claustrophobia see Fatema Ahmed, ‘Return of the Prodigal’, *New Statesman*, 27 October 2008 <<http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2008/10/robinson-home-glory-jack>> and Hugh Macdonald, ‘A dark journey: Powerful themes emerge in a story of one family’s struggles’, *The Herald*, 4 October 2008 <<http://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-herald-arts/20081004/281603826283416>>. For a review which describes the novel as ‘suffocating’ see Michiko Kakutani, ‘Family Tries Reassembling the Shards of its Past’, *The New York Times Book Review*, 8 September, 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/09/books/09kaku.html>>, [accessed 8 November 2016], (para. 8).

⁴⁷ Tanner, ‘Uncomfortable Furniture’, p.36 and Phillips, ‘Fiction in Review’, p.169. Tanner and Phillips use the identical phrase.

⁴⁸ Tanner, ‘Uncomfortable Furniture’, p.35.

'circumscribed' and 'limiting', particularly for female protagonist Glory.⁴⁹ In this chapter, I posit the tropes of the house/home, as well as homelessness, as more metaphorically spacious and more symbolically resonant than Tanner and a number of reviewers have found.

Robinson's evocations of domestic space and the quotidian enactments of the lives and subjectivities of the men and women who inhabit (or do not inhabit) that space, strongly resist and exceed certain of the limits of a type of feminist criticism that itself appears to be constrained by certain interpretations of the domestic. There is increasing recognition of the restrictiveness of viewing domesticity only within the historically gendered dualisms of private/public and inside/outside space. Scholars (including feminists) have tried to move beyond binary tensions embedded in the history and imagery of house and home, acknowledging that domestic space is never *only* associated for women with notions of the 'oppressive'.⁵⁰ Rachel Bowlby has written that 'domestication' was never 'such a firmly fixed, univocal concept in the first place' and Roberta Rubenstein's work on nostalgia and mourning in women's fiction has pointed in particular to the 'archetypal theme' of both home and 'homecoming' in literature that stretches right back to Homer.⁵¹ Susan Fraiman's work on housekeeping contends that within left-leaning criticism at least, the house has become 'somehow inherently bourgeois and suspect'.⁵² Her work is a part of a 'recuperative' mode of feminist scholarship determined to rethink the house as a space that also, and amongst other things, 'protects and consoles'.⁵³

In re-thinking the feminist approach to Robinson's work, I follow a number of other scholars who have found political feminist readings incomplete or unsatisfying. In

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.35 and p.37.

⁵⁰ Roberta Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p.2 – my emphasis. For other recent feminist scholarship that explores the complexity of domesticity see Kathy Mezei and Chiara Brigante 'Reading the House: A Literary Perspective', *Signs* 27.3 (2002), 837-846 and Susan Stanford Friedman 'Bodies on the Move: A Poetics of Home and Diaspora', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 22.3 (Fall 2004), 189-212.

⁵¹ Rachel Bowlby, 'Domestication', in *Feminism Beside Itself* ed. by Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.71-91, (p.89) and Rubenstein, *Home Matters*, p.2 – italics in the original.

⁵² Susan Fraiman, 'Shelter-Writing: Desperate Housekeeping from *Crusoe* to *Queer Eye*', *New Literary History* 37.2 (Spring 2006), *Critical Inquiries*, 341-359, (p.358). Fraiman uses the phrase 'feminist poetics of interiors' to describe the exploratory approach to the domestic she sketches in 'Shelter-Writing', p.348.

⁵³ Ibid., p.345.

the case of *Housekeeping*, Christine Caver argues that feminist interpretations of Sylvie and Ruth's flight into transience and out of the home are themselves limited because they 'downplay' the novel's complex depiction of loss.⁵⁴ Reading transience as 'feminist freedom', she argues, seems to 'disregard' or 'hinder the [...] noticing' of the 'suffocating tone' and 'excruciating [...] pain [...]' of the novel.⁵⁵ Similarly, William Burke argues that 'polemic' readings of *Housekeeping* are themselves a form of 'domestication' that the novel 'implicitly resists'.⁵⁶ He maintains that such interpretations limit the ambitious scope of a novel that '*spills over* convenient and culturally conditioned critical enclosures to challenge both our perceptions and our conventional and taming critical vocabulary'.⁵⁷ Attempts to press the novel to fulfill various ideological critical functions have resulted not only in limited interpretations of the relationship between female subjectivity or consciousness and the domestic, but have left some feminist critics inevitably 'disenchanted' and 'frustrated'.⁵⁸ This is in part, I suggest, because of a reliance on models of feminism that themselves have been hindered by circumscribed versions of what constitutes female subjectivity or feminist interpretation, not least the problem of accommodating inevitable bereavement, pain and suffering into a model of female experience based on the hope that in resistance to patriarchy, women's lives should somehow always be liberating or ideally pleasurable.⁵⁹

In feminist writing about *Home*, while there remains a palpable discomfort with the limited modes of womanhood available in Robinson's 1950s setting and with 'the sense of gendered inadequacy' in depictions of Glory and her sacrificial decision to *stay home* at the novel's end, Tanner, Siobhan Phillips and Jennifer L. Holberg are all unable to settle on *exclusively* feminist readings.⁶⁰ Tanner suggests that evocations of the domestic also offer themselves up to 'complicate' third-wave (or indeed fourth-wave) feminist interpretations of home.⁶¹ Holberg reads Robinson's adaptation of free indirect discourse as facilitating a characterization of Glory

⁵⁴ Caver, p.114.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.114 –my emphasis.

⁵⁶ Burke, p.716 and p.717.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.716 and 717–my emphasis.

⁵⁸ Troy, p.48 and Geyh, p.119. Troy here refers to Mile, 'Femme Foetal' and Kaivola, 'Pleasures and Perils of Merging'; Geyh here also refers to Mile.

⁵⁹ For a discussion of the difficult reconciliation of political feminism with perceptions of the progressive see Sinead McDermott, 'Future-Perfect'. For a discussion of the 'feminist recuperation' that in part renders this difficulty moot, see Fraiman, p.351.

⁶⁰ Jennifer L. Holberg, "'The Courage to See It": Toward an Understanding of Glory', *Christianity and Literature*, 59.2 (Winter 2010), 283-300, (p.292).

⁶¹ Tanner, 'Uncomfortable Furniture' p.37 – my emphasis.

herself as 'more complicated, more various, perhaps more understandable' than either her brother or her father; and Phillips reads Glory's decision to stay at home and wait for Jack's son as an act which is political, though not necessarily feminist. She argues that the ending ultimately both 'cherishes the promise of an improved society' and 'grants' the book (and Glory) a 'political efficacy that housekeeping might otherwise preclude, as well as a personal integrity that domesticity might otherwise deny'.⁶²

Domestic ritual and making the domestic sacred

In addition to an emphasis on houses, Robinson also focuses narrative attention on what Fraiman calls 'detailed domestic gestures' in her fiction, repeated gestures and domestic acts which 'produce and determine character as well as [...] enact[ing] and reveal[ing] it'.⁶³ This idea of the domestic as a ritual enactment within an apparently static space has creative potential for reinterpreting houses in Robinson's work. Geyh points out that '[s]pace is not inert, a mere site or setting for the action of our lives and narratives', but rather that 'subjectivity and space are mutually constructing'.⁶⁴ Geographer Tim Ingold has coined the phrase a 'dwelling perspective' to describe a similar 'phenomenology of dwelling' whereby 'the world continually comes into being around the inhabitant' of a space.⁶⁵ Robinson's repeated focus on versions of home and on what Phillips calls 'everyday' domestic actions in her novels suggests then, that the home is *where* the action is and also that it is rendered a meaningful place *because* of the interconnection of humans and the physical spaces of the house.⁶⁶ Understood in this light, Robinson's homes are performative *of* domesticity and are not just settings for it; and the domestic takes on a richer depth of connotation when understood to include the intimate domestic encounter with, and experiential reality of, the human experience of bereavement and grief.

⁶² Holberg, p.291 and Phillips, p.171.

⁶³ Fraiman, p.344 and p.345.

⁶⁴ Geyh, p.103.

⁶⁵ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (Routledge: London, 2000), p.153.

⁶⁶ Phillips, p.160. Phillips does not cite the scholarship on the 'everyday' that has emerged in recent years and which leans particularly on the thinking of Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, but which has been taken up by feminist scholars such as Rita Felski. For further discussion of this, see Fraiman, 'Shelter-Writing' and Rita Felski 'Introduction', *New Literary History*, 33.4 (2002) 607-622. For work on the ways in which space becomes place when rendered meaningful to humans, see in particular Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977 repr. 2002) and Tim Cresswell, *In/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression* (Manitoba: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

In *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Hsuan L. Hsu argues that nineteenth-century American writers regularly ‘responded to the encroachment of vast, external spaces’ in their work by adapting or ‘blend[ing]’ spatial scales.⁶⁷ This, Hsu argues, was to ‘make cognitive and emotional sense of the vast geographical transformations of their era’.⁶⁸ This emotional sense, he argues, described elsewhere by Crang as the ‘emotional resonance’ of space, was made via a form of what Hsu describes as ‘affective mapping that produced and unraveled subjective identifications with different kinds of places’.⁶⁹ Despite the emphasis on extended geographical vistas in Hsu’s work, his explorations at the intersections of literary study *and* cultural geography, make it possible to reconfigure ideas about the domestic and read Robinson’s domestic scenes not so much in terms of circumscription or the limits for women, but in terms of temporal and ‘spatial *scale*’.⁷⁰

Andrew Herod suggests that, of ‘all the concepts that geographers (and others) use to understand the world around them, scale is a – or perhaps *the* – central one’.⁷¹ The application of the term in an analysis of domestic geography affords a more liberating approach to Robinson’s domestic terrain than might otherwise be afforded by traditional depictions. Hsu’s emphasis on ‘affective mapping’ echoes early work done by cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan whose study *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* also focuses on the ‘affective bond between people and place or setting’.⁷² A correlative category can be found in what geographers Maddrell and Sidaway call ‘emotional maps’.⁷³ Although Hsu’s work intersects with cultural geography at the macro level of American geographies, histories (and present realities) of ‘territorial and commercial expansion’ (macro levels I wish, in the main, to avoid), his conceptual framework also allows for consideration of the most ‘intimate’ local geographies

⁶⁷ Hsuan L. Hsu, *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.1 and p.6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.17 and Crang, p.204.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1 – my emphasis.

⁷¹ Andrew Herod, *Scale* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.xi.

⁷² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitude, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p.4.

⁷³ Maddrell and Sidaway, p.2.

and the smaller spatial scale of 'home' in, for example, Emily Dickinson's poetry.⁷⁴ Consequently, the ideas of spatial scaling and 'affective' or 'emotional mapping' allow for an expansive reading of the *micro*-coordinates of Robinson's intimate, fictional domestic spaces as primarily emotional but also, and importantly, unhindered by assumptions about, in this instance, the gendered constraints or binary impositions of the localized and the domestic scale.

Increasingly, literary critics are paying attention to the intimate details of the domestic sphere by interpreting them in light of the phenomenology of domestic space. Work of this type focuses particularly on sensory realities and embodiment and has started to touch on experiences of grief. Haptic and literary theorist James Krasner, for example, examines 'tactility as a critical and experiential framework through which contemporary cultural constructions of intimacy, domesticity, and embodied subjectivity can be understood', notably focusing on 'the suffering body' within the 'emotionally resonant spaces of the home'.⁷⁵ For Krasner, 'tangible grief' is that which is 'somatic', presented via the 'painful and disorienting bodily postures that grief compels us to enact in domestic space'.⁷⁶ Focusing particularly on temporality in her book *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America*, Dana Luciano uses nineteenth-century literary representations of grief and griever's bodies to index the 'alternate temporalities accessed through grief', most notably a 'slow time of deep feeling' that reflects a 'tenderness toward prolonged sorrow'.⁷⁷ Her work presents the 'grieving body as an instrument of affective time-keeping' and grief as represented by certain of the literature of the nineteenth-century as a 'sacralized, regenerative time-space'.⁷⁸ Luciano's work urges a reconsideration of the contemporary 'tendency to consider grief as always exceptional', and instead to reflect on its 'interminable insufficiency' as ironic measure of its very 'ordinariness'.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Hsu, p.19. Hsu's work, though helpful, is relatively typical of the type of literary criticism that I mention in Chapter One which reads the micro human expressions in terms of global, macro scales. Although I borrow his terms here, my debt is partial and I adapt them for my project in which the 'scale' I am working at always starts and ends with the expression of the intimate. For this reason, and again to avoid obfuscation of my intention to develop a specifically emotional epistemology of grief, I favour Maddrell and Sidaway's term 'emotional maps'.

⁷⁵ James Krasner, *Home Bodies: Tactile Experience in Domestic Space* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2010), p.1, 8 and 2.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁷⁷ Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief*, p.22, p.2 and p.5 - my emphasis. Luciano hyphenates 'time-space'.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.5 and p.23.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.24, p.268 and p.24.

In *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction*, Roberta Rubenstein also writes about the emotional epistemology of domestic space. For her, 'home' is never 'merely a physical structure or a geographical location but always an emotional space and as such, she argues, 'is among the most emotionally complex and resonant concepts in our psychic vocabulary'.⁸⁰ It is, she argues, an 'emotionally resonant topos'.⁸¹ Echoing May, Thrift and Crang's work in geography, and drawing on Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, the work of Maria Holmgren Troy also allows for consideration of the house and home as integrated temporal and spatial zone. Troy examines the house in *Housekeeping* as a form of dense metaphor that Bakhtin described as a chronotope (meaning literally 'timespace').⁸² For Troy as for geographer Crang, Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope is more expressive than traditional metaphor because it signifies the 'intrinsic connectedness of *temporal and spatial* relationships that are *artistically expressed*'.⁸³ In the expression of a literary chronotope, Bakhtin writes, '[t]ime thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible' and 'space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time'.⁸⁴

The emotional resonance, thick time and fleshed out space of the domestic offered by these methods of interpreting the 'timespace' of the house afford a rich interpretive framework for considering Robinson's domestic realms as places and metaphors for forms of grief which do not end. This is deepened when the timespaces of house/home/shelter/homelessness are read as inseparable from the everyday ritual domestic acts that occur within them. Across the secular literature on spatiality and death, the word 'sacred' is often used to designate the human significance that transforms spaces to *places* associated with loss.⁸⁵ From the old French *sacrer* and the Latin *sacrare*, the etymology of 'sacred' includes

⁸⁰ Rubenstein, *Home Matters*, p.3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.2 and p.3.

⁸² Troy, p.11 and Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Towards a Historical Poetics' in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by C. Emerson and M. Holquist, ed. by M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), p.83. The chronotope has a geographical correlative in May and Thrift's metaphorical geographical category 'timespaces' – see May and Thrift eds., *Timespace*. In the name of clarity, I favour May and Thrift's term.

⁸³ Bakhtin, 'Forms', p.84.

⁸⁴ Troy, p.11 and Bakhtin, 'Forms', p.83.

⁸⁵ For an example of the secular use of the word 'sacred', see Maddrell and Sidaway, p.3. For a secular geographical exploration of 'the moment' as an 'extra-temporal' and 'sacred time-space', see Anne Game, 'Belonging: Experience in Sacred Time and Space' in May and Thrift eds., *Timespace*, pp.226-312.

amongst its meanings '[d]edicated, set apart, exclusively appropriated to some person or some special purpose'.⁸⁶ In *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Talal Asad stresses that 'there is nothing essentially religious, nor any universal essence that defines 'sacred language or 'sacred experience', but that throughout history it has repeatedly designated 'individual things, persons, and occasions that [are] set apart and entitled to veneration'.⁸⁷ In much the same way that I interpreted Robinson's first-person expressions of grief as privileged expressions of Jaggar's 'outlaw emotions' in Chapter Two, in this chapter I interrogate marginal domestic timespaces as metaphors – in particular for the 'prolonged sorrow' of grief—by exploring the ways in which both houses and transients are 'set apart and entitled to veneration' throughout Robinson's work.

Timespace and ritual

In the article 'On Influence and Appropriation', Tace Hedrick describes the house in *Housekeeping* as a composite of 'dull dreary dusty spaces'.⁸⁸ But Robinson has amplified the sacred significance of these spaces, and their role in the experience of bereavement for her characters in *Housekeeping*, by positioning them within the literary heritage of Emily Dickinson. She has explained:

The use of household objects in the book – the idea of ruined and faded spaces, and the idea of the sacramental quality of eating together, and the effect on the household of a death having physically occurred there, with its consequences – I think of those as Dickinson.⁸⁹

In linking household object, domestic space, the qualities of sacrament in everyday ritual acts *and* death and its consequences, Robinson's description of Dickinson's influence on domestic architecture in *Housekeeping*, not only re-states her nostalgic debt to nineteenth-century Romanticism (and Dickinson's appreciation of death and domesticity), but strongly invokes the iconography of the symbolic anthropological study of ritual archetype. This in turn, invokes a long tradition of reading marginal and domestic timespaces and actions – in secular and religious tradition – as sacred.

⁸⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edn, < <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/169556?redirectedFrom=sacred#eid> > [accessed 23 October 2015].

⁸⁷ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.25.

⁸⁸ Hedrick, 'On Influence', p.7.

⁸⁹ Robinson in Hedrick, 'On Influence', p.7.

In anthropology and ritual studies, the performance of ritual has long been recognized as both spatial and temporal experience. For early twentieth-century ritual anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, the house was a particularly helpful metaphor for spatializing the temporal experience, in particular, of significant rites of passage.⁹⁰ It also conveyed the potent interconnectedness of space, time and ritual with sacred qualities that Van Gennep described as the 'magico-religious'.⁹¹ In his 1909 book, *The Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep argued that 'the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages' each 'accompanied by special acts' which are themselves 'enveloped in ceremonies'.⁹² His figure of the 'passage' conveyed both the spatial channels and temporal actions inherent in the rites associated not only with major life changes or 'life-crises' such as birth, marriage and death, but with 'any change from one state to another'.⁹³ Van Gennep's extensive study of pre-industrial and tribal societies established a tripartite taxonomy of the phases of these rites of passage which he classified as: 'rites of separation, 'transition rites' and 'rites of incorporation' alternatively known as *preliminal*, *liminal* and *post-liminal* (from the Latin *limen* meaning threshold).⁹⁴ Throughout *Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep repeatedly stressed the connection between the temporal phases of life (a quality he 'designated a *transition*') with 'territorial' spaces such as 'the frontier' or 'imaginary line'.⁹⁵ Despite drawing the distinction between 'profane' and 'secular' in then contemporary societies, Van Gennep's attention throughout his work was repeatedly drawn back to manifestations of the ritual space and time of the "passage" as 'intrinsically magico-religious', omnipresent as a 'pivoting of sacredness', which he stressed was made operative in the spatial act and 'magico-religious aspect of crossing

⁹⁰ Emerging out of social anthropology in the late 1970s, Ritual Studies is an interdisciplinary subset of both social anthropology and religious studies. This cross-discipline field continues to challenge categorization but, according to leading scholar of ritual Ronald Grimes, has influenced disciplines as wide as psychiatry, kinesiology and communications theory. For a detailed history of the field see Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Waterloo, Canada: Ritual Studies International, 2010).

⁹¹ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by, M.B Vizedom and G.L. Caffee (London: Routledge & Kegan and Paul, 1960), p.15.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁹³ The phrase 'life-crises' is from Solon T. Kimball's 'Introduction' to Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, p.vii. The second phrase here is Victor Turner's, summarizing Van Gennep in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1967), p.95. In *Forest of Symbols*, Turner describes them as 'an important point in the physical or social development of an individual, such as birth, puberty or death' otherwise summarized as "'big moments'", p 7.

⁹⁴ Kimball, 'Introduction' to Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, p.vii. Van Gennep, p.11 and p.21.

⁹⁵ Van Gennep, p.18 and p.15 – my emphasis. For a critique of the positivism inherent in the category 'transition', see footnote 160 below.

frontiers'.⁹⁶ He noted that these symbolic magico-religious frontiers proliferate in human ritual experiences as concrete threshold markers such as the 'natural boundary' of 'rock, tree, river, lake [...] stake, portal' or, particularly in the domestic sphere (and at the reduced scale), as a 'beam, threshold [or] vestibule'.⁹⁷

In the mid-1960s, symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner re-theorized Van Gennep's work, focusing in particular on the middle phase of a rite of passage and the metaphorical potency of liminality itself which he labelled the 'betwixt and between'.⁹⁸ Turner argued that ritual and liminal experience is present in 'all societies' (including the post-industrial) and accompanies 'every change of state or social position'.⁹⁹ This he theorized as occurring in a 'rift [...] in time' but also, after Van Gennep, in terms of spatial symbolism.¹⁰⁰ He argued that liminal states are usually made physical and symbolic via liminal imagery, giving an 'outward visible form [to an] inward and conceptual process' equivalent to literary metaphor.¹⁰¹ Like Van Gennep, Turner was repeatedly drawn to the ways in which the liminal and its concrete manifestation as variations of thresholds, perpetuated as metaphors of the 'sacred' by being 'set apart'.¹⁰² Although he focused repeatedly on the expansive symbolic scope of the liminal space, state, person or group in his work, Turner also re-figured the first phases of rites as ones of 'seclusion' as well as separation, and described these also as spatial as well as temporal.¹⁰³ Typically, in the groups he studied, they took the form of 'seclusion lodge or camp' where those entering a rite of passage such as puberty or bereavement were 'set aside from the main arenas of social life' often in a 'sacred place of concealment'.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.16, p.13, p.18 and p.15. For Van Gennep, the sacred was inherent in passage or journey and ironically, for my purposes, potentially absent in the secular "home". He explained that 'Sacredness is not an absolute [...] A man at home, in his tribe, lives in the secular realm; he moves into the realm of the sacred when he goes on a journey and finds himself a foreigner near a camp of strangers', p.12. It is part of my argument that Robinson re-flexes the apparently static, secular spaces such as the home by refiguring conceptions of movement, passage and journey as interior experiences which occur as much within as outside the home.

⁹⁷ Van Gennep, pp.15-19.

⁹⁸ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.93

⁹⁹ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.93 and *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), p.231 – my emphasis.

¹⁰⁰ Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, p.126.

¹⁰¹ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.96. – For a critique of Turner's use of the word 'process', see footnote 157 below.

¹⁰² Turner, *Dramas*, p.241.

¹⁰³ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.98

¹⁰⁴ Turner, *Dramas*, p.232.

Despite the origins of Van Gennep and Turner's work in the study of ritual including funeral and death rites, the categories made available by their work have not been used to explore or articulate descriptions of prolonged grief either in thanatology (where their influence is still notable) or in contemporary literary study, where they have largely fallen out of fashion. Their work is also conspicuous in its absence from the psy-disciplinary study of grief.¹⁰⁵ It is my contention, however, that their ideas (despite their limitations) provide a significant methodological help in the analysis of bereavement. I apply them here to the domestic spaces in Robinson's novels, where houses function as seclusion spaces filled with liminal thresholds, but also as markers of the ultimate 'liminality' of 'prolonged sorrow' in grief. The temporal manifestations of prolonged grief are visible in Robinson's domestic seclusion spaces and in her evocations of intimate, quotidian and liminal domestic acts and rituals. Her domestic landscapes become 'emotional maps' or 'sacralized [...] time-spaces' of bereavement, such as those described by Maddrell, Sidaway and Luciano. In Robinson's depictions of homelessness, the complex private acts that characters perform to ritualize loss and metaphorize the potentially infinite time and space of the intimate geography of grief figures loss by bereavement as a metaphysical 'deathscape'.

Houses as sacred timespace of grief in *Housekeeping* and *Home*

In the openings of both *Housekeeping* and *Home*, Robinson impresses upon her reader the interconnectedness of family, loss and the domestic realm. Each house is presented as the ritual timespace of bereavement, a Turnerian 'seclusion lodge' emphasizing the 'symbolic behavior signifying detachment' of its inhabitants who

¹⁰⁵ While 'rites of passage' has entered everyday parlance, liminality remains largely a conceptual category in academia. Van Gennep and Turner recur as influential figures across a broad set of disciplines, but most notably within social anthropology, ritual studies and thanatology. For a critical overview of their ongoing impact on anthropology and ritual studies see Ronald Grimes *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* and 'Victor Turner's Definition, Theory and Sense of Ritual' in Kathleen M. Ashley ed., *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism: Between Literature and Anthropology* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990). For a current integration of their work in thanatology see Hockey *et al* eds., *The Matter of Death: Space, Place and Materiality*. Within the humanities, the work of Turner and the metaphorical scope of liminality in particular has influenced literary, religious, American and, perhaps most lastingly, performance and theatre studies. He appears, however, to have fallen out of fashion within literary and American studies since the 1990s. For a critique and comment on the 'virtual disappearance' of Turner's work as a previously 'major methodological influence' see Donald Weber, 'From Limen to Border: A Meditation on the Legacy of Victor Turner for American Cultural Studies', *American Quarterly*, 47:3 (September 1995), 525-536, (p.525). For a critique of the full applicability of Turner's categories within religious studies, see C.W. Bynum, 'Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality' in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp.27-51.

have all been repeatedly bereaved and for whom grief is an experience that lasts fully as long as life (and the novel) does.¹⁰⁶ *Housekeeping* starts with Ruth linking both her female lineage and her family history of death and abandonment with the home. While her relatives are described as having ‘died’, ‘escaped this world’ or ‘fled’, Ruth points out that ‘through all these generations of elders *we lived in one house, my grandmother’s house*’ (HK 3 – my emphasis). *Home* opens literally on the threshold of the family home with the dying Reverend Robert Boughton opening the door to his returning daughter and declaring, ‘Home to stay, Glory! Yes!’, a pronouncement which is met with the response that Glory’s ‘heart sank’ (H 3). Momentarily, the home is described through the eyes of the old, dying man as a ‘good house’ with a ‘gracious heart’ and is said to embody, even more since the death of his wife, ‘the general blessedness of his life [...] especially when it stood over against particular sorrow’; for Glory, however, it seems both ‘abandoned’ and ‘heartbroken’ (H 3 and 4).

The family house in *Housekeeping* is characterized by Robinson as a seclusion place in a liminal space. The home ‘at the edge of town’ is ‘low, and set back and apart’ (HK 5 and 35); and Fingerbone is ‘a meager and difficult place’, a place ‘chastened by an outsize landscape and extravagant weather, and chastened again by an awareness that the whole of human history had occurred elsewhere’ (HK 178 and 62). In ‘Erased by Space, Ignored by History: Place and Gender in Marilynne Robinson’s West’, Tony R. Magagna explores the spatial implications of this liminality in the context of the literary history of “the west”, suggesting that Robinson reflects a ‘common theme of western experience’ by figuring Fingerbone as a chastened ‘hinterland’, a ‘no-place’ at the ‘center of nowhere’.¹⁰⁷ Magagna also draws attention to the ‘[t]ales of tragedy and exodus, of violence and disaster’ that ‘haunt’ and map the liminal ‘landscape of loss that encompasses Fingerbone’.¹⁰⁸ In Magagna’s analysis, the ‘legacy of loss’ and the ‘[u]nremarked stories’ of bereaved and abandoned women who bear the ‘brunt of the labor and

¹⁰⁶ Victor Turner, *Dramas*, p.231 and *Forest of Symbols*, p.94.

¹⁰⁷ Tony R. Magagna, ‘Erased by Space, Ignored by History: Place and Gender in Marilynne Robinson’s West’, *Western American Literature*, 43.3 (Winter 2009), 345-371, (p.57). For other explorations of *Housekeeping* as a novel of ‘the west’, see Sheila Ruzycski O’Brien, ‘*Housekeeping* in the Western Tradition: Remodeling Tales of Western Travelers’ in *Women and the Journey: The Female Travel Experience* eds. B. Frederic and S.H. McLeod (Pullman, Washington: Washington State University Press, 1993), pp.218-233 and Marilynne Robinson, ‘My Western Roots’ in *Old West–New West: Centennial Essays*, ed. Barbara Howard Meldrum (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1993) republished as the title essay in *When I Was a Child*.

¹⁰⁸ Magagna, p.359.

of the loss' are dominant themes of the novel.¹⁰⁹ However, by demoting the 'actual acts and roles of "housekeeping" to merely 'socialised' acts 'contained in the patriarchal structures of the home and society', a demotion revealed by his moving swiftly past them to an analysis of transience, Magagna misses an opportunity to scrutinize how the landscape of loss is initially subtly charted *within* the family house of Sylvia before the arrival of Sylvie and her more dramatic 'refusal to maintain the proper rules of housekeeping'.¹¹⁰

According to Jacqui Smyth, the house in *Housekeeping* 'occupies a role as central as that of the many female inhabitants'.¹¹¹ It is certainly a looming presence. The 'rambling house' is a quirky, Thoreauvian self-build, constructed by the grandfather who, knowing 'nothing whatever of carpentry', built it with its 'fenestration [...] random' and its 'corners out of square' (HK 28 and 74). It is presented in the early sections of the novel in terms of its interior: as the private seclusion space for grandmother Sylvia's cumulative bereavements. As such, the house is figured from the outset as a domestic timespace that indexes loss. When Edmund dies, the emphasis is placed on the behaviours and routines of Sylvia's daughters and their interconnectedness with their mother's body and the enactment of her domestic tasks. Molly, Helen and Sylvie are described in active connection with their mother; they always 'hovered' around their mother and 'followed her through the house' and 'got in her way' (HK 10). When she sits down to mend, they 'settle themselves around her on the floor [...] their heads *propped* against her knees on the chair' (HK 10 – my emphases). Each act of each child is intimate and vital, physically entangled with the props of the home and family: they '*pull* fringe off the rug, *pleat* [the] hem' and the 'older girls' build Sylvie's hair into 'pompadours with ringlets at the ear and nape' (HK 11 – my emphases).

With these descriptions Robinson invokes a type of domestic temporality that Dana Luciano calls the 'time out of time' created by the 'affectionately shaped task-orientation' of mothering that she argues was popular among certain middle-class, white-authored, sentimental domestic literatures of the nineteenth century.¹¹² Luciano argues that the writing of 'sentimentalists' such as Lydia

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.360, 359 and 361.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.360 and 363.

¹¹¹ Jacqui Smyth, 'Sheltered Vagrancy in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *Critique*, 40.3 (Spring 1999), 281-291, (p.281).

¹¹² Luciano, p.126.

Sigourney anticipated E.P. Thompson's observations of 'the rhythms of women's work' as demonstrating a 'sense of time' that was outside the linear because it attended to 'other human tides'.¹¹³ Analogously, Turner positions this conception of time beyond just the nineteenth-century, explaining that while 'all rituals of any length [...] 'may be said to possess "temporal structure"', the experience of the ritual body within a seclusion space is, paradoxically, a time/less condition he describes as 'an eternal now'.¹¹⁴ This time/lessness, he argues is an inherent quality of the liminal experience or 'liminal persona[e]' during any significant rite of passage.¹¹⁵ To describe the uniquely liminal situation of 'peculiar unity' and 'comity' for a group created within a seclusion space, Victor Turner coined the term '*communitas*'.¹¹⁶ He wrote, 'it is in liminality that *communitas* emerges' with its own spatio-temporal quality.¹¹⁷ As Ruth describes it, the children's responses to their mother's tasks are all linked to the time '[a]fter their father's death' and in the house (*HK* 10 – my emphasis). Their experiences can therefore be read, in symbolic and ritual terms, as the domestic timespace of the 'peculiar unity' of *communitas* forged by Sylvia and the girls in grief.¹¹⁸

In making her argument that in nineteenth-century America, 'the grieving body' functioned as 'an instrument of affective time-keeping', Dana Luciano explores the ways in which 'pronounced nineteenth-century attention to grief and mourning' resulted in a culture that viewed grief as 'something to be cherished', a development which was in part a consequence of the 'advent of modernity constructed [as] a new vision of time as linear, ordered, progressive and teleological'.¹¹⁹ According to Luciano, the nineteenth-century response to an 'anxiety over the new shape of time' was to 'insist' that 'emotional attachment had its own pace – a slower and essentially nonlinear relation to the value of human existence that defended it against the increasingly rapid pace of progress by providing *avenues of return* to the sacred truths that both preceded and exceeded

¹¹³ Ibid., p.126, citing E.P. Thompson 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism', in *Customs in Common* (New York: New Press, 1991), pp.381-82. Thompson first published his article in 1967 almost contemporaneously with Turner's early work.

¹¹⁴ Turner, *Dramas*, p.238 and 239.

¹¹⁵ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.95.

¹¹⁶ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.99 and p.100 and *Dramas*, p.232.

¹¹⁷ Turner, *Dramas*, p.232.

¹¹⁸ The phrase 'liminal persona' or 'transitional-being' is used by Turner to describe anyone in any ritual passage. I quote here from *Forest of Symbols*, p.95.

¹¹⁹ Luciano, p.5 and p.2.

history as such'.¹²⁰ Grief, she argues, was therefore 'aligned with a sensibility that sought to provide time with a "human" dimension' that was 'collective rather than productive, repetitive rather than linear, reflective rather than forward-moving'.¹²¹ Within her argument, it was the 'deployment of the *feeling body*' that became 'the index of a temporality apart from the linear paradigm of "progress"' and the 'pain of grief' was considered 'the body's spontaneous and natural testimony to the importance of interpersonal attachments'.¹²²

In these early depictions of the home after Edmund's death, Robinson's descriptions of Sylvia's house invoke this sense of the feeling body, human time and loss in *communitas*. The pressing physicality of the girls is emphasized as just such an index of the timespace they inhabit: they 'lean[...]' toward Sylvia, 'looking at her face', they '*clustered* about her so', reminding Sylvia of when they breastfed (*HK* 11). The bodies of her children responding to her body, throw Sylvia back in time to their infancy and, in loss, to Sylvia's memories of that era of intimate physical encounter after birth. Robinson writes, '[n]ever' since then 'had she been so aware of their hair, their softness, breathiness' (*HK*11). This 'fleshy' memory and its inherent vitality are inseparable from the sense of time that Robinson evokes and that Luciano figures as sacred. Luciano explains:

The nineteenth century's elaborate arrangements of grief point us toward a time-space comparable to the Sabbath – one *set aside* [...] one that operated to conserve the affective dimension of the human. Grief's time moved, like Sundays, at a different pace from ordinary time: it was slower, more capacious, almost spatialized, enabling contradictory feelings (pain and pleasure) to be indulged at once and without traumatic contradiction.¹²³

During Ruth's re-interpretation of Sylvia's reflections on the slow, capacious time after Edmund's death, this pain-pleasure is suggested as she 'dwell[s]', to use Luciano's phrase, 'within the sensuality of deep feeling' emphasized by proximity and tactility.¹²⁴ Here Sylvia is 'filled' with a 'strange elation, the same pleasure she had felt when any one of her daughters, as a sucking child, had fastened her eyes

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.2 – my emphasis. Luciano here draws on the work of historian of religion Mircea Eliade and the idea of 'sacred time' outlined in his book *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1987).

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.21.

on her face and reached for her other breast, her hair, her lips, hungry to touch' (HK 11).

Sylvia's own routines emphatically focus on what is presented as her usual response to her children's needs: domestic care and nourishment, offered up as they 'always' have been as 'a thousand ways to circle them all around with what must have seemed like grace'; her 'bread was tender and her jelly was tart [...] she made cookies and applesauce' (HK 11-12). In temporal terms, both her and her daughters' experiences *within the house* are presented as traditional domestic routines offered up as recurring ceremonial acts implying the interconnectedness of time, food, the physical body and intimacy. Robinson writes:

When suppertime came, they would follow their mother into the kitchen, set the table, lift the lids off the pans. And then they would sit around the table and eat together, Molly and Helen fastidious, Sylvie with milk on her lip. (HK 11)

With the death of Helen, and the arrival of Ruth and Lucille, time, for Sylvia maintains a millennial, Sabbath-like quality and the measure of the domestic, but it also – and ironically – becomes more fragile as Robinson thickens representation. The pleasures of the domestic give way to experiences that are more uncertain and vulnerable. Robinson characterizes the time after both bereavements as almost identical blocks of five years, literalizing Turner's idea that in *communitas* 'everyday is, in a sense, the same day, writ large or repeated'.¹²⁵ Time is both liberated from constraint as it resists teleology and notions of progression, but the sacramental quality of domestic rituals as *measure of* this time both heightens and deepens the measure of loss. The 'five serene, eventless years' after Edmund's death are described as a time during which Sylvia and her daughters were 'cut free from the troublesome possibility of success, recognition, advancement' (HK 13). The arrival of Ruth and Lucille brings about a repeat 'five years' during which time, Ruth explains, Sylvia 'cared for us like someone reliving a long day in a dream' (HK 24). '[B]affled by the awareness that this present had passed already', Sylvia's second liminal period is marked again by quiet, cyclical repetitions where temporality is, to quote Luciano, 'collective', 'repetitive' and 'reflective' and is inseparable from domestic space and quotidian ritual (HK 24).¹²⁶ Their lives are

¹²⁵ Turner, *Dramas*, p.239.

¹²⁶ Luciano, p.6.

dictated by human tides presented in terms of cycles and seasons rather than linearity, their days 'sp[.]n off the tilting world like thread off a spindle, breakfast time, supertime, lilac time, apple time' and the 'whited shoes and braided hair and fried chicken and turned back bedclothes' of her tragically bereaved daughters are echoed identically in the 'whited shoes and braided hair and turned back bedclothes' of her bereaved *granddaughters* (HK 13, 24-25).

The increased fragility of Sylvia after Helen's death is also given domestic shape in light not of Edmund's death, but of the loss of her daughters that followed his death. It is *this* loss that leaves her to a kind of 'loneliness that made clocks seem slow and loud' (HK 18); a human tide far removed from modernity's clock time. Ruth imagines and remembers the loss of Sylvia's daughters in terms which are measured instead by Sylvia's reflective memory of the tangible, repetitive daily realities of the domestic:

Sylvie took her coffee with two lumps of sugar, Helen liked her toast dark, and Molly took hers without butter [...] Molly changed the beds, Sylvie peeled the vegetables, Helen washed the dishes [...] time and space and light grew still. (HK 15)

The anxiety that she might now lose her granddaughters is conveyed as embedded within and interrupting her domestic repetitions and the slow time of grief. Ruth reflects, 'it must have seemed to her that she had returned to *relive* this day *because* it was here that *something had been lost or forgotten*' (HK 24 – my emphasis). Between Ruth's descriptions of each act of whitening shoes and braiding hair she inserts Sylvia's imagined memory that she 'suddenly feared and remembered that the children had somehow disappeared, every one' (HK 25). The actions of Sylvia's "housekeeping" are not just figured then as 'acts of proper domesticity', as Magagna suggests, but actually as *measure of* the 'brunt' and 'labour' of loss.¹²⁷ In this, the domestic act also reveals its limitations. Ruth wonders:

it must have seemed, too, that she had only the frailest tools for the most urgent uses. Once, she 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 that she had tried to fish a baby out of a well with a tea strainer. Lucille and me she tended with scrupulous care and little confidence, as if her offerings of

¹²⁷ Magagna, p.360.

dimes and chocolate chip cookies might keep us, our spirits, here in her kitchen, though she knew they might not. [...] she offered us deep-dish apple pie as a gesture of well-meaning and despair. (*HK* 25-26)

Ruth's speculations imply that Sylvia's instruction that she and Lucille 'keep the house' because if you 'own the roof over your head you're as safe as anyone can be', belie a greater truth about the illusion of domestic security and the inadequacy of domestic props to prevent or protect from the loneliness of inevitable loss (*HK* 27).

Home and Glory's grief

In Robinson's third novel, the 'claustrophobic [...] Boughton manse' figures as another seclusion space for another family held within the liminality of prolonged and recurrent grief.¹²⁸ Here again another woman enacts the majority of the tiny domestic gestures of home that mark and measure grief-time. *Home* details the return of Glory Boughton and her brother Jack to the family house in Gilead. The dying Reverend Boughton's other adult children have long left home, his wife is long dead and Glory and Jack return nursing their own private disappointments. Glory has fled the life of teaching she gave up for the humiliations of a 'long engagement' to a married man and Jack has returned after a twenty-year absence in the frail hope of finding a home for his "secret" family, a black 'wife' and child (Della and Robert) with whom he has thus far failed to find sustained refuge and whose existence are only revealed to the reader as they are revealed to Glory in the final pages of the novel (*H* 124 and 333).

Home re-presents the same period in time, the same small town and the experiences of many of the same characters as in *Gilead*, though with a different emphasis. Sarah Churchwell describes *Home* as 'the obbligato beneath Gilead's descant: where *Gilead* is consoling' *Home*, she posits 'is almost frighteningly sad'.¹²⁹ It is, she writes, 'a book of sorrows, of disappointment'.¹³⁰ Despite critical pre-occupation with the novel's sadness, the centrality of bereavement to the text

¹²⁸ Wilson, 'Robinson's Latest is Lyrical, Yet Static', *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 7 September 2008, <<http://www.post-gazette.com/ae/book-reviews/2008/09/07/Home-by-Marilynn-Robinson/stories/200809070222>>, [accessed 29 November 2016], (para. 22).

¹²⁹ Churchwell, 'A Man of Sorrows' (para.8).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, (para.10).

has barely been discussed.¹³¹ From the outset, however, the claustrophobia and disrepair of the family house can be seen to figure not only for the disappointments of these adult children and their forced returns, but for other cumulative family losses that include the mother's death (without ever again seeing Jack), the impending death of Boughton and most pertinently, the ever-resonating death of a child Jack fathered in his past. In this sense, the novel has as much in common with *Housekeeping* as it does with *Gilead*.

As I have mentioned, critics often wrestle with spatial scale of *Home*. Laura Tanner focuses on the 'narrowly confined setting' and the 'spare plot, limited cast of characters, [...] and aching slow pace' of the novel.¹³² As Malcolm Jones puts it '[a]lmost all the action is contained in the kitchen, the garden and the barn of [the] old house'.¹³³ Similarly, reviewers have found Robinson's narratological emphasis on free indirect discourse and dialogue to be a limitation. Many find the novel difficult to read precisely because of the attention given to slow and repetitive tasks that make up the domestic care of the house and the dying man, accompanied as they are by awkward, freighted silences and painful verbal encounters characterized as often as not by mis-steps and qualification.¹³⁴ Jones jokes, 'Samuel Beckett couldn't have made it much sparer: three characters [...] talk, talk, talk for more than 300 pages and say pretty much the same things over and over.'¹³⁵ Siobhan Phillips points out, however, that there is 'profundity' in Robinson's 'attentive care' to this 'homeliness'.¹³⁶ She writes, 'full as it is of people turning pancakes, washing shirts, boiling chickens, and sweeping floors', Robinson's attention to detail is evidence of the 'twinned aesthetic and ethical

¹³¹ Churchwell in particular emphasizes the sorrow of the novel in the extract of her review on the cover of the 2008 Virago edition, 'the saddest book I've ever loved'. Others who focus on the sadness of the text without discussion of bereavement include, Phillips, 'Fiction in Review' and Rebecca Painter, 'Further thoughts'. For a very recent essay on grief in the text (the first), see Petit, 'Mourning Glory'.

¹³² Tanner, 'Uncomfortable furniture', p.37.

¹³³ Malcolm Jones, 'Wanted: More Balm in Gilead', *Newsweek*, 152.12 (September 2008), <<http://www.newsweek.com/marilynne-robinsons-new-novel-88729>> [accessed 2 November 2016], (para. 1).

¹³⁴ See Phillips, 'Fiction in Review' and Tanner, 'Uncomfortable Furniture' for frustrations with Robinson's decision not to write in the first person. Tanner in particular pays close attention to the reader experience. For other views on the slow pace and emotional discomfort of the book see Katherine Govier, 'No Place Like it Indeed', [review of *Home*], *National Post*, 15 November 2008 <https://global-factiva-com.oxfordbrookes.idm.oclc.org/ha/default.aspx#!?&_suid=147920867317203184060580097139> [accessed 3 December 2015], and reviews by Wilson, MacDonald and Kakutani.

¹³⁵ Jones, (para.1).

¹³⁶ Phillips, p.175.

gravity' of her writing.¹³⁷ Thus the micro-coordinates of the awkward emotional topology of 'everyday actions' within the home are presented as painful, yet crucially 'decisive steps', such that 'the resolve not to alter old furniture' or whether or not Jack should 'eat supper with the Ames family', can be considered 'climactic decision[s]'.¹³⁸

The diegetic emphasis on the house also sets it apart from the town of Gilead, to which narrative focalization never extends. As Katherine Govier puts it, this makes anything that occurs beyond the house seem 'fleeting and unreal'.¹³⁹ In contrast to the changes occurring in the neighborhood where most 'families had long since torn down their outbuildings and sold off their pastures', the Boughton home is presented as failing but prevailing. Robinson writes:

Boughtons, who kept everything, had kept their land, their empty barn, their useless woodshed, their unpruned orchard and horseless pasture. There on the immutable terrain of their childhood her brothers and sisters could and did remember those years in great detail, their own memories, but more often the pooled memory they saw no special need to portion out among them. They looked at photographs and went over the old times and laughed, and their father was well pleased. (*H* 8)

In response to this description, Tanner calls the Boughtons' a 'house of memory'.¹⁴⁰ She argues that the 'immutable' furniture and 'terrain' of the house and environs assume a 'primarily nostalgic function' in the novel such that 'big crowded furniture' overwhelms the *lived* bodies' of Glory, Jack and Boughton with the consequence of expelling the 'pleasures of the phenomenological present' both for character and reader.¹⁴¹ Tanner's reading rightly identifies the house in *Home* as an 'inhospitable symbolic landscape', but her emphasis on 'domestic life as a form of confinement' under-reads the losses that the family has incurred and thus misinterprets a lack of *pleasure* as a lack of 'lived' experience in the phenomenological present of the text.¹⁴² She, and I contend other critics, also misapprehends the metaphoric function of the house. Tanner's reading overlooks the centrality of grief for the family and thus the more complex phenomenology

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.158 and p.163.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.158 and p.160.

¹³⁹ Govier, (para.9).

¹⁴⁰ Tanner, 'Uncomfortable furniture', p.38 – my emphasis.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.38. Tanner here cites *Home*, p.52 and uses 'nostalgic' here in the pejorative sense that I challenge in Chapter Two.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p.38 – my emphasis.

and emotionality of sorrow that is figured via the house and its 'empty', 'useless', 'unpruned' and 'immutable' features. While the house, its environs and its denizens have been interpreted by critics as both 'static', 'stall[ed]' and even 'irrevocably crippled', the still, the empty and the immutable are, in fact, alive with meaning in *Home*.¹⁴³ Read against a 'dwelling perspective' and ritual liminality, there is a continual though deeply sorrowful 'coming into being' of the reduced Boughton family and their repeated, indeed perpetual experiences of loss which offers the text up as providing a valuable epistemology of grief.

In addition to actual and impending bereavements, the weight of loss on the family is compounded by the emotional intensity of the return of Jack whose twenty-year absence has been a source of deep mourning indicated by '*all that waiting*' for his family (*H* 307 – my emphasis). This period is repeatedly referred to as a liminal era during which time nobody knew whether Jack was 'alive or dead' and the family experienced pronounced and prolonged 'grief' and 'sorrow' as a result (*H* 126 and 307). With Jack's return, relief of that sorrow is only ever fleeting and rather than alleviating the family's pain, Robinson uses Jack's arrival to initiate another liminal era – the duration of the novel – that ultimately, though meaningfully, exacerbates suffering. This, again, is characterized by 'wait[ing]' and is repeatedly made concrete by the proliferation in the Boughton house of what Tanner calls 'dimmed spaces' and 'dim recesses' such as the 'empty barn', the 'useless woodshed', the 'hallway' and the 'oppressive' dining room, a 'place of solemn and perpetual evening' (*H* 53, 8, 37 and 41).¹⁴⁴

Although intended as a reworking of the parable of the Prodigal Son, *Home* begins and ends with Glory and with the house.¹⁴⁵ Holberg has pointed out that 'despite the critics' propensity to frame the book mostly as a tale about a dying father and his errant son [...] Glory *is* central to the narrative' and 'her story as important as her father's and her brother's'.¹⁴⁶ What has rarely been observed by critics (including Holberg), is the central role that bereavement specifically plays in Glory's characterization and in the interconnectedness of her grief with the house and the grief and the suffering bodies of her father and her brother. Only Sarah

¹⁴³ Kakutani, 'Family Tries', (para. 5), Tanner, 'Uncomfortable furniture', p.43, and Wilson, (para. 21).

¹⁴⁴ Tanner, 'Uncomfortable Furniture', p.43, 44 and 45.

¹⁴⁵ For a discussion of Robinson's approach to the biblical parable, see Painter, 'Further thoughts'.

¹⁴⁶ Holberg, p.289 – italics in the original.

Petit has explored this dimension of the novel, in her article 'Mourning Glory: Grief and Grieving in Robinson's *Home*'. Petit's reading of Glory's 'psychology' shapes it as 'situational depression' in accordance with clinical lore about bereavement and thus as precisely the concept of the 'mourning process' this thesis aims to refute.¹⁴⁷ Despite this, Petit is correct in positing that 'Glory's thoughts and feelings shape everything'.¹⁴⁸ As agent of the majority of 'domestic gestures', and focalizing consciousness of the novel, it is Glory, therefore, who measures and bears the brunt of the family's tragic, domestic 'microdrama'.¹⁴⁹ It is Glory who offers the novel's 'dwelling perspective'. Phillips writes that 'like Ames' in *Home*'s companion novel, 'Glory expects death' and, along with her father, has been 'scarred by the past'.¹⁵⁰ But Phillips, like most critics of *Home*, summarizes this past as the accumulation of *Jack*'s childhood transgressions – a 'decade of betrayals, minor and major', his petty thefts and alcoholism, and 'his crowning disgrace', the abandonment of the child he fathered illegitimately with poor, white, fifteen-year-old Annie Wheeler in his twenties (*H* 6 and 16).¹⁵¹ Absent from criticism so far is the impact that both the birth *and death* of this nameless child has on Glory and her father. In fact, it is the circumstances of Jack's illegitimate baby's short, tragic life as much as Jack's resulting departure and twenty-year absence that is subtly foregrounded and repeatedly referred to throughout the novel as source of deep 'grief' for Glory and Reverend Boughton (*H* 19).

The enactment of this bereavement in the family home is depicted through the focalization of Glory's memories of the past but, on return to the house, simultaneously sets in motion a different temporal reality in the diegetic present. Initially, the many, often subtle, allusions to the baby are integrated into the descriptions of the exterior of the domineering house and the loss of the large family it once housed. Jack's long absence from the family home is revealed to be a direct consequence of his baby's birth and is figured as a mourning period for the dwindled family that were left behind in the diegetic past: adolescent Glory and her parents (just three of a family of ten). The now 'disheveled' Boughton home is linked nostalgically, with a lost time when the home was 'in its prime' and *full of children* (*H* 4 – my emphasis); as A.O. Scott describes it, an 'emblem of the

¹⁴⁷ Petit, 'Mourning Glory', p.88.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.88.

¹⁴⁹ Fraiman, p.344.

¹⁵⁰ Phillips, p.159 and p.160.

¹⁵¹ Phillips, p.160.

family's prosperity and fertility'.¹⁵² The early pages of the novel, therefore present the childhood outdoor games of 'Hide-and-see[k] [...] croquet, badminton and baseball' through Boughton's eyes in terms of his preferred memories of *his* children:

"Such times you had!" her father said, as if the present, slight desolation were confetti and candy-wrappers left after the passing of some glorious parade. (H 4)

Glory and Jack's childhood is presented as a time when four swings in the yard 'announc[ed] to the world the fruitfulness of their household' (H 4).

Pieced together across fragments of reminiscence, however, the impact of Jack's fathering and abandoning an illegitimate daughter emerges and is repeatedly figured as the desolation of grief-time made real in the dark *interior* of the house in stark contrast to those fruitful years. His departure after the baby's birth is described swiftly, domestically and liminally: Robinson writes, after 'a quiet talk *behind a closed door*' with his father, 'twenty years passed' (H 59-60 – my emphasis). The result is an era that extends the initial mourning period by years and which Glory describes as 'those *other* years [...] *those tense* years only she and her mother and father had lived through', an era of lingering grief, for the diminished family (H 56 – my emphasis). It is figured explicitly as a period of interior bereavement during which time 'her mother stayed in her room', when 'evening fell' and 'no lights were put on' and during which time Glory waited in isolation in the 'dark parlour' eating pieces of dry toast 'because she dreaded the sound she might make spreading butter on them', never imagining their 'household could contain so desolate a silence' (H 60).

As for Sylvia in *Housekeeping*, bereavement is a source of emotional ambivalence and a fusion of liminal times for Glory, but unlike the depictions of Sylvia, for Glory this is novel-length. Time, to quote Crang, is 'pluralized' in *Home* by the space of the house in which past and present merge.¹⁵³ Glory notes:

¹⁵² A.O. Scott 'Return of the Prodigal Son', [review of *Home*], *New York Times Book Review*, September 19, 2008 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/books/review/Scott-t.html?pagewanted=3&_r=1> [accessed 1 July 2015], (para.2) – my emphasis.

¹⁵³ Crang, p.202.

The past was a very fine thing, in its place. But her returning now, to stay, as her father had said, had turned memory portentous. To have it overrun its bounds this way and become present and possibly future too – they all knew this was a thing to be regretted. (*H* 8)

Gradually, the house's interior, its 'old books' and 'overfurnished rooms' meld with memories and fuller recollections of the time of the baby's birth, her short life and her death; a time during which isolation and alienation within the family home was experienced by Glory as silence, solitude and loss, but a time nonetheless figured as deeply meaningful. Like Ruth in *Housekeeping* and Ames in *Gilead*, Glory's nostalgia is reflective, and as such Glory's experience of bereavement brings the strange vitality of a death in the past into life in the present. Robinson writes, 'It was *being home* that made her remember' (*H* 19 – my emphasis). '[B]eing *alone* in all that *silence*' in the house recalls the other silent time of her adolescence when, 'in a *suddenly quiet* house', her siblings moved away and Jack's baby was born; *the time when 'everything happened'* (*H*18 and 35 – my emphases). Citing Jeri Johnson, geographer Mike Crang explains that "space functions in fiction through and as temporality, as a narrative event or events" where it presents a "network of relationships be they unfolded or not".¹⁵⁴ The silence in the house becomes vehicle for the time of the baby's birth and death and as such communicates the tenor of the loss incurred by the tragically foreshortened life of the baby and the '*not-unfolded*' relationship she never had with the Boughton family, particularly Glory. The time is thus figured as a vital time of 'everything', the emotional kernel of Glory's life experience, and the simultaneously potent grief of silent nothing.

Critics focus on Glory's representation in relation to her father and to her brother, but it is Robinson's subtle depiction of the vital era of the baby's life and death that most strikingly maps Glory's relationship with the house in tiny, domestic gestures. The first allusion to the baby occurs before Jack's arrival and is buried amongst a list of domestic activities and reveries that Glory pursues '[w]ithin weeks of her return' and with the departure of her father's paid 'housekeeper' (*H* 13). Robinson lists the quotidian as a developing integration of father's need and daughter's care, infused with the poignancy of Glory's memories of her childhood presented as inseparable from the birth of the baby:

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p.216, citing J. Johnson, 'Literary Geography: Joyce, Woolf and the City', *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 4.2 (2000): 199-214, (p.200) – my emphasis.

Every day she swept and straightened – light work, since the house was virtually uninhabited. She did what little her father required to make him comfortable. He sat at the window, he sat in the porch, he ate crackers and drank milk and studied the newspaper and *The Saturday Evening Post*. She read them too and whatever else she could find. Sometimes she listened to the [...] big old 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. It had alarmed her mother though'. (H 14)

This first reference to the baby can (and in criticism does) go unnoticed, but as in Robinson's other novels, it is by returning to image and memory that Robinson's subtle reference gains resonance as index of loss.¹⁵⁵ When Glory's memories next return to 'knitting' it is as part of her reflection on the 'deep secret' that she and her parents withheld from her siblings but religiously maintained. She remembers:

Her father told her with tears in his eyes that the three of them could alleviate Jack's guilt and also his shame by making the very best of the situation. So she took up knitting. [...] They were at work on a great rescue. (H 73)

This rescue never occurs. Narration has already revealed that Glory in childhood 'confused, in fact fused, the words "secret" and "sacred"' (H 15). Her adult reflection suggests that she 'had never really distinguished the secret from the sacred, and loved tact and discretion better than she should' (H 15-16). With this fusion, Robinson connotes the sanctity of the deep secrecy that her memory of knitting invokes. This is deepened and complicated by the ways in which Glory's memories are evoked by the sadness of the dark old family house and the house full of '[b]roken things, rusted things' where the baby lived, but which in turn remind her of her brief joy in that era (H 308). Silence and solitude are always merged with Glory's secret joy at the arrival of the baby and the 'feelings' that her 'naïve' young self privately considered a baby 'a fairly delightful thing' (H 19 and 17). Thus, repeatedly, the baby's birth and short, precarious life are associated with Glory feeling 'happy', an emotion that is always shadowed by her parents' 'misery' and 'sorrow', the 'depths' of her father's 'grief' and the tragedy of the baby's subsequent death (H 19, 16-18 and 58). Again, Robinson lends these emotions a temporal quality and emphasizes grief time's duration and dilation:

¹⁵⁵ At time of writing only Petit in 'Mourning Glory' discusses the death of the baby in *Home*.

Those years of her late childhood, when she felt so necessary, when she was so sure things would come right if only enough effort was given to making them come right – *those years* stayed with her as if they had been *the whole of her life* [...] It embarrassed her to remember how happy she had been, those three bitter, urgent years until it all ended. (H 73 - my emphasis)

Later, in discussion with Jack, it becomes clear that the expansive and prolonged time of Glory's private grief – the three bitter, urgent years that feel like the whole of her life – suffuses the space in which the house resides as much as the house itself. Although secretive about her reasons, she says to Jack, 'I hate this town [...] Because it reminds me of when I was happy' (H 137).

Glory's losses condense in timespace toward the end of the novel when it becomes clear that she will remain in the seclusion space of her father's house forever. This revelation proceeds to merge her pain with that of her father and her brother, and in turn alters the 'shape and textures' of what Luciano calls grief time's 'flow'.¹⁵⁶ In an angry outburst that reveals his own live and vital suffering at the death of Jack's daughter and the concomitant and endless loss of Jack, Boughton compares the inefficacy of his love for his doomed son to a death. He states, 'there is only more grief, more sorrow [...] It's like watching a child die in your arms [...] Which I have done' (H 308). By conflating the actual death of Jack's baby (it is implied that this is the corpse that he held, though it could also refer to Ames' dead baby, Rebecca) with the grief he continues to feel for Jack, Boughton conveys the accumulation of grief's temporal density over time in the present continuous experience of 'watching a child die'. Fusing his 'grief' and 'sorrow' with Glory's own experience of bereavement, Boughton gives lie to the idea that grief time ends, instead leveling at Glory the accusatory question, 'Have you put it aside?' before stressing that she '*never would get over*' the baby's death (H 308 – my emphasis).

The novel ends with Boughton leaving 'the house to Glory' (H 309). This is followed by the brief, devastating and tragically belated visit of Jack's wife and son, Della and Robert, just days after Jack has given up hope of reuniting with them and has left town again for good. Glory's distress at her brother's going has

¹⁵⁶ Luciano, p.2.

already been described as a 'dread[ed] absence' which 'made her life seem intolerably long' (H 329). Robinson makes the tragedy of Glory's suffering one of persistent temporality with the novel's final lines, a dream that Jack's living child, Robert, will one day come again:

He *is* Jack's son [...] He *will* be curious about the place, though his curiosity *will* not override his good manners. [...] he *will* thank me and leave, walking backwards a few steps, thinking, Yes, the barn *is* still there, yes, the lilacs, even the pot of petunias. This was my father's house. And I *will* think, He *is* young. *He cannot know that my whole life has come down to this moment.*

That he has answered his father's prayers.
The Lord is wonderful. (H 339 – my emphases)

Here Robinson blends the proleptic present tense of Glory's dream with declarative and repetitive future tense use of the auxiliary verb, 'will' to evoke the non-teleological and pluralizing qualities of the life-time that is both the 'flow' of grief time and the endless projected 'coming into being' of Glory as a consequence of her cumulative bereavements. She at once stretches this grief time to Glory's 'whole life' and distils it, as worth it, into an imagined and prayerfully anticipated (though implicitly never realized) future 'moment' on the porch of the house when her life-long experience of sorrow might, though probably won't, end.

Ritual Liminality and 'monumental time' in *Housekeeping* and *Home*

Robinson repeatedly figures the prolonged sorrow of all the characters across all four of her novels as versions of a 'permanent liminality'.¹⁵⁷ This is the case for those of Robinson's characters who find or remain within homes, but is perhaps more striking in her depiction of those who are homeless. Just as Ruth and Ames dwell in *algia* and Sylvia and Glory enact the performativity of domesticity as a demonstration of the family *nostos* as bereaved seclusion space, so 'unredeemed transient' Sylvie Fisher (and her 'initiant' Ruth Stone) in *Housekeeping*, and 'lifelong exile' Jack Boughton in *Home* live lives that are figured as perpetual grief (HK 49 and H 210).¹⁵⁸ In the strictest sense of these anthropological terms, these three characters are what Turner called 'ritual liminars', and as such, in their homelessness, they at once occupy and embody both the 'time that is not a time'

¹⁵⁷ This phrase is Bynum's.

¹⁵⁸ The word 'initiant' is from Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.96.

and the 'place that is not a place' that Turner argued was generated in the specific *communitas* of liminality.¹⁵⁹

While Turner always emphasized the metaphorical aspects of the liminal, his application of Van Gennep's definitively *teleological* terms and the self-conscious 'positivism' of his taxonomy, relied on assumptions about the *completion* of rites of passage.¹⁶⁰ Referred to by anthropologists as '*processual* symbolic analysis', Turner's theories always implied either 're-integration' into society 'or irreparable breach' after liminality.¹⁶¹ For Turner, even though his preoccupation was with the experience of being 'betwixt and *between*', the liminal was implicitly temporary and, though 'ambiguous', he held it to be a 'transition' that was 'a *process*, a becoming'.¹⁶² In his analyses, the 'passage' was inevitably 'consummated'.¹⁶³ Medieval religion historian C.W. Bynum has used and simultaneously critiqued Turner's metaphorical application of liminality, arguing that this assumption of completion is a 'fundamental limitation' in Turner's otherwise valuable work.¹⁶⁴ She argues that his ideas provide language 'for which scholars have long needed terms', but simultaneously 'describe the stories and symbols of men *better* than those of women'.¹⁶⁵ Bynum explains that this is largely because there is 'no completed social drama' for the women she studies and as such, 'one either has to see [them] as permanently liminal or never quite becoming so'.¹⁶⁶ In Bynum's argument, this limitation of Turner's work 'misrepresents' and thus 'speaks less fully to the complexity of human experience'.¹⁶⁷ As has repeatedly been the case for women writing about experiences figured as processes, Bynum's work re-

¹⁵⁹ Turner, *Dramas*, p.239.

¹⁶⁰ Kimball, 'Introduction' to *Rites of Passage*, p.vii. Kimball's introduction outlines the positivism of the tradition in social anthropology at the turn of the century, emphasizing in particular, Van Gennep's view that 'general laws of social process should be derived from empirical observation', p.vii. Van Gennep himself tacitly revealed the limits of this positivist approach in a disclaimer not unlike (and just as revealing as) Freud's own in 'Mourning and Melancholia'. He prefaced his study with the proviso that 'by no means' were 'all rites' to be seen as 'rites of passage', but also that his 'three sub-categories are not developed to the same extent by all peoples or in every ceremonial pattern', concluding, 'I am trying to group all these rites as clearly as possible but since I am dealing with *activities* I do not expect to achieve as rigid a classification as the botanists', *Rites of Passage*, p.11. Turner reveals similar social scientific bias when he uses natural scientific analogies in his description of processes of 'transition'. In *Forest of Symbols*, he equates transition with 'water in process of being heated to boiling point, or a pupa changing from grub to moth', p.96.

¹⁶¹ Bynum, p.29.

¹⁶² Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.94.

¹⁶³ Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969), p.95.

¹⁶⁴ Bynum, p.32.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.32- my emphasis.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.33.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.28 and p.50.

presents the value of *non*-teleological ways of considering ritual experience and liminality. Similar to Boym's interpretation of the 'reflective' qualities of nostalgia, Bynum reads the liminal as an experiential category that rather implies 'continuity' (at least for women) and which renders assumptions of *telos* effectively redundant.¹⁶⁸

In her article, 'Women's Time', Julia Kristeva, (after Nietzsche), explores the implications of 'two temporalities' on the evolution of Western – notably European – feminism.¹⁶⁹ These temporalities she calls '*cursive*' and '*monumental*', cursive being 'the time of linear history' and monumental being 'the time of another history [...] another time' that 'has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the word temporality hardly fits'.¹⁷⁰ In Kristeva's argument, "female" subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations'.¹⁷¹ This temporal apprehension includes the measure of both the cyclical time of 'biological rhythm' invoked, for example, by Sylvia's experience of grief in *Housekeeping*, and a *monumental* time, that Kristeva suggests is '[a]ll-encompassing and infinite, like imaginary space'; a time that invokes 'mythology' and 'the various myths of resurrection which in all religious beliefs, perpetuate the vestige of an anterior or concomitant maternal cult'.¹⁷² As Thomas Foster puts it, monumental time has 'archaic connotations'.¹⁷³ Kristeva links both cyclical and monumental time to 'the problematic of space which innumerable religions of matriarchal reappearance attribute to woman'.¹⁷⁴ She designates both time and space, throughout history, as 'female', but argues that while cyclical and monumental time are 'the fundamental, if not sole, conceptions of time in numerous civilizations and experiences, particularly mystical ones', they are simultaneously 'not incompatible with "masculine" values'.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p.32.

¹⁶⁹ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', trans. by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 7.1 (Autumn 1981), 13-35, (p.13).

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p.13.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p.16.

¹⁷² Ibid., p.17.

¹⁷³ Thomas Foster, 'History, Critical Theory, and Women's Social Practices: "Women's Time" and *Housekeeping*', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14.1 (1988), 73-99, (p.75).

¹⁷⁴ Kristeva, 'Women's Time', p.17.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p.17

It is as metaphors of monumental time within 'all-encompassing' and 'infinite' monumental spaces that I read the metaphysical dimension of timespace accessed by Robinson's homeless characters, Sylvie, Ruth and Jack. Although a good deal of scholarship on both novels focuses on these characters, neither Jack nor Sylvie has been read as a griever, nor has either been considered a metaphorical rendering of the experiential outcomes of bereavement. However, Robinson's representations of their homelessness rely on intricate ritualization of grief (inside and outside the home) that includes the repeated use of archaic imagery of eschatology and rebirth to figure the timespace of loss. This is realized in Robinson's metaphorical rendering of Sylvie as mystic 'elder' and 'instructor' to 'neophyte' Ruth and in her representation of Jack as ultimately Christ-like.¹⁷⁶ The result is a mythic re-presentation of grief for male and female that adjusts the scale of the domestic to incorporate variants of both the painful beauty and the sublime terror of loss. In *Housekeeping* grief as sublimity expands outwards from the home to the extra-ordinary metaphysical geography of female transience and female origin metaphors of birth; in *Home*, Robinson figures Jack's existential suffering as both beautiful *and* sublime via the tragedy of Jack's suicide attempt and the very ordinary micro-gestures of the domestic experienced with his sister in the home.

For Turner, liminality was an 'interstructural situation', a state of being that relied on the social anthropological category of any society as formally organized around the 'structure of positions'.¹⁷⁷ His early work found that 'liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness [...] to the wilderness'.¹⁷⁸ Turner's observations of ritual liminars in tribal societies and later in Christian ceremonies and pilgrimages found that liminars were always symbolized as such via spatio-temporal means of ritual expression that figured for, and were thus coterminous with, the interstructural qualities of invisibility, poverty, dissolution, ritual pollution and 'cunicular' darkness.¹⁷⁹ As homeless, both Sylvie and Jack are explicitly represented in these terms. Having left home at sixteen, shortly after her father's death, Sylvie is described by Ruth as 'very transient' (*HK* 51 – my emphasis), someone who has been away from the family house for years

¹⁷⁶ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.99 and p.96.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.93. For further discussion of Turner's use of the word 'structure' and its use in the work of other social anthropologists see in particular Turner, *Dramas*, pp.235-237 and pp.241-242.

¹⁷⁸ Turner, *Ritual Process*, p.95.

¹⁷⁹ Turner, *Dramas*, p.232.

'riding around in freight cars' (HK 49 and 42). She lives between socially normative structures, thus, for example, although married, she has 'simply chosen not to *act* married', and instead travels alone, 'drifting' outside normative law and custom, even when she returns to Fingerbone (HK 43 – my emphasis and 42). Jack, also returning from a long absence, is the Prodigal Son, 'the black sheep', penitent 'boy thief' and 'boy drunkard' grown up (H 72 and 12).¹⁸⁰ He too is socially interstructural; he is a homeless alcoholic and an ex-convict in an unlawful relationship with Della in a state that prohibits inter-racial marriage. Jack's interstructural state is also figured repeatedly at the local, familial level as alienation and 'estrangement' from the family and the family home (H 46). His father, exclaims, 'I just never knew another child who was not at home in the house where he was born' (H 120). He is 'betwixt and between' the normative Presbyterian structures of his pious family and small town and implicitly racist 1950s Gilead, because of his childhood transgressions, his difficult atheism, the secrecy of Della and Robert and because of his shameful abandonment of Annie Wheeler and their daughter (H 178).

Appropriately, each character arrives 'home' with 'nothing', symbolic 'prototypes' of the 'sacred poverty' of the liminar.¹⁸¹ Jack pretends to have lost his suitcase *en route* and Sylvie arrives with only the clothes she stands up in, her 'feet bare except for loafers', her 'raincoat so shapeless and oversized that she must have found it at a bench' (HK 45). Once home, like all of Robinson's characters, they occupy the terrain at the peripheries. Jack, like his sister, is usually to be found in 'dim recesses', in the 'doorway' (H 144), 'just outside the back door', 'at the edge of the garden', or on 'the porch' (H 85, 61 and 131). His principal domestic act is 'wait[ing] for the mail' (H 53), hoping for a letter from Della, and his perennial actions are enactments of suspension, 'pausing' (H 213), 'loiter[ing]' (H 214), 'lingering' and 'lurking' (H 258). *In extremis*, he retreats, to the 'earthy dank concealment' of miniature home-spaces such as the 'the barn, the car, the shed, the porch', describing the car as his 'home away from home' (H 90, 253 and 118). He is, as his father puts it, 'always hiding somewhere' (H 119). Verbalizing his estrangement in domestic and spatial terms, he reveals to Glory that in childhood:

¹⁸⁰ The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) and The Penitent Thief (Luke 23:39-43) are both parables from Luke's Gospel.

¹⁸¹ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, pp.98-99.

I used to wish I lived here. I used to wish I could just walk in the door like the rest of you did and, you know, sit down at the table and do my homework or something. (H 287)

In *Fingerbone*, Sylvie makes her existential transience concrete by also remaining at the fringes of the family home. Usually associated with the image of ‘a very long train’ (HK 167), a signature analogue explained by her father’s dramatic death, her bedroom is described like a compartment on a sleeper train. It is ‘the hall bedroom’, a ‘narrow dormer’ with only ‘a curtain closing it off’ from the ‘half-dark hallway’ (H 48). Later she moves closer to the earth, to her mother’s room which is ‘three steps below the ground floor’ and otherwise, she is to be found out of the house in outlying spaces, at the lake, ‘at the shore’ (HK 81), in a boat, ‘in the road’, at the ‘railroad station’, on a park bench, or on the bridge (HK 89, 81 and 56). She, like Jack, is the epitome of the Dickinsonian metaphor of grief as a state of being ‘Homeless at home’.¹⁸² Sylvie occupies a ‘millennial present’ that links her eternally with her bereavement; she has ‘no awareness of time’, because, for her, ‘hours and minutes’ are ‘the names of trains’ (HK 165-6). Her arrival sets in motion an altered, eternal temporality captured initially by Ruth’s image of the two girls with their aunt ‘posed in all the open doors of an endless train of freight cars – innumerable, rapid, identical images that produced a flickering illusion of both movement and stasis’ (HK 50).

Because both Jack and Sylvie are made structurally ‘invisible’ by their social exclusion, their representations have been especially amenable to socio-political interpretation.¹⁸³ Sylvie’s transience in particular has been the focus of much critical interest. McDermott contends that *Housekeeping* is ‘about transience’, Anne-Marie Mallon argues that ‘transience is a metaphor for transcendence’ and

¹⁸² ‘Homeless at home’ is a quotation from the Emily Dickinson poem, ‘To the bright east she flies’ [1573], T.H. Johnson ed., *Emily Dickinson: The Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp.652-653. It is a eulogy to her dead mother. I am indebted to Thomas Gardner for this observation on Sylvie’s characterization in ‘Enlarging Loneliness’, *A Door Ajar*, p.37.

¹⁸³ Amongst the many who examine Sylvie’s transience in socio-political terms, Jacqui Smyth explores the ways in which Sylvie’s homelessness puts her ‘outside a positivist category’ and presents a sociological and feminist challenge to ‘traditional constructions of domesticity’ in ‘Sheltered Vagrancy’, p.282. In ‘Burning Down the House’, Geyh argues the trope enables Robinson to ‘attempt to imagine a new transient subjectivity [...] located in a place outside all patriarchal structures’ because it takes the female outside the ‘father-house’, pp.104-105. Similarly, in interview with Painter, Robinson has made explicit that part of her intention for *Home* was to articulate the destructive force of racist ‘pressures of law and social custom’ which, in pre-Civil Rights America, proscribe Jack’s mixed race marriage to Della, even in a state where such a union is officially legal; see Painter, ‘Further thoughts’, p.488. Sarah Churchwell’s review articles and interviews provide the fullest socio-political and literary-historical reading of Robinson’s latter three novels.

Jacqui Smyth considers the female 'vagrant' more literally, reading transience as a 'metaphor for subversion'.¹⁸⁴ Despite the social context of Robinson's novels, however, and the possibilities of literary historical interpretation of Sylvie and Jack as realistic characters who are homeless in space and time, Robinson deliberately avoids overtly historicizing either character in favour of presenting their suffering as archetypal. She does this using archaic referents from myth and religion. Thus, Robinson deliberately transforms the social marginality of Sylvie and Jack's transience and homelessness into metaphor by rendering them in and as ritual liminality, their bodies the 'time-piece[s]' of the monumental time of loss.¹⁸⁵

According to Turner, one fundamental aspect of ritual liminality is the symbolism of darkness. Smiling at Lucille and Ruth on their first morning together, Sylvie says, 'it was nice with the light off' (HK 49). She is usually to be found 'in the dark' (HK 71) and leads neophyte Ruth into a life of permanent transience at night (HK 67).¹⁸⁶ Darkness is a state that Jack also favours. When laid low by shame and regret he heads for liminal spaces and 'turn[s] out the light', or hides, when most sorrowful, in the 'dim recesses' of the barn loft saying, '[i]t's nice out here. Dark' (H 160 and 103). Both Sylvie and Jack seek out, too, the liminal, darkening times of day. Their dissolution and liminality are both coded as crepuscular by Jack's choosing 'earthy, perpetual evening' (H 118) and Sylvie's preference for 'half-dark' (HK 48).

According to Van Gennep and Turner, common to all liminal states is the imagery of death. In his work on the parallels between tribal death rites and Christian pilgrimage, Victor Turner explained that during liminal phases the 'symbols of death, dying, and catabolism proliferate'.¹⁸⁷ This is true even if the ritual heralds a new birth or entry into marriage, but is thickened by Robinson in her representations of those in bereavement. Turner observed that in both tribal and more complex Christian rituals, 'the pains of dissolution' are experienced '[m]etaphorically'.¹⁸⁸ Elsewhere, he writes that 'neophytes' are allowed to go filthy'

¹⁸⁴ McDermott, 'Future-Perfect', p.268; Anne-Marie Mallon, 'Sojourning Women', p.96 and Smyth, 'Sheltered Vagrancy', p.282.

¹⁸⁵ Luciano, p.2.

¹⁸⁶ Turner, *Dramas*, p.232.

¹⁸⁷ Turner, 'Death and the Dead in the Pilgrimage Process', in *Religious Encounters with Death: Insights from the History of Anthropology of Religions*, ed. by Frank Reynolds and Earle H. Waugh (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1973; repr.1977), p.25.

¹⁸⁸ Turner, 'Death and the Dead', p.25.

and are often 'identified with the earth'.¹⁸⁹ Robinson makes concrete these metaphors in the presentation of Jack and Sylvie as deathly, dirty, polluted and polluting particularly inside their family houses. They are deathlings in that they are mortal personifications of death, while death itself also functions as metaphor for their grief which always manifests as being 'filthy' (H 97).

Corpse-like physicality marks them both. Sylvie enters the family home already cadaverous and resembling her drowned sister, Helen. She is 'quiet', 'her hair [...is] wet, her hands [...] red and withered from the cold' (HK 47). In *Home*, Jack's diseased and wasted representation seems initially to be the consequence of hard living, his body showing signs of weariness and deterioration. He is 'pale and unshaven...[with] a nick of scar under his eye' the implied consequence of street life and alcoholism (H 31). However, this physicality takes on greater significance as the extent of his lifelong suffering becomes clear. Jack is 'wretched' (H 182). He is unable to escape his harrowing self-perception in a pious Presbyterian family that he is the living embodiment of 'perdition' (H 149). Jack's 'sadness', in the diegetic present is always figured in terms of the twenty-year absence when he might have been 'dead', a deathliness that defines his physical characterization, not just when absent from the house but when present in it (H 120 and 126). He explains to Glory that he was always nearer to home than he seemed, either 'out in the barn', or 'in the loft', in childhood as in adulthood, but that this estrangement 'felt like death, in a way' (H 287).

In contrast to ethereal Sylvie in *Housekeeping*, Robinson delineates Jack's suffering and the misery he brings to others in concrete terms that are strongly embodied. He is the quintessence of Krasner's notion of tactile, 'tangible grief' made real and 'somatic' as the 'suffering body' in the 'emotionally resonant spaces of the home'.¹⁹⁰ Where Sylvie's (and Ruth's) ritual liminality of grief is always ultimately verging on states of metaphysical absence and disembodiment, Robinson externalizes Jack's complex psychology of sorrow and self-hate strongly in terms of physical presence, showing his suffering tangibly on the outside of his body. He is 'disgust[ed]' by his own 'sweat' (H 260) and argues that his 'scurrility [...] is like an itchiness under [his] skin', that it 'seems to be contagious', that he 'should wear a leper bell' (H 179). This dissolution and disease is connotative of

¹⁸⁹ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.96.

¹⁹⁰ Krasner, p.1, 8 and 2.

Jack's self-perception as blighted but, within the storyworld, Robinson presents it repeatedly as manifestation of family grief. She layers the representation of Jack as embodiment of grief in the novel, repository of all of his family's disappointments, 'a grief so generous that it embraced them all [...a perpetual] 'weight on the family's heart' (H 44).

For Sylvie in *Housekeeping*, ritual pollution and the imagery of 'undoing, dissolution and decomposition' are one means by which Robinson metaphorically iterates what Tanner calls the ultimately 'disembodied experience of grief' that dominates *Housekeeping* and which functions, I contend, as a figure of grief's inherent outsideness and alienation.¹⁹¹ This imagery also figures Sylvie's liminality, unlike Jack's, in terms that Gernes calls 'quasi-mystical', defying 'the body's demands and limits'.¹⁹² This starts to reveal itself in her relationship with the house and her critically infamous acts of housekeeping (source of the tragicomic pun of the book's title); both of which set in motion Ruth's ritual initiation into transience as mystic and monumental in time and space. Even before Sylvie arrives, the house starts to take on the material qualities of Ruth (and her great Aunts Nona and Lily's) anxieties about danger, death, fragility and loss. Chapter Two proliferates with imagery of the house falling down. As Ruth recounts the winter of her maiden aunts' care, she explains that some 'houses in Fingerbone simply fell from the weight of snow on their roofs' and that 'Lily and Nona *knew* that our house would fall' (HK 33 – my emphasis). By the end of Chapter Three, Ruth says, 'we and the house were Sylvie's' and Sylvie's presence, in Elizabeth Meese's words, commences an 'opening up' of the 'outside to the inside' that takes the form of an invasive pollution of the house by nature.¹⁹³ After the flood at the end of winter, '[f]ungus and mold' creep into 'wedding dresses and photo albums', the water in the house making a 'tea of hemp and horsehair' of the 'couch and armchairs' (HK 62). As Geyh puts it, Sylvie 'mistakes accumulation for housekeeping' and, 'carrying a broom', she heralds a '*time* that leaves began to gather' and the house becomes 'attuned to the orchard and the particularities of the weather, even in the first days of Sylvie's housekeeping' readying it for 'wasps and bats and barns and swallows' (HK 85 – my emphasis).

¹⁹¹ Tanner, *Lost Bodies*, p.102.

¹⁹² Sonia Gernes, 'Transcendent Women: Uses of the Mystical in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *Religion and Literature*, 23.1 (Autumn 1991), 143-165, (p.155).

¹⁹³ Meese, p.59.

Sylvie's unconventional relationship to the family home and to housekeeping has intrigued critics. It has provided inspiration for a great deal of feminist analysis, including the work of Thomas Foster and Elizabeth Meese who suggest it offers 'an alternative economy of the home' to that afforded by traditional 'women's work'.¹⁹⁴ Some, including Sarah Hartshorne, focus more on Sylvie's housework as transcendentalist homage to Henry David Thoreau's declaration in *Walden* that 'a taste for the beautiful is most cultivated out of doors where there is no house and no house keeper'.¹⁹⁵ However, it can also be argued that Sylvie's housekeeping is an ironic response, not just to patriarchal or Thoreauvian models, but to the illusory act of housework as an attempt to keep pollution at bay. Hartshorne uses the term 'un-housekeeping' to describe Sylvie's eccentric habits and Geyh describes how Sylvie's domestic gestures performatively divest her and Ruth of a home in 'the slow but inevitable process of unhousing' as they approach the metaphysical state of 'unbeing' at the novel's end (*HK* 215).¹⁹⁶

Sylvie prefers open doors and the 'stern solvents [...] most of all air' (*HK* 85), but under her care, the house physically deteriorates. The children eat from 'plates that came from detergent boxes' and drink 'from jelly glasses' (*HK* 100), 'cupboard doors [...] come unhinged' and are 'propped against [...] boxes of china', 'leaves [...] gather in the corners [...] with scraps of paper among them, crisp and strained from their mingling in the cold brown liquors of decay and regeneration' (*HK* 84-85). '[N]ewspapers [are...] stacked to the ceiling' and the kitchen is 'stacked with cans' (*HK* 180). The 'remnants of [dead swallows]' wings and feet and heads' lie about on the couch and the floor (*HK* 180-181). Her housekeeping also brings darkness inside and with it, Ruth's ritual initiation into liminality in transience and Lucille's parallel desire to 'slip across that wide frontier into that other world' of 'seemly' social structure (*HK* 123). Ruth comments:

[Sylvie] seemed to dislike the disequilibrium of counterpoising a roomful of light against a world full of darkness. Sylvie in a house was more or less like a mermaid in a ship's cabin. She preferred it sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude. We had crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the

¹⁹⁴ Foster, p.85 and Meese, p.64.

¹⁹⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971; repr. 2004) p.30. For essays on the influence of *Walden* on Housekeeping, see in particular Sarah Hartshorne, 'Lake Fingerbone and Walden Pond' and Marilyn R. Chandler, *Houses in American Fiction* (Berkeley, LA and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992).

¹⁹⁶ Hartshorne, p.52 and Geyh, p.114.

eaves, sparrows in the attic. Lucille and I stepped through the door from sheer night to sheer night. (HK 99)

Sylvie's housekeeping then actively *pollutes* the house, making concrete death and decay as metaphors for what Mark Ford calls her 'topsy-turvy metaphysics of loss'.¹⁹⁷

Turner writes that:

Liminal *personae* nearly always and everywhere are regarded as polluting to those who have not been, so to speak, "inoculated" against them, through having been themselves initiated into the same state.¹⁹⁸

In *Housekeeping*, this fear of pollution is made literal by Lucille's creeping horror at Sylvie's housekeeping and disgust at her transient habits and culminates when she finds Sylvie asleep on a park bench, a 'newspaper tented over her face' (HK 105). Lucille regards her as 'polluting' precisely because, unlike Ruth, Lucille is not becoming 'initiated into the same state', rather Lucille 'hated everything that had to do with transience' (HK 103). Lucille knows she is 'not like that' (HK 130) and feeling 'no mercy, and no tolerance', responds by 'running toward home' to perform a '*tumult of cleaning, with the lights on*' (HK 105-107 – my emphasis). By contrast, Ruth, uncomfortably drawn by a recognition and kinship in grief to her aunt's familiarity with 'perished things', is 'reassured by her sleeping on the lawn, and now and then in the car' (HK 103). She silently articulates parallel feelings of 'invisibil[ity]' and describes herself as similarly 'incompletely and minimally existent' (HK 105). Ruth starts here to narrate her correct suspicions that 'Sylvie and I were of a kind' (HK 106) and that she too is a liminal persona, defined by transience as disembodied grief state. Unlike Lucille, Ruth cannot pull herself into 'some seemly shape' and says that 'other world' (of tidy, settled domesticity) is somewhere she 'could never wish to go' (HK 123). She continues:

For it seemed to me that nothing I had lost, or might lose, could be found there, or, to put it another way, it seemed that something I *had* lost might be found in Sylvie's house. (HK 123-124 –my emphasis)

¹⁹⁷ Ford, p.19

¹⁹⁸ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.97

Eventually, as part of her highly ritualized transition to more ethereal transience and mystic transcendence, Ruth joins Sylvie in a physicality of wet, cold 'dishevelment' and 'ruin' that contrasts sharply with her sister (*HK* 173). When they pass Lucille for the last time, she is 'dressed *like all the others* in a [clean] sweatshirt and sneakers and rolled-up jeans', while they, Ruth now in Sylvie's outsized raincoat and just off the train, resemble dirty hoboes (*HK* 173 – my italics).

Robinson also uses clothing and cleaning to explore Jack's polluting effect in *Home*. The first thing Jack does on his return to the family home is wash 'at the kitchen sink with a bar of laundry soap' (*H* 34). Throughout the novel, 'thin, weary and unkempt', it is Jack's prevailing physical challenge to stay clean, fed and smartly dressed (*H* 32). The novel is filled with images of him trying to de-pollute by 'washing up, shaving again' (*H* 184), 'jaw polished' and 'hair combed' (*H* 35). Jack also lives in fear of polluting others. In one of the few scenes of joy in the novel he returns, 'disheveled', from the woods having found a basket of morel mushrooms (*H* 154). Before showing his father this gift, however, he anxiously says to Glory, 'I think I'd better clean up a little' seemingly fearful of contamination (*H* 155). After his suicide attempt, he macabrely jests, 'I managed to *smell* like death at least' (*H* 256 – my emphasis). Jack's regular retreats to liminal seclusion spaces, are also always to protect others from his contagion, tragically unaware of the irony that they only want him near. The barn loft, for example, is revealed at novel's end to 'smell strongly of whisky and sweat' (*H* 297). A hiding place and secret shelter furnished with markers of the rank dissolution of homelessness, the 'floor of newspapers [and] a rumpled blanket' (*H* 297) reveal 'terrain where loneliness and grief are time and weather' (*H* 298).

Where in *Housekeeping* Lucille's repeated acts of cleaning are attempts to escape lifelong grief personified by her eccentric aunt, Jack's are an attempt to cleanse his 'cankered' soul (*H* 117). Jack labours under the burdensome perception that he is the living embodiment of total depravity, central source of his existential torment.¹⁹⁹ He asks Ames whether 'there [are] some people who are simply born

¹⁹⁹ For criticism which touches on Robinson's treatment of the more contentious tenets of doctrinal Calvinism such as total depravity and predestination, see Hesselink, 'Marilynne Robinson: Distinctive Calvinist', *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, 1 January 2011 <<http://perspectivesjournal.org/blog/2011/01/01/marilynne-robinson-distinctive-calvinist/>>

evil, live evil lives, and then go to hell [...]’ (H 235) and wonders, ‘If I may not experience predestination *in my own person*’ (H 235 – my emphasis). Again Jack’s sense of himself as Calvinist sinner is linked to disease and physicality, but the vehicle of his infectiousness is the eternal time of damnation. Jack *embodies* grief as the living death of Christian perdition, both infinite and all-encompassing. The dictionary definition, he says, is:

“The utter loss of the soul, or of final happiness in a future state – semicolon – future misery or eternal death” (H 149)

and describes himself in those terms:

My hapless disreputable existence [...] There is no end to it. I’ll always be somewhere in eternity, rotting, or writhing. (H 149)

In Christian terms then, Jack *sees himself* as the present-continuous expression of a monumental grief timespace of literal eternity that is a living death. For him, perdition is the one Christian tenet ‘that always made sense’ (H 124), revealing, despite his difficult atheism, that ‘the antithesis to eternal life is not earthly life but eternal death’.²⁰⁰

Funeral rites

Despite the omnipresence of loss and the proliferation of ritual liminars as characters and narrators in Robinson’s novels, there is almost no textual representation of formal death rites or funerals in her fiction.²⁰¹ This too is a figure of liminality since, Turner explained, ‘liminal entities’ are ‘betwixt and between the situations assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial’.²⁰² Where traditional death rites are absent in the diegetic present of her novels, Robinson’s characters create their own. Van Gennep wrote that death rites are necessary as a ‘transition period for survivors’ and observed that ‘death rituals’ in particular ‘stress threshold rites’.²⁰³ He concluded that the transition is ‘first marked *physically* by the stay of the corpse or the coffin in the deceased’s room

²⁰⁰ ‘Christianity’ in *Encyclopedia Britannica* [author uncited]
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/115240/Christianity/67527/Concepts-of-life-after-death>> [accessed 12 June 2016].

²⁰¹ The exception to this is in *Lila* in which there is a scene of the corpse of the man Doll kills and whom Lila wonders might be her father.

²⁰² Turner, *Ritual Process*, p.95.

²⁰³ Van Gennep, p.146.

[...] in the vestibule of his house, or elsewhere' before a series of other funerary rites are carried out to facilitate transition.²⁰⁴ In *Housekeeping*, Robinson leaves a gap in the narrative where Helen's corpse (and the children's participation in the ritual of her funeral) might be. She is 'elsewhere', like Edmund, but deep in the lake. Her body is never found or discussed aloud or even seen by the children, except in Ruth's imagination. This textual invisibility renders Helen forever liminal herself and makes of the lake an open 'graveyard'.²⁰⁵ Without ritual sight of their mother's dead body, the girls enact private mourning rituals, truanting from school to visit the lake where Helen is perpetually made visible in the 'drowned hair' of the weed and the 'silty face of submerged stone' that is 'white as bits of tooth' (*HK* 112, 117 and 80). Their vigils set them apart, secluded liminally in the darkness of 'twilight' (*HK* 34) or 'prowl[ing] the dawn' (*HK* 49). For Lucille, this is the 'fruitful darkness' of Turner's typical, and processual transitional liminality, preceding, for her, a rebirth into womanhood figured, archetypally, as fertility. For Ruth, it is the origin of her ritual transition to transience figured as delay of growth and then death. Lucille's difference from her sister has always been there in the potent connotation of her name (from Latin *lucidus*, meaning light), but is further revealed when Ruth worries on one of their night-time, lake-side walks, 'It doesn't seem to get any lighter,' and Lucille replies 'It will' (*HK* 117). The difference is emphasized as a difference in growth. All that seems to change for Ruth in adolescence is her height: as Lucille transitions into a 'small woman', Ruth simply becomes 'a towering child' (*HK* 97), 'silent and ungainly' with a 'buzzard's hunch' (*HK* 195 and 121). Where Lucille feels her 'clothes [...] begin to irk' as her 'tiny child-nippled breasts' grow (*HK* 97), Ruth only 'imagin[es]' a 'gathering toward fecundity' and remains, instead in Turnerian 'androgyny', a 'juvenile' (*HK* 97 and 132).²⁰⁶

In *Gilead* and *Home*, birth and death rites are more overtly inflected with Christian ritual. Again, they are absent from the diegetic present. Tellingly, Jack misses all symbolic rites. Critically, he is not present at his mother's funeral and the illegitimate baby he fathers 'dies without the sacrament', having not been baptized (*H* 159). These latter two narrative gaps are repeatedly returned to by Robinson and persistently nag at Jack's father. In *Gilead*, Ames reveals that the gravestone

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p.48 – my emphasis.

²⁰⁵ Patrick O'Donnell, *The American Novel Now: Reading Contemporary American Fiction Since 1980*. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp.180-182.

²⁰⁶ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.98.

of the abandoned child does not even record a name, merely 'Baby, three years' (G 181). Robinson's repeated references to the missed rituals perpetuate the father's heartbreak and sorrow for his son, deepening 'all that old grief coming back' (H 121).

Reviewer Frank Wilson condemns Glory and Jack in their 'misery' using psychologically reductive terms.²⁰⁷ He describes them as 'irrevocably crippled by their upbringing' and as 'gripped' by a 'kind of psychic paralysis'.²⁰⁸ This is contrasted by the argument of theologian and grief scholar Darlene Fozard Weaver who calls prolonged sorrow in grief 'sorrowing well'.²⁰⁹ In her essay 'Sorrow Unconsoling and Inconsolable Sorrow: Grief as a Moral and Religious Practice', Weaver argues against the post-Freudian positivist view that 'healthy' grieving should 'terminate in acceptance', and instead suggests that 'to sorrow well [...is not] to eventually cease to sorrow', but 'to *suffer well*'.²¹⁰ When viewed in these terms and in terms of Luciano's 'tenderness' towards 'prolonged sorrow', the qualities of Glory and Jack's misery are revealed to be far more subtle and philosophical. Like Ruth, Glory and Jack are defined, metaphorically, by absent rituals. They are described as 'graying children' (H 81). While each cares for their father as if for an infant, they have both been deprived of the opportunity to parent their own children: Glory by the early death of the baby that cut short the years 'when she felt so necessary' and later with the failure of her engagement, the reduced prospect of having a child of her own. For Jack, societal and familial racism as well as the failures of communication with his father keeps him apart from his son, Robert. Their adult sorrow is marked by the absence of the opportunity to parent and by the want of traditionally and socially sanctioned rituals. Glory's 'long engagement' turns out to be defined by the absence of ceremony, her married lover thus becomes the 'the man I *didn't* marry' (H107 and 126 – my emphasis). She admits as a 'secret' to her brother, 'I was never married' as he admits, 'I'm not married either' (H 123). Glory harbours the secret fantasy of a different 'emotional map' for herself, the 'spare, sunlit rooms' of a '*real* home' she had always imagined for 'herself and the babies and the fiancé' is presented in

²⁰⁷ Wilson, (para.19).

²⁰⁸ Ibid., (para. 21).

²⁰⁹ Darlene Fozard Weaver, 'Sorrow Unconsoling and Inconsolable Sorrow: Grief as a Moral and Religious Practice' in *Making Sense of Death and Dying* ed. by Andrew Fagan (New York: Rodopi Press, 2004), pp.31-49, (p.32).

²¹⁰ Ibid., p.32 – my emphasis. Here Weaver references acceptance as the final of Kubler Ross's Five Stages.

stark contrast to the ‘fustian and oppressive tabernacle’ of her father’s house (*H* 107 – my emphasis). During the course of the novel, Glory’s cumulative losses are figured by these absences made concrete in the painful imagining of different, elusive spaces. The ‘sweet thought of sunlight and children she had cherished in secret’ is ‘dispelled’ and Robinson reveals that Glory ‘knew, she had known for years, that she would never open a door on that home, *never cross that threshold*’ (*H* 321 and 107 – my emphasis).

Anti-miscegenation laws in Della’s home state of Missouri and her family’s disapproval of Jack have prevented Jack and Della’s marriage and his repeated failure to engage the compassion of his racist father (in a state that would otherwise allow for mixed marriages) means that he too is defined, in adulthood, by the absence of that rite of passage. In *Forest of Symbols*, Turner points out that ‘society’s secular definitions do not allow for the existence of a not-boy-not-man’ in the ‘structurally indefinable’ between states of ritual passage.²¹¹ Robinson leans on this liminal quality of in-definition in describing Annie Wheeler, mother of Jack’s nameless daughter, as ‘the non-bride-of my non-youth’ (*H* 288). In situations where the person in passage is undefined like this, Turner argues that the ‘emphasis tends to be laid on the transition itself, rather than the particular states between which it is taking place’.²¹² So for Jack, this first non-marriage is revealed over the course of the novel to be partial cause of the shame, inadequacy and unmet ‘obligation’ that makes his second marriage impossible, compounding his profound sense of loss in eternal liminality (*H* 250). For readers of *Gilead*, the dramatic irony of Jack’s secrecy is excruciating, but Robinson’s negation of socially constructed rites is also ironic and again renders his secrecy sacred. Not only does her representation of grief as permanently liminal re-render loss in non-teleological terms, but it simultaneously undoes the false teleology of other rites. The ‘secret’ is never revealed by Jack in *Home* and only comes to light in the final pages of the novel. Rather than condemn her characters for these absences, by rendering absent rites as secret, Robinson reinterprets their inferred meaning, as Glory would, as sacred.

²¹¹ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.95.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p.96.

Dens, rebirth and the threshold to grief's sublimity in *Housekeeping*

In his study of the poetics of space, Gaston Bachelard wrote that the creation of nests by humans is a 'primal impulse' aimed at creating a sense of 'well-being that takes us back to the primitiveness of the refuge'.²¹³ Turner too wrote of the symbolism of refuges in ritual practices, but emphasized the role of miniature nest and shelter spaces as inherently ambiguous and paradoxical, linked both to birth and death. He explained that:

logically antithetical processes of death and growth may be represented by the same tokens, for example [...] huts and tunnels are at once tombs and wombs.²¹⁴

In *Housekeeping* and in *Home*, Ruth and Jack both build miniature homes that function as temporary refuges and tombs and wombs from which they are 'born' repeatedly into the sublime timespaces of exile as sorrow that Robinson then sanctifies with the archaism of their intertextual resonance. In *Housekeeping*, these are transformed by novel's end into a space of 'unbeing' that figures for the mystic monumental time of grief in metaphysical space (*HK* 215). In *Home* they function, ultimately, as the means by which Robinson sacralizes the humanity of Jack's existential suffering as both beauty and sublimity in the intimate domestic realm.

In *Housekeeping*, Ruth's nests and dens are failed refuges, broken wombs and tombs from which she is repeatedly reborn into a state of absence ultimately figured as transience and in turn figured as death. Emergence from each of these is figured as the ritual aspect of a series of journeys and rebirths that Mallon reminds the reader are both 'perilous and transformative', swathed as they are in imagery of 'parturition' that is both 'pure and appalling in its mystery'.²¹⁵ In her essay 'Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*: Misreading *The Prelude*', Lorrain Liscio wonders:

If we did not have a tradition of the sublime deriving from Longinus (via Boileau), Addison, Burke, Shelley, Wordsworth and other men, why couldn't

²¹³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958; repr.1994) p.91.

²¹⁴ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.99.

²¹⁵ Mallon, 'Sojourning Women', p.102.

the terrors and mystery of childbirth be the central signifiers of sublime moments?²¹⁶

In the last of their forays to the lake, Robinson's imagery suggests we can. Ruth and Lucille find themselves stranded one night 'terrified' by the 'black woods' on their right and the lake on their left (*HK* 114). From 'driftwood', a 'big stone' and 'fir limbs', they build a 'low and slovenly structure' on the 'difficult shore' between wood and water (*HK* 114). Twinned with her sister in this dark, cramped, neo-natal space, they are the "Babes in the woods" creating the place of their own deaths.²¹⁷ 'Twice the roof [falls]' and then later, Ruth wakes and 'scramble[s] out through the roof and over the wall *into darkness no less absolute*' (*HK* 114-115 – my emphasis). Ruth is reborn then, but from broken refuge into no less absolute sublimity. From this 'ruined stronghold', Ruth feels herself *succumbing* to and absorbing the flow of darkness. She lets 'the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness' in her 'skull', her body the fluid and permeable vessel for the sublime experience of terror she and her sister experience (*HK* 116).

These journeys and rebirths continue. The final section of the novel proliferates with ancient and Christian eschatological images of rebirth and transition into death. In what Ravits calls the 'climactic eighth chapter', the morning after Lucille leaves for good, Sylvie takes Ruth across the lake to a 'little valley' that 'hardly gets any sun at all' (*HK* 137).²¹⁸ Here, Sylvie abandons Ruth at a 'cabin' of which only the 'doorstep' remains, the cabin and the imaginary children it housed having fallen 'into the cellar hole years ago' (*HK* 148). On the boat journey out to the valley and back *and* in the 'fallen house' itself, Ruth experiences a series of painful rebirths. Again, the imagery is of the traditional sublime, though vitalized by allusions to the remnants of the domestic and the imagery of childbirth: 'the 'cries of birds' are 'sharp' and sting 'like sparks or hail'; the mountain's 'black crest, bristly and red and improbable' (*HK* 144 and 147). Left alone in the cold, Ruth starts to recognize that she has been 'turned out of house' and that now, 'there was neither threshold nor sill between' her and the dead 'solitary children who almost breathed against [her] cheek and almost touched her hair' (*HK* 154). She goes to the 'cellar hole' where the 'shingles' have been 'stripped' and the

²¹⁶ Lorraine Liscio, 'Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*: Misreading *The Prelude*' in *English Romanticism and Modern Fiction* ed. by Allan Chavkin (New York: AMS, 1993), pp.139-162, (p.153).

²¹⁷ I am indebted to Hartshorne, p.54 for this link.

²¹⁸ Ravits, p.652.

'ridgepole' has 'snapped' and thinks of the 'perished settlers' and the 'unsheltered folk' who have also been 'turned [...] out of house' around Fingerbone (*HK* 154 and 155). Ravits argues that the 'American *topos*' of the abandoned homestead typically 'bring[s] the sublime down a key', but mis-reads the homestead in *Housekeeping* as an image of 'narrowing [...] options' rather than as fruitful vehicle of loss as sublime.²¹⁹ Imagining herself abandoned again forever in the cellar hole, Ruth pictures the family home breaking 'gracefully, like some ripe pod or shell' and thinks:

Let them come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart. It was no shelter now [...]. (*HK* 159)

It is better, she concedes, to 'have nothing', for here, her mother 'almost slip[s] through any door' and Ruth sees her 'from the side of [her] eye', here, in nothingness, her mother is 'not perished', but is instead a 'music' Ruth 'no longer hear[s]', but which rings in her 'mind, itself and nothing else [...] but not perished, not perished' (*HK* 159-160).

In what Mallon describes as a 'series of immersions' which link Ruth's 'origin myth' with the lake, Ruth is repeatedly born again in the boat drenched in lake water. On the boat *to* the valley she 'crawl[s] under [Sylvie's] body and out between her legs' (*HK* 146) and later, after Sylvie finally returns to the cellar hole and wraps Ruth in her coat, Ruth is born again, into 'watery darkness [...] like a seed in a husk' on the boat journey back (*HK* 162).²²⁰ Here she is 'the nub, the sleeping germ' and, as she imagines the water invading the boat, she 'swell[s] and swell[s]' and 'burst Sylvie's coat' (*HK* 162). The scene throbs with eschatological imagery that is both archetypically feminine and deathly. The 'moonlit' lake water shifts so that the boat 'tipped' and 'wallowed' evoking the 'shuddering' in the etymology of Styx.²²¹ The entire scene is evocative of the journey to the "Isle of the dead" and the 'dark valley' itself echoes the 'shadow of the valley of death' in Psalm 23:4.

But Ruth's uncomfortable baptism continues and, as she states, 'it was the crossing of the bridge that changed me finally' (*HK* 215). With this ultimate

²¹⁹ Ravits, p.656.

²²⁰ Mallon, 'Sojourning Women', p.96.

²²¹ 'Styx' *Encyclopedia Britannica* [author uncited], online edn, <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/570397/Styx>> [accessed 3 June 2016].

symbolic ritual act, Ruth and Sylvie cross the threshold into the metaphorical death of lives of observant grief that are painfully rich with the gnosis of loss. Robinson uses the terrifying, death-defying passage across the bridge to sacralize their journey and the ultimate and ongoing sublimity of their loss. With this passage, they metamorphose into 'drifters' (HK 213). Having burned and abandoned the house, they walk the 'whole black night across the railroad bridge', like 'blind women groping' against the 'terrors' of the 'wind' and the 'pull of the current' (HK 215-216). The bridge, Ruth dreams later, has 'the frame of a charred house' (HK 175). Despite the depictions of fearful sublimity and Heraclitan flux at the end of *Housekeeping*, Sylvie and Ruth end the novel, not in isolation, but together and famously merged. Throughout the novel Ruth's vision has given lie to her "self" as a single, bounded consciousness. In the truanting mourning rituals with her sister she speaks of herself and Lucille as 'We' describing them 'almost as a single consciousness' and feels the same blurring with Sylvie on the night they try to burn the house, when she says 'that night we were almost a single person' (HK 98 and 209). Similarly, Sylvie, Ruth and Helen frequently merge in Ruth's mind's eye. Ruth states, 'We are the same. She could as well be my mother' and Sylvie remarks, 'Now I look at Ruthie and I see Helen too' (HK 145 and 138).

The ending of the novel invokes, then, both 'dissolution and communion'.²²² Ruth is simultaneously the 'famished I' of spiritual autobiographer and the 'we' that is herself, her mother, her aunt and her sister. Elizabeth Aldrich argues that this 'resistance to individuation' is 'intrinsic' to Puritan personal narratives and Bercovitch confirms that such narratives often discard 'the difference between the plural and the singular'.²²³ Robinson's use of the ancient religious threshold image of the bridge, multiple broken refuges as wombs and tombs and the watery mediums of primal rebirth serve to sanctify the transition of Ruth and Sylvie to a transient and sensory state redolent with the 'smell of lake water' and an incomprehensible language swelling with 'cadences distended, like sounds in water' (HK 218 and 217). It is in this final, permanently liminal state of unhoused 'unbeing' and continuity that Ruth, Sylvie and Helen merge in final *communitas*. Critics have read the merging of characters in *Housekeeping* as a form of

²²² Joan Kirkby, 'Is There Life After Art?: The Metaphysics of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 5.1 (Spring 1986), p.104.

²²³ Elizabeth Kaspar Aldrich, "The Children of These Fathers": The Origins of an Autobiographical Tradition in America' in Robert A. Lee, *First Person Singular: Studies in American Autobiography* (London: Vision, 1988), pp.15-36, (p.22) and Bercovitch, p.114.

psychoanalytic 'regress' and pre-Oedipal 'symbiotic union' and, alternately, as an example of radical female kinship, but as Sonia Gernes points out, Ruth's 'journey' with Sylvie is also a 'form of spirituality'.²²⁴ Ruth's 'surrender' to the 'dissolution of her separate self' under the tutelage of Sylvie is indicative, Mallon writes, of a 'classic mystic experience' which opens her up to the 'ceaseless cycles' and the 'eternal realm' that are free from the 'confines of immediate space and time' as she achieves what Gernes calls 'a greater union'.²²⁵ Not only is it here that Ruth is 'free to remember the images of the past', nor just that here Sylvie and Ruth enter a 'new community' with each other; it is in this final place that she can be with her mother. McDermott points out that:

Ruth's longing to recover her mother becomes increasingly prominent in the text as she becomes more of a transient; and it seems that part of the attraction of transience represented by Sylvie is that it seems to offer the possibility of drawing nearer to her mother.²²⁶

Ritual passage with Sylvie seems to suggest then that 'the boundaries between living and dead could also be successfully breached'.²²⁷ In ritual terms, in transience, Sylvie and Ruth enter what Van Gennep calls the 'special world', the place during mourning where there is a union of the living with the lost, a monumental timespace and deathscape in which 'the living mourners and the deceased constitute a *special* group situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead'.²²⁸ This, Ruth says, is a place where '[m]emory is the sense of loss and loss pulls us after it' (*HK* 192).

Dens, rebirth and 'being-with' in *Home*

A type of familial connectedness is also at the heart of Robinson's evocation of Jack Boughton's final alienation in grief and sorrow. In *Home*, Robinson's

²²⁴ Gernes, p.156. For a psychoanalytic reading of the merging of Sylvie and Ruth see Mile, Wyatt, and Aviva Weintraub, 'Freudian Imagery in Marilynne Robinson's Novel *Housekeeping*', *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* (March 1986), 69-74. For examinations of Sylvie and Ruth as a new kind of "family" to challenge the trope of the archetypal lone male traveller, see Sheila Ruzyski O'Brien, '*Housekeeping in the Western Tradition: Remodeling Tales of Western Travelers*' in *Women and the Journey: The Female Travel Experience* eds. B. Frederic and S.H. McLeod (Pullman, Washington: Washington State University Press, 1993), pp.218-233, D.J. Greiner, 'Revising the Paradigm: Female Bonding and the Transients of *Housekeeping*' in *Women Without Men: Female Bonding and the American Novel of the 1980s* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), pp.66-81; and Ravits, 'Extending the American Range'. For comment on the blurring of boundaries between Ruth and Sylvie see Burke, 'Border Crossings'.

²²⁵ Mallon, 'Sojourning Women', p.98 and Gernes, p.156.

²²⁶ McDermott, 'Future-Perfect', p.263.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.263.

²²⁸ Van Gennep, p.147.

characterization of Jack's multiple rebirths has the cumulative effect of transforming him, and his embodiment of *of* and *as* grief, into a holy Christian incarnation of grief's sanctity. Like Ruth, Jack builds dens from which he is always metaphorically reborn, but only ever back into 'lifelong exile' (H 210). Robinson uses these rebirths also to sacralize Jack's private perdition, but in doing so she similarly venerates the micro-dramatic ceremonial gestures of Glory's correspondent housekeeping as at once both beautiful *and* sublime acts of being-with. As for Sylvia in the early sections of *Housekeeping*, the slow time of grief in *Home*, 'the endless excruciating past' set in motion by the baby's death and Jack's departure, is recreated and figured as 'continuity' by Jack's rebirths and Glory's responses. Each receives Robinson's 'attentive care'.²²⁹

Jack recreates his childhood hiding places in the car and in particular in the construction of a secret 'shanty' in the barn loft (H 299). This 'crude tabernacle' (H 297) is powerfully evocative of Bachelard's 'refuge' and makes Jack's 'estrangement literal' (H 313). After Della returns his letters, it is from this shabby womb/tomb that Jack emerges after his failed suicide attempt. Constantly figured as Prodigal Son, implicitly 'dead and [...] alive again [...] lost and [...] found'; in her depiction of his exit from the barn den, Robinson thickens Jack's representation as living death typologically (Luke 15:24). Exiting the barn, reborn into utter defeat, Glory washes him. The depiction is both that of Lazarus sick and waiting for Christ and Lazarus arisen emerging from the cave:

[...] he emerged barefoot, wincing, abashed by daylight, startlingly white and thin. He lowered himself into the chair and she brought the bucket and the soapy water and the cloth and began to wash him down, starting with his hair and face and neck and shoulders, wringing out the cloth again and again, scrubbing his arms and his hands, which were soiled with grease and were injured, marred. (H 256)

In New Testament metaphors, Glory is Lazarus' sister Mary washing her ailing brother tenderly as he awaits Christ's help; the same Mary who bathes Christ's feet with her hair.²³⁰ The cleansing is gentle and devotional, symbol of Glory's piety and her faith in Jack. And Jack is Lazarus, arisen and walking out of the

²²⁹ Phillips, p.175.

²³⁰ Lazarus emerges in John 11:13 and Mary washes Christ's feet in Luke 7:37-50.

cave, echoing John's gospel, 'the memory of ceremonies about him no matter how often he might wash or shave' (*H* 250).²³¹

But in this depiction, Jack is also Christ with 'injured, marred' hands that Glory washes as if at the deposition (*H* 301). He bitterly jests, 'I could show you the wound in my side if you like' (*H* 269). In Old Testament metaphors he is the embodiment of prophet Isaiah's prediction of Christ who 'despised and rejected by men' is 'a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering' (*H* 331).²³² With this thick description, Robinson figures Jack as always 'beloved and lamented', utterly sacred in his humanity (*H* 260). In his thin, white, deathling's body he 'looks', Glory considers, 'like destitution' and epitomizes Weaver's 'inconsolable sorrow' and Krasner's 'suffering body' by 'suffering [painfully] well' (*H* 260). Weaver points out that, within a Judeo-Christian framework, the inconsolability of human suffering is not something that God seeks to alleviate. Citing Wolterstorff, she says '[i]nstead of explaining our suffering God shares it', 'he sent his beloved son to suffer *like us*'.²³³

Glory's gestures of care in this scene are consistent with the endless tender, domestic and intimate ministrations she performs throughout the novel. The micro-coordinates of the emotional map of loss are here, as elsewhere, granted Robinson's full attention. She recounts, in detail, Glory's preparation for washing Jack, throughout which, Glory is quietly 'sobbing' (*H* 254):

She took a sheet and a blanket and a washcloth and towel from the linen closet at the top of the stairs, and she took a pail from the broom closet, rinsed it out, and filled it with hot water [...] She dropped a bar of laundry soap into the water and carried the things she had gathered out to the porch step. [...] She imagined him in that bleak old barn in the middle of the night, stuffing his poor socks into the DeSoto's exhaust pipe, and then, to make a good job of it, his shirt. (*H* 255-258)

Critics have claimed to find the pace and repetition of domestic moments such as these 'painfully slow', 'soporific' and even 'suffocating' aspects of *Home*.²³⁴ In 'The Courage to See', Holberg argues, however, that the richness of Robinson's Christian theology is to be found in her repeated emphasis on the 'fragments of

²³¹ See John 11:44.

²³² See Isaiah 53:3.

²³³ Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Lament for a Son* cited in Weaver, p.45 – italics in the original.

²³⁴ Govier, (para. 6.), Ahmed, (para. 7) and Kakutani, 'Family Tries', (para. 5).

the quotidian' that she deems 'integral to any conception of the holy'.²³⁵ Holberg's argument relies on Robinson's repeated (Calvinist) assertion that 'the aesthetic is the signature of the divine' and that the divine is immanent in the human.²³⁶ In interview, Robinson has said that 'beauty' is to be found in 'a casual glimpse of something *very ordinary*'.²³⁷ Under such terms, if 'someone in some sense lives a life that we can perceive as beautiful in its own way,' she says, 'that is something that suggests grace, even if by a strict moral standard [...] they might seem to fail'.²³⁸ Depicting the 'beauty' of a life such as Robinson describes is, I suggest, in part, the project of *Home* and is glimpsed in the intimacy and repetition of mundane domestic gestures throughout the novel. In turn, this accentuates the ordinariness of grief. For example, after washing her brother, Glory collects fresh clothes for Jack and frets on the exquisitely painful sublime ordinariness of socks: 'It bothered her that she had forgotten to bring socks' to replace the ones Jack stuffed in the car's exhaust (*H* 260). Afterwards, Robinson adds:

They walked together up the path to the porch, he behind her, the two of them no doubt looking very unlike *two ordinary people* who had not passed through fearful and wearying hours together. (*H* 260 – my emphasis)

Robinson reiterates her belief in the divinity immanent in the human in a recent interview with Scott Hoezee. She describes it in terms of human encounter:

Any person one encounters is an image of God, with all that implies in terms of the obligation to honor and comfort, and with all it implies about the astonishing privilege of being given the occasion to encounter such an image, and to honor and comfort.²³⁹

In a much earlier essay (anticipating the character of Jack in *Home*), Robinson puts these ideas of encounter and comfort in the context of the family. She writes:

The real issue is, will people shelter and nourish and humanize one another? [...] Maybe the saddest family, properly understood, is a miracle of solace [...] Imagine that someone failed and disgraced came back to his

²³⁵ Holberg, p.283.

²³⁶ Robinson in Andrew Brown, 'Marilynne Robinson, God and Calvin', *Guardian*, Thursday 4 June 2009, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2009/jun/04/religion-marilynne-robinson>> [accessed 22 June 2005], (para. 5).

²³⁷ Marilynne Robinson in Sarah Fay, 'Interview: The Art of Fiction No. 198', *Paris Review*, 186 (Fall 2008), <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5863/the-art-of-fiction-no-198-marilynne-robinson>> [accessed 22 June 25], (para. 46) – my emphasis.

²³⁸ Robinson in Brown, (para.5).

²³⁹ Robinson in Hoezee, (para.8).

family, and they grieved with him, and took his sadness upon themselves, and sat down together to ponder the deep mysteries of human life. This is more human and beautiful, I propose, even if it yields no dulling of pain, no patching of injuries. Perhaps it is the calling of some families to console, because intractable grief is visited upon them.²⁴⁰

The intractability of grief for all of the characters in *Home* is measured, though not alleviated, by the humanizing acts of temporary comfort, shelter and nurturance which are most often enacted by Glory. Moments of ordinary domestic encounter structure *Home* more than any narrative arc, and exemplify what Ann Romines calls the 'profoundly *felt* life' of domestic ritual, never more so than after Jack's attempt on his life.²⁴¹ Thus, after the sublime torture of a night that is both 'fearful' and 'wearying', Robinson depicts these 'two ordinary people' and the most quotidian moments of their encounter as beautiful, despite their ultimate inability to dull the pain or patch the injuries of either person's grief.

Her rich typology offers Jack up, in his ordinary humanity, as Christ-like, and in so doing, Robinson finds another (physical) form for inarticulable sorrow and intractable grief. Her patterning describes '[t]he grief Jack caused. The grief Jack *was*'. (*H* 259 – my emphasis) and her typology locates him in eternal kinship in loss and in *communitas* with all who suffer, like Christ who, 'by the grace of God [tasted] death for everyone' (Hebrews 2:9). And in response, Glory is given the 'privilege of being given the occasion to encounter such an image, and to honor and comfort' such a man of sorrows, if only temporarily. Grieving with him and taking his sadness upon herself, she washes Jack's shirt and cooks supper, with no expectation of actually dulling the pain. Instead, she acknowledges two things. Firstly, that there 'would be a rightness in [Jack's] grieving in every nerve. However slight her experience, she knew that' and secondly that the 'talking and joking and the moments of near-candour, the times they were almost at ease with each other' is a type of 'good' done to her brother' that 'rescue[s]' *her* from shames of her own, though not without eradicating 'the bitterness of her [own] chagrin' (*H* 265). Pondering this mystery, she prepares a last supper and wonders:

How to announce the return of comfort and well-being except by cooking something fragrant. That is what her mother always did. [...] And it would

²⁴⁰ Marilynne Robinson, 'Family', *Death of Adam*, pp.87-107, (pp.89-90).

²⁴¹ Ann Romines, *The Home Plot: Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p.16, cited in Tanner, 'Uncomfortable furniture', p.39.

mean, This house has a soul that loves us all [...] She wished it mattered more that the three of them loved one another. Or mattered less, since guilt and disappointment seemed to batten on love. Her father and brother were both laid low by grief, as if it were a sickness, and she had nothing better to offer them than chicken and dumplings. But the thought that she could speak to them in their weary sleep with the *memory of comfort* lifted her spirits a little. There was a nice young hen in the refrigerator, and there were carrots. (*H* 264 – my emphasis)

Spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre designates all 'representational space' as 'alive' arguing that 'it speaks'.²⁴² It has, he writes, 'an affective kernel or centre'.²⁴³ Robinson's secluded and liminal timespaces inside and outside the home are vocal metaphors for both the inherent outsideness and alienation of human grief, but also and as such, the open-endedness, potentiality and *sorrowful vitality* of any ordinary experience of grief central to human experience. This vitality is manifest in precisely the same spaces that Tanner reads as having 'limiting parameters' in *Home*, indeed I contend that vitality is at the emotional centre of Robinson's depictions of homes. As such, I put forward these readings to challenge ideas of progressive subjecthood and vitality (male or female) as liberating or always pleasurable. The house and all markers of "home" in Robinson's fiction is thick and fleshy (after Bakhtin) and, though or even because sad, as fundamentally 'alive' (after Lefebvre). In the words of John Stillgoe (on Bachelard) they function as the ultimate 'metaphor of humanness' but also, by sacralizing a 'tenderness towards prolonged sorrow' along the lines of certain nineteenth-century articulations of grief described by Luciano, they operate in Robinson's work as 'profoundly *humanizing*' timespaces of grief.²⁴⁴ Robinson's depictions chart the alienating vitality (or vital alienation) of intimate loss in response not to the 'vast' national and transcontinental vistas described by Hsu, nor as problematically (or ever only) gendered and 'circumscribed' as in the argument of Tanner.²⁴⁵ Instead, in her microscopic attention to small, intimate and domestic (or transient) timespaces even when rendered as alienating, Robinson offers up the domestic as demonstrating a dense emotional gravity, in fact *shifting* the very centre of emotional, spatial and temporal gravity to the equally 'vast' interior realm for which

²⁴² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.42 – my emphasis.

²⁴³ Tanner, 'Uncomfortable Furniture', p.37 and Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p.42 – my emphasis.

²⁴⁴ Luciano, p.5 and John Stillgoe, 'Foreword to the 1994 edition' of Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, p.vii– my emphasis.

²⁴⁵ Tanner, 'Uncomfortable Furniture', p.35.

domesticity *and* homelessness figure in her work. By locating and mapping this emotional geography within and around family homes, which are at once utterly central to diegesis, but repeatedly marginal in space and evocations of time, Robinson literally *makes sacred* the experiences of grief that she charts. As such, her domestic 'emotional maps' offer a cartography (not of American nationhood or limited female subjectivity), but of the 'topography of our intimate being', the expansive and potentially limit/less terrain of the ordinary, interior, human world of grief.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁶ Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, p.xxxvi.

What if we understood our vulnerabilities to mean we are human, and so are our friends and our enemies, and so are our cities and books and gardens, our inspirations, our errors. We weep human tears, like Hamlet, like Hecuba.

Marilynne Robinson, *Facing Reality*¹

Chapter Four – Transfictionality, the parabolic imagination and the sociality of grief in *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, *Home* and *Lila*

Sociologist David Clark argues that ‘the regulation of the emotions of grief has been altering since the sixteenth century’, but social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer best describes the twentieth-century outcome and the twenty-first century residue of this evolution.² In *Death, Grief and Mourning*, he argues that by 1965, expressions of grief in the West had become so regulated and so divorced from the social realm that, ‘one mourns in private as one undresses or relieves oneself in private, so as not to offend others’.³ Gorer’s work alludes to the evolution of the social mores of death and bereavement that historians including Phillipe Ariès and Pat Jalland, and sociologists including Tony Walter, have argued ‘shifted dramatically’ and with significant ‘homogeneity’ over the early part of the twentieth century in Western nations.⁴ In this argument, according to Jalland, the decline of externalized and socially expressive funeral and mourning rituals in Anglophone nations was brought on by ‘the decline of religion, the major impact of the two world wars, and the medical revolution since the 1930s’.⁵ In *Western Attitudes to Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, Ariès causally maps the slow change in approaches to death over the course of a millennium, and attributes it to the longer history of ‘industrialization’; he notes however, like Jalland, that attitudes to the dead ‘accelerated markedly’ between 1930 and 1950.⁶ He calls this sharp shift a ‘death revolution’; a ‘brutal revolution’ in ‘ideas and feelings’ about death which, though attributable to a ‘combination of phenomena’, can be traced most specifically to the ‘displacement of the site of death’ from the home to the

¹ Marilynne Robinson, ‘Facing Reality’, *Death of Adam*, p.86.

² David Clark, ‘Foreword’ to Walter, *On Bereavement*, p.x.

³ Gorer, p.113.

⁴ Pat Jalland, *Death in War and Peace: A History of Loss and Grief in England, 1914-1970* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p.1 and Tony Walter, ‘Why different countries manage death differently: a comparative analysis of modern urban societies’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 63.1 (2012), 123-145, (p.123). Jalland refers here to grief in the British context, but explores similar ideas in the Australian context in *Australian Ways of Death: A Social and Cultural History 1840-1918* (Oxford: OUP, 2002).

⁵ Jalland, p.1.

⁶ Phillipe Ariès, *Western Attitudes to Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. by Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p.x and p.87.

hospital.⁷ This transition, he argues, means that neither a person nor their family any longer presides over the fact or experience of dying in the West; instead, as he puts it, doctors and the hospital team are the ‘masters of death’.⁸ According to Ariès, the overwhelming consequence of this is an ‘interdict’.⁹ Death, ‘so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar’ has been effaced; and the ‘great death scene’ of communality – the bedside vigil for example – that ‘changed so little over the centuries, if not the millenia’ is no more.¹⁰ Death, he argues, has become ‘shameful and forbidden’.¹¹

American historian James Farrell has traced this change in the context of the United States in particular, exploring the ‘intellectual, institutional and emotional roots’ of what he calls the ‘American Way of Death’ which, he argues, incorporates an ‘unreasoning fear of death’.¹² His book reinstates the phrasing of British author Joseph Jacobs who, in 1899, described the ‘practical disappearance of the thought of death as an influence bearing upon practical life’ as the ‘dying of death’.¹³ Despite Ariès’ argument that the United States was in fact slower than Europe to efface death from social life, the contemporary literature on bereavement (in Anglophone territories) reveals wide recognition that the ‘dying of death’ has prevailed and inevitably influenced experiences of grief in the West; it is both cause and consequence of the ‘rationalization of suffering’.¹⁴ As Jalland puts it, in the turn of the century British context, ‘open and expressive sorrow’ in the face of death quickly gave way, especially between the wars, to cultural change which meant that grief reactions became emotionally ‘suppressed’ and actively ‘privatized’.¹⁵ Making explicit the effects of this privatization, Ariès, whose work more ambitiously (and controversially) charts the evolution of all ‘Western attitudes to death’, argues that as ‘outward manifestations of mourning are repugned and

⁷ Ibid., p.91, p.85 and p.87.

⁸ Ibid., p.87 and p.89.

⁹ Ibid., p.92.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.85.

¹¹ Ibid., p.85.

¹² James Farrell, *Inventing The American Way of Death 1830-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), p.4 and p.3.

¹³ Joseph Jacobs, ‘The Dying of Death’, *Fortnightly Review*, New Series, 72 (1899). This document is cited by Farrell as anonymous, published in the *Review of Reviews*, London, Volume 20, September 1899, pp.364-365, *American Way of Death*, p.4-5.

¹⁴ For mid-twentieth century examination of this phenomenon, see Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (London: Gallancz, 1992) and *The American Way of Death Revisited* (London: Virago, 2000). For more recent examinations of the same phenomenon, see Sandra Gilbert, *Death’s Door*, Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Granek, ‘Grief as Pathology’.

¹⁵ Jalland, p.10.

are disappearing' it is considered 'above all essential that society – the neighbors, friends, colleagues, and children – notice to the least possible degree that death has occurred'.¹⁶

Although causally complex, the majority of contemporary grief scholars trace the further privatization of grief over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first to the effects and qualities of "normalizing psychology".¹⁷ Valentine argues that psychology, as it emerged in the early twentieth century, was, by definition, 'focused on the internal, private worlds of individuals in isolation from their social world'.¹⁸ According to Alan Page-Fiske, the 'prevailing assumption in Western psychology has been that humans are by nature asocial individualists'.¹⁹ He argues that '[p]sychologists (and most other social scientists) have continued to explain social relationships as instrumental means to extrinsic, nonsocial ends, or as constraints on the satisfaction of individual desires'.²⁰ Despite his corrective that 'people are' in fact, 'fundamentally sociable', the assumption of asociality – a quality inherent in notions of the private – has inevitably infiltrated and been sustained within contemporary conceptions of grief.

Within grief scholarship, the idea of asociality is considered multiple and complex. Woodward has argued that 'the private' is the 'instituting mark of modernity' and has implied that, given the overreliance in grief study on Freudian psychoanalysis, it is because 'Freud theorized mourning as a purely private affair', that 'for the most part mourning has continued to be associated with the private sphere'.²¹ Granek presses the point that bereavement has been 'privatized' largely because, as an object of scientific scholarship, it has now been 'psychologized completely'.²² Klass *et al* extrapolate from the privatized model of grief the essential values of individualism and autonomy, as Walter and others have.²³ They argue that 'the model of grief that began with Freud is based on a view of the

¹⁶ Ariès, p.90. For a recent critique of what she terms the Ariès School, see Luciano, *Arranging Grief*.

¹⁷ Valentine, p.59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.59.

¹⁹ Alan Page-Fiske, 'The Four Elementary Forms of Sociality: Framework for a Unified Theory of Social Relations', *Psychological Review*, 99.4, (1992), 689-723, (p.689).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.689.

²¹ Woodward, 'Grief-Work', p.103 and 'Freud and Barthes', p.102.

²² Granek, 'Grief as Pathology', p.46 and p.64.

²³ See Walter, 'New Model', Stroebe *et al*, 'Broken Hearts' and Meghan O'Rourke, 'Grief – the great universal'.

world that stresses how separate people are from each other' and which thus privileges the quality of '[i]ndependence rather than interdependence'.²⁴ In his epochal essay the *Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief*, Lindemann perhaps unwittingly charted the shift to a privatized view of grief in real-time. The mid-war urgency of Lindemann's language and tone explicitly demonstrates that, by 1944, tight interrelations between the asocial psychological with the medical psychiatric put the management of bereavement in the hands of the expert professional psychiatrist, rather than the community, family or church. Explicitly, Lindemann outlined the need for a professionalized and privatized approach to grief. He wrote:

Religious agencies have lead in dealing with the bereaved. They have provided comfort by giving the backing of dogma to the patient's wish for continued interaction with the deceased, have developed rituals which maintain the patient's interaction with others, and have counteracted the morbid guilt feelings of the patient by Divine Grace and by promising an opportunity for "making up" to the deceased at the time of a later reunion. While these measures have helped countless mourners, comfort alone does not provide adequate assistance in the patient's grief work. Social workers and ministers will have to be on the lookout for the more ominous pictures, referring these to the psychiatrist while assisting the more normal reactions themselves.²⁵

Lindemann's interviews occurred in psychiatric wards of hospitals where doctors were becoming not just the 'masters of death', but, led by him, the masters of acute grief, a role now occupied by specialist psychiatrists including Colin Murray Parkes in the UK and Katherine Shear and Holly Prigerson in the US.²⁶

Small suggests that the 'discipline of the therapeutic' that emerged from the work of Freud and Lindemann is, like the 'dying of death', another 'key aspect of modernity'.²⁷ According to recent work by Robert Neimeyer, a central irony of bereavement scholarship is that bereavement therapy and counselling – one contemporary knowledge product of grief psychiatry – is 'typically ineffective, and

²⁴ Klass *et al*, p.14.

²⁵ Lindemann, pp.113-114.

²⁶ For a critique of the evolution of Colin M. Parkes role in the history of bereavement psychiatry and the medicalized "expertise culture" of grief, see Granek, 'Grief as Pathology'. For comment on the controversial research and methodologies of Shear and Prigerson see Granek and O'Rourke, 'Is Mourning Madness?'

²⁷ Woodward, 'Grief-Work', p.103.

perhaps deleterious'.²⁸ Valentine's review of the literature suggests that, in the specific context of grief, this implicitly isolating and privatized "discipline", though helpful to some, can 'marginalize and separate bereavement from ordinary life'.²⁹ She argues that it is specifically still the 'widespread "sequestration" of death', the 'psychologizing' and 'medicalizing' of grief and the 'exclu[sion of] the social dimension' of the death and grief experience from academic constructions that has led to 'increasingly inadequate' methods of 'addressing the complexity and diversity' of 'western society', as much as it has delimited manifestations of grief within that broadly understood context.³⁰

The reduction of grief to an inherently private and psychological phenomenon mirrors all other aspects of the 'rationalization of suffering'. This inevitably has a philosophical dimension. According to Ariès, death and grief are 'forbidden' because of the:

need for happiness – the moral duty and the social obligation to contribute to the collective happiness by avoiding any cause for sadness or boredom, by appearing to be always happy, even if in the depths of despair.³¹

Showing the 'least sign of sadness', he continues, 'one sins against happiness, threatens it, and society then risks losing its *raison d'être*'.³² Ariès and others have argued that the philosophical problem of death is particularly challenging to, as well as a product of, American thinking. They have argued that the emphasis on the 'pursuit of happiness' embedded within the American Declaration of Independence as well as the emergence of embalming; the development of death as an 'object of trade and profit' and the professionalization of 'funeral directors' as 'doctors of grief' committed to 'returning abnormal minds to normal in the shortest possible time' all contribute to the philosophical shift in which '[s]adness and mourning have been banished' from the experience of bereavement.³³

²⁸ Robert A. Neimeyer, 'Searching for the Meaning of Meaning: Grief Therapy and the Process of Reconstruction', *Death Studies*, 24.5 (2000), 541-558, (p.541). See also, 'Is Mourning Madness?', Granek and O'Rourke.

²⁹ Valentine, p.57.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.59, p.61 and p.73.

³¹ Ariès, p.94.

³² *Ibid.*, p.94.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp.94-99. The phrase 'doctors of grief' is Jessica Mitford's – for a critical examination of the emergence of the professional funeral industry in the United States, see Mitford, *The American Way of Death* and *The American Way of Death Revisited*. Ariès in fact argues that for a complex of reasons 'American society has not totally accepted the interdict' on death to the extent that

'Continuing Bonds'

A majority of grief scholarship across the West has focused on the stress that the interdiction on death and grief has put, specifically, on the bereaved individual to gain independence from their dead. In the words of Stroebe *et al*, 'good adjustment' on the part of the bereaved is still most 'often viewed as the breaking of ties between the bereaved and the dead'.³⁴ Maintaining links with the dead, as well as prolonged expressions of grief, are consistently linked with pathology, assumptions which Chapters Two and Three of this thesis have already set out to challenge. In *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS*, William Havers uses psychoanalytic terms to describe the impact the asocial world view has on the dead themselves. He writes:

[v]ery schematically, we know the work of mourning [...] is a process by which the dead are rendered radically *other* by means of a process of dissociation or separation that is simultaneously and thereby a process of objectification, the work of mourning *historicizes* the dead.³⁵

By paraphrasing the Freud of 'Mourning and Melancholia', Havers argues (not uncritically) that, within the psychoanalytic paradigm, restoring the 'wounded ego' of the bereaved to its 'integral propriety' actively *relies* on this process of objectifying and 'historicizing the dead'.³⁶ By 'relegat[ing] the dead to the past,' this philosophy, and language, not only renders the dead '*other* abject' (to use Havers' words), but it also *others* death and grief, rendering these aspects of human experience abject too. Such a view not only relies on an alienated and alienating view of the dead, but compels the griever to ground their experience of successful grief on ideas of separation, independence and autonomy that must ultimately aim to objectify and historicize their experience of bereavement *along with* their dead. Understood this way, the goal of bereavement is, in Walter's words, the 'reconstitution of an autonomous individual', one whose ability to 'form new

European culture has, though others disagree (p.102). For the argument that 'death' as a contravention of the declaration is 'un-American' see Arnold Toynbee *et al*, *Man's Concern with Death* (St. Louis: McGraw Hill, 1968), p.131. For historical studies of the US and death specifically, see also Charles O. Jackson 'American Attitudes to Death', *Journal of American Studies*, 11 (December 1977), pp.297-312 and *Passing: The American Vision of Death* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1977).

³⁴ Stroebe, *et al*, 'Broken Hearts', p.1206.

³⁵ William Havers, *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), p.57 – my emphasis.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.57.

attachments' relies 'in large measure' on the ability to 'leave the deceased behind'.³⁷

As Chapter One outlines, since the 1990s, critical grief scholars have repeatedly argued that a privatized grief with an emphasis on detachment is not only a demonstrably inaccurate reflection of lived experience, but is far from imperative. Bereavement scholars whose work emerged in the 1990s, including Walter and Klass *et al*, explicitly challenged the stress on severing bonds with the dead in the post-Freudian 'intellectual schemata', by emphasizing a new "model", the idea of 'continuing bonds': the 'healthy, enduring bonds' that many of the bereaved describe feeling for their 'dead'.³⁸ According to Klass *et al*, continuing bonds, a critical manifestation of human sociality, had been observed in empirical studies for decades, but left out of the 'conceptual framework that guided most practice'.³⁹ According to Walter, this absence was another product of 'selective reading' of the 'classic texts' on grief.⁴⁰ Scholars re-read the founding texts, combing them for evidence that supported what their increasingly qualitative studies were saying about the social relationship between the living and their dead.⁴¹ For example, according to Ruth Davies:

Bowlby and Parkes (1970) [had] identified the phenomena now associated with continuing bonds in their London study of bereaved widows who reported an attenuated sense of their dead husband. Likewise, Rees (1971), in his study of 293 widows and widowers living in mid-Wales, described how 36% reported experiencing their late spouses' sense of presence years after the initial bereavement.⁴²

Davies suggests that ignoring continuing bonds was perhaps an issue of 'emphasis', revealing the intellectual priority that leading 'theorists placed on the theme of detachment at this time', a form of individualism they perceived was

³⁷ Walter, 'New Model', p.7.

³⁸ Klass *et al*, p.3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁴⁰ Walter, 'New Model', p.8.

⁴¹ For critical analysis of assessment methods in the study of bereavement see R.O. Hanson, B.N. Carpenter and S.K. Fairchild, 'Measurement Issues in Bereavement' in *Handbook of Bereavement: Theory, Research and Intervention* eds. M.S. Stroebe, W. Stroebe and R.O. Hansson (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.62-74. For critiques of the privileging of quantitative over qualitative methods see Klass *et al*, *Continuing Bonds*.

⁴² Ruth Davies, 'New Understandings', pp.510-511.

'based in the psychoanalytic tradition of Freud'.⁴³ However, Bowlby himself, the senior figure in British post-Freudian psychiatry of loss, wrote in 1980 that:

[f]ailure to recognize that a continuing sense of the dead person's presence [...] is a common feature of healthy mourning has led to much confused theorizing.⁴⁴

Walter has suggested that the elision of this data and the confusion it has caused is due, in part, not only to the values of individualism, nor just to selective reading, but to the inherent secularism of late twentieth-century culture. Western societies that privilege individualism and have disavowed religious faith, he writes, are 'likely to discount the possibility of a meaningful relationship between the living and the dead, having abandoned those religious beliefs and rituals which articulate such relationships'.⁴⁵

Regardless of cause, the late entry of 'continuing bonds' into the academic discourse on grief appears to have delayed any major integration of the idea into popular understandings of grief where 'clinical lore' still prevails. It is also a concept that is infrequently considered by literary critics. Accounts differ as to the extent to which a recognition of a 'sense' of the dead, has penetrated academic or lay conceptions of grief. Similarly, scholars disagree about whether or not there is increased recognition of what Valentine calls 'grief's sociality'.⁴⁶ According to Valentine, the recent work of social scientists has 'revealed' grief to be 'profoundly social' and continuing bonds is a theme which is now being developed productively across disciplines.⁴⁷ Her review of grief literature concludes that 'humanizing death' and 'resocializing grief' have produced a paradigm shift in the social sciences that is 'opening up new areas of inquiry' and greater communication between psychologists and sociologists.⁴⁸ Similarly, cultural geographer Avril Maddrell's work on 'memorialization' and 'vernacular memorial artefacts' identifies ways in which bereaved individuals and groups employ 'material forms and practices' such as cairn and bench building as public and

⁴³ Davies, 'New Understandings', p.511.

⁴⁴ John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, Vol.3 (London: Hogarth, 1980), p.1.

⁴⁵ Walter, 'New Model', p.8.

⁴⁶ Valentine, p.67.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.62 and p.69.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.62, p.69 and p.57.

communal 'expressions' of continuing bonds.⁴⁹ The work of a number of very different theorists from across the disciplines including sociologist Tony Walter and anthropologist Sylvia Grider have also explored the increasing significance of large, public displays of grief and mourning into the twenty-first century such as those which occurred after Hillsborough, the Oklahoma bombings, Princess Diana's death and 9/11.⁵⁰

But as Torill Lindstrøm has pointed out, there is a 'tedious slowness' to paradigmatic change when it comes to scholarship on grief and, thus, despite these examples and despite ongoing clinical recognition that a 'continuing sense of the dead' is a part of the grief experience for a great many of the bereaved, there is a paucity of literary critical interventions in the discussion about continuing bonds.⁵¹ Similarly, the recent work of Granek and Breen and O'Connor, as well as the testimonials of all the bereaved writers I cite in Chapter One suggest a lingering and experiential "pressure" on the bereaved to detach from the dead and thus divorce themselves from the felt experience of their own loss. Gilbert's emphasis on the social taboo she experienced while grieving and Sidhu's account in particular, including her description of grief as a 'dirty secret', reveal residues of 'asocial individualism' that continue to enforce the cultural view of grief as something to be psychologized and sequestered, with an emphasis on ultimate detachment from the dead as the desired outcome and a privatized experience of suffering as the unfortunate bi-product.

Not only do such accounts continue to reveal the diminished social value placed on continuing bonds between the living and the dead, they also expose social structures that disassociate the bereaved from one another. As the social value of the bereavements of others is denied, a griever is further isolated within their own experience of loss. As Small puts it, when we continue to 'relegate the dead other

⁴⁹ Avril Maddrell, 'Living with the Deceased: absence, presence and absence-presence', *cultural geographies*, 20.4 (2013), 501-522, (p.501).

⁵⁰ See Tony Walter, 'The Mourning after Hillsborough', *Sociological Review*, 39, 599-625; Walter ed. *The Mourning for Diana* (Oxford: Berg, 1999); Walter, 'The New Public Mourning' in Stroebe *et al*, *Handbook of Bereavement* (2008), pp.241-262; and Sylvia Grider, 'Spontaneous shrines and public memorialization' in K. Garces-Foley ed. *Death and Religion in a Changing World* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), pp.246-264.

⁵¹ Lindstrøm, T., "'It Ain't Necessarily So"...Challenging Mainstream Thinking About Bereavement', *Family Community Health*, 25.1 (2001), 11-21, p.11. For one of the very few works of literary criticism to engage with the idea of 'continuing bonds', see Bush, *Continuing Bonds with the Dead*.

to a historicism that we separate ourselves from, we do not see mourning as central to the cultural world of society and to our own sociality'.⁵² He insists that it is 'in and through our exposure to death that we can appreciate the contingency of our intersubjectivities'.⁵³ It is this last aspect of bereavement, the contingency and value of the intersubjectivity or sociality of the dead with the bereaved, and the bereaved with one another that is the focus of this last chapter.

Robinson's 'symbiotic' novels: transfictionality as sociality

For twenty-four years, Robinson was the writer of a single novel. The publication of three new novels in the last twelve years means that reviewers and academics are now in a position to discuss her fictions as a body of work, but due to the very recent date of the publication of *Lila*, such criticism is in its infancy.⁵⁴ Because *Gilead* and *Home* were published so close together and because both novels are set at the same time, in the same place, featuring many of the same relationships, encounters, images and thematic concerns, critics have naturally viewed these novels as paired. When *Home* was first published, reviewers wrestled to find the appropriate language to describe the nature of the unusual intertextuality of these 'parallel narratives'.⁵⁵ It was clear, in the words of Rowan Williams, that the novels were 'interrelated', but it was difficult to explain how.⁵⁶ To try to capture Robinson's innovative narrative strategy, critics described *Home* as 'not sequel, but sibling' and, more clumsily, as a 'coquel'.⁵⁷ Most often it came to be called a 'companion' novel to *Gilead*, though this term fails to capture the ways in which the novels operate intertextually.⁵⁸ With the recent publication of *Lila*, Robinson has added another layer and thus another dimension to the complex interrelatedness of the novels.

⁵² Small, p.41.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.41.

⁵⁴ As yet there is in fact no published criticism which draws parallels between the novels as a collection. Only reviews of *Lila* take a synoptic approach.

⁵⁵ Painter, 'Further Thoughts', p.486. For Robinson's pleasure at finding this narrative technique she says she 'hit on', see this same article.

⁵⁶ Rowan Williams, 'Living the Good Life', [review of *Lila*], *New Statesman*, 10-16 October, 2014, 68-70, (p.69).

⁵⁷ Churchwell, 'A Man of Sorrows', (para.2); and Kecia Lynn, 'Conversations from the Iowa Writer's Workshop' [Interview with Marilynne Robinson, part 1 of 4]

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sPBBDWmOi4>> [accessed 14 July 2016].

⁵⁸ Lynn uses the word 'coquel' and 'companion'. Churchwell also describes the novel as a 'companion', (para.2).

In *Lila*, Robinson provides the backstory to the life of Lila Ames neé Dahl – the young second wife of Reverend Ames, a quiet and, according to Rowan Williams, ‘enigmatic presence’ in both *Gilead* and *Home*.⁵⁹ The novel weaves together the diegetic present, in which Lila is already married to Ames and pregnant with their child Robert, with her life up to that point, a life of itinerancy, prostitution and hardship. Abandoned as an infant, but rescued by a drifter named Doll, Lila’s childhood is spent largely on the road where she and Doll join a group of itinerant workers led by a man named Doane. The depression and Doll’s violent and fatal knife fight with a man from their past leads to Lila spending years in a St. Louis whorehouse and more years living alone in the city, before ending up in Gilead and walking into Ames’ church one day to escape the rain. Diegetically, the novel begins somewhere in the early years of the twentieth century, takes readers through Lila’s experience of the Great Depression, and ends six years before *Gilead* and *Home* begin, with the birth of the child who will become the recipient of the letter that is *Gilead*. Like *Home*, narration is third-person, but tightly focalized through Lila’s eyes. Like *Gilead*, narration is also intercalated and Lila’s past and present operate in parallel in the novel. Again, there are overlaps of character, setting, style and theme, but the intertextuality of this novel also extends to include *Housekeeping* with which *Lila* shares, not specific characters, but echoes of characters and resonant imagery.

Just as in *Housekeeping* where Ruth’s origin story starts with her abandonment on a step waiting for her mother, so *Lila* opens with a motherless girl child abandoned on a ‘stoop in the dark’ (L 3). Just as Ruth is “adopted” by itinerant Sylvie, reborn into a life of drifting, so Lila is ‘taken [...] up’ by itinerant Doll, ‘born a second time, the night Doll took her up from the stoop and put her shawl around her and carried her off through the rain’ (L 4 and 12). Both Lila and Ruth know grief, though, where Ruth’s bereavements are inscribed in the text, Lila’s are only ever hinted at. Her birth parents are never known nor named and even the male figure whom Doll ‘cut’ and apparently murders, only ‘might have been her pa’ (L 121 and 174). The death of Doll, too, is neither depicted nor ever quite certain (Doll simply disappears into the ‘woods or in the corn fields’ near the jailhouse where she has been kept since the knife fight), though the impact of Doll’s disappearance from Lila’s life is

⁵⁹ Williams, ‘Living the Good Life’, p.68 and Ben Lehnardt, ‘The Pastor’s Theology of Uncertainty’, *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*, 10.1 (2016), 120-131, (p.126).

defining (*L* 138). It is a loss which echoes the time Doll left Lila briefly in the care of Doane's people—an abandonment Lila never quite forgives because Doane in turn leaves her on the steps of a church, a reminder of the primary abandonment in her infancy. Like Ruth and Sylvie, Lila comes from a world of '[d]rifting', loss and transience, but her narrative present is what, in *Gilead*, she calls the 'settled life', that is the fragile domestic realm in which *Gilead* and *Home* take place (*L* 147 and *G* 228).

In grappling with the narratological ingenuity of the explicit interrelatedness of *Gilead*, *Home* and *Lila*, reviewers have struggled again to find appropriate terms, often resorting to awkward yet descriptive tags to describe the three books as a 'trilogy' that is 'loose' or 'kind of interconnected'.⁶⁰ Due perhaps in part to what reviewer Diane Johnson calls the 'special place' that 'regionalism' has always played in American literature and the emergence of socio-political and historical analyses of the novels, the relationship between *Gilead*, *Home* and *Lila* is most often now collectively identified with markers that privilege the fictional middle western town in which the novels are (mostly) set.⁶¹ Reviewers and critics seem to have settled, therefore, on calling these books the 'Gilead Chronicles', the 'Gilead novels', or the 'Iowa Trilogy'.⁶² Although a convenient short hand, Sophie Elmhurst argues that to describe them as a 'trilogy [...] wouldn't be right'.⁶³ Both plot and chronology, she insists, are irrelevant, and while the books 'can stand

⁶⁰ Ben Jeffery, 'Lila and Co', [review of *Lila*], *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 August 2015, 21-22, p.21; and Mel Piehl, 'Predestination and Love in Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*', p.27.

⁶¹ Diane Johnson, 'Moral of the Story', [review of *Lila*], *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, October 3 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/05/books/review/lila-by-marilynne-robinson.html?_r=0> [accessed 2 June 2016], (para.1). Sections of *Lila* take place on the road and in St. Louis.

⁶² Neel Mukherjee, 'A Moving Journey from Poverty to Happiness', [review of *Lila*], *Independent*, September 27 2014 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/lila-by-marilynne-robinson-book-review-a-moving-journey-from-poverty-to-happiness-9759576.html>>, [accessed 14 July 2016], (para. 3); Churchwell, 'Lila a great achievement', (para.1); 'Iowa trilogy' is used by both Lucy Scholes in 'Wild and magnificent: Marilynne Robinson's *Lila* concludes the dazzling achievement of her Iowa trilogy', *The National* 9 October 2014 <<http://www.thenational.ae/arts-lifestyle/the-review/wild-and-magnificent-marilynne-robinsons-lila-concludes-the-dazzling-achievement-of-her-iowa-trilogy>> [accessed 1 March 2016] and by Roxana Robinson, 'Faith and Suspicion: On Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*', [review of *Lila*], *Nation*, January 26 2015 <<https://www.thenation.com/article/examined-life/>>, [accessed 1 March 2016], (para. 2).

⁶³ Sophie Elmhurst, 'Lila Review – Marilynne Robinson's Triumphant Return to Gilead', *Guardian*, 12 October 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/12/lila-marilynne-robinson-review-john-ames-gilead>>, [accessed 14 July 2016], (para.2).

alone' (a view held also by Robinson), Elmhirst argues, they coexist; they are 'symbiotic'.⁶⁴

Similarly, for all the importance that geographical setting has to some of the key political and thematic concerns of *Gilead* and *Home* in particular, defining Robinson's writing by setting alone (even if just for ease) risks simplifying the metaphoric potential of the novels; the symbolic function of the intertextual operations between the novels; and indeed the metaphorical and metaphysical reach of the relationships between the characters who traverse the storyworlds of all three novels. These descriptors also exclude *Housekeeping* from being viewed, narratologically and/or thematically, as coexisting – at times symbiotically – as part of the same collection; yet evidently (and as some reviewers have noted) *Lila* has as much in common with Robinson's first novel as it does with *Gilead* and *Home*.⁶⁵ To echo one critic, all four novels 'clearly belong in the same clan'.⁶⁶

Viewed transfictionally as a symbiotic collection, or, to continue the familial metaphor, as a 'clan', Robinson's four novels can be read as a dense metaphor for sociality and a vision of human community; one which revolves around grief and loss but which, to use the language of Small, insists on the 'contingency' of human intersubjectivities. In his article, 'Ontologies of Interdependence, the Sacred, and Health Care: Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*', Jeffrey Gonzalez has pointed out that, in the first three of her novels, Robinson 'makes suffering a central part of her fictional project'.⁶⁷ In his secular reading, Gonzalez argues (after Judith Butler and Levinas) that the relationships between Robinson's characters in each of her novels can be read as symbolic of human 'interdependence', equivalent to what bereavement sociologists Small and Valentine call 'intersubjectivity' and / or the 'mutual dependency of the living and the dead'.⁶⁸ Gonzalez argues that *Gilead* and *Home* in particular offer a 'compelling ethical

⁶⁴ Ibid., (para.2). See Robinson in interview with Kecia Lynn and also Joan Acocella, 'Lonesome Road: Marilynne Robinson Returns to Gilead in her New Novel', [review of *Lila*], *New Yorker*, 6 October 2014, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/06/lonesome-road>>, (para. 4).

⁶⁵ For this link see Churchwell, 'Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*' and 'A Conversation with Marilynne Robinson', *The Nation*, 7 January 2015 <http://www.thenation.com/article/conversation-marilynne-robinson/> [accessed 23 June 2016].

⁶⁶ Jeffery, p.21.

⁶⁷ Gonzalez, p.379.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.373 and Valentine, p.70 and p.73. Gonzalez draws much of his terminology from the recent theoretical work of Judith Butler, including the terms 'interdependency' that she uses in *Precarious Lives*, p.xii.

framework for contemporary readers', one which is derived from Robinson's Christian belief system, but which is more broadly 'humanistic' in intent and effect; one which focuses on ethical imperatives which are not inherently religious such as 'self-sacrifice', 'responsibility, generosity, and interdependence'.⁶⁹ This framework operates, he argues, because at the centres and peripheries of the 'small communities' within these novels there is always a 'suffering person', one who demonstrates the always present reality of the 'precariousness of human life' and, given Robinson's emphasis on the "sacredness" of the human person, one whose suffering her readers and her other characters 'must recognize'.⁷⁰

Although Gonzalez does not refer to the role played by dead characters and his argument speaks to a conception of suffering that is broader than "just" grief, his reading supports an expansive interpretation of bereavement and grief as the source and expression of much of human suffering. It also facilitates a broader interpretation of the novels as a response to Small's call for a recognition of death and mourning as forms of suffering that are central to human sociality.

Emphasizing the social dimension of human experience and the inherence of suffering to that experience, Gonzalez writes (again drawing on Butler), if 'discontent is a part of the conditions of existence, then discontent is a shared burden – something not to be dissolved but to be borne' by the human *and* their community. He argues that if 'self-awareness relies on some sense of an Other', then the 'human, in other words, begins with the social'.⁷¹ Gonzalez' argument allows for an interpretation of Robinson's entire fictional oeuvre which is relational. Because her fictions focus, in his words, on 'sorrow, grief and loneliness' and, critically, because they all interlink, Robinson's novels can thus be read to concurrently re-socialize grief while (re)placing bereavement and suffering as central to her broader ethical vision of human sociality.⁷²

It has been my argument throughout that Robinson's ethics crystallize around the ways in which her fictional characters respond to loss in each of her individual novels. But a consideration of the symbiotic transfictionality and intertextuality of her novels as a group, or as 'counterparts', offers a more far-reaching view of

⁶⁹ Ibid., p.373, 376, and 373.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.373, 374 and 377.

⁷¹ Ibid., p.379.

⁷² Ibid., p.377.

Robinson's evocations of community and ethics, not least because, as reviewer Ben Jeffery puts it, the novels have a 'cumulative effect', one that is 'subtly devastating' and which is 'far more expansive than it appears'.⁷³ Reading her novels transfictionally also emphasizes an unusual form of active reading across the novels, one which forces readers to re-evaluate or reflect on what they have already read and understood of her other novels. This does not rely on chronology. The publication of *Home*, altered and re-shaped the ways in which *Gilead* was read and received, drawing out certain themes, revisiting certain moments and fleshing out certain characters; but *Gilead* is a different book once the reader has read *Home*, and vice versa. The recent publication of *Lila* drives a new set of re-readings. The similarities between *Lila* and *Housekeeping*, when read alongside the more obvious links between *Lila*, *Gilead* and *Home* not only prompt re-readings and re-interpretations of *Gilead* and *Home*, but stimulate an active reconsideration of *Housekeeping* too. This relatedness of the novels and the performative function that reading them enacts, lends additional force to the social dimension of Robinson's work (both within the novels and for their readership) and to the potency of (Robinson's) fiction as a legitimate source of the emotional epistemology and the social and ethical ontology of bereavement and grief.

Family, continuing bonds, transfictionality

In the first instance, Robinson's depiction of human interdependence and community relies on the methods she uses to represent families. As such, her central transfictional mode is character, although, in the words of Joan Acocella, her 'most forceful piece of technical machinery' is the use of 'point-of-view narration'.⁷⁴ Sarah Fay has written that *Home* 'borrows characters' from *Gilead*, but it also shifts the narrative viewpoint.⁷⁵ The same characters – both living and dead – traverse the storyworlds of both novels, resolutely privileging continuing bonds between the bereaved and their dead, but, depending on narration, focusing in on different characters and perceptions of those relationships. In *Gilead*, the point of view is all Ames'. Through him the reader is introduced to his living wife Lila and their precious child Robert. Ames' intention of writing Robert's

⁷³ Jeffery, p.21. The word 'counterpart' here is from Saint Gelais' entry on 'transfictionality' in D. Herman, M. Jahn and M.L Ryan, eds. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, p.613.

⁷⁴ Acocella, 'Lonesome Road', (para.4).

⁷⁵ Fay, 'Art of Fiction', (para. 5).

'begats' means, however, that much of the narrative focuses on, and revivifies the dead. This includes Ames' long dead first wife and child, his mother and elder brother Edwards and his father and dead grandfather. The dead, in this novel, are major characters then, their representations literalizing Robert Anderson's observation that 'death ends a life', but 'it does not end a relationship'.⁷⁶ The reader of *Gilead* also meets the Boughton family, notably Glory, Jack, their dying father Robert and – in the novel's epiphany and in a description which presents them verbatim from Jack's account – Della and the other young Robert, Jack's family.

Home, as I have detailed in Chapter Three, is focalized through Glory whose appearances in *Gilead* are infrequent and what might typically be called "minor". She is revealed in the first novel, however, to be a friend to Lila. *Home* too, is as much a novel about continuing bonds with the dead as it is about the relationships of the living. Again, as Chapter Three has explored, Glory and Boughton's relationships with Jack's dead baby are losses which are both compounded by the father's impending death and Jack's prolonged absence and are echoed in Jack's forced separation from his wife and living child, losses that are themselves presented with the profundity of bereavements. This source of suffering is magnified for the reader via Glory's perception at the end of the novel, but long before that, a reader of *Gilead* already knows, before starting *Home*, about Jack's secret family, a painful awareness that intensifies the reader's impression of Jack's grief. In *Home*, it is Ames who is a minor character. Aside from Glory's epiphanic and direct encounter with Della and Robert, and while the novel alludes to other people (Glory's nameless fiancé, other family members, Boughton's dead wife, Annie Wheeler, the dead baby and Theo, Jack and Glory's elder brother who makes a late appearance), the emphasis and intensity of the novel's narrative focus is entirely on Glory, Jack and Boughton.

For a reading of the sociality of bereavement and grief across all of Robinson's fiction, it is Robinson's most recent novel *Lila* that is the critical, connecting text. This novel's obvious intertextuality with *Gilead* and *Home*, and its resonant relationship with *Housekeeping*, make it possible to read Robinson's literary work

⁷⁶ Robert Anderson cited in Dennis Klass, 'Grief, Religion and Spirituality', in K. Garces-Foley (ed.), *Death and Religion in a Changing World* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), pp.283-384, (p.288).

as fully transfictional. Reviewer Neel Mukherjee, writes that the novel is about 'Lila's inscription into the world of loving humanity'.⁷⁷ The word 'inscription' speaks to the full arrival of Lila into text and into Robinson's transfictional realm, one in which her character takes fuller narrative shape in what Ben Lehnardt calls her 'stories', her 'untold narratives'.⁷⁸ Like *Home*, *Lila* is written in the third person and is focalized by an, up until this point, relatively minor female character. The novel frequently anticipates Ames' death (referring to its inevitability as consequence of his age rather than the illness he develops later), but readers of *Gilead* know already that Lila will outlive her husband, her marriage will be cut short by bereavement and that her unborn child will grow up without a father. Over the course of the novel, readers learn too that she has been violently bereaved of her companion Doll and, possibly, at Doll's hand, of her own violent, absent father. In the diegetic present of the novel although there are occasional references to the younger Boughtons and Robinson fleshes out the friendship between Ames and Reverend Boughton, the focus on the relationship between Lila, her husband and her baby (to whom her thoughts are directed mostly *in utero*), is presented always in relation to her experiences of suffering. Lila is bound, intertextually and within the novel, to the suffering of others, to Ames' dead and more pressingly, towards the end of the novel, to her own. All of the dead are subjectified, rather than objectified by Robinson's depictions. As Robinson portrays in detail more of the dead than the living, Lila becomes a centre around which these communities cohere.

***Lila* and continuing bonds**

Ben Jeffrey writes that *Lila* is a novel that is 'tremendously serious about the pain it wishes to come to terms with'.⁷⁹ In *Lila*, Robinson creates a character who both recognizes and embodies the forms of suffering that are central to human existence and reflected across her other novels. Lila, like Jack and like Isaiah's prophecy of Christ, is a *woman* 'full of sorrows and familiar with suffering' (*H* 331 and Isaiah: 53.3). It is this familiarity with suffering that is the point of interconnection between her and all of the suffering characters in Robinson's other

⁷⁷ Mukherjee, (para.5).

⁷⁸ Williams, 'Living the Good Life', p.68 and Lehnardt, p.126.

⁷⁹ Jeffery, p.21.

novels. From the opening of *Lila*, Robinson emphasizes that it is loneliness that she shares with Doll. Of their escape into the night she writes:

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. (*L* 5)

Similarly, as much as Lila's relationship with Ames is based on the elderly man's unexpected 'passion' for the young woman who enters his church one rainy Pentecost, *Lila* conveys the full extent to which it is forged from their mutual experience of suffering by emphasizing what she calls, and he repeats, the 'damn loneliness' of all their years of bereavement and loss (*G* 204 and *L* 85). Lila notes his loneliness is 'one thing she understood about him', and a good deal of the novel explores the ways in which they recognize and mis-recognize the effects of this in each other (*L* 18). Like Glory in *Home*, Lila fantasizes about 'stealing off with a child', the child of another woman in the whorehouse in St. Louis who is pregnant to a man that Lila is 'horribly in love with' (*L* 202 and 194). This is a dream, like Glory's dream of the 'great rescue' of Jack's first child, which sustains and protects Lila from the 'sadness and the meanness' that is her 'life', until the pregnant woman moves on, and Lila is left to 'regret the child she never had', bereft even of the dream of the child, as Glory is (*H* 73, *L* 202 and 216). Both women know the rejection of unkind men and the loss of children they loved but did not give birth to.

The links between Lila and Ruth Stone are many, but in addition to the echoes between these two characters, Robinson also patterns a relationship between Lila and Lucille. Robinson depicts Lila's more sustained though fragile experience of the 'settled life' at the end of *Lila* with imagery that echoes the fragility of Lucille's at the end of *Housekeeping*. In a reverie about what Doll would make of her home life: a husband, a child and a 'beautiful' kitchen 'all painted white', with 'red geraniums' in 'glasses on the windowsill'; Lila is shown to have achieved what Lucille seeks and what Ruth imagines for her sister at the end of *Housekeeping* (*L* 123). Robinson writes of Lucille:

The house is hers now. Perhaps she is in the kitchen, snuggling pretty daughters in her lap, and perhaps now and then they look at the black windows to find out what their mother seems to see there [...]. If Lucille is

there, Sylvie and I have stood outside her window a thousand times, and we have thrown the side door open [...] and tipped the bud vase. (*HK* 218)

But readers of *Gilead* and *Home* know that Lila's 'settled life', like Lucille's, indeed like all life, is precarious (*G* 228). Her husband will die and she and her son, like Ruth, Sylvie, Doll and Jack, will be 'cast out to wander' (*HK* 209). Hovering over Lila's narrative are the words of Ruth: who knows that there will be 'an end to housekeeping' and that there is a 'mourning that will not be comforted' (*HK* 209 and 192). In this respect, Lila is presented as connected with Jack, Sylvie and Ruth. Lila knows what they know about loss, transience, separation and destitution. In conversation with Jack she stresses that she knows, most of what she knows about the 'settled life', from being outside it, being more familiar with what it is like to 'look through people's windows at night and wonder what it [is...] like' than to live inside a house with any degree of comfort (*G* 228). When Jack jokes that this is how he was planning to spend his evening, outside people's windows looking in, Robinson recalls Ruth and Lucille staring in at the windows of passing trains looking for figures of mothers; Ruth and Sylvie looking in at Lucille and her imaginary children through the 'black window' at the end of *Housekeeping*; and indeed Ames looking out at his young family through the window of his study while anticipating his death (*HK* 54 and 218 and *G* 10).

In addition to pivoting a transfictional iteration of loss around Lila, Robinson also re-articulates the ongoing presence of the dead in the lives of the living, an articulation that emphasizes sociality. Relationships between the living and the dead are intimately mapped in all of Robinson's novels, but in *Lila* she re-iterates this as an expansive manifestation of affinity between Lila and the dead and the sociality of loss between Lila, the dead and the living. In her article 'Living with the deceased: absence, presence and absence-presence', geographer Avril Maddrell integrates the psychological idea of 'continuing bonds' into a broader and 'more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the living and the absent deceased' that she calls 'absence-presence'.⁸⁰ Maddrell draws on work being done in material studies and argues that 'expressions of continuing bonds' are a 'relational and dynamic absence-presence' that can be found in tangible form in

⁸⁰ Maddrell, 'Living with the deceased', p.501

'material foci' such as graves, memorials, cairns, and shrines.⁸¹ She argues that such foci figure for the 'ongoing relationship and its practices' which are 'informed by culturally determined attendant notions of caring'.⁸² In *The Secret Cemetery*, anthropologist Doris Francis examines cemetery practices and describe such expressions, for example in the visiting of graves, as 'keeping kin and kinship alive'.⁸³ Through the material foci of the graves of Ames' dead, the battered old kitchen table and staircase in his house, and the knife that Lila inherits from Doll, Robinson enacts a dynamic relationship between the dead and Lila, one which foregrounds caring and compassion, dynamically enveloping the 'absence-presence' of the dead with the living.

Readers of *Gilead* know that Ames is the single living member of his family and that since the death of his wife and child, he has lived alone for forty years. In *Lila*, Lila tends to the graves of his dead relatives. Before she develops an intimate relationship with Ames, a 'lady' from the church tells her about 'the wife and the child' (L 32). Shortly afterwards, Lila walks up to the cemetery and finds the grave of Louisa and Rebecca, noting the 'the grass was mowed, but nobody had thought to prune the roses' (L 32). Lila's rationale for visiting isn't immediately clear, caught up as it is in her thoughts about Ames' religion and what she perceives to be his misplaced trust in God, but, she rationalizes in an act of connectedness, that '[s]ince he did seem to think about her', she would begin 'tending that grave' (L 33). Soon after, she notices his garden is 'running to weeds' so she begins 'tending that too' (L 33). The graves and the garden become recurrent tropes in the novel (tropes that are also in *Gilead*), a material focus for Lila's thoughts about life and death and the, for her, unfamiliar idea of family. Re-socializing Louisa, she starts to talk to her, calling her 'Mrs. Ames' (even after she herself becomes Mrs. Ames); she watches the 'roses on the grave [...] blooming', and 'the weeds [...] too' and finds that 'she love[s] them', the woman and the child lost to Ames (L 71). When Ames mentions this act of care, late on in the novel, Robinson implies that Lila's actions – 'you covered her grave with roses. That was a wonderful thing' –

⁸¹ Ibid., p.501 and 507. Maddrell draws in particular on E. Hallam and J. Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

⁸² Ibid., p.508.

⁸³ Doris Francis, Georgina Neophytu and Leonie Kellaheer, *The Secret Cemetery* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p.141.

are an act of kinship and compassion akin to Ames' lifelong loyalty to the bride of his 'youth', neither of which need (or in the novels does) end (*L* 225 and 224).

Concurrently, the family at the cemetery expands, their existences marked by grave stones and etchings on the furniture of Ames' house. In an early conversation about 'why things happen the way they do', Ames 'trace[s] a scratch on the table with his finger' and begins to tell Lila about 'the brothers and sisters who died before he was born, and about how his mother said once that the stairs were scuffed by the children's shoes because she could never keep them from running in the house' (*L* 29). These children are unfamiliar to the reader of *Gilead*, new members of the dead re-socialized by their inscription in this most recent novel. Ames recollects his mother in a way that is new to readers of *Gilead*, figuring the marks the dead children left as a measure of their ongoing presence in absence. Robinson writes:

when she found a scrawl in a book, she said, "One of the children must have done it." There was a kind of fondness and sadness in her voice that he heard only when she mentioned them. So when he found a scratch or a mark on something, he still thought, One of the children. His brother Edward, the oldest, was spared the diphtheria that took the rest of them. So Edward knew the children, and he had stories about them. One, closest to him, was named John, a family name. Once, he heard his brother call him Non-John, thinking he was too young to understand. Because Edward missed the brother he had lost, he always did miss him. He was – very loyal to him. Their mother and father and grandfather seldom mentioned those children. They could hardly bear to think of them. (*L* 30)

Loyalty again figures for maintaining connection with the dead and scratches and marks as the inscription of their existence. Later Ames worries that the marks of the dead will alienate Lila and asks, 'You don't mind all the scars and the scratches? All the departed souls who left them behind?' and Lila replies, again embodying sociality, 'I believe I'd be lonesome without them' (*L* 169).

Lila gathers up these dead in her visits to 'that sad place', the cemetery, finding 'the grave of the John Ames who died as a boy, with a sister Martha on one side and a sister Margaret on the other', and later walking up to 'see Mrs. Ames and the child, and now the boy John Ames and his sisters' (*L* 75, 40 and 107). She continues to visit when she is pregnant, including and directly addressing the unborn baby as she cares for the community of the dead:

You got a pa who is a preacher. His brother and sisters are here and his mother and father, and his wife and her baby. The whole family lying here together. (L 123)

The red geraniums she grows in the kitchen are from 'cuttings' taken from the cemetery. And readers of *Gilead* know that she continues to visit the graves throughout Robert's childhood (G 58).

As the birth of the baby approaches, Lila gathers more people to her: both the living and the dead. She finds herself 'missing Doll again' and thinks more and more frequently of the 'stragglers' who populated her old life and Ames' (L 199 and 258). She includes Jack in this group – '[t]hat son of Boughton's' – and transients Mellie, Doane and Marcelle from her time on the road (L 258). She and Ames both anticipate the 'saddest thing that could happen' happening to them, and Lila and her baby dying as Louisa and Rebecca did; and her reveries turn to 'Old Boughton again, struggling up those stairs to weep and pray and dampen a small brow, his bony self a step from the grave'; she imagines him after their deaths as he was for Louisa and Rebecca, because 'he had to be there, because he was always there when he thought he might be able to help, bony old thing that he was, eyes full of tears' (L 246, 231 and 246).

The novel ends with two scenes: Lila's capacious and not entirely Christian vision of eternity and a picture of her husband and child in the kitchen of the old house. Her 'eternity', one which – contrary to Boughton's vision of the elect – incorporates everyone, is expansive (L 258). She pictures the 'stragglers' and includes the homeless boy she has visited in the shack she inhabited, and his dead violent father. She imagines the cemetery and the day they will 'lower' her husband 'John Ames into his grave' and imagines him with 'Mrs. Ames on one side and his father John Ames, on the other, and his mother and that boy John Ames and his sisters, a little garden of Ameses', a family she imagines, come the Resurrection, 'coming up some June day, right through the roses, not breaking a stem or bruising a petal' (L 251). And of herself and the child, she pictures a different end, one which unites her not just with Doll, but with 'stragglers' like Jack (and Ruth and Sylvie). She says to the child whom she imagines asking about his place in the graveyard:

It don't matter. We'll just wander a while. We'll be nowhere, and it will be alright. I have friends there (L 252)

In the kitchen scene, Lila is in the house with the scuffed stairs. She has decided to 'keep that knife' – her link to Doll (L 260). She thinks:

Other people had houses and towns and names and graveyards. They had church pews. All she had was that knife. [...] That was her dowry. (L 241)

Committed, temporarily, to this 'other life', the material foci of her relationships with the dead become emblematic of her living, and the scene tacitly acknowledges the extended family of the living and the dead (hers and Ames') in communion together (L 249). She notes that 'for now' there is the knife, but there are also 'geraniums in the windows' and the 'old man' at the scratched 'kitchen table telling his baby some rhyme he'd known forever' (L 261).

Transfiction and horizontality

The living families in Robinson's novels are usually small, at most points clustered in groups of two or three: Sylvie, Ruth and Lucille (in *Housekeeping*); Ames, Lila and Robert (in *Gilead* and in *Lila*) and Glory, Boughton and Jack (in *Home*). They are not always formed in traditional family structures, so in *Housekeeping* the family unit of single mother and two daughters is replaced by grandmother and two grandchildren, then two aunts and two nieces, one aunt and two nieces, and finally aunt and niece. In *Lila*, the family unit for much of the novel is just Lila and Doll, the 'cow and her calf', though for 'about eight years' they are part of a bigger collective, travelling and finding work as 'Doane's people' (L 199 and 14).

Gonzalez argues that it is specifically Robinson's focus on 'small communities' that 'dramatizes the necessity of interdependence and the precariousness of human life' in *Gilead* and in *Home*.⁸⁴ In secular terms, he surmises that Robinson's first three novels in particular (though his argument easily extends to include *Lila*) rely on the intimacy of these small communities to elucidate the experience of human suffering as a major source of human interdependence.⁸⁵ In her discussions of *Lila*, Robinson has echoed this view, describing the microcosmic situation of that

⁸⁴ Gonzalez, p.374.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.374.

novel as a ‘*small* model of the problem’ that religious traditions call forth, that is ‘to be compassionate to a much broader human world than we know’.⁸⁶

Using the now-freighted (and perhaps dated) language of the early ‘counterhegemonic’ criticism of *Housekeeping*, Gonzalez argues that the intimacy and interdependence of Robinson’s communities make it impossible as a reader to ‘take a “privileged position” in relation to her characters’ pain’.⁸⁷ He argues that ‘to affirm Ruth is to espouse her grief’, something that was anathema particularly to a feminist readership at the time of the novel’s publication; but that ‘taking the opposite position’ is also deeply ‘uncomfortable’.⁸⁸ Gonzalez presents this as something of an ethical difficulty for readers of *Housekeeping*, particularly those concerned with Ruth’s “well-being” or liberation. He discerns a ‘more developed system of ethics’ in *Gilead* and *Home*.⁸⁹ In these novels, where the ‘suffering figure’ (for him Jack) moves from the role of narrator to the ‘narrator’s concern’, he argues the ‘protagonists’ are themselves ‘incapable of assuming a privileged position in relation to the suffering person’, especially since they do not benefit from the ‘troubling but ultimately safe distance that aesthetics allow’.⁹⁰ Although Gonzalez under-reads all three novels – presenting as critics often do, Jack, as the ultimate figure of suffering – his emphasis on the absence of privileged positioning and Robinson’s ‘clear ethical imperative’ that both characters and readers ‘must react’ to the suffering figures in her novels, draws attention to another democratic impulse of Robinson’s, that is the equal recognition that she assumes for all characters in her novels.⁹¹

In interview Robinson has explained that she sees ‘no hierarchy of value among human beings. At all’.⁹² Her aesthetics are driven by a relationality which reflects this and her belief in what she calls ‘the deep acknowledgement that everyone owes to everyone else’.⁹³ Familial connections are patterned across all four of her novels and as such society is levelled, invoking, as demonstrated in *Lila*, a far

⁸⁶ Robinson, ‘Interview with Marilynne Robinson’, [*Lila* book launch], Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, 12 November 2014.

⁸⁷ Gonzalez, p.375.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.375.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.373.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.375.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.375.

⁹² Robinson in Holland, ‘Interview’.

⁹³ Robinson in Elie, ‘The Resurrection of the Ordinary’.

broader conception of family. In *Housekeeping* it is female relationships that are emphasized. *Lila* too is an examination of the deep kinship between two women, as well as an intimate exploration of a marriage, and of motherhood, as Lila prepares for the arrival of her son. In *Gilead* and in *Home* male relationships are emphasized and are most often the focus of criticism. These relationships echo and traverse both novels. They too are highly patterned: two elderly, dying fathers are best friends, godfathers and 'namesake[s]' to each other's sons (*G* 215). Their sons, when they get to know one another, both soon to be bereaved, are presented as 'brother[s]' (*G* 105). Jack calls Ames 'papa' although, ironically, for much of *Gilead* Ames fears Jack as a replacement father for his own child (*G* 264). Though Ames and Jack are themselves separated by a generation, the two men are paralleled both as the sons of difficult fathers, and as bereaved husbands and fathers, with sons they will not see grow up, wives they do not wish to leave, and daughters who have died in infancy.

In her essay, 'The Nature of the Horizon: Genealogy in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*', Adriana Smith writes about the family structures in Robinson's *Gilead*. According to Smith, the positioning of characters in a small, shared – non-hierarchical – community can be described as a form of 'horizontality' at work in Robinson's novels, a horizontality that Robinson transforms from New Testament writing.⁹⁴ According to Smith, the small, interlinked and patterned familial communities – including the repetition of male names – in *Gilead* in particular, depict horizontal rather than vertical genealogies which invoke the 'unusual' Christological family structures depicted in the New Testament Gospels of Luke and Matthew.⁹⁵ Smith notes that, in contrast to the many genealogies of the Old Testament, there are only two genealogical accounts in the New Testament, both of which belong to Jesus. She reads *Gilead* in tandem with Robinson's essay 'Son of Adam, Son of Man', and argues that Robinson works, in her theological essay, to reconcile Christ's 'divinity' with his 'humanity through genealogies'.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Adrianna Smith, 'The Nature of the Horizon: Genealogy in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*', unpublished paper delivered at the Marilynne Robinson Symposium, Nottingham Trent University, 9 June 2016, 1-11, (p.1).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3. For another view of genealogy in *Gilead* and *Home*, see Yumi Pak, "Jack Boughton Has a Wife and a Child" in Stevens, ed. *This Life This World*, pp.212-236. Pak argues that Robinson's exploration of white genealogies relies on and maintains the disavowal of affirmative

Luke's account of Christ's genealogy traces it in reverse, ending, 'which was son of Adam, which was the son of God' (Luke 3:23-38). Smith explains that Robinson's essay title, taken from this account, emphasizes the human genealogy of Jesus because 'son of man', means at its simplest, 'human being'.⁹⁷ Robinson's essay argues that by emphasizing Jesus' origin as 'son of Adam, that is, of man' in these accounts, Luke not only emphasizes Jesus' humanity, but makes 'ancestry moot and opens the way to universalism, the movement of the knowledge of God beyond ethnic, cultural, and historical boundaries of its first revelation, to all those other children of Adam, to humankind'.⁹⁸ Smith develops this, noting that Robinson's depictions of interconnected, interdependent and biologically unrelated families in *Gilead* 'transfigures the shape of genealogy from one of verticality (a family tree, distinguishing generational differences) to one of horizontality (the horizon, highlighting generational universalism)'.⁹⁹ The outcome of this horizontal view of genealogy, according to Smith, 'collapses generational differences' such that Jack and Ames become kin to one another and Ames and his child, in Ames' vision of heaven, will also, like Jack and Ames, be 'brothers' (G 189). In addition, Smith's argument allows that extending the relational beyond the (biologically) familial has the effect of 'equalizing every human' and 'every generation, on the same plane'.¹⁰⁰

In Robinson's early commentaries on *Housekeeping* she offered a way of viewing characterization as a type of relationality that in some ways anticipated the horizontal relationships and transfictionality of her later novels. In interview with Eileen Bartos and Carolyn Jacobson, Robinson indicated a similar (though not explicitly religious) "thick", horizontal relationship between the female characters in her first novel. She said:

When I write fiction – or when I read fiction, too – I always have a very nervous feeling that any character is too thin. And my way of resolving that in *Housekeeping* was to create characters that I considered to be aspects of one character. I used to say it was a cubist portrait. I consider them to be *related to each other along a continuum*, rather than being opposed or

kinship between white fathers and black children by focusing more on the relationship between Ames and Jack than Jack and his son Robert.

⁹⁷ Smith, 'Nature of the Horizon', p.4.

⁹⁸ Marilynne Robinson, 'Son of Adam, Son of Man', *Givenness of Things*, pp.240-257, (p.248).

⁹⁹ Smith, 'Nature of the Horizon', p.9.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1.

being separate. [...] Sylvie is what Lucille forbids herself, Lucille is what Sylvie can't quite attain. That's how they *relate*.¹⁰¹

More recently, she has said of the characters in *Housekeeping* and in *Lila*:

I have found that when you write a novel, a character never actually leaves you from that point on. It's clearly true that Sylvie and Doll are *sisters*, are *associated* in terms of what is important to me about both of them.¹⁰²

Clear from these reflections is a sense of the relationality of Robinson's female characters, particularly in *Lila* and *Housekeeping*, akin to that of the male (and under-scrutinized female) characters in *Gilead* and in *Home*.¹⁰³ Robinson's view speaks to the fluidity of her characters' place in text, and the meaningfulness to their author of the ways in which they 'relate' or are 'associated'. Horizontal relationships and communities are built around loss, connectedness and the contingency of the experience of loss across all of Robinson's novels. This emphasis on relationality, and the ways in which characters or echoes and types of characters populate and traverse all four of her works, is not just a representation of Robinson's Christian humanist ethic – corollary of Gonzalez' interdependence and Small's sociality – but an *enactment* of it, at its most pronounced when it comes to the suffering of the vulnerable, the lonely, the dying and the bereaved. It is also part of what lends Robinson's novels the qualities of parable – a mode of story-telling with an inherently social dimension.

Marilynne Robinson's 'parabolic imagination'¹⁰⁴

As trans-fictions, Robinson's novels focus on families, relationships and horizontality; as parables (or rather within the parables they depict) they focus on moments of connection which recognize and sanctify the pain experienced within (and across) these horizontal families, rendering suffering as sacred and universal

¹⁰¹ Eileen Bartos and Carolyn Jacobson, 'Mostly on *Mother Country*', *The Iowa Review*, 22.1 (Winter 1992), pp.8-21, (p.17) – emphasis mine.

¹⁰² Robinson, 'A Conversation', *Nation*, (para. 3) – emphasis mine.

¹⁰³ I refer here to the emphasis in scholarship on male characters and the theme of son-ship when *Gilead* and *Home* are read together. As Chapter Three demonstrates, some criticism of *Home* now focuses on Glory, but Ames' mother, dead wife, dead daughter and dead grandmother, as well as Reverend Boughton's wife, are not yet the subjects of criticism. The same is true, as I have pointed out in Chapter Three, of Sylvia and Helen in *Housekeeping* and there is now scope to draw links between Lila and Glory as well as Lila and Ruth.

¹⁰⁴ Maxine E. Walker, "How do you read it?" Rowan Williams, Marilynne Robinson and Mapping a Postmodern Reading of the Good Samaritan Parable', *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 12.2 (September 2013), 203-225, (p.203).

and thus central to sociality. Reviewers often use the word parable in association with Robinson's work, and although scholars have recently started to explore more deeply the role that parable plays in the novels, none have yet examined the exegetical potential of what Joan Leonard calls the 'parabolic aesthetic' across all four novels.¹⁰⁵ Of scriptural tradition, including what he calls the 'profound hermeneutic of the parable', Rowan Williams writes that.¹⁰⁶

diverse events, persons, patterns of behavior are reconstructed in writing and in the editing process of canonical formation a shared form emerges – a family resemblance.¹⁰⁷

Within the Christian context, Williams argues that the 'family resemblance' of text and type, person and community communicated by the 'methods displayed' in biblical writings lends 'graspable shape' to the types of recognition available in and as experiences of human (explicitly Christian) 'unity'.¹⁰⁸ The parabolic form in Robinson's hands becomes, when the novels are read together, a 'shared form' gesturing towards this unity, but one which both uses and transcends the Christian context. It repeatedly implies unity in the experience of human suffering and, simultaneously, operates as the vehicle for a vision of communality that is presented as a type of 'family resemblance' both of text and personhood.

For many centuries parables—the simple stories with deeper moral meaning that occur in both the Old and the New Testaments—were read as allegories, but scholars generally concur now that parable is a form of analogy.¹⁰⁹ From the Latin

¹⁰⁵ Joan Leonard, 'Loitering with Intent: Muriel Spark's Parabolic Technique', *Studies in Literary Imagination* 18.1 (Spring 1985), 65-77, p.66. For reviews which use the word, see Gardner, 'This Poor Gray Ember of Creation: Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* is a novel to savour', *Christianity Today*, 1 March 2005, <<http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2005/marapr/2.15.html>>; Kakutani, 'Woman Caught in the Paradox' and Churchwell, *Lila – a great achievement*. For exploration of the Good Samaritan in *Housekeeping*, see Walker. For discussion of the Prodigal Son parable in *Gilead* and *Home*, see Rebecca Painter 'Doom, Destiny, And Grace: The Prodigal Son in Marilynne Robinson's *Home*', Volume 109 of the series *Analecta Husserliana*; The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research (*Destiny, The Inward Quest, Temporality, and Life*) ed. by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, pp 223-233 and 'Further Thoughts'. See also the transcript of the speech 'Native Speakers: Identity, Grace and Homecoming', The Archbishop's Speech on Christianity and Literature, 15 July 2011, by Rowan Williams <<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2136/archbishops-speech-at-conference-on-christianity-and-literature>> [accessed 30 July 2016].

¹⁰⁶ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), p.27.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.22.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.22-23.

¹⁰⁹ Aside from the historical tradition of reading parables as allegories, the central controversy in parable study has been the extent to which New Testament parables in particular should be read *Sitz im Leben*, that is exclusively within the historical context in which they were written, or, more

parabola meaning ‘comparison’ and Greek *parabolē* meaning ‘side by side’, critics do tend to agree that the power of parable relies on the metaphorical potency of a story that heightens the domain of the real and by so doing directly engages the reader or listener in the interpretive act.¹¹⁰ According to literary critic Joan Leonard parables ‘are brief stories, displaying a sharp economy in the presentation of character and plot’.¹¹¹ They ‘take place’, she continues, ‘in a usual setting and involve everyday people’, but their analogical force relies on a ‘realistic picture’ that is ‘exploded by an extravagance in detail and description’ with the effect that they ‘startle us with the suddenness of the sacred in the midst of the ordinary’.¹¹² According to Dan O. Via parables are the ‘aesthetic mingling of the realistic and the surprising’, a mingling that suggests ‘that everyday existence is crossed by the problematical, contingent, unpredictable’.¹¹³ Such ‘aesthetic minglings’ occur throughout Robinson’s fiction, lending her ordinary representations of grief and grievers aesthetic and realistic depth.

For all her American, regional and temporal specificity, the language, setting and time of the Gilead novels are stripped of certain qualities of realism, altering the narratological terrain and sharpening the economy of presentation. As Williams puts it, there is a ‘spareness and precision of expression’.¹¹⁴ As such, and notwithstanding their potential to be read socio-politically and historically, these books can also be read to situate themselves in the ‘world remote’ that Robinson more consciously developed when writing *Housekeeping*. Realism within this context is a vexed idea. For all its mythopoetic lyricism, *Housekeeping* still

diachronically as religious, literary or art objects with ongoing theological relevance. For a brief, though partial summary of the history of parable scholarship see, Robert J. Plummer, ‘Parables in the Gospels: History of Interpretation and Hermeneutical Guidelines’, *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 13.3 (2009), 4-11. For the classic *Sitz im Leben* reading of the parables, see C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet and Co, 1935). For work that initiated the view that parables were literary works, see Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York, Evanston and London: Harper and Row, 1966) and Dan O. Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1967). For contemporary work that draws on both traditions, see David Wenham, ‘How Jesus Understood the Last Supper: a Parable in Action’, *Themelios*, 20.2 (January 1995), 11-15 and Williams, *On Christian Theology*. For definitions of parable that define it specifically as analogy, see Dodd and Roy A. Stewart, ‘The Parable Form in the Old Testament and the Rabbinic Literature’, *Evangelical Quarterly*, 36 (1964), 133-147. For explorations of the parable as ‘early Christian rhetoric’, see Amos Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospels* (Boston, Harvard University Press, 1976).

¹¹⁰ ODE, p.1287.

¹¹¹ Leonard, p.76 and Walker, p.67.

¹¹² Leonard, p.67.

¹¹³ Via, p.106.

¹¹⁴ Williams, ‘Living the Good Life’, p.70.

prompts interpretations that Robinson, as recently as 2014, argued read the novel 'more literally' than she intended it to be read.¹¹⁵ Roxanna Robinson describes the three Gilead novels as 'beautifully rendered works of realism' and, for Sarah Churchwell, *Lila* is the third installment of Robinson's socio-political and historical excavation of United States history essentially rooted in place, whereby 'all three books link life in Gilead to the history of its region [...] emblem of the forgotten past of the middle west' and its neglected Abolitionist and civil libertarian activists.¹¹⁶ Despite these readings, and the depiction of Depression-era itinerancy in *Lila*, Mel Piehl writes that there is something ahistorical about the world created in *Lila*, that the novel is 'not mimetic or realistic fiction' and certainly 'not concerned with the usual revelations of narrative fiction'.¹¹⁷ Similarly, Diane Johnson argues, again in response to *Lila*, that Robinson 'steps away from the conventions of the realistic novel to deal with metaphysical abstractions' and does so by creating a 'timeless tone and setting'.¹¹⁸ Ben Lenhardt describes *Lila* paradoxically as both 'stunningly realistic', but with a 'sense of time and place' that is 'wispy'.¹¹⁹ James Wood, who, like many, missed the strong political undertow of *Gilead* in his early review of the novel, was nevertheless not wrong when he wrote that it is a novel that is 'out of time'.¹²⁰ These observations affirm the heightened realism that Robinson works with and cohere with Robinson's repeated emphasis on the choice she makes to write in a language without overt contemporary signification, language that she has often said she attempts to make 'unrecognizable in terms of a particular decade'.¹²¹ To use the words of parable scholar C.H. Dodd, Robinson writes of the 'common life', then, but with an arresting 'vividness or strangeness' of time, setting, language and tone, all of which enhance a reading of the 'parabolic imagination' at work in her novels.¹²²

It is possible to read any and all of the key moments in Robinson's novels as stand-alone parables. Amongst many others, these include, the visit from the

¹¹⁵ Robinson in Rebecca M. Painter, 'On the Responsibility of Churches to Safeguard and Promote the Spirit of Democracy, the Potential of the Humanities, and Other Thoughts – An Interview with Marilynne Robinson', *Renascence*, 66.2 (Spring 2014), 151-160, (p.154).

¹¹⁶ Churchwell, '*Lila* – a great achievement', (para. 13).

¹¹⁷ Piehl, (para.25)

¹¹⁸ Johnson, 'Moral of the Story', (para 10).

¹¹⁹ Lehnhardt, p.127.

¹²⁰ Wood, 'Acts of Devotion', (para.2)

¹²¹ Robinson, 'A Conversation', *Nation*, (para. 4).

¹²² Walker, p.203.

sheriff when Ruth hides in the orchard in *Housekeeping*, the tableau of father and son at the grandfather's grave in *Gilead*, Glory's washing of Jack's body in *Home*, and Lila's baptism at the river in *Lila*. These are always intimate moments of sociality in Robinson's novels – even in the keenest moments of loneliness and solitude – moments of communion and communality during which time the sorrow, grief and loneliness of one character is in some way acknowledged by another and concomitantly by the reader. There is an action occurring in these depicted moments and in the reading of them. According to Via, parables are 'real aesthetic objects'; but contemporary critics acknowledge that they are not just 'language events', and emphasize, in particular, their active qualities.¹²³ According to David Wenham they are 'verbal dramas' in that they are stories, but are made 'terribly vivid' in 'action'; they have, he posits, 'multi-dimensional power' and are 'multi-media' as 'acted' forms.¹²⁴ According to theologian Roy Stewart, 'acted parables' are a 'common feature' of the Old Testament, more 'rarely' found in the New; but more recent theologians regularly use the term to describe any of Jesus' actions (as compared to his narrated accounts) that occur in the synoptic gospels of the New Testament.¹²⁵ For example, Jesus washes his disciples' feet (John 13:1-17), he heals the sick (Matthew 8:1-16) and he feeds the five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21 and John 6:1-14). Interpreting these actions as acted parables both enacts and dramatizes their ethical function, acting on their audience within the novel and on readers of it. Thus it is with action as well as description with which these moments of suffering and recognition have such force.

According to Andrew Stout, the 'sacred nature of ordinary people and places' and the 'divine in the common' is central to what he calls the 'Protestant sacramental vision' of Robinson's prose.¹²⁶ Leonard argues that it is the creative tension between the vividness of the 'realistic picture' presented by parable, paired with

¹²³ Via, p.ix and Funk, p.128. Via and Funk have been criticised for reading parables as 'language events' to the exclusion of context, see Plummer, 'Parables in the Gospels'. Their 'New Hermeneutic' literary critical approach to parable is now of some vintage, but has clearly influenced contemporary scholars and is not as reductive as critics suggest. For analysis that engages with the relationship between context and aesthetics see Wenham, 'How Jesus Understood the Last Supper'.

¹²⁴ Wenham, p.14 and p.11.

¹²⁵ Stewart, 'The Parable Form', p.139. For more recent work on acted parable in the New Testament, in particular work that engages with the "trends" of scholarship on parables, see Wenham, 'How Jesus Understood the Last Supper', Robert J. Plummer, 'Parables in the Gospels' and Rowan Williams *On Christian Theology*.

¹²⁶ Andrew Stout, "'A Little Willingness to See": Sacramental Vision in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*', *Religion and the Arts*, 18 (2014), 571-590, (p.571).

the 'sharp economy' of character and plot that lend the parabolic a 'universality' beyond Christianity, and in turn, a capacity to 'reveal the deeper dimensions of what she calls 'our radically human situation', one which creates 'stories that transcend one time or one situation to extend to all times and many settings'.¹²⁷ This, she argues, is the representational force of the 'parabolic aesthetic'.¹²⁸ In *Gilead*, *Home* and *Lila*, it is in Robinson's fusion of the sacramental with the parabolic – embodied specifically in acted parables of Christian ceremonies of communion, baptism, blessing and benediction – that Robinson's humanist vision of community and suffering is most fully fleshed out. In *Housekeeping* and *Lila*, Robinson uses the reimagining of Old Testament parables alongside the New Testament vision of the Good Samaritan to recreate vivid dramas of suffering and of care.

Communion, baptism, blessing and benediction: socialized grief and the sacraments as 'acted parables' in *Gilead* and *Home*

It is well documented that Robinson wrote *Home* in part to re-examine the parable of the Prodigal Son. In Painter's view, *Home* and *Gilead* together explore 'the length and breadth' of the Prodigal Son recounted in Luke's gospel 15:11-32, a parable about homecoming, traditionally read to figure for the 'all-embracing forgiving embrace of the father'.¹²⁹ In interview, Robinson has discussed her interest in the original parable, arguing that she sees it more as a parable about 'grace' or 'love' which, she argues is 'probably a synonym for grace', than about forgiveness, given the absence of a request for forgiveness on the part of the returning son.¹³⁰ She has explained the ways in which her novel 'change[s] the terms of the parable' such that, amongst other things, where the Prodigal Son in the bible leaves 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'.¹³¹ In Robinson's view, one aspect of her transformation of the parable is in the roles of father and son. Jack, she says, 'finds himself continually having to forgive his father and to love *him* graciously', rather than (or as much as) the other way

¹²⁷ Leonard, p.67

¹²⁸ Ibid., p.67 and 76.

¹²⁹ Painter, 'Further thoughts', p.487.

¹³⁰ See Painter, 'Further Thoughts', p.488.

¹³¹ Painter, 'Further Thoughts', p.488.

around.¹³² Elsewhere, Robinson has described Jack as the ‘major theological problem’ of *Home*, because his father Boughton cannot make his love for Jack ‘efficacious’ and thus, despite compassionately welcoming his son home, cannot alleviate his son’s suffering.¹³³ Her reading of Boughton in the Painter interview suggests, however, that he too presents a ‘theological problem’, an opportunity for forgiveness and grace that ultimately only Ames is able to recognize. The structural patterning of bereaved father-son relationships across both novels, enables Robinson to make the relationships between Ames and Boughton, Ames and Jack, and Boughton and Ames’ child Robert, ones of recognition, compassion and interdependence, via a parabolic reimagining of her own.

To compensate for Ames’ childlessness, Jack is metaphorically gifted to Ames at birth, ‘beloved child’ of his ‘oldest and dearest friend’ Reverend Boughton (*G* 177). This act is formalized by Ames’ baptism of Boughton’s child with his own name long in the diegetic past of the novel and long in advance of when Ames is able to name a living child Robert, ‘Robby’ after Boughton (*H* 226). Thus John ‘Jack’ Ames Boughton is not only Boughton’s Prodigal Son, but Ames’, not only Boughton’s ‘theological problem’, but Ames’. *Gilead* chronicles Ames’ difficulty with Jack’s return mostly in further familial terms in the form of the ‘discreditable emotions’ of jealousy Ames feels are ‘alloyed’ to his sorrow in imagining adult Jack as a replacement father to his own young son and as a more age-appropriate husband for Lila (*G* 161). Ames constantly suffers from the gap in the world that his anticipated death will leave and which he radically misapprehends that Jack wishes to fill.

This difficult father-son relationship is patterned in *Home* by Jack’s problems with his real father. The aged Robert Boughton is dying, and though his love of Jack is ‘extravagant’, his age, declining health, limited comprehension and racism all contribute to the forces that ultimately expel Jack from Gilead and prevent him from bringing his own mixed-race son, another ‘Robert Boughton’ home (*G* 272 and 278). Difficult father-son relationships are patterned also in *Gilead*. Ames describes himself in terms of the parable as ‘the good son [...] The one who never left his father’s house’, but constantly refers to his challenging relationship with his

¹³² *Ibid.*, p.488.

¹³³ Robinson in Lynn, ‘Conversations’.

father as one that is defined on both sides by disappointment (G 280). He also refers repeatedly to his father's difficulties with his grandfather – the violent abolitionist and the pacifist implicitly turned atheist who are mostly 'at each other's throats'; and ultimately Ames is dismayed by late recognition of his own racism and complacency and hopes for better for, and from, his young son (the other young Robert) (G 218).¹³⁴ Beneath the umbrella of the Prodigal Son parable, then, there is a complex and transverse genealogy emphasizing 'sonship' and suffering that reaches across both novels and across three 'interlinked' families and four generations.¹³⁵

Biblical scholar Mary Mills explains that New Testament writers lifted sections of the Old Testament 'out of context' and placed them into a wholly new 'explanatory setting' in order to derive Christological meaning from the 'deep theology presaged' in the Old Testament.¹³⁶ Mills argues that the New Testament writers were, of course, concerned with narrative techniques which had exegetical and explicitly Christological purpose. These, she has said, included the 'broader re-workings of character and theme' from the Old Testament for the purposes of hermeneutic understanding of Christ in the New.¹³⁷ Mills explains that for New Testament writers it was critical that new meaning did not supplant the old, but rather that the meanings from the Old Testament were 'subsumed' into the new.¹³⁸ Thus, typological representations, for example, rendered Christ 'greater than' Moses or Elijah who prefigured him; or New Testament words, images and parables in the form of 'quotations, allusions' and 'broader re-workings of character and theme' which cited, 'proof-texted' or alluded to Old Testament books, when repeated, were expanded in meaning in a new context.¹³⁹

Robinson has also written of this tradition, linking it to the parabolic. She writes:

¹³⁴ As yet, there are no published explorations of the socio-political implications of the two young Roberts, but at the recent Marilynne Robinson Symposium, both Professors Bridget Bennett and Sarah Churchwell commented on this aspect of the novels, particularly the figuring of the mixed race Robert Miles Boughton as an 'Obama'-type figure of hope in Robinson's 2008 novel, *Home*.
¹³⁵ Robinson, 'Son of Adam, Son of Man', p.241 and Gordon Leah, "'A person can change": grace, forgiveness and sonship in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*', *Evangelical Quarterly*, 80.1 (2008), 53-58, (p.53).

¹³⁶ Mills, 'New Testament Interpretations of Old Testament Texts', notes taken from a lecture delivered at Rewley House, Oxford, 2 April 2016.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

Biblical writers typically isolate moments of history as emblematic narratives in which God addresses his people, as if experience taught them in parables [...] The effect of this pulling forward of certain moments, fixing them in narrative rather as they might be stabilized in ritual or iconography, is to make history, that is, experience, seem prodigious and numinous.¹⁴⁰

The 'emblematic' qualities of the 'experience' of isolated moments and the 'fixing' in narrative in ways which resemble 'ritual' or 'iconography' is distinctive in Robinson's deep structural patterning of character, theme and action across the novels and is vivified when she reworks sacraments into acted parables.

Ames and communion

In *Gilead*, Robinson re-dramatizes the acted parable of The Last Supper as just such an 'iconographic' moment using a recurring childhood memory in which Ames' father, helping with the clean up after the burning of the Baptist church, feeds the child Ames a 'biscuit' with 'some soot on it' (G 108). The ordinariness of the moment is recounted realistically, yet, in accordance with Leonard's terms, with extravagant detail. He writes:

Lightning struck the steeple, and then the steeple fell into the building. It rained the day we came to pull it down. The pulpit was left intact, standing there in the rain, but the pews were mostly kindling. There was a lot of praising the Lord that it happened at midnight on a Tuesday. It was a warm day, a warm rain, and there was no real shelter, so everybody ignored it, more or less. All kinds of people came to help. [...] The ashes turned liquid in the rain and the men who were working in the ruins got entirely black and filthy, till you would hardly know one from another. My father brought me some biscuit that had soot on it from his hands. 'Never mind,' he said, 'there's nothing cleaner than ash'. But it affected the taste of that biscuit. [...] I remember my father down on his heels in the rain, water dripping from his hat, feeding me biscuit from his scorched hand, with that old blackened wreck of a church behind him and steam rising where the rain fell on embers, the rain falling in gusts and the women singing 'The Old Rugged Cross' while they saw to things, moving so gently, as if they were dancing to the hymn, almost. (G 107-109)

The 'biscuit ashy from my father's charred hand' becomes, in Ames' nostalgic recollection, the Eucharist. It is sacrament and as such, re-enactment of the acted

¹⁴⁰ Robinson, 'The First and Second Epistles of Peter' in *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament* ed. By Alfred Corn (New York: Viking, 1990), pp.305-15, (p.306-307).

parable of The Last Supper (G 130). Ames links the memory, explicitly, both to communion and to bereavement. He describes the biscuit as the ‘bread of affliction’ and writes to his son:

Grief itself has often returned me to that morning, when I took communion from my father’s hand. I remember it as communion and I believe that’s what it was. (G 108-9)

Within Christian tradition, The Last Supper has come to be known as the acted parable of Christ foreseeing his own death, and so too Ames (and Robinson) weave the scene of the ashy biscuit into Ames’ relationship with his dead father alongside his anticipation of his own imminent death and the loss and suffering he feels at this as well as the grief he knows it will cause his son. Ames returns to the memory multiple times, indeed, in her article, “Looking back from the grave”, Tanner writes that the novel ‘circles around and around’ this particular memory perhaps more than any other.¹⁴¹ By emphasizing its role in his own life as an acted parable and iconographic moment of communion, the memory functions – for Ames – to acknowledge and eclipse the difficulty of the relationship he had with his father in life, but in its repetition it also reflects an intention on Ames’ part to impart a similar enactment of communion between himself and his living child that Robert will remember after Ames has died. Ames’ narrative attempts this enactment in a number of ways, one of which is the fusion of this memory with a memory of giving young Robert actual communion, a moment rendered ‘greater than’ his own experience with his own father.

Before his reminiscence of the moment of the ‘ashy biscuit’, Ames recounts to Robert the day of the ‘Lord’s Supper’ that occurs in the diegetic present of the novel, when the child is six (G 79). He offers up his re-telling of the event as active parable to which his intended adult reader (Robert) can one day return. After preaching on Mark 14:22 and Genesis 32:23-32 and giving the Sacrament to his congregation, Lila brings their child up to Ames saying, ‘You ought to give *him* some of that’ (G 79 – my emphasis). Ames responds, directly addressing the older reader adult Robert in the diegetic present, blurring tense as always:

You’re too young, of course, but she was completely right. Body of Christ, broken for you. Blood of Christ, shed for you. Your solemn and beautiful

¹⁴¹ Tanner, “Looking back”, p.230.

child face lifted up to receive these mysteries in my hands. They are the most wonderful mystery, body and blood. [...] It was an experience I might have missed. Now I only fear I will not have time enough to fully enjoy the thought of it. (G 79)

The 'thought of it', in fact, returns as Ames later recounts his memory of the 'ashy biscuit' as something that 'matters' and yet as something that he is aware he misremembers.

In interview with Sanford Pinsker, Robinson has said that she believes that '[m]emory makes the essential choices; it is the inventory of meaning'.¹⁴² This view of memory as equal in status to material reality informs her depiction of one of the many moments in which Ames (mis)remembers and recounts his experience with the ashy biscuit. Thus, while reminding his son that it 'has never been our custom for the minister to place the bread in the communicant's mouth, as they do in some churches' he writes, 'it is strange that I remember receiving it the way I do', adding his description of physically enacting the parable with his son:

I broke the bread and fed a bit of it to you from my hand, just the way my father would not have done *except in my memory*. And I know what I wanted in that moment was to give you some version of that same memory, which has been very dear to me, though only now do I realize how often it has been in my mind. (G 117-118 – my emphasis)

Ames' repetition—in memory and in action – is both didactic and exegetical: a deliberate attempt to communicate and inscribe the meaningfulness of a moment to a son who in adulthood might not otherwise remember it. It is also an example of what Via calls the 'configuration of action-and-meaning' found in the parabolic, and belies Ames' desire to communicate the sanctity and tangible felt reality of that moment of spiritual regeneration as a moment of communion in life and in death between (dead) father and bereaved son.

According to Robinson, *Gilead* draws on the Old Testament motif of the 'blessing of sons by fathers' in order to render the 'whole book' a 'blessing of the son'.¹⁴³ Despite repeated enactments of the sacrament of communion Ames sees in the ashy biscuit and his re-enactment of it with Robert, there are moments, when Ames' feels he has failed in transforming the narrated into the acted parable for his son, saying, 'I *wish* I could only *give* you what my father gave me', adding, 'it all

¹⁴² Robinson in Pinsker, *Conversations*, p.120.

¹⁴³ Robinson in Elie, 'Resurrection of the Ordinary'.

means more than I can say' (G 130 – my emphasis). In part, the frustration Ames experiences is because Ames' letter is ultimately, like his sermons, only 'one half of a passionate conversation' (G 51). It is in dialogic relationships that Ames has with Jack in *Home* and with his friend Boughton depicted in *Gilead* and in *Lila* that Ames achieves (or rather the reader perceives) a greater sense of communion than Ames is able to experience directly with his own son in *Gilead*. By this means, Robinson sanctifies all three men's grief. She expresses these communions by depicting a series of sacramental acts conveyed using the parabolic aesthetic, rendering them collectively 'greater than' any individual moment. These take the form of the ritual acts of the sacraments of a benediction for Jack, the repetition of that moment in parabolic detail that Ames performs for his friend Boughton (both in *Gilead*), and the baptism of Ames' child Robert that is depicted in *Lila*. These function, transfictionally, to acknowledge the contingency and horizontality of the intersubjectivities and interdependence of both families across all three novels, and to acknowledge the fundamental sociality of their suffering in loss via collective 'modes of communion', suffering which cumulatively gathers meaning – and sanctity – as the novels are read together.¹⁴⁴

The blessing of Jack

At the very end of *Gilead*, when Ames' suspicions of Jack's motives for spending time near Ames' family are proven to be unfounded, and Jack reveals the existence of a young family of his own that he is unlikely to be reunited with, Ames performs for him a blessing. The blessing occurs at the bus-stop, as Jack prepares to leave town. It is described by Ames as the blessing of his other 'son' and functions as the symbolic transfiguration of the sacramental act of communion into an act of benediction (G 215). The departure of Jack is recounted in both *Gilead* and in *Home*, though the blessing is only described in *Gilead*. In *Home*, the moment of Jack's departure is captured in the Old Testament iconography of Isaiah. Through Glory's eyes, the departing figure of her brother is of a suffering man who is 'too thin' wearing clothes that are 'weary, weary' (H 331). Her vision of him brings to her mind the image of the prefiguration of Christ as a 'man of sorrows, acquainted with grief' (H 331 / Isaiah 53.3). Any reader of *Home* knows

¹⁴⁴ I borrow the phrase 'modes of communion' here from Jason W. Stevens, editor of *This Life, This World*, p.1. Stevens uses it to describe the acts of writing and prayer in *Gilead*.

the suffering experienced by Jack and the degree of pain that his departure will cause his sister, father, wife and child. In *Gilead*, Jack is depicted immediately after the moment he leaves Glory in *Home*, when Ames sees him in the same light 'walking up toward the bus stop, looking too thin for his clothes' (G 272). Despite *Gilead*'s earlier publication date, it is as though Jack walks out of the pages of *Home* and directly into the pages of *Gilead*. Regardless of which of the two novels a reader comes to first, the repetition of this iconic moment subsumes the meaning of its occurrence in the other novel, rendering the parabolic depiction of Jack, on both occasions, 'greater than' his first representation, just as Christ is deemed greater than his anti-type, the man of sorrows.

Early in *Gilead*, Ames tells his son that he believes blessings of all types are an act of recognition of the sanctity of the human person. He writes, '[t]here is a reality in blessing' and explains to his son that he believes it 'doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it' (G 26). The 'prodigious and numinous' palimpsestic figure of Jack – lost sheep, lost coin, prodigal son, type and anti-type for Christ, frail and bereaved human son, husband and father – is therefore 'acknowledged' by the blessing that Ames performs. Ironically, Ames' sense of disconnection from Jack stems from his own grief and childlessness at the time of Jack's birth, a time when he confesses his feelings were 'a little more complex' than he'd 'have wished' (G 177). At Jack's baptism Ames admits, 'I was so distracted by my own miserable thoughts I didn't feel that sacredness under my hand that I always do feel, that sense that the infant is blessing me' (G 215). Thus, Ames' grief for his lost first family and 'covetise' of his friend Boughton's large *living* family, interrupts (for him) the sanctity of the first sacrament bestowed on Jack, a sacrament that Ames insists is 'always' (that is usually) experienced as a mutual blessing, a moment of intimate sociality.

Tormented by the theological and personal problem Jack has always posed, Ames admits to an experience of alienation, thinking, in the (first) act of baptism, '[t]his is *not* my child' and admitting guiltily that this is something he has 'truly [...] never thought of any child before' (G 214). Moments later, he recognizes the falsity of his statement and corrects himself. Fusing any meaningful distinction between himself and this other man, he says, 'I wish I could christen him again, *for my sake* [...] Jack Ames Boughton *is* my son. [...] By 'my son' I mean another self, a more

cherished self' (G 215 – my emphasis). Ames also uses the language of horizontality in this moment and collapses the generations between himself and the younger man calling him 'that child, that man, my namesake' as he strains to reconcile his jealousy and to honour his secular and spiritual fatherly responsibilities, remembering the 'burden of guilt' he feels at what he considers to have been the failure of the baptism (G 215). Determined to manage the 'discreditable emotions' that have complicated his own grief at losing his daughter and the prospect of now losing his young son, as well as to find some sanctity in his own sorrow, Ames knows that blessing Jack will bless him too.

When, at the end of the novel, Ames realizes the full implications of his mistaken judgement of Jack as well as his complicity in the racist structures that have, and will continue, to keep Jack apart from his wife and child, (as well as his father and sister), he performs the second blessing. Jack's final departure from the town that might (and in proper Christian terms, should) have provided sanctuary for Jack's mixed-race family is depicted as a loss as great as that experienced by Ames when his wife and daughter died. Jack is bereft of his family and Ames recognizes Jack's grief. He says to Jack:

'I understand why you have to leave, I really do'. That was as true a thing as I have ever said. And I will tell you, remarkable as it seemed to me, at that moment I felt grateful for all my old bitterness of heart. (G 274)

In kinship with the suffering of another father facing eternal separation from his son, and another husband separated from his wife, Ames performs the blessing, 'placing' his hand on Jack's 'brow' (G 275). Robinson writes:

he took his hat off and set it on his knee and closed his eyes and lowered his head, almost rested it against my hand, and I did bless him to the limit of my powers, whatever they are, repeating the benediction from Numbers, of course – 'The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace'. Nothing could be more beautiful than that, or more expressive of my feelings, certainly or more sufficient for that matter. Then, when he didn't open his eyes or lift up his head, I said, 'Lord bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father'. Then he sat back and looked at me as if he were waking out of a dream. (G 275).

This parabolic rendition sanctifies Jack's suffering and in the same moment recalls a memory that Ames has recounted earlier in the novel, the memory of blessing

his baby daughter just before her death, minutes after Boughton baptized her. Both scenes emphasize again the feeling of the brow of a child beneath his hand and the continuing bonds of the living and the dead. He recalls:

I have that infant Rebecca in my mind, the way she looked while I held her, which I seem to remember, because every single time I have christened a baby I have thought of her again. That feeling of a baby's brow against the palm of your hand [...]. Boughton had christened her, as I said, but I laid my hand on her just to bless her, and I could feel her pulse, her warmth, the damp of her hair. [...] Boughton named her Angeline. (G 63-4)

The repetition of hand on brow, the simple act of 'benediction', is performative. It echoes and subsumes the blessing of Ames' dead child and all the children he has christened, including the two he is christening when Lila walks into his church, indeed including Lila whom he baptizes in *Lila*.

Robinson has said that she has always been 'struck' by the ways in which churchgoers are so often 'solemn and moved' by performance of the benediction in church services.¹⁴⁵ This 'consecrated act' she says is both 'intrinsically real' and 'good'.¹⁴⁶ In the moment of Jack's benediction, Robinson transcends time, space and memory, enabling one anguished, grieving father to enter into *communitas* and connect with another (or if read across all the father-son relationships, many others) in a mutual and social act which recognizes the suffering experienced by both men. The moment is greater than the other moments it subsumes. In blessing Jack, Ames performatively sanctifies the 'sorrow' of Jack as suffering, difficult grieving father and son, whose sacredness is not enhanced, but is acknowledged. But also, this time, Ames *does* feel the 'sacredness under his hand' knowing as such that Jack – 'the infant' – is, in turn, blessing him (G 215). Smith writes of the moment as another moment of 'horizontal' in the novel, where the commonplace image of two men sitting side by side on a bench, 'recreates a similar horizontal aesthetic to that of the earlier grave scene' (another parabolic moment of communion) when Ames' father prays over Ames grandfather's grave and when the sun and moon hover on the horizon.¹⁴⁷ She points out that this moment enacts a physical horizontality that reinforces the

¹⁴⁵ Robinson in Elie, 'Resurrection of the ordinary'.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Smith, 'Nature of the horizon', p.8.

'irrelevance of patrilineal genealogy' not only reiterating the moment as a 'fundamentally Christian image', but one which is such, because it 'universalizes the human lineage'.¹⁴⁸

The re-enactment of the blessing for Boughton

In recognizing the further grief that Jack's departure will again bring to his father Robert Boughton, Ames re-enacts the blessing in recollection as yet another acted parable for, and to include, his dying friend once Jack has gone. In an echo of the baptisms that Boughton has performed on both of his children, he says, 'I blessed that boy of yours for you. I still feel the weight of his brow on my hand [...] I love him as much as you meant me to' (*G* 279 and *L* 246). Ames' recitation of this moment and the 'action-in-meaning' of reliving the felt weight of Jack's brow invokes not only all the other brows he has blessed, but the moments in *Lila* when Boughton baptizes baby Robert using melted snow water and the recollection of Rebecca's baptism (in *Lila*) when Boughton cries. In contrast to when Ames first baptized Jack, Boughton is now the father most immediately bereft. Ames recounts the (second) blessing when Boughton is in bed asleep, 'so nearly gone from the world that the clouds have settled over his mortal understanding' (*G* 278). In speaking to him in sleep, Ames' parabolic account takes on the qualities of a dream. He tries to protect his friend from being 'alone in the confusions of his grief', knowing that if he woke his friend to tell him of Jack's departure, 'he'd be back', suffering like Christ 'in Gethsemane' (*G* 278-9). Instead, he likens Boughton, in 'thought' and in the text that only his *own* son will read, to 'ancient Jacob', (patriarch of the Israelites who figures, not only in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, but also in the Qu-ran, the Talmud and the sacred scriptures of the Mormon and Bah'ai faiths), whose 'cherished son [Joseph] had been lost to him' but is reunited in Genesis after twenty-two years (*G* 278). In the biblical reunion with Joseph and his children, Jacob (Israel) says, and Ames quotes, 'I had not thought to see thy face, and lo, god hath let me see thy seed also!' (*G* 278 and Genesis 48:11).

In the diegetic realm of Robinson's novels, Boughton is denied sight or even knowledge of Jack's 'seed', his grandchild Robert. Unwittingly, his racism is a

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p.8 and p.10

partial cause of this, preventing the meeting that Jack fears and Ames cannot deny 'might kill him' (G 261). In the moment of telling his friend about the blessing, however, Ames describes the child as embodiment of the sacrament, as Jack's '*blessing*' the 'splendid young Robert Boughton Miles', a 'sad and splendid treasure' that he can acknowledge, even if his friend cannot; just as Boughton baptized Rebecca when *he* could not (G 278 – my emphasis). When Ames recounts the enactment of his blessing of Jack and the blessing that *is* young Robert (a mirror to his own child Robert and of course to Boughton himself), Ames *imagines* a reunion, telling his reader (implied and real):

There was a joy in the *thought* of how beautiful that would have been, beautiful as a vision of angels. It seems to me when something really ought to be true then it has a very powerful truth [...]. (G 278 – my emphasis)

Thus, just like the horizontal moment of blessing over his grandfather's grave and the felt experience of the "memory" of the 'ashy biscuit' of communion subsumed within a moment of communion with his son, Ames imagines a memory of communion for Boughton, Jack and Jack's son Robert, two bereaved fathers and two bereaved sons he is able to bless and be blessed by. He writes, 'I do wish Boughton could have seen how his boy received his benediction, how he bowed his head. If I had told him, if he understood, he would have been jealous to have seen it, jealous to have been the one who bestowed the blessing'; making 'ancestry moot', he merges himself and his best friend both grieving fathers and says, 'It is almost as if I felt his hand on my hand' (G 277). His vision is made sadder, but also shared, social, "real", 'beautiful' and 'greater than' all the others in sacramental and parabolic reenactment for his dying friend.

'Suffer Little Children': Lila and the women and children

There are many parabolic accounts of moments of communion in *Lila* which echo and repeat those in *Gilead* and in *Home*. Lila feeds a homeless boy 'crackers' and 'cheese' which he 'take[s]' from 'her fingers' and the reader remembers Ames, their child and the 'ashy biscuit'; Lila is offered an umbrella by Ames to shelter her from the rain, and the reader recalls the same image but of Jack sheltering Della on the rainy streets of St. Louis; and Lila is baptized by Ames at the river, 'resting his hand three times on her hair' and again at her child's baptism where he 'touche[s] the water to her head, two, three times' and the reader remembers all

the other baptisms that he and Boughton have performed (*L* 146, 260, 257) Many of these moments also draw on imagery from *Housekeeping*, (for now) closing the circle of all four texts. So the cracker Lila feeds the boy reminds the reader of the graham crackers that Sylvie keeps in her raincoat pocket and feeds to Ruth and Lucille, and the catfish flipping in the bucket at Lila's baptism – as well as the governing metaphor of water throughout both novels – reminds readers of the fish in Sylvie's pockets and the girls fishing and then lost at the lake. Baptism too – albeit the dark repetitious ritual blessings of Lake Fingerbone – is a recurring trope in *Housekeeping*. By returning to and transforming Old and New Testament parables in *Lila*, and turning Lila herself into a parabolic figure of bereavement, suffering and compassion, Robinson rounds out a diachronic picture of human loss that she began with *Housekeeping*, enveloping, subsuming and transforming *Gilead* and *Home* in its vision of compassionate recognition of that suffering along the way.

As for the men in *Gilead* and *Home*, a similar argument can be made for the mapping of the relationships between Ruth, Sylvie and Lucille in *Housekeeping* and Doll and Lila in *Lila*, such that each representation of any one of these bereaved women – when read across the two texts as well as in light of the reclaimed stories of biblical and parabolic women – creates characterizations of bereavement within the parabolic imagination that subsume and expand or are 'greater than' their first manifestations. The same is true for the dead: Helen and Doll. In *Housekeeping*, Ruth repeatedly draws on the iconography of Old Testament parabolic women, including Lot's wife, Ruth, Naomi, Eve and Noah's wife to describe her experience of loss. According to Ravits, Robinson dusts off these 'symbolic women of woe' to use as 'archetypal referents' with which to explore the 'explicit connection between female experience and bereavement' in that novel.¹⁴⁹ By so doing, Ravits argues that when Ruth imagines a frost-glistened Lot's wife at the abandoned homestead in the valley, 'salt and barren, because she was full of loss and mourning, and looked back' she invokes the 'silent mother-figure, the unnamed wife in Genesis who is transfixed by gazing on *too much* experience', a mother-figure who becomes in Ruth's imagination a 'generalized personification of bereavement, "full of loss and mourning"' (*HK*

¹⁴⁹ Ravits, p.657.

153).¹⁵⁰ In *Lila*, Robinson creates another such ‘silent mother-figure’ in the character of Lila herself, a woman who has seen and suffered far ‘too much’, but one who has also been the suffering child. Read in light of all of Robinson’s other novels, she becomes perhaps Robinson’s ultimate ‘personification of bereavement’ and of care.

As much as *Lila* is an intimate portrait of a marriage – and at times – a reminder of the fragile bonds of fathers and sons, it is also an expansive vision of mothers. The two core narratives that run through the novel are that of Lila’s rescue by Doll and that of Lila’s pregnancy. Running these narratives side by side, Robinson fills out her ethical vision and her poetics of loss and with it she foregrounds the qualities of ‘self-sacrifice’, ‘responsibility, generosity, and interdependence’ necessary to honour that ethical vision.¹⁵¹ Like Sylvie is to Ruth, Doll is Lila’s Naomi and Lila follows her loyally, keeping close even beyond death. She ‘live[s]’, as she puts it at one point, ‘for Doll to see’ (*L* 97). Indeed, she is so loyal to Doll that, when confronted by the crude limitations of Boughton’s thoughts on the ‘elect’ and the Last Judgement, she goes to the river and washes her baptism off, washing ‘herself in the water of death and loss and whatever else [...is] not regeneration’, rather than associating herself with a religious vision that leaves out all of those she has known in her life and ‘most of the people who [have] lived on earth’ (*L* 97 and 103 and 97). This moment when Lila is ‘unbaptized’ is as much a moment of unity as her baptism (*L* 105). It reiterates Lila’s connection with Doll and, via the waters of death and loss, simultaneously connects her to the ‘remembrance and communion’ of the ‘heavy, blind, encumbering waters’ of Lake Fingerbone, to all who are dead there and to the girls who stand vigil by its shores (*HK* 194).

For language to furnish her experience of being abandoned, rescued and abandoned again, Lila looks to what Ames calls the ‘[p]oetry and parables and visions’ of the Old Testament prophets, particularly Job and Ezekiel (*L*128). In the bible she steals from the church and which she uses to practice her literacy, she finds Ezekiel 16:4-6, and the figure of Jerusalem in the image of a baby ‘cast out’ that she returns to again and again:

¹⁵⁰ Ravits, pp.657-658.

¹⁵¹ I refer here again to the terms used by Gonzalez in ‘Ontologies of Interdependence’.

In the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to cleanse thee [...] No eye pitied thee [...] I passed by thee and saw thee weltering in thy blood. (L 36)

In the recognition this baby is granted by God, figured in the parable as a passing man who says 'live!', Lila recognizes her rescue by Doll, who 'had said to her, Live. Not once, but every time she washed and mended for her, mothered her as if she were a child someone could want' (L 47). Rowan Williams writes that Lila finds in her 'laborious biblical reading' many such 'unexpected moments of recognition' and in this and other 'stormy metaphors', that she 'recognizes that she has been recognized'.¹⁵² What Lila seeks from these stories is acknowledgement of her suffering. She wants the 'desolation' and 'reproach', knowing 'what those words meant without asking'; and the 'sorrow' which acknowledges and recognizes the 'ache and the sting' with which she is most familiar (L 125, 176 and 116). At one point she thinks, she 'never expected to find so many things she already knew about written down in a book' (L176). At another, she says to Ames, 'Don't matter if it's sad. At least Ezekiel knows what certain things feel like' (L 126).

For all her pain and mistrust of the 'settled life', Lila is also a character who Williams describes as recognizing the human 'hunger of and for solidarity' and as such, he argues, she functions as a reference point for a sense of goodness that has real 'political and ethical weight'.¹⁵³ As such, and perhaps more than any other of Robinson's characters, it is arguably Lila who enacts Robinson's ethical vision in such a way as to implicate her readers. Williams writes:

The Lilas of this world are those who challenge the ways in which the good refuse to know what they do not know. This is why Lila in the earlier, but chronologically later, novels can function as a point of (near silent) reference by which the rhetoric of others is to be judged; why she is an absolving as well as a disturbing presence, aware of the irony of being who she is where she is but neither rebelling nor colluding, simply stating by her presence that things might be different.

That 'things might be different' is an explicit hope of Robinson's, voiced repeatedly in interviews and her non-fiction. Recently, in an interview with novelist Tom

¹⁵² Williams, 'Living the Good Life', p.69.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.70.

Holland, she linked *Lila* to her broader democratic ideal, saying bluntly, 'we are not taking care of each other'.¹⁵⁴ Gonzalez argues that Robinson's 'ethics' are 'not rooted in the individual's importance', but on a 'set of responsibilities' that human's owe to each other as suffering people.¹⁵⁵ Glory's care of Jack in *Home* and Ames' blessing of Jack in *Gilead* and *Home* are two of the many ways in which Robinson represents this debt of care as both entitlement and gift to both parties, to all parties. She calls these, often unsolicited kindnesses, the 'little acts that people carry out for each other's comfort', acts that are both 'ordinary' and 'absolutely beautiful'.¹⁵⁶ Readers of *Gilead* know of Lila's tender ministrations to her son, but it is in the self-sacrificial act of taking care of a stranger that Lila embodies a diachronic testament of care.¹⁵⁷

When Doll steals Lila, she wraps her up in 'her shawl' (L 5). Years later, the shawl is burnt by their travelling companion Doane in a moment of anger, but it always figures, for Lila, unlike the more complicated knife, for care. In adulthood, she steals a sweater from Ames and sleeps with it as a pillow in her shack at the edge of town, comforted by it. Later still, she inherits a coat. In what Williams calls a 'poignant and central episode' in the novel, Robinson creates a parable in which a heavily pregnant Lila returns to the shack she lived in before marrying Ames and gives her coat to a homeless boy who is living there. As with all of Robinson's vignettes, the scene blends the sacred and the ordinary, extravagant with detail. The coat is 'new and heavy and too warm for the weather' (L 144). The journey to the shack takes in the pelicans on the river (ancient symbols of self-sacrificial motherhood), the 'cornfield' with 'sunlight on the leaves' and the 'stalks all bent one way' (L 144). The shack itself is as she remembers it, 'with the same old weeds' and the 'familiar old parched wood smell' (L 144-5). As the scene develops, it becomes clear that a boy is living there, he has taken the money she kept in a jar. He is on the run, believing he has killed his father and, 'with no place to go' he admits he's 'kind of hoping they hang me' (L152 and 151). Over the course of eleven pages, Lila sits with the boy. She shares her food, sits him 'on the stoop', gifts him the money he has already taken from her hidden jar and offers him her coat. Robinson writes, 'Kindness was something he didn't even know he

¹⁵⁴ Robinson in Holland, 'Interview'.

¹⁵⁵ Gonzalez, p.375.

¹⁵⁶ Leonard, p.71 and Robinson in Elie, 'Resurrection of the Ordinary'.

¹⁵⁷ Williams, 'Living the Good Life', p.70.

wanted, and here it was. It made him teary and restless, and he was trying to seem to repay it by pretending he'd hid the money partly for her sake' (L 148).

Initially, the boy refuses the coat, but as Lila walks back to Gilead, the weather worsens, the 'wind now bitter' and so she returns, takes it off, and 'drape[s] it over him', like the shawl Doll wrapped her in (L 154). Walking back through the cold she thinks of the 'man-boy, crouching under her woman's coat and sure to be wretched with cold anyway' and the coat, like Sylvie's coat with which she wraps Ruth in *Housekeeping* after the visit to the frosty valley, becomes in parabolic reenactment, 'like beatitude' (HK 161). Lila is loyal follower, like Ruth and her biblical forebear, but she is also Naomi, like Doll and Sylvie. She is mother – to her unborn baby, to the unborn babies in her past, to the boy in the shack – and, returning from the shack, cold herself and visualizing Doll's 'arm [...] around her', she is child. She is also the Good Samaritan.

In her article "How Do You Read It?" Rowan Williams, Marilynne Robinson and Mapping a Postmodern Reading of the Good Samaritan Parable', Maxine E. Walker analyses the parabolic imagination of housekeeping and *Housekeeping* in light of Williams' theology in order to consider the urgent contemporary question 'who is my neighbor?'.¹⁵⁸ Walker refers to a speech that Williams gave on economics in 2010, in which he drew on the idea of 'housekeeping theory' to argue that given that "economy" at its origins is simply the word for housekeeping', housekeeping based on 'a common identity shaped by the fact that each depends on all others for their life', should be the foundation for economics.¹⁵⁹ According to Walker, Williams reads housekeeping, then, as 'mutuality' and as something which 'develops our humanity'.¹⁶⁰ Lila's draping of the coat over the boy is an act of housekeeping, then. She recognizes the boy as she has been recognized and in this act of recognition she develops her, and our, humanity.

¹⁵⁸ Walker, p.204.

¹⁵⁹ Rowan Williams, 'Theology and Economics: Two Different Worlds', speech delivered to the Trinity Institute at Trinity Wall Street, 29 January 2010, published in *The Anglican Theological Review*, 92.4 (Fall 2010), 607-615, <<http://www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/static/pdf/articles/williams.pdf>> [accessed 18 July 2016], p.609.

¹⁶⁰ Walker, p.213.

According to Walker, in his theology Williams 'locates the historical time of the [biblical] text on a continuum with contemporary time'.¹⁶¹ One consequence of this for the Christian is that they engage with a mode of 'dramatic reading'; a mode of reading that, Williams writes, 'assumes the diachronic' as:

a central element in the working of Christian text and interpretation, and also – very importantly – that the time of the text is recognizably continuous with my time. The movements, transactions and transformations of the text are not different in kind from the movement of my own experience.¹⁶²

Robinson has described this theological phenomenon more humanistically, as the narrative method of the bible which 'assumes a steady march of history, the continuous unfolding of significant event' as it plays out in '[m]oments of the highest import' for '*people* who are so marginal that conventional history would not have noticed them: aliens, the enslaved, people themselves utterly unaware that their lives would have consequence'.¹⁶³ As Walker puts it, the text is an 'ensemble of human stories'.¹⁶⁴ This feature of biblical writing, Robinson has argued, is often echoed in literary fiction where 'ordinary lives are invested with a kind of significance which justifies, or requires, its endless iterations of the commonplace'.¹⁶⁵

In interview with Robert Alter she has expressly pointed out her interest in the humanity not just of biblical figures, but of the bible writers. She says:

One of the things that is so striking to me about the Bible, the literature of the Bible altogether is that it has known human writers, or known human voices speaking, named human writers shall we say, and they are human, you know. The Psalms despair and, you know, the prophets lament and all that sort of thing and they feel weakness and you feel the burden of their humanity in something that is nevertheless received as being a sacred testimony, you know. It seems to me that that's one of the most poignant and powerful things about scripture, that it situates the testimony of the sacred in fallible human voices which are only extraordinary, only more beautiful because you sense the frailty, the frailty is insisted upon. [...] there

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p.212

¹⁶² Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p.50.

¹⁶³ Robinson, 'Book of Books', (para.2) – my emphasis.

¹⁶⁴ Walker, p.218.

¹⁶⁵ Robinson, 'Book of Books', (para.2).

is just an extraordinary complexity of the human presence in a sacred literature.¹⁶⁶

It is Robinson's humanity as a writer which lends her writing a parabolic function and social dimension beyond the pages of the novels.

Marilynne Robinson, grief and "real life"

Integral to the parabolic is the dramatic relationship that exists between the parable itself and the reader or listener not just within the text but external to it. Leonard argues that in parables, 'the lives of the fictional characters expand to touch the lives of the readers'.¹⁶⁷ According to early twentieth-century bible scholar C.H. Dodd, the parable is defined at 'its simplest' as:

a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, *arresting* the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about the precise application to *tease* it into *active* thought.¹⁶⁸

Dodd's definition makes explicit the necessary actions of the reader or 'hearer' of parable; an interactivity that occurs in parable between reader and story, between the experience of recognition and just enough alienation to startle a reader or listener into 'active thought'. Rowan Williams argues, parable has a 'profound hermeneutic' potential.¹⁶⁹ He argues that the 'significance' of the 'parabolic mode' is that the 'story *moves* in recognizable ways, sufficiently recognizable to invite the hearer's or reader's identification'.¹⁷⁰ This active dimension of parable lends the parabolic a uniquely social dimension beyond the representational, a dimension that readers repeatedly testify to finding in Robinson's work.

Readers often comment on the direct impact that Robinson's writing has on their felt lives. When presenting Robinson with the 2012 Humanities Prize, Barack Obama said, 'your novels have fundamentally changed me, I think for the better,

¹⁶⁶ Marilynne Robinson, transcribed from Robert Alter and Marilynne Robinson, 'The Psalms: Reading and Conversation', 17 December 2007, 92nd Street Y, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b57U-3Nd_MM> [accessed 29 June 2016].

¹⁶⁷ Leonard, p.69.

¹⁶⁸ C.H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1961), p.16 – emphasis mine.

¹⁶⁹ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p.27.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.50.

Marilynne, I believe that'.¹⁷¹ Academics note this too. Professor Sarah Churchwell has said that *Gilead* challenged her 'analytical mode', saying it is 'one of the first books that made me cry in years'.¹⁷² Reviewer Ann Patchett insists on the interactivity of her fictions, writing, of *Gilead*, 'I would like to see copies of it dropped onto pews across our country, where it could sit among Bibles and hymnals and collection envelopes'.¹⁷³ Paul Elie has described these types of reactions as a 'sense of recognition' that readers often find or feel in response to Robinson's work, a sense of recognition with, I suggest, a 'family resemblance' to the types of recognition that Robinson draughts for her characters.¹⁷⁴ Robinson has reported that she finds it 'very moving' that *Gilead* in particular 'seems somehow or other to fit into people's lives and they value it'.¹⁷⁵

Funk writes,

To grasp the parable in its fullness means to see what happens when parable *occurs*, to see what happens in the words themselves and to see what happens within the horizons circumscribed by the parable.¹⁷⁶

Clearly, Robinson's best-selling status and the above reports means that the horizons of her parables extend well beyond her storyworlds. And it seems that 'what happens' when Robinson's parables occur is something 'felt' by her readership, something most recently acknowledged by the awarding of the Dayton literary peace prize.¹⁷⁷ It may be an emotional logic which drives her texts—and her readers' responses to her texts – but, as Rowan Williams says the 'moral acuity' of her fiction is politically and ethically weighty; this, alongside her aesthetics, is, as Phillips puts it, their 'gravity'.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷¹ Barack Obama, 'National Humanities Medals Presentation at the White House', National Endowment for the Humanities, <<http://www.neh.gov/films/2012-national-humanities-medal-presentations>> [accessed 14 July 2016].

¹⁷² Churchwell in 'Balm in Gilead'.

¹⁷³ Ann Patchett, "'Whispered in Your Ear" A Moral Man's Good Word' [review of *Gilead*], *New York Observer*, 12 December 2004 <<http://observer.com/2004/12/whispered-in-your-ear-a-moral-mans-good-word/>> [accessed 8 July 2016].

¹⁷⁴ Elie, 'Resurrection of the Ordinary'.

¹⁷⁵ Robinson in Elie, 'Resurrection of the Ordinary'.

¹⁷⁶ Funk, p.126.

¹⁷⁷ Robinson will be awarded the Richard C. Holbrooke distinguished achievement award as part of the Dayton literary peace prize in November 2016. See, 'Marilynne Robinson wins literary peace prize for tales of 'reconciliation and love'', *Guardian*, Thursday 25 August 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/25/marilynne-robinson-wins-literary-peace-prize-for-tales-of-reconciliation-and-love>> [accessed 30 August 2016].

¹⁷⁸ Phillips, p.160.

At the core of Robinson's vision, there is a profound sociality, not just within the texts, but beyond any traditional limits that might be applied to them as novels.¹⁷⁹ But they are not propaganda. In Gonzalez's secular interpretation, Robinson's depictions of suffering individuals and human communities revitalize a humanistic ethics. He argues that by revisiting and revising 'old orthodoxies' her fictions represent 'a useful means of recovering interred notions of community and responsibility that effectively speak back to the neoliberal logics' that are currently 'dismantling the welfare state' and troubling 'left-leaning intellectuals'.¹⁸⁰ Gonzalez contends that drawing as she does on a 'faith in orthodoxies and universals', Robinson's 'liberal progressivism' and 'Christian beliefs', precisely the qualities that he suggests make her 'distasteful to many' implicitly atheist 'leftists', paradoxically offer what he calls an 'antidote to the relativism that frustrates the same audience'.¹⁸¹ Liberal humanism has been controversial within the academy – notably, and ironically within the humanities – for decades. But as long as there have been proponents of poststructuralism, postmodernism and posthumanism, there have been defenders of humanism. Robinson is one of these and the critical response that greeted *Housekeeping* is a testament to the debate.

The work of Gonzalez strongly implies that there is a place and a desire for a secular corollary to Robinson's Christian ethic in the form of a revitalized humanism within academia. He, like others, implies it is actively being sought in the intellectual sphere.¹⁸² He argues that the:

relativism that followed as a philosophic consequence of poststructuralist, postmodernist, and deconstructive critiques of humanism severely undermined the ability of the progressive left to organize resistance to the growing power of neoliberal and neoconservative movements.

He highlights an irony that has arguably inhibited scholarship in the humanities – certainly, I contend, when applied to the literary critical scholarship of grief–

¹⁷⁹ Via, p.x.

¹⁸⁰ Gonzalez, p.373.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p.373.

¹⁸² For just some of the recent explorations into the resurgence of various forms of humanism both within the academic social sciences and in the humanities, see Marcus Morgan, *Pragmatic Humanism: On the Nature and Value of Sociological Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2016), Andrew Copson and A.C. Grayling (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Humanism* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano (eds.), *Renaissance Posthumanism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016) and Janine Utell, 'Humanism in the Humanities: What it means to be an academic mentor', *The Guardian*, 21 August 2012, <<https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2012/aug/21/academic-mentor-humanities-dissertation-supervisor>>, [accessed 12 July 2016].

whereby the 'affinities between academic postmodernism and political libertarianism' have meant that both 'movements' have managed to 'eradicate faith in the solidity and importance of collective identities' with the result that what might once have seemed like 'extreme individualism' is now the 'status quo'.¹⁸³ But Robinson, he argues, 'breaks with the rigidly antidogmatic relativism that has followed from postmodernism', instead insisting on 'systematizing an ethics' that is 'built on axioms of interdependence and self-sacrifice'.¹⁸⁴

As is often the case with scholarly writing, Gonzalez emphasizes the academic implications of Robinson's work, positioning her fictions as a critical and ethical intervention into the vexed domain of contemporary literary academia, what he calls 'the left-leaning intellectual sphere craving a more potent response to the ideological dominance of neoliberalism'.¹⁸⁵ But clearly Robinson's work answers other calls. In her article 'Grief – the great universal', poet, essayist and bereavement memoirist Meghan O'Rourke argues that 'mourning a death is a great universal – a condition that unites us' and that there is a 'very real human need to mourn communally'.¹⁸⁶ She writes that as 'Western cultures have become more secular and heterogeneous, the rituals that once guided mourners and communities through the painful currents of this intense time have dropped away' resulting in a 'dysfunctional culture' in which we avidly consume news of death and loss in the media, but 'duck away from it in real life'.¹⁸⁷ Sinead McDermott writes that 'loss gives a significance and a meaning to events and people that would otherwise have remained ordinary' implying that grief makes everyone extraordinary.¹⁸⁸ The impact of Robinson's aesthetic vision clearly offers fertile ground for a re-socialized approach to grief and indeed for a view of grief as a synecdoche for all of human suffering. Simultaneously, it has critical cultural valence inclusive of, but also beyond, the Christian context to a revitalized humanist intellectual and non-academic sphere whereby Robinson implicates her readership simply as human beings in the enactments of her ethical vision.

¹⁸³ Gonzalez, p.374.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p.376.

¹⁸⁵ Gonzalez, p.373.

¹⁸⁶ O'Rourke, 'Grief – the great universal', (para. 7).

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., (para. 4).

¹⁸⁸ McDermott, 'Future-Perfect', p.266.

Conclusion

In 1914 the British psychologist A.F. Shand published a book on 'instincts and emotions' in which, John Archer recalls, he 'devised a series of hypotheses about grief, which he called the 'laws of sorrows', drawn from his readings of many of the great classical authors.¹⁸⁹ Archer has often written that he regrets the twentieth-century 'overshadowing' of Shand by Freud and argues that, in part because of his reference to the literary arts, Shand's 'laws of sorrows' 'would have made a sounder basis for research than that provided by Freud's depictions of grief.'¹⁹⁰ For Archer and for Shand, there appears to be no need to artificially separate the knowledges of psychology and literature and no unreflective privileging of new knowledge over old.

The fiction and essays of Marilynne Robinson grant us another opportunity to reconsider knowledge about sorrow, in particular the sorrows of bereavement, not to establish laws, but to respect complexity. In *Gilead*, Ames writes:

I heard a man say once that Christians worship sorrow. That is by no means true. But we do believe there is a sacred mystery in it. (G 156)

Robinson's fictions, their complex narratologies, their nostalgic poetics reach back through history to 're-establish a sense of sacredness' in humanity and in loss, honouring in particular the sacred mystery of sorrow.¹⁹¹ She manages, in her dense metaphoric representations of grieving characters, in and out of space and time, to find ways of representing deeper structures of knowledge about grief while resisting any temptation to be conclusive or authoritative; her work expands rather than delimits thought and feeling, and feeling as thought.

This thesis has set out to prove that Robinson's originality as a novelist and a thinker is largely a matter of her aesthetic practices and of the ethics she embeds within her use of language. My intention has been to prove the value of scrutinizing this style in order to deepen understanding of grief. Although critics are increasingly alert to the philosophical complexity of Robinson's writing, close readings of her dense poetics are still often avoided by contemporary literary

¹⁸⁹ Archer, *Nature of Grief*, xiii.

¹⁹⁰ Archer, *Nature of Grief*, p.25.

¹⁹¹ Robinson in Schaub, 'an interview', p.251.

critics. This may well be due, in part at least, to Buell's prediction that many of us in the academic humanities are no longer trained to read a writer like Robinson who draws on the bible, Christian theology, metaphysics and pre-twentieth century philosophies. It may also be because Robinson writes as though the 'canon wars' never occurred.¹⁹² Drawing as she does most commonly on the same religious and metaphysical texts of pre-twentieth-century literary tradition that were deemed in the mid-1990s to be on the wrong (that is the conservative) side of the canon wars, her style is so steeped in the once dominant religious and intellectual traditions of Protestantism in America that it might in some ways alienate secular academics for whom the 'canon wars' are recent and important history. But as Frank Cottrell Boyce recently commented, her 'Christian vocabulary', 'however you read it, allows her to keep complex ideas – love, for instance, or the soul – on the table'.¹⁹³ And as Jason W. Stevens argues, it is Robinson's language, her writing that is at the 'crux' of her 'literary, theological and democratic project.'¹⁹⁴ Her work, then, offers as much to the secular realm as it does to religious thought.

It is by engaging with the density and texture of Robinson's style that my readings of her novels attempt to reposition her fictions as a fruitful intervention into knowledge about grief. Her prodigious literary imagination offers much to any project determined to re-imagine grief and to move away from the rationalization of the human and of suffering. Robinson's resistance to the determinism and reductive language of contemporary experience has been and continues to be a choice designed to privilege the realm of literary art as it relates to knowledge and human experience; one which she says allows her to attempt to give form to an 'esthetic understanding appropriate' to the depth of human consciousness as she sees it.¹⁹⁵ Eight years after the publication of *Housekeeping*, Robinson wrote the

¹⁹² Schaub discusses Robinson's positioning in relation to the so-called 'canon wars' in *Lingering Hopes*. For a different discussion which contextualizes contemporary literary criticism in light of that era in literary studies and makes the point that 'the "conservative" position involved upholding the idea of humanistic education', see Matt Reed, 'Remember the Canon Wars?', *Confessions of a Community College Dean*, 11 April 2013, [blog], <<https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/confessions-community-college-dean/remember-canon-wars>>.

¹⁹³ Frank Cottrell Boyce, 'Grace Under Fire: Marilynne Robinson's essays sing with the thrill of intellectual humility', [review of *Givenness of Things*], *New Statesman*, 10 December 2015 <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2015/12/grace-under-fire-marilynne-robinson-essays-sing-thrill-intellectual-humility> [accessed 22 July 2016], (para.9)

¹⁹⁴ Stevens, *This Life, This World*, p.3.

¹⁹⁵ Marilynne Robinson, 'The Hum Inside the Skull – Symposium', *The New York Times Book Review*, May 13 1984, <<http://www.nytimes.com/1984/05/13/books/the-hum-inside-the-skull-a-symposium.html?pagewanted=5>> [accessed 25 July 2014], (para. 1).

introduction to an edition of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. She situated Chopin amongst other nineteenth-century novelists whose 'impulses', she suggested, were 'interrogatory rather than declarative, those more inclined to inquiry than to statement', novelists whose work, she wrote, can 'embarrass us with evidence that the world exceeds our grasp.'¹⁹⁶ She wrote:

Our modern "realist" tradition makes us oddly impatient with real life. We are eager to coerce art into the service of politics and morality, both of which are concerned with controlling or changing human nature. We are not interested in according attention or doing justice to the gallant, sad, unregenerate form of it we have, which, for all we know is its true and final form. [E]very human act is of the highest order of complexity and of ultimate significance.¹⁹⁷

Paul Elie has suggested that one reason for the popularity of Robinson's fiction is that she, like Chopin, has the ability to articulate the complexity of that which exceeds our grasp, to express the 'intuitive but not uttered', a quality which he suggests is what generates and sustains 'a sense of recognition' in her readership.¹⁹⁸ The Greek word for this, adopted by Christian theology and defined, in more secular terms, by Robinson herself in her essay 'Imagination and Community', is the word apophatic: that is, as she puts it, 'reality that eludes words'.¹⁹⁹ She writes that we 'live on a little island of the articulable, which we tend to mistake for reality itself.'²⁰⁰ According to Robinson, this applies very generally to the realm of human experience, but her reviewers frequently apply it to the emotional realm depicted in her fiction.

Critics of Robinson's novels have repeatedly emphasized the ways in which her prose 'illuminates' the qualities of 'all the things we don't have names for', what critic Leslie Jamison calls 'truths without names'.²⁰¹ More often than not, these 'truths' are emotional. Amongst them, critics list: 'loss and its residue', 'shame', 'suffering', 'solitude', 'sadness', 'loneliness', 'destitution'; but also, 'loyalty', 'trust', 'kindness', 'sensitivity', 'joy' and 'compassion'; all abstract phenomena of the

¹⁹⁶ Robinson, 'Introduction' to *The Awakening*, p.viii.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.viii-ix.

¹⁹⁸ Elie, 'The Resurrection of the Ordinary'.

¹⁹⁹ Marilynne Robinson, 'Imagination and Community', *When I Was a Child*, pp.19-34, (p.19).

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.21.

²⁰¹ Leslie Jamison, 'The Power of Grace', [review of *Lila*], *Atlantic*, 17 September 2014 <b` <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/10/the-power-of-grace/379334/>>. [accessed 30 November 2016], (para.4 and 10).

emotional realm.²⁰² These profound, yet abstract nouns are, of course, metaphors which have emerged over time to give name to qualities of felt life that are “true”, but which are otherwise inexpressible; that are real, but not objectively or empirically measurable.

In ‘The Paradox of Grief’, Bernard Beatty uses apophasis to specifically engage with the experience of grief. Beatty adheres to the stricter religious definition of the term which stems from the Greek *apophatikos* ‘negative’, from *apophasis* ‘denial’, from *apo-* ‘other than’ + *phanai* ‘speak’.²⁰³ For Beatty, grief, like God, is apophatic in the sense that it can only be described in terms of what it is not. He argues that it is, paradoxically, ‘the coinciding of the unreligious and the religious. A direct experience of Nothingness as something.’²⁰⁴ Hence, he argues, the need for metaphor. Early in her writing career, Robinson herself argued that:

the only way to understand the world is metaphorical and all metaphors are inadequate, and [...] you press them far enough and you’re delivered into something that requires a new articulation.²⁰⁵

She has said that pressing metaphor in this way leaves you with ‘an understanding that’s larger than you had before’, one which uses ‘language as a method of comprehension on the largest scale’.²⁰⁶ Robinson’s fiction operates as a mode of enquiry more than a mode of didacticism, but one which presses metaphor and by so doing draws attention to the expansion of understanding that relies on the value of language as much as its inadequacy. In her essay, ‘Language is Smarter Than We Are’, she argues that language ought to be considered ‘not like a tool, but like an intelligence’ and that it should undergo a ‘remystification’ as such.²⁰⁷ She posits:

There is no evidence that language contracts to conform itself to any current level of material or spiritual culture. [...] language remains the great repository of experience in memory, each word a cellule coded with its own

²⁰² These terms are found in the reviews of *Lila* written by Leslie Jamison, Sophie Elmhirst, Michiko Kakutani and Sarah Churchwell.

²⁰³ *ODE*, p.73.

²⁰⁴ Beatty, p.3-4.

²⁰⁵ Robinson in Hedrick, ‘On appropriation’, p.6.

²⁰⁶ Robinson in Schaub, ‘an interview’, pp.240-241.

²⁰⁷ Robinson, ‘Language is Smarter Than We Are’, *The New York Times*, 11 January 1987 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/01/11/books/about-books-language-is-smarter-than-we-are.html>> [accessed November 30 2016], (para. 7 and 1).

history. [...] Freightened as it is, language remains possibility first of all, which should not be circumscribed by any assumption. Myth and metaphor fail, too, of course, but when they do it is like a door opening to effect a great liberation.²⁰⁸

Robinson's fictions position both the human felt experience and the language of literary art as sources of critical, valid and ethical knowledge. As such her fictions propound a liberating democratic impulse that runs counter to the expertise culture that has dominated Western academia and the scientific study of grief.

The work of critical grief scholars indicates a palpable shift in the 'culture of feeling' of bereavement, grief and mourning. This shift is away from positivism and the mechanistic view of the human; it is away from the medical, the psychiatric, the empirical and the objective. Even the therapeutic is being reevaluated when it comes to experiences of grief. This marks a shift towards a subtler, more complicated and quite possibly ultimately incoherent picture of human suffering. It is one which is hospitable to a reconsideration of the place of the arts in valuable and legitimate knowledge construction, in tandem with science. According to Robinson, the epistemological challenge of accessing and articulating complex human states of consciousness – such as those forged in grief – is one that has always been the job of an artist. She has said:

there is no moment in which, no perspective from which, science as science can regard human life and say that there is a beautiful, terrible mystery in it all, a great pathos. Art, music, and religion tells us that. [...] Science has no language to account for the fact that it may overwhelm itself [...] it cannot think analogically, though this kind of thinking is very useful for making sense and meaning out of the tumult of human affairs.²⁰⁹

Instead, she writes:

Every culture creates art that indicates that extraordinary efforts have to be made to articulate feelings that are very deep and also very general. Those are the things that become the literatures of cultures [...] That's what we're [artists] supposed to be doing, I think, is saying what people can't say for themselves.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Ibid., (para. 8).

²⁰⁹ Robinson, 'Freedom of Thought', *When I Was a Child*, pp.15-17.

²¹⁰ Robinson in Schaub 'an interview', p.237.

Robinson has repeatedly argued that the kind of perception that occurs in art is 'perfectly legitimate in its own terms' and that art is 'occurring at the frontier of understanding because it integrates the problems of experience and the ordering of experience'. Art, she says, is closer to 'the essence of things'.²¹¹

In her fiction, Robinson uses bereavement and the expansive landscape of emotions in loss as the lens through which to re(view) essential human experiences. Characters and landscapes are not literal depictions, but metaphorical evocations of the emotional logic of the everyday profundity of grief. Her fiction exposes the limitations and hubris of any systemic and totalizing models for human experience and indeed for comprehending modernity. Instead, her 'project' offers descriptions of the experience of grief as it is lived, understood and not understood, cracking through the fragile veneer of the modern to access deeper, more 'arcane' and lasting knowledges.²¹² The complexity of her metaphors, in particular, but also the interconnectedness and deep inter- and trans-textuality of her novels, gesture towards the profound individuality and communality of the grief experience – its radical singularity and its multiple meanings – moving the reader towards a deeper understanding of grief as a felt experience, but never delineating its limits conclusively. Her poetics offer more far-reaching connotations for the word and experience of grief than is afforded by the language of the secular scientific domain, simultaneously demonstrating that the potentially very deep suffering of bereavement is, frankly, an ordinary sanctity. At the same time, Robinson's fictions gesture to the inherent outsidership, inconclusiveness and intractability of grief revealing that any grief experience ultimately, and rightly, exceeds the meanings made available by language at all. This resistance to representation is honoured by her expansive nostalgic poetics which reflect and respect the fact that language is always only ever an estimation of experience, and that there is a space between the word and the world which can never be known or normalized, but is always intimate, personal and liable to change.

²¹¹ Robinson in Schaub, 'an interview', p.244.

²¹² Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p.102.

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