MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S *GILEAD* SEQUENCE: LITERATURE AND THE TRANSLATION OF RELIGIOUS TRADITION

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Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores the precarious survival of religious tradition in the modern world through reinvention between generations. It concentrates on novels that deal with religious crisis and conflict, with particular reference to the work of Marilynne Robinson, an American novelist and essayist born 1943, working within the Christian tradition while still reaching a wide audience on both sides of the Atlantic.

It argues that once the transmission of theology becomes problematic, it is in the human melting pot of psychology that religious problems are re-experienced in ostensibly secular terms. It investigates the possibility of re-translating those psychological and existential concerns into a renewed religious understanding, via the uses of literature. In this, as a cross-disciplinary study in which Robinson's novels acts as a holding-ground for a mass of competing concerns, the thesis takes its theoretical origins in particular from the work of philosopher Alasdair Macintyre, and psychologists William James and Wilfred Bion. The Introduction outlines this orientation, especially in light of the Victorian realist novelist George Eliot and her 1854 translation of Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* which converted religion into secular terms. Robinson has been called the modern George Eliot, though working within a religious tradition.

The thesis then consists of two parts: part 1 concentrating on an examination of the *Gilead* novels; part 2 offering case histories of reader responses.

Part 1 comprises three chapters:

Chapter One, The Attempt at Transmission, examines religious tradition from one generation to the next in Robinson's novels *Gilead* and *Lila* in the light of Robinson's understanding of theologian John Calvin (1509-64) as reinvented through Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), and including Robinson's interest in Feuerbach (1804-72) and in William James (1842-1910).

Chapter Two, The Problem, examines religious tradition in crisis in Robinson's novel *Home.* It uses William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) on mental 'hot spots' and the work of psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1897-1979) to track moments and places involved in potential changes of reality and crises of belief.

Chapter Three, Shakespeare's Grace, starts from *Home*'s need for a way forward for blocked and damaged meaning. First it follows Robinson back to her 1977 Masters thesis on Shakespeare's early history plays. Then it goes forward to her later non-fictional essays on Shakespeare's late plays, offered as what she calls a 'natural' model for why grace might be needed and what the experience of grace might be like outside a formal religious framework. Shakespeare offers for her own fiction a tradition of literary (in lieu of formally religious) language as a holding-ground for meaning.

Part 2 explores a variety of modern readers of different backgrounds and persuasions reading *Home*, using and testing the findings of Part 1 to ask what literature can do to carry meaning previously deemed religious.

Chapter Four, Praxis in Groups, examines a live shared-reading group brought together through The Reader, using analytic research tools from the Centre for Research into Literature, Reading and Society to test the development of literary thinking in the challenge of *Home*.

Chapter Five, Praxis in Individual Readers, focuses on individual readers of *Home* through the use of reader diaries and follow-up interviews. Three case histories of highly experienced readers explore the kind of thinking needed to break through the blocks described in chapter two.

Chapter Six, Conclusion, considers how far the language of literature can carry forward in readers' experience the feeling of meanings previously held within religious tradition, through an analysis of *Jack* (2020) in recent culmination of the *Gilead* novels.

Acknowledgments

Written with love for my brother Taft
and all the generations to come.

Thank you to my loving husband Daniel. Thank you to the many people who have helped me with or participated in this research. I would especially like to thank Professor Philip Davis, who took my work seriously and helped me to find the language.

Introduction

This thesis aims to explore the precarious survival of religious tradition in the modern world through reinvention across and between generations. It concentrates on novels that deal with religious crisis and conflict, with reference to the work of Marilynne Robinson, the American novelist and essayist born 1943, working within the Christian tradition while still reaching a wide audience on both sides of the Atlantic. It argues that once the transmission of theology and sacred observance become problematic, it is in the human melting pot of psychology that religious problems are re-experienced in ostensibly secular terms. It investigates the possibility of re-translating those psychological and existential concerns into a renewed religious understanding, through the writing and reading of literature. As I will explain, it takes its theoretical origins in particular from the work of philosopher Alasdair Macintyre, and psychologists William James and Wilfred Bion, while in the background lies my previous work on George Eliot and Feuerbach.

But first the formal and informal background to this thesis is perhaps best given through the following introduction, taken from a letter I sent to a local author, Carys Bray, in the early stages of this research. Bray wrote a novel about the experience of a religiously devout family losing a child, and the crisis of belief that followed. *A Song for Issy Bradley*[1] is set within a Mormon family context, which the author herself abandoned, partly through becoming a novelist, but which I continue to embrace. I wrote to Carys Bray with regard to my broad thesis concerning the complex relation between a traditional religious faith, a family crisis, and the work of the realist novel. I wanted to ask her about her fictional work in the light of her previous tradition, but also about her own reading of Marilynne Robinson who retains her religious faith within and alongside the writing of her novels. The letter tries to find in autobiography a language that makes most honestly explicit the concerns of my research, in response to Carys Bray's request for further clarifying explication of my questions to her. The search for a language is itself part of my subject-matter.

[1] Carys Bray, *A Song for Issy Bradley* (London: Windmill Books, 2014).

I want to start with some brief 'facts' about myself, only as background to help explain the nature of my thesis.

A) BACKGROUND

- I was brought up as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism) and remain so, but with an education in a wider culture: there has been no sense of conflict between these two traditions since both spring in particular from my father. Religion has been a grounding foundation for my father from what was a very broken and vulnerable childhood.
- When I was last in England to study for my Masters, my subject-matter was the transmission of what I took to be religious values and feelings into non-religious settings, without proselytizing. In this my interest was especially in George Eliot. This was because George Eliot, in her shift from her youthful Evangelicalism, believed she must and could translate the best of religion via Ludwig Feuerbach into a secular way of being – into a second language that salvaged what was humanly important. After all, as Feuerbach had shown in *The Essence of Christianity* which she herself as Marian Evans had translated into English in 1854, religion was itself an unconscious translation of essentially human needs in the first place. I have added to Feuerbach the work of William James and the psychological investigations undertaken in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* – both of whom are admired by Marilynne Robinson. This means that I take religion to be all that is to do with the most really real of serious human concerns: hence my interest in the great psychological realist novel in the hands of George Eliot. In my Masters dissertation, I offered an argument towards the extension of family feeling, with particular reference to *Silas Marner*. My question was: could the close human feelings felt and developed in the nuclear family at its primal best become widened and felt *outside* the unit, even between strangers?

- It does not seem to matter to me if people are what I would call religious in feeling *without* being nominally or formally religious as such. I endorse George Eliot's aim for a new transmission of feelings associated with religion, though I myself remain committed to my first language, my first tradition, as a Christian. Nor am I troubled by the thought that my own religion may be seen by others, in turn, as no more than a particular dressing-up of humanism. What does it matter provided somewhere, humanely in-between the extremes, connections can be made and good gets done?
- Though I myself do not suffer from conflict in all this. I am aware of conflict, even within my own tradition and my own family.

  (i) Religion and family have always been a central focus of my family. We all faced a deep heartbreak almost two years ago when my younger brother Robert was killed unexpectedly. He was walking across the street when a drunk woman going 55 miles an hour over the speed limit hit him as she ran through a red light. The woman continued driving after hitting Robert, and she was caught and confined less than a mile later. Within 10 minutes of hearing of our Robert's death, my father asked to speak to the woman who was in jail, because 'she needs to know' he said, 'that we don't hold anything against her.' Within 24 hours my parents were interviewed by four news television stations, where they publicly declared their forgiveness to this woman for what she had done to their son, asking everyone around them to do likewise. All this was done before the other seven children arrived back home after news of the death. I hardly have to say how this is related to the traumatic death of the child in *A Song for Issy Bradley*.

  (ii) Another brother Taft was already deeply struggling with the idea of leaving the religion, and was absolutely devastated by his brother's death. Taft felt nothing but the living reality of Robert's death, with nothing having power enough to comfort him; and only my father's immediate faith to disturb him. I seemed to stand in the space of my own grief, yet from an additional angle

of being a mediator or translator in between what I thought my parents were meaning to do or say in their sincere faith, with my father clinging towards religion in the threat of instability, and the very real need felt within the grief of my siblings. I was not unhappy to try to offer that mediation or translation, though there was a cost, and more, an inability even so to 'fix' it. That is why I am interested in Glory in the novel *Home* as attempted mediator though I do not share her sense of haplessness and am critical of her (understandable) attempt to moderate and even fudge the situation, in denial of realities that it is crucial even within religion to accept. In literature, George Eliot is actually the great mediator. But I am intensely interested in situations *without* apparent mediation, without what George Eliot in *Daniel Deronda* calls a third presence.[2] Hence again my interest in *Issy Bradley* and what you called – in speaking to me – not so much the 'misunderstandings', but the unbearably 'missed understandings' where there are huge gaps and spaces, full of matter, that none of the suffering participants can fully grasp or articulate or manage. I mean that invisible place somewhere between two people, where either something doesn't happen that should have happened, or something does not get translated in a way it should have.

- In relation to the thesis, I have the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* on traditions and what happens to them in change and development, in fragmentation and deterioration.[3] I also deploy the psychologist W.R. Bion in terms of sensing proximity to or distance from what he thinks of the really real in human existence. I use their work in relation to my own background, to investigate the *Gilead* constellation of novels that create a melting pot concerned with the tradition of faith

[2] George Eliot, "Chapter 36," in *Daniel Deronda (*1876*),* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[3]Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

and modern alternatives to formal faith, with conflicts and unstable middle grounds. In this, Marilynne Robinson is (as has been much repeated in reviews) a version of George Eliot, contesting albeit from a different direction the clear distinction between religious and secular. She has said that if she had not been a Christian, she would have been a Feuerbachian, and that she would often think of people as religious even if they would not call themselves so in formal terms. In what I take to be a state of modern confusion and complexity and contested values, mine is necessarily a cross-disciplinary study in which literature acts as a holding-ground for a mass of competing concerns.

- I should say something about why I use Bion and especially his *Attention and Interpretation*, in a thesis that partly comes out of a department of psychology. Bion calls the really real '0' (as both Zero or Origin). It is what Kant called the noumenon and Plato ideal Forms: that is to say, an unnameable but regulative sense of real reality unavailable to the phenomenal world of human beings but felt amongst them, even so, as the force an unattainable truth. When vocabulary can be overcharged with inherited implications, this psychoanalyst wanted to try to use notations, letters, indicators, instead of precipitate nouns and unrespectful categories. He wanted to give a blind pointer to intensity, without giving the reality that was there a premature name, too soon imposing interpretation in a situation where finding a fitting language is itself a problem.[4] 'In mathematics, calculations can be made without the presence of the objects about which calculation is necessary'[5]: cannot we have a similar

[4] Another way that could describe Bion's process in specific relation to Robinson is described thus: 'This ability to review one's writing without fear of outside judgement or condemnation is crucial to the therapeutic process. Speaking metaphorically, Lago compares 'the writing itself [to] a holding container, a psychological holding station as it were.' Jason W. Stevens ed., *This Life, This World: New Essays on Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping, Gilead and Home* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). p.182; hereafter cited as *This Life, This World.*

[5] Wilfred R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation: A Scientific Approach to Insight in Psycho-Analysis and Groups* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), p.1.

technical pointer for an apprehension of ultimate reality which is otherwise too easily called God or too comfortably assimilated into an overly familiar theological system? This suits me for two reasons. First, it helps steer a humane pathway (religious or not) between a what MacIntyre calls a first language (such as I inherited through Christianity) and its possible re-creation in a second form in common life: i.e. Am I nearer or further away from '0', the really real, when 'this' happens or 'that' is said? Second, I am not myself a natural writer: a lot of my thinking seems intuitive, emotionally practical – I am better, I think, at pointing than explaining. Reading with Bion's tools within the experimental model of human existence called literature, and moving this way and that within its complexity, helps me find a language for the densely mixed-up considerations and entangling circumstances within which reality I want to do my thinking. These real life situations and memories are hard to work through: when I am faced with them, it can feel almost too much, too hard, too painful. Nevertheless, literature has an enabling power to face the same kind of unspeakable things in a more bearable way, without taking away the seriousness of the feeling. As with Bion in relation to his patients, I think we can tell when characters are using certain elements of themselves that are conscious, and when there enters some other elements that are more unconscious.

B) APPLICATION

So I have to be a reader rather than a writer. To reiterate: I have found I am better as a pointer than anything else, and that is sometimes why I have difficulty turning the pointing into writing. I have needed to find tools to help me point to these areas of powerful language, especially when that language has to operate in an area that can no longer be easily defined in traditional or conventional terms. This is why Wilfred Bion's idea is useful to me: in the novels I can identify the point when it gets nearer or further away from the 'thing', the 'it', the powerful reality, the ultimate, the '0', even though (as Bion says) that sense of total reality

> or truth is never fully available to us. That 'it' or '0' of the really real marks those great moments in human beings: even if they're terrible, these are the things that seem to hold (however unbearably) the primary secrets of existence, like birth, marriage, crisis, and death. I don't mind how terrible they are, not because I want to be uncaring about the emotions of the terrible, but because I believe that crises such as have occurred in my own family have to be fully respected and undergone, since that is life at its most revealingly intense. Crucially I am not in favour of a religion that apologetically explains away every human suffering: I consider most explanations feel more irreligious, a form of first language that has fallen into secondary psychological distortions as with Father Broughton in *Home.* Hence my desire to take on the toughest situations and challenges wherever they arise - the things called '0'.

In the discussions that followed, I tried to point to places in Carys Bray's own novel which were, I believed, best located in terms of '0', the novel's origin-place for serious human thinking and feeling. These places of utmost reality – what George Eliot in chapter 20 of *Middlemarch* famously called 'the roar on the other side of silence'[6] - often existed almost unspeakably in the widening gulf between the still observant husband and the wife falling away from the faith in the aftermath of the terrible death of their daughter. There, any imaginative reader would feel for both sides at once, even in their variance. At least this enabled me to test this tool on a novelist who could respond to what I was doing with it in her novel, as a work of powerfully experienced disorientation. Carys Bray confirmed its usefulness as what she called 'a reader's version of a novelist's intuition', 'an orientation' within a difficult terrain, prior to explication or interpretation. Bion's interests remain unspecifically religious in the search for meaning and purpose, and he concluded thus:

> Reality is not something which lends itself to being known. It is impossible to know reality for the same reason that makes it impossible to sing potatoes; they may be grown, or pulled, or

[6]George Eliot, "Chapter 20," in *Middlemarch (*1871*)* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2019).

> eaten, but not sung. Reality has to be "been": there should be a transitive verb "to be" expressly for use with the term "reality".[7]

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Such was my letter in particular relation to experiments with readers that I carried out in Part Two of this thesis. But I must now add a few further preliminary thoughts in relation to the conceptual and theoretic background I sketched for Carys Bray.

In *After Virtue* Alasdair MacIntyre imagines a world in which an original framework commanding universal belief becomes destroyed, surviving only in broken fragments. What follows is a profound mess and existential confusion which MacIntyre likens to the incoherence of Babel where many tongues, competing languages and values, replace a single universal discourse. In *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* MacIntyre goes on to consider how the loss of a single coherent tradition may be repaired or re-shaped by a second version of a first tradition, or what he calls 'a second first language':

> Every tradition, whether it recognizes the fact or not, confronts the possibility that at some future time it will fall into a state of epistemological crisis, recognizable as such by its own standards of rational justification, which have themselves been vindicated up to that time as the best to emerge from the history of that particular tradition. All attempts to deploy the imaginative and inventive resources which the adherents of the tradition can provide may founder, either merely by doing nothing to remedy the condition of sterility and incoherence into which the enquiry has fallen or by also revealing or creating new problems, and revealing new flaws and new limitations. Time may elapse, and no further resources or solutions emerge.[8]

The adherents of that tradition may now face a state of radical crisis, encountering as if for the first time the claims of some rival tradition or critical opposition – for example, the mind-set of modern science or the world-view of rational secularism. The conflict between the old language and its rival in a new setting may result in the defeat of the religious tradition but, alternatively,

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[7] Wilfred R Bion, *Transformations: Change from Learning to Growth* (London: Heinemann, 1965), p.148.

[8] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), p.364; hereafter cited as *Whose Justice?*

may generate, dialectically through a dialogue between the two world-views, 'a new and second first language.' John Flett argues:

> A second type of progress occurs when deciding between rival traditions. Again MacIntyre rejects any possibility of a neutral position able to narrate "the subject matter about which they give rival accounts or the standards by which their claims are to be evaluated" (WJ, 166). All rational debate is particular. Certain values in one tradition may have no counterpart whatsoever in their rival, and traditions that contrast in one aspect may share beliefs, images, and texts in another. Recognition of background is thus a necessary precondition to meaningful dialogue.
>
> Once this basis is established, the potential exists for protagonists of one tradition to overhear conversations held in another. This demands of the protagonist a "rare gift of empathy" as they must: "…understand the theses, arguments, and concepts of their rival in such a way that they are able to view themselves from such an alien standpoint and to re-characterize their own beliefs in an appropriate manner from the alien perspective" (WJ, 167) MacIntyre dubs this learning an alien tradition, learning a "second first language" (WJ, 394ff).

Genuine dialogue, he concludes, occurs on two levels:

> First, each tradition, using its own terms, questions, and standards, characterizes the position of its rival. This identifies contrasting belief structures and makes explicit the fundamental incongruity of the rival. It also clarifies any possibility for shared meaning. Here a tradition may recognize where its rival is able to instruct it on subordinate questions. If such a consideration exists and the adherents of one tradition chose to ignore it, they cheapen their own standards and exclude relevant reasons for future believing or disbelieving; they stunt their own tradition.[9]

The aim of this thesis is to follow the psychological and existential need for a second first language within the space of the first tradition's crisis, re-presenting the old in a new context. In the predicaments offered by the novelists, it is not possible or sufficient merely to cling to the old ways or to return nostalgically to them. There has to be some radical act of transmutation and translation, always tested by the risk of breakdown and destruction.

It is this crisis area that the psychologist William James depicts in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the founding text for the psychological investigation of what had previously been considered essentially religious issues. Since it is an area of massed confusion and perplexity, without fixed names or certain directions, James offers within it pragmatic tools of orientation for the

[9] John Flett, "Alasdair MacIntyre's Tradition-Constituted Enquiry in Polanyian Perspective," *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical*, 26 (1999) <http://dx.doi.org/10.5840/traddisc1999/200026219> [accessed 20th April 2018].

struggling seeker. He is above all concerned with whatever it is that causes change, however temporary, in the individual's field of mental vision. Suddenly some key thought or encounter becomes central to attention, creating around it a gravitational field. This field may hold or it may give way to an alternative orientation. All the time, the individual in crisis is moving between different possible world-views:

> Now if you ask of psychology just HOW the excitement shifts in a man's mental system, and WHY aims that were peripheral become at a certain moment central, psychology has to reply that although she can give a general description of what happens, she is unable in a given case to account accurately for all the single forces at work. Neither an outside observer nor the Subject who undergoes the process can explain fully how particular experiences are able to change one's centre of energy so decisively, or why they so often have to bide their hour to do so. We have a thought, or we perform an act, repeatedly, but on a certain day the real meaning of the thought peals through us for the first time, or the act has suddenly turned into a moral impossibility. All we know is that there are dead feelings, dead ideas, and cold beliefs, and there are hot and live ones; and when one grows hot and alive within us, everything has to recrystallize about it.[10]

My aim is to follow James' sense of the dynamism involved in certain changes or crises of belief. In particular I am interested in the subjective experience of getting closer to or further from the sense of a powerful reality that is not fully nameable but felt as a presence:

> It is as if a bar of iron, without touch or sight, with no representative faculty whatever, might nevertheless be strongly endowed with an inner capacity for magnetic feeling; and as if, through the various arousals of its magnetism by magnets coming and going in its neighborhood, it might be consciously determined to different attitudes and tendencies. Such a bar of iron could never give you an outward description of the agencies that had the power of stirring it so strongly; yet of their presence, and of their significance for its life, it would be intensely aware through every fibre of its being (*Varieties of Religious Experience,* p.55).

William James's individual seekers are like those bars of iron, sensitive to invisible forces, affected by waves of attraction and repulsion. I try to track those waves in the fictions I examine. In this way, James' influence helps authorise my use of Bion described above. As I have said, I use the concept of '0' to show how fictional characters navigate through the rich but painful mess that

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[10] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature: Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (London: Longmans, Green, New York, 1902), p.196; hereafter cited as *Varieties of Religious Experience.*

follows their loss of clear religious orientation. This is not just to do with the workings of each character's internal thinking. It is also to show the novel's own thinking, in its configurations and reconfigurations between and across characters as though they were thoughts within its mind.

It should be noted that whilst I employ MacIntyre's thought for its vital insight into the modern fragmentation of values and the threat to tradition and a coherent world-view, I am aware that Marilynne Robinson herself has grave reservations as to his thesis. Her essays in *Absence of Mind* show her sympathetic to opposing with aggression the externally reductive rival tradition of scientism, without merely ignoring it. But it also stimulates her to emphasise instead the place of wonder and mystery within the findings of modern science, especially physics, in relation to the composition of reality. Equally, it takes her back to the original texts of her Protestant divines, to restore an ancient language against decay and paraphrase, and rescue the version of a non-reductive science present within their theology of creation.[11] It is striking to her that so many human values – love, faithfulness, compassion – that are translated by scientism into forms of self-interest are also attributes ascribed to God and previously upheld within religious faith.[12] This is not Feuerbachian translation which to her at least saw religion as a form of human art and creative making, but a mere reduction of meaning by a cold view from outside the world of individual experience.[13] But still she does not believe in MacIntyre's grim sense of a complete modern catastrophe, a modern equivalent of the dark ages in the loss of faith and value, and resists his view that liberalism is a kind of untidy botch and compromise.[14] That is why William James is important here: he is vital as a countervailing American voice

[11] Marilynne Robinson, 'Happiness by Marilynne Robinson: A paper presented at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture consultation on Happiness and Human Flourishing, sponsored by the McDonald Agape Foundation', <https://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/robinson_1.pdf> [accessed 29th June 2020], hereafter cited as '*Happiness*'.

[12] Marilynne Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* (London: Virago, 2018), p.211; hereafter cited as *What Are We Doing Here?*

[13] Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011), p.126; hereafter cited as *Absence.*

[14] Ari Schulman, "Marilynne Robinson On Alasdair Macintyre: Where's The Decline? — The New Atlantis", *The New Atlantis*, 2012 <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/futurisms/marilynne-robinson-on-alasdair> [accessed 29th October 2020].

celebrating the diversity of experience, relishing the democratic republic of many voices and struggling individual souls as something far better than a fall into the state of Babel and more like God's plenty in God's own novel of life.

Marilynne Robinson, who was raised as a Presbyterian, later became a Congregationalist, worshipping and sometimes preaching at the Congregational United Church of Christ in Iowa City. Her Congregationalism and her interest in the ideas of John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards in particular have been crucially important to her fiction. In *The Death of Adam* (1998), her references to Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer reveal her as a thinker emphatically unable to rest content within a lifeless tradition.[15] It was Barth who saw in organized religion a lack of faith. It was Bonhoeffer who asked what Christianity – and its words of repentance and faith and grace and rebirth - could mean in the religionless world of Nazi Germany. It was radical renewal even amidst and through devastating loss and peril that was the imperative, not simply mindless repetition and empty continuance, any more than dismissal by cold reduction or accommodation through modernizing paraphrase. And that again is what I will call '0': the real reality to which Marilynne Robinson refers in her chapter on 'Realism' in *The Givenness of Things*. 'Our realism,' she says wryly, 'distracts us from reality'[16]: we have no language for those moments when we seem to surpass ourselves by what the ancients would have called divine favour. That is why she loves the thought of the moon strangely raising the tide, alleviating the burdensome weight of the sea: within reality, a parable or a metaphor of cosmic lifting and easing, in a language that only the art of literature can express and renew. In this thesis, to put it very simply, I look very closely at the language of the novels.

My concentration in this thesis is on the *Gilead* novels, for their religious concerns and inter-relationships, though some limited reference is made to *Housekeeping*. In her non-fictional writings, I am less concerned with her political or environmental publications, and indeed focus more on her

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[15] Robinson, Marilynne, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998); hereafter cited as *Adam*.

[16] Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (London: Virago, 2015), p.275; hereafter cited as *Givenness.*

lectures and interviews. Although her theological thinking and influences are vital to her writings, and I try to show how this works in close relation to the novels, this is not a PhD that can deal separately and thoroughly with the theological background of Marilynne Robinson.

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QUALITATIVE STUDY

In relation to the case histories of reading in Part Two, this is essentially a qualitative study, treating the language of the participants in close relation to the language of the texts being read. Psychology in this thesis provides the space in a secular world for investigations that are not necessarily defined by current world-views: the space for these explorations in the midst and depth of individual lives is partly sustained by the founding example of the work of William James on the boundaries between psychology, philosophy and religion, as endorsed by Marilynne Robinson herself. It also allows me to use Bion as a sort of pointer that does not commit me to either a dogmatically religious language or a reductive scientism.

Part Two takes grounded theory as its method. Grounded theory is defined as 'the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research'.[17] The methodology, as a form of realistic evaluation, involves the development of hypotheses and theories through the collecting and analysis of complex human 'data', or what Robinson (quoting James) calls the 'given', at ground level in the world. In my case this means taking case histories of reading groups and individual readers and looking at the effect in terms of the wider life of their thinking in relation to Marilynne Robinson's novels. It is again in the wider definition of psychology that this study belongs. If I was simply undertaking a study of the text then this thesis would be more narrowly literary, but this my concern is with wider real-world effects in relation to individuals, and works within a broad sense of human psychology as the site of response. Equally grounded theory, in refusing to begin from rigidly

[17]Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research.* (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Co, 1967), p.2.

preassembled categories, is appropriate to a literature-inflected study, and in particular a literary study that is concerned with religious meaning in (what might be called for shorthand) meltdown. It allows the possibility of empirical work, careful detailed analysis, within what (again as shorthand) I think of as a more agnostic, neutral place from which to see what, through the work of literature in relation to the psychology of continuing religious concerns, can build itself up again, or fail to build itself up, from something close to ground level in the middle of modern life. The thesis is also consonant with the place of CRILS, the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society in which my advisers have been situated, within a school of psychology. Through the use of psychologists William James and Wilfred Bion, psychology is offered as a holding ground for personal thinking in a world without clear traditions and beliefs. The thesis involves various literature, theology and philosophy in order to see what psychology can be made of. Literature especially becomes the further investigation of that holding-ground. The thesis shows literature as being a kind of psychology-plus.

I have said that grounded theory works from below upwards, directed as little as possible by the determinants of a single preconceived theory overall. But what lies behind grounded theory is a form of thinking also involved in the writing process of this thesis. I have sought form less by planning forward, though obviously there has been basic groundwork, and more by pulling things back together in movements across chapters 1 to 5: that is to say, finding form by discovering connections that were often revealed retrospectively.

In particular, the research praxis undertaken with the shared reading group (Chapter 4) was conducted through The Reader Organisation, by approval of the University of Liverpool's ethics committee. The Reader Organisation is an award-winning charitable social enterprise working to connect people with great literature and with each other. Its mission is to build a reading revolution and create environments where personal responses to books are freely shared in reading communities within many different out-reach settings. Beginning life as a small outreach unit at the University of Liverpool in 1997, this national charity (established in 2008) pioneered the weekly 'read aloud' model at the heart of its Get into Reading project, now also known as Shared Reading. The Reader currently has over 1,000 volunteers and partners, bringing over 2,500 people together each month to share and

discuss great novels, plays and poems in all four corners of the UK. Sessions take place in a variety of locations, including hospitals, prisons, corporate boardrooms, schools, GP surgeries, libraries, community centres, care homes, and supermarkets. The stimulating, friendly and non-pressured environments provide stability, support and enjoyment for people who attend, establishing shared meaning and connections across social, educational, religious and cultural boundaries. Previous evaluations have shown how The Reader's work is helping to improve wellbeing and reduce isolation, through using live literature as a vehicle for the search for meaning.

*

In this thesis I follow and develop one further method tried out in my Masters dissertation. There I first worked out my own thoughts about a novel such as *Silas Marner* and then in the second part of the work silently took those thoughts and the passages that most inspired them into the running of a reading group set up within The Reader Organisation, to test my own findings in practice, and to see whether the group would come anywhere near the same places in a version of family feeling. This is why my doctoral thesis is likewise in two parts.

The first part comprises *my* own reading of Marilynne Robinson, testing my questions about the survival of religion traditions through her first three novels of the *Gilead* sequence (*Gilead, Home, Lila),* as well as some of her non-fiction writings (*Death of Adam, Absence of Mind, The Givenness of Things, When I was a Child I read Books, What Are We Doing Here?* and her unpublished postgraduate work on Shakespeare).

The second part, again, to take what was learnt in the first and see how it fares in practice within the leading of a reading group and also in the interviewing of a variety individual readers, comes from that development learned from my Master's experience. What I did not anticipate in part two of the thesis was *a third* and final experiment included in the last chapter. Near the conclusion of the first two experiments, I saw that Marilynne Robinson announced that the final novel of the *Gilead* sequence *Jack,* would be published September 2020. I realized that the natural development of my

thesis could be looked at as predictions towards this final novel. The timing of publication before my thesis submission created a window just large enough to write about *Jack* as part of my final chapter.

Part 1 comprises three chapters:

Chapter One, The Attempt at Transmission, examines the possibility of transmitting religious tradition from one generation to the next in Marilynne Robinson's novels *Gilead* and *Lila* especially in the light of Robinson's understanding of theologian John Calvin (1509-64) as reinvented through Jonathan Edwards (1703-58)

Chapter Two, The Problem, examines religious tradition in crisis in Robinson's novel *Home.* It uses William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* on mental 'hot spots' and the work of psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion to track moments and places involved in potential changes of reality and crises of belief.

Chapter Three, Shakespeare's Grace, starts from that excess of crisis-bound or disinherited meaning, no longer categorisable within dogmatic religion, examined in chapter 2. Using William James again, it develops out of *Home*'s blocked way forward the need for what used to be called 'grace'. It links the essays on grace in *What Are We Doing Here?* back to her 1968 thesis on Shakespeare's Henry VI. Robinson believes that Shakespeare offers for her own fiction a tradition of *literary* (in lieu of formally religious) language, as a holding-ground for an overplus of meaning in search of future resolution.

Part 2 explores the reading of Marilynne Robinson by a wide variety of modern readers of different backgrounds and persuasions, using and testing the findings of Part 1: what can literature do to carry meaning which can be seen as religious or previously deemed religious amongst readers who may not think of themselves in such terms?

Chapter Four, Praxis in Groups, examines a live shared-reading group brought together through The Reader Organisation, using the research tools developed by CRILS in the analysis of transcripts to test the development of literary thinking in the challenge of Robinson's *Home*.

Chapter Five, Praxis in Individual Readers, focuses on 12 individual readers who read *Home* separately, then responded to passages that moved them by means of reader diaries and follow-up interviews. It offers four case histories of highly experienced readers to explore the thinking used to break through some of the blocks and sufferings described in chapter Two.

Chapter Six, Conclusion: the thesis concludes by considering how far the vision and language of literature can offer a holding-place for meaning and its development. It is tested through the ideas and predictions built up throughout the thesis towards Robinson's fourth novel *Jack* just published in September 2020.

Part I: The Reading of Marilynne Robinson

1.
Gilead

This chapter is in three sections and aims to explore the possibility of transmitting religious tradition from one generation to the next. In *Gilead*, written as an epistolary novel, the Reverend John Ames, knowing he will soon die, writes to his young son to share valuable lessons and religious thoughts through his own memories. 'If I could only give you what my father gave me. No, what the Lord has given me and must also give you. But I hope you will put yourself in the way of the gift'.[18] Ames is seeking to do the sort of work that Marilynne Robinson seeks to do in her non-fiction writings: 'I have spent a great part of my adult life working to rescue wounded and discounted reputations'.[19] That rescue work, as this chapter will show, is very much to do with a half-lost, half-distorted Puritan tradition, in particular relation to John Calvin in the Reformation of sixteenth-century Geneva and Jonathan Edwards in the Great Awakening of American Evangelicalism in the 1730s and 1740s. Such reclamation feels urgently necessary to Marilynne Robinson because of her sense of the impoverishment of the modern world-view: 'It seems we have wearied of the demands our traditions made of us' (*Givenness,* p.170).

(i) Writing to the Son

In *Gilead* this reclamation of the tradition is achieved personally through a particular individual. John Ames is an elderly Congregationalist pastor. American Congregationalism belongs to the Calvinist tradition, creatively re-invented by Jonathan Edwards (1703-58). The Congregationalist church, to which Marilynne Robinson herself now belongs, was brought to America by English Puritans in the 1620s and 1630s and was distinguished from the more conservative tradition of Scottish

[18] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, (Virago, 2014), p.130; hereafter cited as *Gilead*.

[19] Timothy Larsen, Keith L. Johnson, *Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academics, 2019), pp. 52-35; hereafter cited as *Balm.*

Presbyterianism by its insistence on democratic rule by members of the local congregation rather than an assembly of elders. In the tiny town of Gilead in Iowa, Presbyterianism is represented by Ames' closest friend, Robert Boughton, the personal friendship working against sectarian rivalry.

What is more important to Ames is what Marilynne Robinson, brought up as a Presbyterian, only really discovered at college through her reading: 'I was astonished to realize how utterly different Calvin is from anything I had ever heard or read about him It was really moving to discover such a vast and lucid and gracious spirit. It was as if I had just happened upon Beethoven. Much better' (*Balm*, p.52). This was not the received Calvin of crude predestination, the elect and the damned divided by an unknowable God regardless of merit, or the dark Calvin of utter human corruption, but as Robinson calls him in *The Death of Adam*, Jean Cauvin, closer to the original. 'Everyone knows Calvin also says radical things about sin,' she says in an interview in 2010, 'as theologians have tended to do throughout Christian history. But no one has had a more exalted view of human nature than his, sin notwithstanding':

> Calvin is very much a Renaissance humanist in his appreciation of everything wonderful in the human creature. We are, he says, the highest proof of the divine wisdom. It is rare indeed to find ourselves celebrated in such terms by anyone in any age. And Calvin sets us in a universe of wonders and splendors, which we excel. If this is how creation is to be understood, as a vast and continuous effusion of wisdom and beauty, then it seems trivial to imagine God weighing our merits and demerits as we would weigh them. This is only truer if, as Calvin says, so much of our beauty is inward, in the agility of our minds and souls, in the workings of memory and the capacity for art and invention. It seems fair to assume that we appear very differently as we figure in God's creation than we do as we live within the constraints of worldly circumstance and of our own perceptions. Given that beauty is, for Calvin, the signature of the divine in creation, that the aesthetic should be an aspect of human nature that reveals our affinity to God simply follows. And there is no reason to think it might not be, by our lights, a difficult, or obscure, or even a terrible beauty. [20]

It is in this spirit of beauty, 'in the workings of memory and the capacity for art and invention', that John Ames writes to his son, as Marilynne Robinson writes her novel.

It is personal memory that is for Ames the first vehicle for tradition. He has a capacity to both receive and connect meanings from his memories in the effort to retain amidst an increasingly secular

[20]Matthew Sitman, 'Saving Calvin from Clichés: An Interview With Marilynne Robinson', Commonweal Magazine, 20th October 2017, v. 144 n.17, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/print/39562> [accessed 15th May 2018].

society, a vision of the deeper, wider world of Creation, to re-create and sustain a future for his faith and vision, most of all for his child.

This includes the terrible beauty. One memory goes back to Ames' own childhood when lightning struck the local Baptist church, causing it to burn down:

> I remember that day in my childhood when I lay under the wagon with the other little children, watching them pull down the ruins of the Baptist church, and my father brought me a piece of biscuit for my lunch, and I crawled out and knelt with him there, in the rain. I remember as if he broke the bread and put a bit of it in my mouth, though I know he didn't. His hands and his face were black with ash – he looked charred, like one of the old martyrs – and he knelt there in the rain and brought a piece of biscuit out from inside his shirt, and he did break it, that's true, and gave half to me and ate the other half himself. And it truly was the bread of affliction, because everyone was poor then. There had been drought for a few years and times were hard. Though we didn't notice it so much when they were hard for everybody. And I guess that must have been why no one minded the rain. There had been so little of it. One thing I do always remember is how the women let their hair fall down and their skirts trail in the mud, even the old women, as if none of it mattered at all. And then the singing, which was very beautiful as I remember it, though I'm pretty sure it could not have been. It would just rise up with the sound of the rain. 'Beneath the Cross of Jesus.' All the lovely, sad old tunes. The bitterness of that morsel has meant other things to me as the years passed. I have had many occasions to reflect on it (*Gilead*, pp.116-7).

When he says 'I remember as if' – 'as if he broke the bread and put a bit of it in my mouth, though I know he didn't' - Ames turns the factual memory of biscuit from the bread of affliction into the sacramental imagination of bread, in this way instinctively combining old and new testaments.[21] The imagined memory that did not quite happen makes the action from father to son have something holy attached to it now, making the ordinary things like rain and biscuits and singing reveal a religious significance within them. It is the inner beauty of a religious significance that for Robinson's Calvin is lost if we reduce memories to apparent facts at the time rather than the feelings that, arising out of them, go beyond them. Probably the singing was poor, Ames acknowledges, but the poorness, the poverty, made whatever was managed more significant and valuable: 'And it truly was the bread of affliction, because everyone was poor then'. In Ames' thought-process it is 'as if' he is taking his entire life back with him to that founding memory: he is only able to view it with the rest of his life there accompanying him, blended with all the 'other things' it has meant in a lifetime.

[21]The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments, Authorised King James Version, (Cambridge University Press, 1984), Deuteronomy 16.3.

Ames had recounted part of this same memory a few pages before, for in this book narrative is not simply linear, chronological, driven only by fact and date:

> [. . .] it seems to me much of my life was comprehended in that moment. Grief itself has often returned me to that morning, when I took communion from my father's hand. I remember it as communion, and I believe that's what it was.
> I can't tell you what that day in the rain has meant to me. I can't tell myself what it has meant to me. But I know how many things it put altogether beyond question for me (*Gilead,* p.109).

And this is the point: that though this moment cannot be defined, its power lies in three forces. That ordinary life may be intrinsically religious, the sharing of biscuit a communion. That as such it may stand against as a memory, a refuge for meaning, even against all later grief. That crucially it 'puts together' a whole series of other moments in a life as of itself, in its returns, rather than simply by force of his own recall. It is this later which is the great aesthetic force of the creative art Robinson's Calvin celebrates as grace, as good things given and re-given. And this is a guiding principle in the working method of this chapter: to see what is put together before ever knowing quite how or why. 'I can't tell' says Ames twice, 'I can't tell you what . . . I can't tell myself what'. But the founding process of bringing things together and seeing things come together is more important than subsequent apprehending and fully knowing. 'What' says Robinson's admired William James, always comes first existentially, a pure 'what' before the naming of 'that' and the description of 'which'.[22] 'Comprehended' for Ames is more about an all-encompassing motion rather than comprehension as understanding. So any premature attempt to try to give explanation feels less important than the potential of gathering of things together in a rich form that could eventually create an emergent understanding which, nonetheless, could never become exhaustively explicit. The only truth that is known to Ames is that one thing echoes or recalls the other, as if they are part of something (a life) ahead of any telling or control.

Here for Ames, time and placement are not just linear and successive, in just the same way that the subsequent novels after *Gilead* will not necessarily go forward in time one sequel after another,

[22] William James, 'The Function of Cognition', Chapter 1 in *The Meaning of Truth* (London: Longmans, Green, 1909); 'The Compounding of Consciousness', lecture 5 in *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).

but are like different combinations of the same essential story from individual angles and points of view. It is almost as if they are all written at the same time: 'Time in some sense exists simultaneously with itself. It's not actually sequential in the way we experience it' (*Balm,* p.210). And she writes in another essay:

> We pass through time like pilgrims, always changed and somehow always the same. We have identity through time, not only in the sense that, as Wordsworth said, the child is father of the man but also because dreams recur and memories abide whether or not they are welcome. Periods of trial and of insight interact in our minds not simply as memory but as things to be pondered, whose meanings modify one another over time and whose value changes in light of further experience (*What Are We Doing Here?* pp.208-9).

Ames says to his son, "Perhaps that is the one thing I wish to tell you . . . I believe there are visions that come to us only in memory in retrospect" (*Gilead,* pp.103-4). Memories in time are not used up in one utterance of themselves, their 'value changes in light of further experience', '[they] modify one another' and, not being finite or simply past, they are, as John Henry Newman put it, capable of development.[23] But that development is not willed: the language here is receptive to comings, to recurrence, to abiding, to change. The receiving of these signs of life, as given, is marked by the capacity to ponder them.

Ames continues to bring memory forward as a future for his own consciousness in writing to his son, poignantly imagining the young boy reading this letter as an adult:

> It is not surprising that I remember that day as if my father had given me communion, taking that bread from his side and breaking it for me with his ashy hands. But it is strange that I remember receiving it the way I do, since it has never been our custom for the minister to place the bread in the communicant's mouth, as they do in some churches. I think of this because, on the morning of communion when your mother brought you forward and said, 'You ought to give him some of that,' I broke the bread and fed a bit of it to you from my hand, just the way my father would not have done except in my memory. And I know what I wanted in that moment was to give you some version of that same memory, which has been very dear to me, though only now do I realize how often it has been in my mind (*Gilead,* p.118).

Ames is on both sides of his letter now – imagining it being read after his death even as he is now writing it; being the son still to his own father even as he is the father to his young and unknowing son. Here his wife plays the unexpected yet fitting part in being the one to suggest that he give this

[23] John Henry Newman, Fifteen Sermons Preached Before The University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826 and 1843, (Longmans, Green and Co, 1909).

experience to his son, when of course she wasn't included in the experience of her husband's childhood. These are connections and transmissions that his pondered work is making; bringing value from the past but that value itself only fully realized 'now' in the act of trying to offer it on. 'Only now' is related to 'how often': this is given with the gentle weight of a whole life revealed in the act of trying to pass it on.

It is the 'just the way my father would *not* have done *except* in my memory': that is the manifestation of MacIntyre's ideas of a second first language. The 'as if' area that Ames stands in is what adds to or develops out of his memory initially, but then in an equal loyalty to reality is the admission that it is his own doing more than his father's. Yet it is not a fantasy in Ames as it would be were it written, 'just as my father would have done', nor is it the bitterness of 'just as my father didn't do it'. When he says 'just as my father would not have done it except in memory', it is the *not* and the *except* that go together, almost like saying 'I've created something out of this that is not fully negative, but does admit what didn't happen." It is important to note in this moment where the three generations are suddenly brought together that what did *not* happen is also a bequest to make sure that it *does* happen, not just in fantasy at the time, but in relation to his son *later*. He can perhaps help make it happen now; time is not over.

So thirty pages later there is a connection with a simple family evening:

> We had a fine time, we three watching television. There were jugglers and monkeys and ventriloquists, and there was a lot of dancing around. You asked for bites off my plate so you could decide which casserole and salad you wanted—you have the child's abhorrence for mingling foods on your plate. So I gave you a bite of one after another, (guessing) Mrs Brown, Mrs McNeill, Mrs Pry, then Mrs Dorris, Mrs Turney, feeding you with my fork. You would say, 'I *still* can't decide!' and we'd do it all again. That was your joke, eating it all up. It was a wonderful joke. I thought of the day I gave you communion. I wonder if you thought of it also (*Gilead,* p.145).

Ames' 'I wonder if you thought of it also' brings a new dimension in the outward reaching of his memories. Now the chaste curiosity is to see if that feeling which went beyond his own strict memories, will also have gone beyond him to the other less conscious person taking part in the remembered occasion. Are these same experiences of extraordinary value of the apparently mundane being felt by his son in a similar way to the experience Ames had with his own father? The 'you',

throughout the book, is itself an act of faith trying to get through; an act of love that doubles the meaning of trying to write a life.

Writing in this way to his son in the present, it is as if Ames wishes his bequested memories to come forward to a future for his son that, most poignantly, he knows he will no longer be a part of:

> The history of the church is very complex, very mingled. I want you to know how aware I am of that fact. These days there are so many people who think loyalty to religion is benighted, if it is not worse than benighted. I am aware of that, and I know the charges that can be brought against the churches are powerful. And I know, too, that my own experience of the church has been, in many senses, sheltered and parochial. In every sense, unless it really is a universal and transcendent life, unless the bread is the bread and the cup is the cup everywhere, in all circumstances, and it is a time with the Lord in Gethsemane that comes for everyone, as I deeply believe. That biscuit ashy from my father's charred hand. It all means more than I can tell you. But I hope you will put yourself in the way of the gift (*Gilead,* p.130).

All those 'I know's are like the facts that Ames grants earlier about the singing and the bread, in line with the rationality of modern scepticism and its dues. They are not incompatible with the other side of all 'I can't tell', or 'more than I can tell you'. So Marilynne Robinson says of her own writing and its sources, 'it's actually reassuring to me that I feel as if I know something that I can't articulate' (*Balm* p.203). But what is crucial here is what in the novel is a kind of double translation taking place within the tangle of the religious, the human, and the secular. That is say, on one side is the figure of Calvin insisting on the religious value, universal and transcendent, incarnate in apparently ordinary elements of human being everywhere. On the other hand, conversely, is a crucial figure in the history of secularization, Ludwig Feuerbach, read and admired by Ames's older brother, claiming that religious symbols are actually human objects of human value:

> Ludwig Feuerbach says a wonderful thing about baptism. I have it marked. He says, 'Water is the purest, clearest of liquids; in virtue of this, its natural character, it is the image of the spotless nature of the Divine Spirit. In short, water has a significance in itself, as water; it is on account of its natural quality that it is consecrated and selected as the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. So far there lies at the foundation of Baptism a beautiful, profound natural significance.' Feuerbach is a famous atheist, but he is about as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anybody, and he loves the world. Of course he thinks religion could just stand out of the way and let joy exist pure and undisguised. That is his one error, and it is significant. But he is marvellous on the subject of joy, and also on its religious expressions (*Gilead,* p.27).

There is a two-way translation between the idea that the sacraments are there because water is vitally important (Feuerbach), and the belief that water is important as an earthly expression of God's gifts

(Calvin/Edwards). So instead of translating the old sacraments of an earlier faith in the way Feuerbach would do, Ames sees sacraments as the fullest expression of the elements they celebrate as holy. Instead of turning religious issues into secular ones with Feuerbach, albeit secular ones with a still retained sacred value, Ames is saying that secular issues are really religious issues often in disguise.

Even so, Feuerbach is not reductive: the elements of life are made religious because they are so valuable, so emotionally full of celebration and life. He does something to rescue the tradition, the sense of religion, albeit through a second language that inverts what MacIntyre would call the first. That first was never real to Feuerbach: it secretly and unconsciously came out of the hopes, fears and projections of the human second language in the first place. At the very end of *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach writes in the translation by Marian Evans, soon to become George Eliot:

> Forget not that wine is the blood of plants, and flour the flesh of plants, which are sacrificed for thy well-being! Forget not that the plant typifies to thee the essence of Nature, which lovingly surrenders itself for thy enjoyment! Therefore forget not the gratitude which thou owest to the natural qualities of bread and wine! And if thou art inclined to smile that I call eating and drinking religious acts, because they are common every-day acts, and are therefore performed by multitudes without thought, without emotion; reflect, that the Lord's Supper is to multitudes a thoughtless, emotionless act, because it takes place often; and, for the sake of comprehending the religious significance of bread and wine, place thyself in a position where the daily act is unnaturally, violently interrupted. Hunger and thirst destroy not only the physical but also the mental and moral powers of man; they rob him of his humanity—of understanding, of consciousness. Oh! if thou shouldst ever experience such want, how wouldst thou bless and praise the natural qualities of bread and wine, which restore to thee thy humanity, thy intellect! It needs only that the ordinary course of things be interrupted in order to vindicate to common things an uncommon significance, to life, as such, a religious import. Therefore let bread be sacred for us, let wine be sacred, and also let water be sacred! Amen.[24]

'Forget not' is still in memory of the tradition. That is why Marilynne Robinson writes:

> If I were not myself a religious person, but wished to make an account of religion, I believe I would tend toward the Feuerbachian view that religion is a human projection of humanity's conceptions of beauty, goodness, power, and other valued things, a humanizing of experience by understanding it as structured around and mirroring back these values. Then it would resemble art, with which it is strongly associated (*Absence, pp.125-6).*

What is wonderful about the art of *Gilead*, is that for a moment the vital difference between Calvin and Feuerbach need not make a complete difference: the water, the bread, the singing are either way, and from either side, of transcendent value.

[24] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, [1854] Trans. by George Eliot [Marian Evans], (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p.171.

Ames shares another memory of taking a journey with his father, to find his grandfather's grave in Kansas. It deserves to be treated at length, in fully embodied exemplification of this chapter's argument and its sense of the complex human movements it involves. The father and grandfather left each other on bad terms years before. Finally, after finding the sad-looking graveyard, they do all they can to clean it up, in the father's desire to 'put things to rights':

> When we finished, my father sat down on the ground beside his father's grave. He stayed there for a good while, plucking at little whiskers of straw that still remained on it, fanning himself with his hat. I think he regretted that there was nothing more for him to do. Finally he got up and brushed himself off, and we stood there together with our miserable clothes all damp and our hands all dirty from the work, and the first crickets rasping and the flies really beginning to bother and the birds crying out the way they do when they're about ready to settle for the night, and my father bowed his head and began to pray, remembering his father to the Lord and also asking the Lord's pardon, and his father's as well. I missed my grandfather mightily, and I felt the need of pardon, too. But that was a very long prayer.
> Every prayer seemed long to me at that age, and I was truly bone tired. I tried to keep my eyes closed, but after a while I had to look around a little. And this is something I remember very well. 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 there were great taut skeins of light suspended between them. I wanted my father to see it, but I knew I'd have to startle him out of his prayer, and I wanted to do it the best way, so I took his hand and kissed it. And then I said, 'Look at the moon.' And he did. We just stood there until the sun was down and the moon was up. They seemed to float on the horizon for quite a long time, I suppose because they were both so bright you couldn't get a clear look at them. And that grave, and my father and I, were exactly between them, which seemed amazing to me at the time, since I hadn't given much thought to the nature of the horizon.
>
> My father said, 'I would never have thought his place could be beautiful. I'm glad to know that' (*Gilead,* p.15).

The memory shared starts with a space in need of repair. From the perspective of a young boy watching and assisting his father, something in the transmission of grandfather to son to grandson has been left undone. This first paragraph has magnified thoughts of grief within regret, where even ordinary actions such as plucking 'at little whiskers of straw that still remained' will be carefully tended to. But for the father, there is now 'nothing more for him to do'. Nothing more to be done not only in what he did do to his own father while he was still living, but also more importantly, nothing more to be done to make up for what he didn't do, or what he held himself back from doing. It is as if he couldn't do anything more by the merits of his own acts. Calvin himself writes, 'Grace, as Augustine teaches, precedes every good work, the will following grace, not leading it, being its

companion, not its guide'.[25] Actions not being sufficient, the only thing to be done now with 'miserable clothes' and 'hands dirty from the work' is to pray.

Although regret is present, the first movement of the father in praying is to *remember* his father not simply in the human sense of that verb but 'to the Lord' as if it were important for him to make sure he stood in the place of advocating, in so far as he might, the salvation of his father. Then in the same sentence he asks pardon from the Lord and from his own father, as if he cannot stand in the place of being an advocate without also standing in the place of asking forgiveness. The togetherness of these actions of 'remembering to' and 'asking for' is a subtle mixture of the active and passive in a religious human. At another level there is the grandson, young Ames, seeing his father offer this prayer, something about it causing himself to feel 'the *need* of pardon, too', as if he is wanting to join in the space with his father.

The paragraphing now becomes structurally vital in what Robinson calls the architecture of thought and wonder, as the second paragraph holds onto an experience almost completely void of actions from the first.[26] It is as if transmission was taking place between the two paragraphs, meaning the first paragraph is more about regret and trying to do things to make up for something that they ultimately fell short of, while the second paragraph, continuing to pray, is more a response out of their control, increasingly something beautiful given to them beyond the human from Creation. The second paragraph looks more like heavenly grace: the episode could have stopped at the first, the second movement need not have come. Nothing from the first paragraph, no matter how kindly intended, could deserve to usher in the grace of the second which repairs it. Sun down, moon up: there is something lovely in how the 'most wonderful light between [sun and moon]' becomes 'that grave, and my father and I, were exactly between them'. Then there are these three 'as if' movements - 'as if you could touch it, as if it were palpable currents of light *passing back and forth'* or 'as if there were great taut skeins of light suspended between them' - close to conveying actions of non-verbal

[25] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Trans. John Allen. 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education), Vol. 1, 2.3.7; hereafter cited as *Institutes.*

[26] 'Theology is the great architecture of thought and wonder that makes religious experience a house of man mansions, open to the soul's explorations, indeed made to invite and to accommodate them' (*What Are We Doing Here?* p.39).

transmission, visibly reordering humans in life and death, in the midst of the universe. The currents going back and forth look as though they are going between the generations, between grandfather to son to grandson, as if the generations are together in connection to something meaningful. Robinson shares:

> 'Calvin interprets John's saying "The life was the light of men" in this way: "[The Evangelist] speaks here, in my opinion, of that part of *life* in which men excel other animals; and informs us that *the* life which was bestowed on *men* was not of an ordinary description, but was united to *the light* of understanding. He separates man from the rank of other creatures; because we perceive [still] more readily the power of God by feeling it in us than by beholding it at a distance," that is, in the brilliance of the created order, which for Calvin is a revelation of the Divine Architect' (*Givenness*, p.147).

And still in the art of the passage, it is 'you' instead of 'I' in 'as if you could touch it', casually letting this become more of a universal than individual experience.

The biblical image of Malachi's words come to mind: 'And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers'.[27] Young Ames is the unexpected part in this. He has not really taken part in what has happened before, in all the regret between the older father and son. In all this he cannot even stay in that 'very long prayer', but by breaking out of the formality of the prayer, he is the one that discovers the miraculous moment taking place outside it but in better answer. The boy is the only one to help his father 'turn' towards the miracle or moment of grace, by giving his father something, 'I wanted to do it the best way, so I took his hand and kissed it'; using simple, almost primal affection and honour from son to father, as the father is praying with remorse and affection for his own father. So the short simple sentences join as in the Bible itself: 'And then I said, "Look at the moon." And he did. We just stood there . . .' The father could not have the reconciliation to his own father without the next generation assisting in the process or trying to repair the past. So there is a something there about the generation below being a force of human grace to the generations above. 'The child is father of the man'.

At such moments generations feel as one together. It is related to the general experience that Marilynne Robinson herself finds in the regularity of attendance at church, its rhythms, rituals and community: 'that we will see children baptized that we not live to see married . . . I don't think there

[27] The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments, Authorised King James Version, (Cambridge University Press, 1984), Malachi 4.6; Luke 1.17.

is a situation in life where I feel more like I'm a human being among human beings than in a church' (*Balm,* p.204). In her essay on the feeling of 'theological virtues' she writes about an older lady in her Congregationalist church:

> Once a minister at my church asked the congregation to reflect on their understanding of Christian hope. A lady so tiny with age that when she stood up her hat was just visible above the pew said, "The first thing I'll do when I get to heaven, I'll run and find my grandma. She loved me so much!" Her small voice crackled with anticipation [. . .] She imagines herself running like a child through the New Jerusalem, taking no note of its splendors, avid as a child would be for one voice, one face, one touch [. . .] [The grandmother] had figured so graciously in a child's life that the memory had been cherished through long years, keeping her, child and woman, loyal to the hope of heaven. When the grandmother was younger and capable, by whatever tender human arts, of giving the child such utter confidence in her love, she probably had no idea that she was creating in the child a memory that could take its place among out conceptions of celestial things, even outshine them (*What Are We Doing Here?* p.222).

She would now be as old her grandmother, yet still the loving child remains within her, turning round as by another complexity of time past memory into forward hope. The memory is itself as 'cherished through long years' as the old woman was loved by her grandmother over the years of her childhood.

40 pages later, in thinking of one of his last experiences with his grandfather at a baseball game, Ames goes back to the graveyard with his father. In the aftermath of the experience of the prayer, there came another moment of transmission:

> When my father and I were walking along the road in the quiet and the moonlight, away from the graveyard where we'd found the old man, my father said, 'You know, everybody in Kansas saw the same thing we saw.' At the time (remember I was twelve) I took him to mean the entire state was a witness to our miracle. I thought that whole state could vouch for the particular blessing my father had brought down by praying there at his father's grave, or the glory that my grandfather had somehow emanated out of his parched repose. Later I realized my father would have meant that the sun and moon aligned themselves as they did with no special reference to the two of us. He never encouraged any talk about visions or miracles, except the ones in the bible.
>
> 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 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 (*Gilead,* p.55).

Here again a memory is shared in two paragraphs, the space between the two witnessing another separation of thought, as though operating in the small space of difference between the father and the

boy. The first paragraph offers the father's warily commonsensical explanation of what happened through natural causes ('everybody in Kansas saw the same thing we saw'): the paragraph itself is in two halves, one to do with the child's misunderstood sense of the shared miracle, the other 'later' reflection which knows more of the rationalised disillusionment of adulthood. But the second paragraph begins again with 'I can't tell you', a grown adult and father this time unable to explain, let alone explain away as his own father tried to: it is almost descended from 'I am glad I didn't understand'. All that Ames knows is that it was something 'in him, and in myself, and all around us' called (like another theological virtue) joy. Its existence is given – as in the title 'The Givenness of Things' - not demanded or willed or deserved or rationalized away, coming out of 'even guilt or dread', and 'beyond anything you might ever actually need'. The movement from the first to the second paragraph is mirrored in the movement of the father himself from the normalization that 'the sun and moon aligned themselves as they did with no special reference to the two of us' to the admission right at the end: 'Despite what he said, I could see that my father was a little shaken. He had to stop and wipe his eyes'. That is the defeat of the world-view that Marilynne Robinson so much abhors in general in the modern world: the enforced scepticism, the adult's near-obligation to be reductive. 'We have turned away from the ancient intuition that we are part of it all . . . The pull of reductivism might be balanced by a countervailing force' (*Absence,* p.7). But here reductivism is overcome not by passionate argument as in the non-fiction, but by a countervailing turn of human art which remains both individualised and quietly surprising: the old man, 'despite himself' is after all, it seems, as moved as his son.

'Who would have thought that the moon could dazzle and flame like that?' The experience of young Ames and his father with the moon and the sun is significant in Robinson's own experience. In her second year of university she found that reading Jonathan Edwards 'made me aware of a much more plausible ontology than anything compatible with the ugly determinisms on offer then and now in courses on philosophy and psychology. I could put a name to my discontents because I had an older brother who shared them' (*What Are We Doing Here?* p.183). While she was reading *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended,* there was a small footnote that she just happened upon, combining a religious and a scientific language even in its old-looking writing:

> The lucid Colour or Brightnefs of the *Moon*, as we look ftedfaftly upon it, feems to be a *permanent* Thing, as though it were perfectly the fame Brightnefs continued. But indeed it is an Effect produced every Moment. It ceafes, and is renewed, in each fucceffive Point of Time; and fo becomes altogether a *new* Effect at each Inftant; and no one Thing that belongs to it, is numerically the fame that exifted in the preceding Moment [. . .] Therefore the Brightnefs or lucid Whitenefs of this Body is no more numerically the fame Thing with that which exifted in the preceding Moment, than the *Sound* of the Wind that blows now, is individually the fame with the Sound of the Wind that blew juft before; which, though it be like it, is not the fame, any more than the agitated *Air*, that make the Sound, is the fame; or than the *Water*, flowing in a River, that now paffes by, is individually the fame with that which paffed a little before. [28]

There is a double significance in this footnote. First, it shows that the solid permanence of sun and the moon, is actually a constancy that it is constantly renewed: 'Philofophers well know, that the Images are conftantly *renewed*, by the Impreffion and Reflexion of *new* Rays of Light' (*Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended)*. It is not just the same old ordinary thing that everyone sees all the time and takes for granted: 'For Edwards,' Robinson writes, 'it means that creation is constantly renewed as an act of God' (*What Are We Doing Here?* p.51). What Ames and his father see is an ordinary miracle: creation re-creating itself, for once in front of their witnessing eyes. Second, finding this passage, which was also to begin to show the relation of Jonathan Edwards to the pragmatism of William James,[29] was to Robinson itself a sort of intellectual revelation: 'that hour felt like an awakening, so to speak, as if a great burden had been lifted from my soul'(*What Are We Doing Here?* p.183). 'Edwards' footnote was my first, best introduction to epistemology and ontology, and my escape—and what a rescue it was—from the contending, tedious determinisms that seemed to be all that was on offer to me then.[30] It was a renewal that was like a re-conversion, a re-discovery of a world view to which she knew she instinctively belonged, which she knew was her tradition. 'Jonathan Edwards provided me with a metaphysics that made the phenomenal world come alive for me again and that seemed to me to undercut every version of determinism, including even

[28] Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended,* (New York. 1766), Chapter III, pp.420-421, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=GL4OAAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&pg=GBS.PA20> [accessed 30th May 2020]; hereafter cited as *Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended.*

[29] Joan Richardson, Chapter 2 and 4, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: the fact of feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein,* (CUP, 2007).

[30] Marilynne Robinson, 'Credo' *Jonathan Edward's Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: A Casebook,* (Yale University Press, 2010), p.181.

predestination, without obliging me to accept an alternative'.[31] The passage itself even in its old spellings renews *her* with a sense of the deeper origins of thought before the modern system.

> A striking difference between the kind of thinking about human nature and experience that one finds in Edwards and his tradition on the one hand and modern thinking on the same subjects on the other is that the older thought invites assent. Readers are implicitly invited to consult with themselves as to the persuasiveness of the description of the inward life that is offered to them. The forcefulness of the prose in these passages is meant to stir recognition. It is possible to assent to the idea of a beauty that exceeds any conception we have of beauty? Is the moral and religious sense an aesthetic sense, as unmediated in its reactions as taste? The meaningfulness of the questions themselves would await affirmation by individual responses to them, and the differences of response would themselves be meaningful. That we live in and with our minds differently from one another is a given of Puritan theology. That we can experience our own minds differently from one moment to the next is also a given. In the understanding of Edwards's tradition, these things are true because the mind is in intimate relation to God, stirred by conscience, accepting or resisting grace (*What Are We Doing Here?* p.199).

It is a tradition, in which the aesthetic and the beautiful are ever-changing signatures of the divine, that Edwards owed to Calvin above all, for Marilynne Robinson. Different people existent at the same time, the same person changed at different moments, this is what the novel can beautifully register: 'My father said, "I would never have thought his place could be beautiful. I'm glad to know that"'. That little tailing sentence has the very cadence of Ames himself now writing of this gratefully to his own son. So it is that in *Gilead*, it is not only the moon and sun that are made alive in their changes, it is the human beings who witness it, themselves changing across paragraphs, over time, as if the universe needs that human consciousness too in the midst of all. The memory is filled with the gift of an overplus – to use a William James-like word - which cannot be accounted for, an abundance of meaning that transmits itself across the generations and over time. 'The feeling of an overplus of meaning in reality,' writes Robinson, thinking of the modern disease of mean-spirited reductivism, 'a sense that the word cannot at all be accounted for in its own terms, is a profound bond and understanding between and among religious people' (*What Are We Doing Here?* p.206).

Robinson's brother, art historian and artist David Summers, who shared her discontent with reductivism, speaks of the generosity vision bestows upon him: 'I realized while making the painting

[31] Marilynne Robinson, 'Jonathan Edwards in a New Light: Remembered for Preaching', *HUMANITIES*, Vol 35, No.6, (2014), < https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2014/novemberdecember/feature/jonathan-edwards-in-new-light-remembered-preaching-fire-and> [accessed 3rd June 2020]; hereafter cited as '*New Light'*.

called *The Poet's House,* that I painted out of gratitude for seeing what I see'.[32] Her brother who had said to her he would be the painter, she the poet, was an intrinsic part of her sense of beauty.

The wonderful response of the humans to the Creation is, says Robinson's Edwards, itself a further emanation of Creation:

> Edwards's thought is loyal to a tradition that does not believe our works in this life can merit any reward in heaven. Instead, he sees whatever is good or gracious or beautiful in any human act or thought as an emanation of the divine beauty, sacredness itself. A vision like his would make any other person potentially or, in any moment, actually a revelation of the nature of God, as the brilliance of creation is also. I find this wonderful understanding of the highest human capacities, for generosity and love, equally with intelligence and aesthetic sense--the last of these, in Edward's scheme, the means of our individual participation in a revelation that saturates experience, since Being itself is an emanation of God (*What Are We Doing Here?* p.66-7).

It is the *voice* of Ames that the reader feels will be the legacy passed down to his son. Ames' tone is like an aesthetic signature that comes in those small sentences that often close a paragraph, like his father's own "I am glad to know that': 'I wonder if you thought of it also' (*Gilead,* p.145), 'But I hope you will put yourself in the way of the gift' *(Gilead,* p.130). Emotions are often verbs in these sentences, vulnerable in their temporary present tense, written in place of being able to speak of everything to the child. In this aesthetic the beautiful here is not separate from the good, just as 'Edwards's metaphysics is first of all an esthetics' (*New Light*).

(ii) Ames and His Wife

Marilynne Robinson spoke of the very first time *she* heard the voice of John Ames. Her interviewer talked of how unusual and difficult it is convincingly to present in literature the portrait of a good man. But Robinson replied that:

> [. . .] when the Rev John Ames 'presented himself to her' as she put it, he did so as an unquestionably decent human being. 'The voice makes the rules, and this is the voice of a good man.'

[32] Lyn Bolen Warren, 'A Conversation with David Summers', *VA MODERN,* 5th June 2013, <https://virginiamodern.wordpress.com/2013/06/05/a-conversation-with-david-summers/> [accessed 3rd June 2020].

> She went on to say that she was driven crazy, as a teacher and writer, by the clichéd assertion that it is difficult to write novels about good people, because damaged characters are thought to be more interesting. 'I think anyone who tries to be good knows there's nothing simple about it, much easier to be bad. I knew that about the character - and, also, I don't quite believe in bad characters'.[33]

It is another example of the reductiveness, the loss of faith, that Robinson describes in The Death of Adam: 'When a good man or woman stumbles, we say, "I knew it all along," and when a bad one has a gracious moment, we sneer at the hypocrisy. It is nothing to mourn or admire' (*Adam,* p.78). Robinson speaks of John Ames as if he were already somewhere living, and as though she was almost given the office to transcribe a voice that was already almost in existence. The anti-religious animus is, she argues:

> [. . .] another expression of the belief—for which no proof is imaginable—that human goodness is not natural, and therefore is neither beneficial, nor, if the truth were known, even truly good. This is the impetus of the attack on religion, the rejection of the belief, encoded in the terms of myth, that goodness is not only present in creation but is the essence of it (*Adam,* p.55).

The 'essence of it' is this, as Ames describes walking his town at night, past every house, trying 'to remember the people who lived in each one, and whatever I knew about them': 'And I'd imagine peace they didn't expect and couldn't account for descending on their illness or their quarrelling or their dreams' (*Gilead,* p.81). He - his imagination - is in lieu of grace.

But the good man cannot think of himself as good and deserving. It would be impossible for his own character to narrate the influence of his own goodness, or even wish to bestow on himself what he can hope to bestow on others. He is not the hypocrite described by Jonathan Edwards who tries to secure his future by good deeds, by the accrual of self-interested and self-conscious sentiments of piety: for whom 'everything is as it were paid for beforehand' (*What Are We Doing Here?* p.293). There is no automatic guarantee of his goodness or of his being able to hand it on. The Greek root for the word 'beauty', says John O'Donohue, is related to the word for 'calling', to 'kalon' and 'kalein'.[34]

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[33] Jim Naughtie, 'Bookclub: Marilynne Robinson – Gilead', Interview by Jim Naughtie, (Jim Naughtie Presents Bookclub on BBC Radio 4, BBC, 4th October 2012), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/radio4/entries/cb95772d-9f7f-32d5-ac52-7da30cdf3202.> [accessed 15th May 2018].

[34] Krista Tippett, 'John O'Donohue: The Inner Landscape of Beauty', *On Being,* (2008), <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty-aug2017/> [accessed 1st June 2020].

It is as if the situation needs silently to call upon another perspective that can pick up on the predicament and present appreciation from a different position; as if the novel needs to be rotated by opening another book within the same world. Here then, near the end of the third book after the first-person narration of *Gilead,* Lila, Ames' second wife, offers the needed perspective of Ames that he cannot wholly provide for himself. 'Lila knew what would happen next. One day she and the child would watch them lower John Ames into his grave':

> She would keep every promise she had made, the boy would learn 'Holy, Holy, Holy' and the Hundredth Psalm. He'd pray before he ate, breakfast, lunch, and supper, for as long as she had anything to say about it. Every day of every year they lived in Gilead she would be remembering what happened that very day, reciting it to herself in her mind so sometime she could say, One time when you weren't even walking yet he took you fishing with him. He had his pole and creel in his hand and you in the crook of his arm and he went off down the road in the morning sunshine, striding along like a younger man, talking to you, laughing. He came back an hour later and set the empty creel on the table and said, 'We propped the pole and watched dragonflies. Then we got a little tired.' And what a look he gave her, in the sorrow of his happiness. He might as well have said, When he is old enough to understand, tell him about the day we went fishing. So she said, 'You might as well be writing things down.' Coming from him it would mean more.[35]

The beautiful movement here has to do with what is registered through its tenses, in its future sense of what will be past unless the wife and mother recalls it: 'she *would* remember every promise she *had* made'. It is as if the things happening in front of her are not only hers to witness, but hers to take part in. Where he (their son) won't remember, she will have to remember for him, in memory of Ames himself. 'She *would be* remembering'. It is a silent promise to carry forward what otherwise stops. Ames was 'like a younger man' as he set off but returning within an hour, there is in his vulnerable presentness 'the sorrow of his happiness', as if he had aged years again. 'Time is the occasion for our strangely mixed nature, in every moment differently compounded [. . .]' (*Adam,* p.244).

It is Lila who creates the transitional space between a present that becomes past and a past that still goes on in the future. It is likewise she who urges, so to speak, the very writing of *Gilead* itself, two books earlier, when she tells her husband to write things down – and not just leave her to tell their son all that he was too young to register at the time. Again those 'as if' tenses strain for a place for promise and possibility: 'He *might as well* have *said*' becomes 'You *might as well* be *writing*'; 'She

[35] Marilynne Robinson, *Lila,* (Virago, 2015), pp.251-2; hereafter cited as *Lila*.

could say' but his writing rather than her saying '*would* mean more'. In this amalgam, she helps create Ames' form of writing-as-though-speaking, through the care involved in both the marriage to Ames and the parenthood with him. For *Gilead* is also a celebration of the marriage of Lila, the illiterate young woman from beyond the pale and the old preacher who lost his first wife in childbirth. It is a celebration of marriage itself, what each partner brings, what each lacks. And here Robinson sees Calvin creating something that is neither the celibacy of the old monks on the one hand nor the sexual promiscuity of the French court but a renewed middle way, itself an amalgam:

> Cauvin invented modern marriage, if that is what he did, by basing his vision of it on the Old Testament use of the metaphor of married love to describe the covenant relationship between God and Israel, in which adultery is idolatry and apostasy, and faithfulness is joy and salvation. He was married for nine years, very happily to Idelette de Bure, a widow with two children. His only child died within days of its birth, and he outlived Idelette by twenty-five years. Throughout his life the idea of marriage seems only to have been more cherished by him. In the enormous positive significance he attached to it, he set himself apart from the religious tradition which idealized virginity and celibacy, and also from the humanist embrace of the sensuality of courtly and pagan literature (which was, nevertheless, published in Geneva, during Cauvin's prominence there). Perhaps he was fascinated with marriage in part because it integrated these extremes. It is the strongest impulse of his though to reject polarities. This enshrining of marriage is seen as narrowness in Cauvin, as Puritanism. But perhaps it should be seen as the solution to a problem [. . .] (*Adam,* p.212*).*

Marriage allows the outcast Lila not only the opportunity to take part in the tradition but also the responsibility of trying in her own way to pass it on after her husband's death. That is why she needs Ames's help through the after-life of writing.

'You might as well be writing things down' from Lila is thus a significant shift in the chronology that reaches back to the origins of the first novel itself. It is as though time is given a new understanding in its turning back around. The turning back around is in terms of not only different points of view but also different time bands, re-newing and re-shaping life together like a kaleidoscope. It is a different order to time than just the sequential. It is as if God's understanding is *beyond*, yet simultaneously *with* whatever one is going through, seeing the beginning and the end of it all. 'Time in some sense exists simultaneously with itself' (*Balm,* p.210). What we see beginning here is how Robinson's novels provide a way to catch a glimpse of the 'all' while remaining close to the individual, in part, in time. As she said in an interview following her unplanned decision to write and publish a second novel as sequel:

> It was interesting to me to write about book on the basis of the stories behind *Gilead.* There is always more to any situation or character than one book can contain. That is my feeling, at least. There is always another way of seeing or knowing. All sorts of strategies have been used to make that point. I was pleased when I hit upon this one.[36]

'Always more' is a key phrase in Marilynne Robinson as surely as it was in William James: it is what life as life truly is when witnessed rightly. 'This mental overplus' (*Givenness,* p. 213) is how she describes our not knowing the actual working of our own minds, not being able or allowed to control in advance the forming of a novel or a continuing series of novels In more formally religious terms, she writes of the gospels and the sayings of Jesus in a way that John Henry Newman did in his work on development: 'There is a richness of meaning always overflowing from the text and the tradition and from experience itself, a glorious plenitude, that to my mind bears the mark of divine origin far more unmistakably than any scrupulously self-consistent teaching can do' (*Givenness,* p.194). The versions of the *Gilead* story over time are not simply and wilfully self-consistent, there is always 'another way of seeing', there is never a complete, finite and absolute solution on earth. But from novel to novel there is a handing on, a renewed transmission of itself.

In 2018 at an event I attended in London where Marilynne Robinson was speaking, I asked her about the use of memories in *Gilead* being visited again and again, and the possibility of memory having the power to be re-shaped and brought forward towards a future. Robinson replied:

> I think that's true, I recommend this kind of writing to everyone. I have taught writing groups with people who simply walked in the door, not selective people. And they are always finding things about themselves, they are always realizing something private about themselves that they have never known before. And it is suddenly as if they are having access to this wealth of memory that somehow lives in them, they presume they live with, but they don't have access to them. And writing forces you inward, and then you realize that your memory is much more forward than you would have anticipated, that it does indeed change over time as circumstances help you redefine and so on, that you could simply step into a kind of realization that is not egoistic, it is purely looking at the thing that is your mind, seeing what it concludes, seeing what it obsesses over. Finding out that there are certain words you love, and that you never thought you loved things like words. Everybody ought to do it, but you have to be very hard on yourself, you cannot do it in this 'dear diary' stuff.[37]

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[36] Rebecca M. Painter, 'Special Feature: Further Thoughts on A Prodigal Son Who Cannot Come Home, on Loneliness and Grace: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson', *Christianity and Literature,* Vol 58, No. 3, (2009).

[37] Transcribed from a live event of 'Marilynne Robinson: A Life in Writing' 30th April 2018, *The Guardian* < https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2018/jun/12/marilynne-robinson-on-democracy-religion-and-donald-trump-books-podcast?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other> [accessed 29th June 2020], hereafter cited as *A Life in Writing*.

The process she speaks as more than 'dear diary' offers 'access' to dimensions other than the merely linear: 'writing forces you *inward*', 'memory is much more *forward* than you would have anticipated'. Writing is, as she says elsewhere, 'absolutely essential to thinking': 'it's a feedback loop' (*Balm,* p.208).

So, here, John Ames writes of the feelings he experiences while writing:

> For me writing has always felt like praying, even when I wasn't writing prayers, as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone. I feel I am with you now, whatever that can mean, considering that you're only a little fellow now and when you're a man you might find these letters of no interest. Or they might never reach you, for any of a number of reasons. Well, but how deeply I regret any sadness you have suffered and how grateful I am in anticipation of any good you have enjoyed. That is to say, I pray for you. And there's an intimacy in it. That's the truth (*Gilead,* pp.21-2).

Writing becomes manifestly more sacred when it is associated with prayer and with witness and with blessing. It is like Ames' lonely night walks around the town, thinking of the people asleep and their unanswered needs. The first two 'you's here mean 'one' – 'you feel that you are with someone' – and then immediately it changes in the next sentence to *'I* feel *I* am with *you* now The third and specific '*you'* in the passage has more of love within it, making '*someone*' incarnate in that imagined '*you*' living independently within and after this present. There are rationalisations, close to anxieties, that these letters will be of no future use or interest, but the tenses of a sort of after-life vulnerably created by this writing – the fatherly regret for his coming sadness, the fatherly gratitude for any anticipated joy – create something more than a ghost or angel. It is that translation – 'that is to say', 'that is to say, I pray for you' – which looks for transmission. The novel itself is an act of faith embodied in every use of the word 'you', one of those 'certain words' that Robinson says are loved, or are love.

And then Ames turns again, venturing to write far beyond what is now in front of him, trying to see what transmission will look like for his reader, his son, in the distant future:

> While I am thinking of it—when you are an old man like I am, you might think of writing some sort of account of yourself, as I am doing. In my experience of it, age has a tendency to make one's sense of oneself harder to maintain, less robust in some ways.
>
> Why do I love the thought of you old? That first twinge of arthritis in your knee is a thing I imagine with all the tenderness I felt when you showed me your loose tooth. Be diligent in your prayers, old man. I hope you will have seen more of the world than I ever got around to seeing—only myself to blame. And I hope you will have read some of my books. And God bless your eyes, and your hearing also, and of course your heart. I wish I could help you carry the weight of many years. But the Lord will have that fatherly satisfaction (*Gilead,* p.239).

'I love the thought' brings together the aged son's imagined 'arthritis' with 'all the tenderness I felt' for the child's 'loose tooth'. It is 'I hope you will', as well as 'I wish I could', keeping through his expression a kind of imaginative fatherly presence – not only as if God becomes a replacement for him but rather that, as father, Ames was only ever an imperfect representative of the original care of God. Ames knows he will miss out on being the lasting model of the father, and the Lord seems to step in to take his place, to take over, though He has always been there. It is so beautifully familiar, almost comically calling his son 'old man' like a contemporary or an equal, and almost ruefully speaking of the Lord having that human 'satisfaction' that he himself cannot have.

Writing then is more than expression for Ames, it is more urgent and less self-serving. It is his version of the process Robinson herself goes through while writing:

> Writing should always be exploratory. There shouldn't be the assumption that you know ahead of time what you want to express [. . .] It's like wrestling with the angel: on the one hand you feel the constraints of what can be said, but on the other hand you feel the infinite potential. There's nothing more interesting than language and the problem of trying to bend it to your will, which you can never quite do. You can only find what it contains, which is always a surprise.[38]

This exploratory process of writing, a mixture of effort and surprise, marks where Ames is right now. If writing is to be the only way to hand on anything to his son, the transmission is still not simple, not to be willed, not to be confined to what is supposed to be known in advance out of a lifetime of experience, transcribed and thus passed on. That is why it is closer to making a prayer - the struggle of calling out for words to the angel of language - than to providing information. It becomes a new world to order and be re-ordered. Again, for Robinson, 'it's actually reassuring to me, that I feel as if I know something that I can't articulate[. . .]' (*Balm*, p.203), and it is out of that sense of not knowing, or knowing something she herself cannot yet articulate that she is able to create Ames by joining *with* him in his voice. It is to do with what she says about not planning too much ahead on her walks, holding it back till she gets home to write; or refusing to know in advance where her novel will end. In an interview at Wheaton College, she spoke of the need for 'trying' and 'pushing': 'How can I

[38] Marilynne Robinson, 'Marilynne Robinson on Finding the Right Word', *The New York Times*, 22 September 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/22/books/review/marilynne-robinson-on-finding-the-right-word.html> [accessed 3rd June 2020]; hereafter cited as *Finding the Right Word*.

articulate this?' or 'This doesn't sound right, what could I know to make it more persuasive to me?' That is why hearing how Ames might say it is vital to her. It is, again, with her as it is with Ames in the struggle to find the 'right words' – not simply in terms of style but as keys to unlock the past and the unconscious and release them:

> Then you realize what your mind is really capable of, how much more memory it has now, if you just find how to tap into it. That's one of the things that's fascinating about writing, how much you find out you actually know. You become interested in your own mind as a rich interlocutor with yourself. And I have no idea how you make that distinction, but it's very real. If you'll be interested in the workings of your mind, and then know 'well this is something my mind is offering me, an intuition' and you think 'what is there?' and you might know. [39]

So Ames has to be an interlocutor with himself in trying to be a speaker to his son. And the 'right words' come to him, or for Marilynne Robinson come through him, like little loving surprises, small acts of grace and beauty – 'be diligent in your prayers, *old man'*, 'all the *tenderness* I felt when you showed me your loose tooth'; I wish I could help you carry the *weight* of many years'.

'Finding out that there are certain words you love, and that you never thought you loved things like words' (*A Life in Writing)*. And yet there are less simple words than 'you', or 'tenderness', or 'weight' that are also needed. There are certain older words with larger meanings that will play a part in the emerging offering that Ames is working at. Again, his author describes the experience of search and recognition:

> It happens, in my own writing, in those moments when you know there's a perfect word, even though you have not written it yet. You cast about for it, and over time, some obscure word will come to you — your mind knows it's there. Often, it's a word with such an extraordinary precision that you wonder how it survived. You think, This must have come down from early modern English or Anglo-Saxon — how did it come to birth? How did it survive? Who was it that needed this word first and coined it? It's amazing. You wonder how many people have had any use for it over the last 300 years, but there it is (*Finding the Right Word*).

One such word is 'prevenient' which Robinson calls 'an old word' (*Givenness,* p.165), needed to open the chance of Ames's son finding meaning in the tradition Ames tries to embody in voice and words. It is not that everything should be translated into the modern idiom. There are older meanings that

39 Wheaton College, 'Marilynne Robinson | Many Ways to Live a Good Life (04/04/2018)', YouTube, 25 April 2018, 45:00-46:30, < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0PJOFA2-eU> [accessed 5th June 2020].

'baffle paraphrase' (*Adam,* pp.189) and should not be reduced to the narrowness of the contemporary agenda:

> For at least a century we have diverted ourselves with the fact that it is possible to translate whole constellations of ideas into terms inappropriate to them. And then, thus transformed, they seem odd or foolish, we have acted as if we had exposed their true nature [. . .] We have alienated ourselves from our history by systematically refusing it the kind of understanding that would make it intelligible to us, until we are no longer capable of understanding (*Adam,* p.181).

The survival of the word 'prevenient' is fitting as Ames looks for a way of survival for himself and for his world-view. So it is with the word 'depravity', for example, which modern-day commentators take as a sign of Calvin's dark sense of man's wholesale sinfulness: 'In Genevan French *depraver* is clearly still near its Latin root, which means "to warp" or "to distort"'. Or with 'corruption', which 'in the French of the period, can mean "exhaustion" or "brokenness", or it can be used just as we use it now when we speak of the corruption of a text' (*Adam,* p.220). Or with the Old Testament God as horribly 'jealous' when 'the word could as well be translated as "passionate", a translation thoroughly justified by context' (*Givenness,* p.207). As Ames cannot automatically give his son what was given to him by the sheer letter, he can only hope to prepare him for the spirit of something that would open a way. Hence the preparation signalled by 'prevenient':

> Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave—that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm. And therefore, this courage allows us, as the old men said, to make ourselves useful. It allows us to be generous, which is another way of saying exactly the same thing. But that is the pulpit speaking. What have I to leave you but the ruins of old courage, and the lore of old gallantry and hope? Well, as I have said, it is all an ember now, and the good Lord will surely someday breathe it into flame again (*Gilead,* pp.280-1).

'Prevenient grace' has the definition in theology of 'grace that precedes, enabling human response', 'that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible'.[40] John Hendryx speaks in regard the background of this idea:

> The term 'prevenient grace' [. . .] refers to a universal grace which precedes and enables the first stirrings of a good will or inclination toward God and it explains the extent or degree to which the Holy Spirit influences a person prior to their coming to faith in Christ. [It] affirms total human moral inability and utter helplessness of the natural man in spiritual matters and the

[40] Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities, (*Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2006), p.35.

> absolute necessity for supernatural prevenient grace if there is to be any right response to the gospel.[41]

This single word 'prevenient' is about something *before* that it is well to have in place in order for anything *after* to be realized and received. Yet Ames speaks not of prevenient grace but of prevenient courage in place of the ruins of old courage. It is still something he cannot will or enforce, but it is something he can try to offer his child.

> Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it, except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it? (*Gilead,* p.280).

Like the young John Ames opening his eyes during his father's prayer in the cemetery, that 'little willingness to see', is the part left for mankind to carry out. This is the paradox that one needs help even to be able to accept help, to have the courage to try to be courageous and not despair, and especially as his son may be more alone in future. Robinson speaks of the need for this preparation in writing on what 'hope' means as surely as what 'corruption' or 'depravity' mean:

> Hope shapes intention. It leaves improbable possibilities open, which means that it influences the unfolding of future time. No one knows what time is, of course, but insofar as it is a stream of events influenced by earlier events—giving this word its broadest meaning—then, say, leaving the light on and supper in the oven might mean that anger would not end in alienation and all its consequences. (*What Are We Doing Here?* p.234).

There must be some kind of belief in order to begin to believe, some preparation, even if it is only preparing a supper for someone who may not come home. Otherwise, it can all feel like more than one can possibly manage or deserve, and even grace may feel impossible or forgiveness unbearable. For that capacity is what the son of Robert Boughton, the child named John Ames Boughton and called Jack, so lacks especially in *Home*, the novel to come, and what Ames wants his own son not to. *Gilead* itself is like a prevenient book in place for the other books in the complete novel.

(iii) Legacies

[41] John Hendryx, 'A Short Response to the Arminian Doctrine of Prevenient Grace', *Monergism,* (2018), <https://www.monergism.com/short-response-arminian-doctrine-prevenient-grace> [accessed 1st June 2018].

And so if this prevenient courage is the wished-for gift to be bequeathed to the son, there are two other bequests. One is to Lila, the other to Jack.

In the third novel in the series, Lila's story is that of an uneducated and abused castaway. When Ames finds her, she begins to learn the religious tradition as a seemingly accidental by-product of her writing out verses of the Bible ten times over, in order to learn the language of reading and writing. She herself has hardly had a name, in her raw and abandoned youth. But, writes Robinson:

> I'm drawn to that movement toward essentials, away from all secondary definitions, all extraneous props and ornaments. People always ask me why I often write about characters who have no name, and no place, and no money, and nothing else. Well, it's in those circumstances that you can get real definitions of things and people and experience. (*Finding the Right Word*).

So the tradition will look very different, learned anew through Lila's eyes. That is the value of her inarticulacy, her damaged wildness, her illiteracy: the words have to come back afresh in all their originality. 'I like the thought of people who are relatively unacculturated, who are self-generated, who are individual in the sense that they have not been carefully schooled in all the manners and thoughts and so on, that we can be schooled in' (*A Life in Writing).* But what she is finally bequeathed, at first ordinarily and casually, but then by the novel's end almost sacramentally is Ames's old coat:

> The old black coat he always wore to preach in was the one he put over her shoulders one evening when they were walking along the road together and he was throwing rocks at the fence posts the way a boy would do, still shy of her. But on a Sunday morning, with the sermon in front of him he'd spent the week on and knew so well he hardly needed to look at it, he was a beautiful old man, and it pleased her more than almost anything that she knew the feel of that coat, the weight of it. She'd be thinking about it when she should have been praying. But if she ever had prayed in all the years of her old life, it might have been for just that, that gentleness. And if she prayed now, it was really remembering the comfort he put around her, the warmth of his body still in that coat. It was a shock to her, a need she only discovered when it was satisfied, for those few minutes. In those days she had all the needs she could stand already, and here was another one. So she said something mean to him. That's how she used to be and how she might be again someday, if she was ever just barely getting by and somebody seemed to be about to make it harder just by making it different. They'd had their wedding by then, but she wasn't married to him yet, so she still thought sometimes, Why should he care? What is it to him? That was loneliness. When you're scalded, touch hurts, it makes no difference if it's kindly meant. Now he could comfort her with a look. And what would she do without him. What would she do (*Lila* p.253).

Then weight of that coat is grace's counterpoint to what Ames had called the weight of many years, making it light. 'It was a shock to her, a need she only discovered when it was satisfied': grace is to

do with a deep sense of surprise, arising out of the ordinary things. 'Ordinary things have always seemed numinous to me', Robinson says.[42] 'In *Gilead,* prevenient grace, wherever it ultimately comes from, is perceived in the everyday world and in the memory of ordinary events, shifting the location of grace'.[43] Grace is what makes a word such as 'old' feel right here – 'the old black coat', 'he was a beautiful old man': she can 'stand' the word, bear her needs without defensive aggression, these older things coming back to her not to replace her own terrible old wounds and memories, but to fit alongside and redeem them. 'If she had every prayed in her old life, it might have been for just that'. Lila does not merely take in the content of Ames's sermons and accept it; it must pass through every memory of her own, in a new blend, through all that the very feel of the coat means to her. It becomes like a bridge: it is not the formal prayer but what she was thinking of while supposed to be praying; it is not the sermon in front of him, it is the beautiful old man who makes the doctrine naturally incarnate, like God implicitly emanating from him. This is further registered in the way that the sentences are not simply successive: certain sentences go back to earlier ones or come out of them, to and fro. 'And if she prayed now, it was really remembering the comfort he put around her' goes back to the beginning of the paragraph with the coat he first 'put over her shoulders one evening when they were walking', to become 'now he could comfort her with a look', as with the force that is carrying a kind of transmission, a small vision in syntax of what meaning is trying to become in this chapter.

Even in this way, their marriage will bring about a new translation of the tradition:

> Viewed this way, our language – and especially literature, that special, potent case – has incredible power. I was very struck by something that I came across in my reading of Jonathan Edwards. I recall him quoting a writer who talks about how whatever we say live on after us, that we continue to exist so long as any word we say exists in a living mind [. . .] We're not in the habit of thinking of ourselves as people of influence in this way (*Finding the Right Word*).

[42] Sarah Fay, 'Marilynne Robinson, The Art of Fiction No. 198', *the PARIS REVIEW,* Issue 186, Fall 2008, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5863/the-art-of-fiction-no-198-marilynne-robinson> [accessed 8th June 2020].

[43] Neil Browne, 'Parcipatory Grace: Calvinism, Pragmatism, and the Ethics of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*', *Connotations,* Vol. 25, No. 2, 1st October 2016, < https://www.connotations.de/article/neil-browne-parcipatory-grace-calvinism-pragmatism-and-the-ethics-of-grace-in-marilynne-robinsons-gilead/> [accessed 5th June 2019].

It is as though the coat is somehow like Ames laying a mantle upon Lila, a cloak. For Feuerbach it would itself be a religious garment for its human sacredness. But even more, this 'old black coat' has been the prevenient thing, the outer garment that allows her, as she sees him wearing it and wears it herself, to be able to take the 'feel' and the 'weight of it'. 'She'd be thinking about it when she should have been praying': what she is naturally thinking about during the time she should pray to God, is again what she might have prayed for 'in all the years of her old life', 'that gentleness'. Ames' character is how Lila is able to see God It is the inwardness from him that stays within her; shaken down as an aftermath that colours Lila's very tone. Even so, the words of Ames will live on, through her own version, her own loving participation, overcoming her past without forgetting or obliterating it.

But just as Lila must be the one to remember for Ames, she cannot leave behind those who were part of her story before. Here she is pondering after the baptism of their young son. He is now accepted into the faith. She had a longer harder route. Robinson has always loved the words of exile and acceptance from: 'You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt'.[44] But the accepted stranger still felt strange:

> She sat down in the preacher's chair and held the baby against her [. . .] The old coat he had put over her shoulders when they were walking in the evening was as good to remember as the time Doll took her up in her arms. She thought it was nothing she had known to hope for and something she had wanted too much all the same. So too much happiness came with it, and the happiness was strange to her. He said, We have to keep you with us. In that eternity of his, where everybody will be happy, how could he feel the lack of her, the loss of her? She had to think about that. Sometime she would ask him about it. It must always be true that there are the stragglers, people somebody couldn't bear to be without, no matter what they'd been up to in this life. That son of Boughton's.
>
> And then there were the people no one would miss, who had done no special harm, who just lived and died as well as they could manage. That would have been Lila, if she had not wandered into Gilead. And then she thought, I couldn't bear to be without Doll or Mellie, or Doane and Marcelle. Even Arthur and his boys—not that they had mattered so much to her when she was a child, but because fair was fair and none of them ever had any good thing that the others didn't have some right to, even Deke. If there was goodness at the center of things, that one rule would have to be respected, because it was as important to them as anything in this world (*Lila,* pp.257-8).

[44] The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments, Authorised King James Version, (Cambridge University Press, 1984), Exodus 22.21.

Doll is the older woman who, whatever her sins and roughnesses, stood in as a sort of mother during the outcast years when hope and need were painful and often denied by violently defensive reactions, struggling for expression. But this is a version where what was ill expressed is re-written and put right. It is not that she can be saved without Doll or all the others that no one else but she would miss. Or without those other versions of herself – the lost one who did not have her luck, if that was what it was: 'that would have been Lila, if she had not wandered into Gilead'. The mantle of this old coat calls to Lila that she should not abandon or deny but represent and in herself and her good fortune redeem those who lived without religious traditions, though 'goodness' was still at times their language and the feeling brought about from their actions. Doll taking 'her up in her arms' gave as good a love in her way as that offered from Ames placing that old coat 'over her shoulders'. She must represent *all those* people who in turn represent *her* life:

> In eternity people's lives could be altogether what they were and had been, not just the worst things they ever did, or the best things either. So she decided that she should believe in it, or that she believed in it already. How else could she imagine seeing Doll again? Never once had she taken her to be dead, plain and simple. If any scoundrel could be pulled into heaven just to make his mother happy, it couldn't be fair to punish scoundrels who happened to be orphans, or whose mothers didn't even like them, and who would probably have better excuses for the harm they did than the ones who had somebody caring about them. It couldn't be fair to punish people for trying to get by, people who were good by their own lights, when it took all the courage they had to be good (*Lila,* p.259).

'All the courage' they had feels like a bequest to her that does the work of Ames' prevenient courage on their behalf. 'One of my old Puritans proposed that we might be judged twice, once at our death and once when the full effects of our lives had played themselves out [. . .]' (*What Are We Doing Here*? p.234). But Lila is also one of the effects of those lives, and embodies the voice that calls against narrow judgment, for mercy and mitigation and forgiveness, and not punishment but grace. If a good person deserving of heaven would be so moved and upset that those they had cared for and those who had played a part of their life *weren't* part of their redemption, then the sadness of that is for their sake like a plea to God. It's an implicit pleading through the strength of Lila's own life, and Ames' feeling for her life, for the all the others 'There was no way to abandon guilt, no decent way to disown it. All the tangles and knots of bitterness and desperation and fear had to be pitied. No, better, grace had to fall over them' (*Lila,* p.260). Surely God pities that mediation and that feeling. It is

Lila's own witness and understanding apart from all her husband has given to her, something that 'Someday she would tell him what she knew' (*Lila,* pp.260-1). And just as she must remember for Ames, it is the same kind of feeling that she must also plead for Doll.

And I now turn finally to the second bequest to prepare for my next chapter: a bequest to the son of Boughton named after Ames. 'That son of Boughton's' is short stabbing sentence of memory that came to mind suddenly, we have seen, when Lila was thinking of the stragglers in need of being saved. Here it is that Ames**'** anxiety for the future of his wife and son involves something less saintly, more sexual. The terrible but naturally fallen fear in the old man is that he will be involuntarily handing them over to Jack, the young man who take his place without preserving his tradition. Part of Ames' challenge that he will need to deal with is leaving the family he loves:

> My impulse is strong to warn you against Jack Boughton. Your mother and you. You may know by now what a fallible man I am, and how little I can trust my feelings on this subject. And you know from living out years I cannot foresee, whether you must forgive me for warning you, or forgive me for failing to warn you, or indeed if none of it turn out to matter at all. This is a grave question for me (*Gilead,* pp.142-3*).*

This is the sexual threat to the future: a dangerous and charming younger man, a non-believer with a notorious past, somebody whose wildness might correspond to something in Lila that is still wild. It is a trial of anxiety that tests Ames to the uttermost, in the form of the black sheep, the prodigal son who let down Ames's best friend. These are the crude judgments and jealousies he cannot easily put aside. And yet at the end of *Gilead,* when the hopeless and self-damning Jack, so lacking in prevenient courage or prevenient grace, is leaving Gilead, Ames meets him at the bus stop:

> I called to him and he stopped and waited for me, and I walked with him up to the bus stop. I brought along *The Essence of Christianity,* which I had set on the table by the door, hoping I might have a chance to give it to him. He turned it over in his hands, laughing a little at how beat up it is. He said, 'I remember this from -- forever!' Maybe he was thinking it looked like the kind of thing he used to pocket in the old days. That thought crossed my mind, and it made me feel as though the book did actually belong to him. I believe he was pleased with it. I dog-eared page 20- 'Only that which is apart from my own being is capable of being doubted by me. How then can I doubt of God, who is my being? To doubt of God is to doubt of myself.' And so on (*Gilead,* pp. 272-3).

The book Ames brings with him, the one Jack recognizes, is not the Bible. It is rather a bridge, the book that his own brother owned that took him away from the orthodox faith. Feuerbach's E*ssence of*

Christianity, the book that the woman who was to become George Eliot translated to maintain the feelings of religion, becomes a holding place of what feels like a potential hope for something like grace to come.[45] Ames gives all he really has left of his brother to Jack 'as though the book did actually belong to him' not like any kind of stolen tradition. The 'actually' stands out because it does not seem as if there is much that actually belongs to Jack. But it is an attempted blessing for all that is to told again in *Home*, that novel that follows *Gilead*.

[45] One critic objects, 'For Robinson, grace is free for all, found everywhere, and in everything. This grace sounds wonderful, but it ignores the problem of evil.' All too rationalistically confined to human terms, Wilson is troubled that Robinson doesn't take into account the sin and sacrifice of the cross from which grace is possible. Marilynne Robinson however is focusing more on the *human* experience of grace, and in extending grace to other humans. To Robinson, it would be wrong to assume that we could give judgement as God does. Ames desires the possibility of grace for Jack, but he does not and cannot give God's forgiveness to Jack.

Jessica Hooten Wilson, "Pushing Back Against Marilynne Robinson's Theology," *Church Life Journal*, 2019 <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/pushing-back-against-marilynne-robinsons-theology-2/> [accessed 24th November 2020].

2.

Home

This chapter marks the move from Marilynne Robinson's account of John Ames in *Gilead,* to that of the younger man named after him, John Ames Boughton, known as Jack. *Home* remarkably dares to replicate the same story as was told in *Gilead*, but dealing with the crisis question of whether traditions may be able to be translated to the next generation from a different point of view and a changed narrative perspective. Ames friend, the old father and minister Reverend Robert Boughton is at home being looked after by his kindly daughter Glory, who will always put the happiness of her family before her own interests. Jack, the wandering lost child or black sheep of the family, has finally come back home after years of absence and profligacy. The novel deals with the temporary return of this prodigal son to visit his now ailing father, and how the family handles the aftermath of failed expectations from years of being apart.

When Marilynne Robinson finished *Gilead,* she was surprised to find out it would lead to another novel itself returning to what thereby becomes its predecessor. She was asked in an interview why there was a sequel to *Gilead,* but not to her first novel *Housekeeping,* after the publication of which there was a long twenty-four-year gap of silence:

> I actually waited for Ruth and Sylvie to stop haunting my imagination. Finally they did stop. After 'Gilead' I realized I was being haunted again, and I decided to let these souls have more life, since they seemed to want it. If there was a time when I could have done the same for Ruth and Sylvie, that time passed.[46]

It was the voices of these souls that seem to haunt her like ghosts seeking a further life rather than a stop. The characters from *Gilead* seemed to be calling back to her, though not in the same way that Ames called to his son through the writing of a long letter. The other characters do not simply, lineally follow on from the first novel but make it begin again from their different viewpoints, as if wanting to speak to and through Marilynne Robinson from their own different angle, within their own intermingled stories. *Home* is a novel full of voices, of dialogue, taking over from Ames' sub-vocal

[46] Marilynne Robinson, 'Marilynne Robinson: By The Book', *The New York Times*, 7th March 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/books/review/marilynne-robinson-by-the-book.html> [accessed 13th June 2020].

first-person narration of *Gilead*. A glimpse of this complex chronology of added dimensions has already been shown from *Lila*, the third novel in the series, where near the end the reader finds out that it was his young wife's idea that Ames should write to his son. The second novel will be about Jack, partly written through Jack's voice but not as if by Jack himself:

> I knew that in order to write what I took to be the narrative of *Home*—which I took to be very much concerned with Jack—that I could not put it in his point of view, that that would be a violation of the character, because he would never have told it. Glory is his sympathetic, but still removed, champion and observer. But she doesn't know everything. There are real limits to what she can know.[47]

Jack cannot speak so openly, directly, confessedly, as John Ames can through the act of writing. He is not the father trying to pass on the tradition, but the son unable to receive it. There is in him a suppression by guilt and shame, through self-disgust and self-bafflement. Jack is terrifying adrift even in his return home, while Ames even in his human flaws, partialities and blindnesses, provides a trust-worthy anchorage rather than an infallible finality:

> As my primary character of course I have this stalwartly religious – in the mainline sense of the word – figure. What I've been interested in doing in both Home and Lila is complicating the sense of what the religious is. I'm very glad to have Ames there and I'm not saying he's a kind of hypocrite or some unconscious pietist or something, but at the same time, using him as a sort of anchor, I can raise questions he wouldn't respect. In *Home* there are ways in which Jack is the righteous man and that's very important to the book.[48]

In order for *Gilead* to be turned around, it had first to offer an anchoring foundation for all that which would follow. Like Ames, the first novel can afford to be challenged, corrected, revised and re-envisioned. This ability in novels to turn something around and speak out of another point of view is what Marilynne Robinson calls a form of mental geometry:

> I feel that I am in conversation with the literature that has gone before me. I feel that I am in conversation with streams of my own civilization as I understand them […] I think of fiction of having dimensionality: you don't make a simple statement, you rotate an idea and look at it

[47] Jennifer L. Holberg, 'A Conversation With Marilynne Robinson' *Image*, Issue 74, <https://imagejournal.org/article/conversation-marilynne-robinson/> [accessed 14th June 2020]; hereafter cited as *A Conversation With Marilynne Robinson.*

[48] Andrew Cunning, 'Reflections on the Ordinary: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson', <https://journals.sagepub.com/pb-assets/cmscontent/CAL/Andrew%20Cunning%20Conversation%20with%20Marilynne%20Robinson%202017-1547563427643.pdf> [27th June 2020].

> from various sides. I never want to write essayistic fiction, but at the same time I never feel as if my fiction and my essays are separate projects.[49]

Turning or rotating the story of *Gilead* produces the same kind of effect as a kaleidoscope in motion, with each rotation creating a new perspective on the same familiar materials. Father to son becomes son to father, but also brother to sister in complicated vectors.

And somewhere behind this artistic method is another version of the brother-sister story. David Summers, now an emeritus professor of art theory and Italian Renaissance art at the University of Virginia, is two years older than his sister, Marilynne to whom he dedicated his book *Vision, Reflection and Desire* in 2007, between *Gilead* in 2004 and *Home* in 2008. For being those two years ahead, he was always in their youth her teacher, bring home the lessons of his education and reading. It was he who early proposed to divide up the sister arts between them, he to be the painter, he said, she to be the poet. What is especially relevant here is this: that as painter turned also art historian, David Summers has been much concerned with the invention of perspective. It is the very subject of *Vision, Reflection and Desire.*

In that book he writes of the historical shift in painting from two to three dimensional representation within the Renaissance, the humanism of which Marilynne Robinson celebrates most of all through Calvin. For David Summers, the movement from surface plane to a sense of greater depth is a transformation through human art that can be seen and renewed every time a viewer recognises the shift from material brushstroke to what brushstroke conveys in its very making. The creation of an individual human point of view in relation to a depicted landscape offers an implicit human presence embedded in what is seen and painted, revealing through its interaction with the landscape 'the whole attentive life of an individual human being' (*Vision,* p.162). That varied human presence is developed through the movement from the science of optics and the effects of light to the lines and laws of the drawing of perspective, what he calls 'the geometry of sight': all the applications

[49] Hope University, 'Dr Marilynne Robinson', YouTube, 11th August 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l28G2b13bh4> [accessed 25th June 2020].

of physical geometries, he writes, 'could be worked out as descriptions of interactions of thought, imagination, sight, and visual reality'. [50] As these practices become more culturally embedded, the very meaning of 'vision' or 'perspective' or point of view' became widened and deepened, until now we almost forget the original force of the words. 'Perspective became a modern Western metaphor for human being-in-the-world' (*Vision,* p160) and not just a practical means of representation. The art came out of science, of optics, and did not remain within a separate aesthetic domain but offered a new perspective on the world, in a wider sense of culture. The ability to offer different perspectives on any subject meant that 'the subject persisted through these changes in the understanding of the subject itself' (*Vision* p.161). So it is with *Gilead* through all its shifts and revisions, like one great human novel, like an American version of Middlemarch, many novels within one, or the four gospels. As David Summers puts it:

> All these points of view give "variety" to the university as a whole composition [. . .] in which "certain beautiful designs seem to be only confusion, until one finds their true point of view" [Leibniz]. In Augustine's theodicy [. . .] the world is in reality a great poem set out with antitheses, its apparent oppositions resolved only in the eyes of God (*Vision,* p.159).

Within that great variety lies the literary version of what is perspective in painting: namely the differences of languages within what had seemed to be one language. So, at its simplest, Jack like some exile does not know how to speak to his own father across what seems a religious divide almost as wide as that between the saved and the damned. As he says to his brother, 'Sometimes it seems as though I'm in one universe and you're in another'.[51] Alasdair MacIntyre spoke of the modern babel, the confusion of voices speaking out of different traditions, of broken fragmented systems, of antagonistic world-views.

This bring me back Alasdair MacIntyre's thinking about inherited languages, outlined in the introduction. The philosopher considers how the loss of a single coherent tradition may be repaired or re-shaped by a second version of a first tradition, or what he calls 'a second first language' (*Whose Justice?).* Where a first-person sense of that first tradition produces beautiful thoughts in Ames, here

[50] David Summers, *Vision, Reflection and Desire* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2007), pp.5, 9; hereafter cited as *Vision.*

[51] Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (Virago, 2009), pp.278; hereafter cited as *Home.*

in *Home* the frequent dialogue produces a loop of conflicting tongues, until the most terrible things become articulated ever more explicitly. Here, for example, father Boughton re-enters the room after having an argument with Jack an hour before, trying for a second attempt at the primary issue, the basic relationship:

> The old man took his hand. 'I think I was cross,' he said.
> Jack said, 'I had it coming.'
> His father said, 'No, no, it isn't how I wanted things to be. I promised myself a thousand times, if you came home you would never hear a word of rebuke from me. No matter what.'
> 'I don't mind. I deserve rebuke.'
> The old man said, 'You ought to let the Lord decide what you deserve. You think about that too much, what you deserve. I believe that is part of the problem.'
> Jack smiled. 'I believe you may have a point.'
> 'Nobody deserves anything, good or bad. It's all grace. If you accepted that, you might be able to relax a little.'
> Jack said, 'Somehow I have never felt that grace was intended for me, particularly.'
> His father said, 'Oh nonsense! That is just nonsense!' He closed his eyes and withdrew his hand. Then he said, 'I was cross again.'
> Jack laughed. 'Don't worry about it. Dad.'
> After a moment the old man said, 'Don't call me that.'
> 'Sorry.'
> 'I don't like it at all. Dad. It sounds ridiculous. It's not even a word.'
> I'll never say it again' (*Home,* p.171-2).

Jack has never had a name for his father. To Boughton 'Dad' seems more like fallen language than the language of familiar endearment. 'I'll never say it again' in response to 'It's not even a word' feels like another form of death, the conversation turned back round again to where it started, with the possibility of a shared language even more damaged. The language of grace is still there – the language that Marilynne Robinson might use against Jack's despairing sense of his own deserts – but it is still sandwiched between the father's being cross and being cross again, between the smile and the laugh and the sorriness of Jack. It cannot get out its single voice – and the novelist is so sensitive to tone and voice - from all the mess that surrounds it. The promise 'I promised myself a thousand times, if you came home you would never hear a word of rebuke from me' is as painfully defeated on the father's side as the son's 'I don't mind'- as if, disinherited and self-condemned, Jack has hardly a right to be fully here. With Jack, 'there was a kind of grace to anything [he] did with his whole attention, or when he forgot irony for a while' (*Home,* p.146). But as Rowan Williams indicates, Jack

can hardly ever forget irony for long, the never being at home or having comfort in his father's language:[52]

> Jack covered his face with his hands and laughed. 'The Lord', he said, 'is very — interesting.'
> 'I know you don't mean any disrespect, his father said.
> 'I really don't know what I mean. I really don't.'
> 'Well,' the old man said, 'I wish I could help you with that' (Home, p.157).

The covering of the face alongside the laugh or smile, the ruefully free sense of deep religious interest along with the apologetic feeling of not knowing the meaning of it all and the danger of disrespect: all this is a mini version of babel sounding in a single head.

In this chapter what I accordingly have in mind, to put it formally after MacIntyre, is as follows:

1. *The first language* of one's tradition, the inherited whole world-view. In *Gilead* and *Home* this is the heritage which ideally should be passed on from a first generation.
2. *The Second first language*. This is the possibility when the first language encounters a rival tradition or critical opposition. It is the problem for the second generation in Robinson's novels. In the face of crisis, internal contradictions and external oppositions, may the remnants of first language to be utterly lost, or can it be renewed?
3. The second generation may be part of the rebellion against, and banishment from the first language, as seems to be the case with Jack in *Home*; but equally they may look for some compromise, as with Jack's sister, Glory. Hence there are also, with characters such as Glory, secondary *substitutes,* for loss of the first tradition. This may occur when a son or daughter tries to substitute human kindness for what was previously seen as Christian charity and mercy, which had a particular place not as an apologetic or mitigating extra, but as no more and no less than one part within a comprehensive theological whole culminating in God's

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[52] Rowan Williams, 'Archbishop's Speech at Conference on Christianity and Literature' <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/2136/archbishops-speech-at-conference-on-christianity-and-literature> [accessed 16th November 2020]; hereafter cited as 'Rowan Williams, *Christianity and Literature*'. See also Rowan Williams, "Poetic and Religious Imagination" <http://people.bu.edu/joeld/Poetic-and-Religious-Imagination.pdf> [accessed 16th November 2020]: 'Kierkegaard understood irony as 'absence', the absence of the speaker from his words; ultimately, the absence of the person from the world. This, however, is to put it in rather extreme form.'

grace. Kindness may simply be a well-meaning add-on in a world caught between a religious hangover and a secular scepticism.

But I will also have in mind something else in terms of secondary substitutes, this time in relation to the first generation. Here I am thinking of Boughton the minister father to Jack and Glory: a man who, without knowing it, has already substituted for the spirit of the first tradition its mere letter, in a closed and essentially worn-out dogma. Where the failing reverend should be representing the first tradition, in this fallen translation he is mis-representing it.

4. The final orientation area occurs in the absence of 2 and in denial of the half-way measures of 3. It is the experience of crisis itself, as the full acknowledgement of the breakdown of 1, such that it alone is closest to what 1 means even through the felt loss if it. The sense of a terrible *primary reality* in that crisis – what I have signalled in my introduction as Bion's '0' and what William James pointed to in his Varieties of Religious Experience – follows upon the chaos of loss of the first tradition. The primary is not so much a mode of translation as are the others: it is more the result into breakdown or tragedy. 2 will never be achieved if 4 is not risked, and may never be attained even so.

(i) The Loss of a First Language

I begin with problems 1 and 3 above.

Glory, said Marilynne Robinson, 'doesn't know everything. There are real limits to what she can know' – and to what she can do. But Glory serves also as a painful marker of how the crisis in *Home* goes far beyond ordinary measures, an old memory hardly able here to help with the present situation:

> How to announce the return of comfort and well-being except by cooking something fragrant. That is what her mother always did. After every calamity of any significance she would fill the atmosphere of the house with the smell of cinnamon rolls or brownies, or with chicken and dumplings, and it would mean, This house has a soul that loves us all, no matter what. It would mean peace if they had fought and amnesty if they had been in trouble. It had meant, You can come down to dinner now, and no one will say a thing to bother you, unless you have forgotten to wash your hands. And her father would offer the grace, inevitable with minor variations, thanking the Lord for all the wonderful faces he saw around his table.
>
> 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 (*Home*, pp.263-4).

The memory presented in the first paragraph should look hopeful and reassuring as each 'it would mean' or 'would have meant' seems to define the safety and love that this tradition gives their family: something they could count on as a version of warm housekeeping. But the first two sentences in the second paragraph show the problems of transition to a second generation and a later setting. There is little of what MacIntyre calls a second first language: that is to say, the tradition recreated to serve a new age or situation, changed but changed only to make new again the old underlying spirit. Instead the gap between the two paragraphs is widened by another generation, as if the first paragraph is the heritage understood and practised by the first generation, and the second, inferior, through the next generation as proxy. The original heritage cannot pull through to the next generation, no matter how badly it wants to. 'No matter what' in the first paragraph thus becomes 'she *wished* it mattered more' in the second. Then, there is only the terrible alternative of 'Or mattered less' as the love which should be the first thing becomes overset by guilt and disappointment, like fallen secondaries. Jack is like that 'less', doing away with what one despairs of re-creating and tires of feeling the loss of. The second paragraph has not power to reshape the memory, or rescue the love, from the first. The mother in the first paragraph says of the almost sacramental meal-giving: 'It would mean, this house has a soul that loves us all, no matter what.' But now, without the mother, with Glory as her surrogate, there is no true home, no container (in Bion's terms) for the soul. Glory might wish for more, or failing that for less, but there is never sufficient, only the little domestic offerings short of being sacramental. As the second paragraph comes to a close, Glory makes a resolution that she is at least happy with the 'thought' that the act of trying to bring back the memory will bring some kind of comfort to her family. This is a secondary position with only secondary outcomes, left as 'a little'. It leaves Glory trying vainly as it were to hold together the two paragraphs, the two generations, offering hope and kindness but in an already half-defeated intention of failed mediator.

The novelist Colm Tóibín writes of this apparently failed young woman, without career or relationship outside the house, as an essential part of a terrifyingly bold experiment on Marilynne Robinson's part:

> She now takes the risk of making Glory very dull indeed and her daily routines and concerns in her father's house as tedious to herself as they almost are to the reader. Glory is, at one level, one of fiction's least interesting creations. Yet she slowly exudes an inner power, a light, almost like the woman in a Vermeer painting or an early Velásquez painting.[53]

In this crisis, the novel has to be ruthless. At moments in the shifting perspectives of Robinson's own form of painting, Glory exudes from the very midst of the ordinary that light that Tóibín describes. But then it is also true that, more continuously, the novel cannot itself occupy Glory's well-meaning position in its a sincere mixture of love and pity. Instead, it has to find traces of a more primary position even in the ruins of the original tradition. Instead of trying to heal the damage or mitigate against it, the main primariness of reality in *Home* is found in the sheer pain of the breakdown. Here two are in pain alone together - the father and son:

> The old man said 'You take your time. But I want you to give me your hand now.' And he took Jack's hand and moved it gently toward himself, so he could study the face Jack would have hidden from him. 'Yes,' he said, 'here you are.' He laid the hand against his chest. 'You feel that heart in there? My life became your life, like lighting one candle from another. Isn't that a mystery? I've thought about it many times. And yet you always did the opposite of what I hoped for, the exact opposite. So I tried not to hope for anything at all, except that we wouldn't lose you. So of course we did. That was the one hope I couldn't put aside.'
>
> Jack withdrew his hand from his father's and put it to his face again. 'This is very difficult,' he said. 'What can I do--I mean, is there something I can do now?'
>
> 'That's true,' his father said. 'Not a thing to be done. I'm sorry I brought it up. I thought it was troubling my sleep. I guess it was. Why did that make me think it was important? I don't know. All that old grief coming back on me. I'm tired now, though. It seems like I'm always tired.' And he settled into his pillow and turned onto his right side, away from Jack, toward the wall (*Home,* p.121).

Again the paragraphing is vital to temporarily stationing a point of view. The first paragraph is read not only from the perspective of the one speaking, but also the one hearing it all. That is the density that the novel now has to occupy, instead of any easy dialogue of transmission between the generations. At first it seems as though that transmission remains possible in the laying on of hands,

[53] Colm Toiblin, 'Putting Religion In Its Place', *London Review Of Books*, Vol. 36, No. 20, 23rd October 2014 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n20/colm-toibin/putting-religion-in-its-place> [accessed 16th June 2020].

the attempted sharing of hearts: 'my life became your life'. But then comes: 'you always did the *opposite*' and 'I tried not to hope' which is pain now gone into the saying and pain renewed in the receiving. For the hurt utterance comes back to hurt Jack too: Jack's hand is over his face almost hiding the damage, but preventing sight and communication. A circle of hurt is the shape and dwelling in this home, leaving everything in an aftermath of negation ('not to', 'except that', 'wouldn't', 'couldn't'). Instead of Glory, it is Jack who is now caught between the two paragraphs here: he can't go back to the first, but he also can't escape it or remedy it. This is a kind of profound post-religious mess, mixtures of hurt in place of nurturing relations, loss of ways out or back or forward. 'Is there anything I can do now . . .?' It sounds like an overly belated plea in despair, left over rather helplessly offering help. Jack finds himself existing at 'home' but in really in a psychological place where he is made to feel like something caught between his father's wishes and disappointments, in his own kind of limbo on earth. There is guilt and despair in the lost wish to be a loving son.[54]

Thoughts are being spoken out loud in this novel on the very edge of the intolerable. 'So I tried not to hope for anything at all, except that we wouldn't lose you. So of course we did. That was the one hope I couldn't put aside.' Marilynne Robinson remembered how as a young woman at home it was her brother David who told her that 'Jonathan Edwards had said never entertain a thought that you would not entertain on your death bed. And I was probably seventeen when he told me that, but I never forgot it' (*Balm,* p.212). Now close to his death bed, Boughton is thinking and saying and hearing those killing thoughts that are close to that realest of realities which Bion signalled by the simple nameless term '0'. In the words of the father's pain 'I tried not' has to encounter that 'except';

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[54] For a negative account of Jack's pain see Ted Gioia, "Home by Marilynne Robinson" <http://greatbooksguide.com/MarilynneRobinsonHome.html> [accessed 24th November 2020]: 'Yet, in the final analysis, *Home* falls short of its illustrious predecessor. This book is not as tightly written as her previous work. The reader must endure at least two dozen conversations in Home during which Jack Boughton is evasive and says "Thank you" or "You are so kind" or "Yes, sir" or some other equivalent statement—dead end dialogues that gets tiresome after the tenth or twentieth repetition. The action of the book revolves around Jack, our prodigal son. Yet, sad to say, no work and all play has made Jack a dull boy—or at least a dull conversationalist.' Jack's limited or broken articulation is argued in this thesis to be due to the force of painful reality he feels in these conversations. It is as if he cannot speak a responding language, even if he wished to.

'we wouldn't' has to become 'the one I couldn't': the reader can feel the very shape of this feeling, the unnamed realities it has to go around, the negatives it is affected by, the ironic tone of 'so of course', and the conditionals that try unavailingly to manage it all. It is a complex fallen language that struggles to find any way through, but at least holds that terrible, vulnerable and final '*one* hope'.

The first language of the religious tradition as embodied in Father Boughton can now get hardly help him to stay anywhere near '0'. In him it is as Marilynne Robinson describes it through the words of Calvin's twentieth-century successor Karl Barth. In Boughton a secondary religion has replaced the true theology:

> 'Religion,' in the invidious sense common to Barth [. . .] exists when, in Barth's words, 'the divine reality offered and manifested to us in revelation is replaced by a concept of God arbitrarily and wilfully evolved by man.' For Barth [. . .] falseness of some kind is a universal phenomenon of religious consciousness In any case, the concept is not far from ideas such as hypocrisy or phariseeism. It is not difficult to understand why this stinging use of the word 'religious' would seem appropriate when most of the religious leaders of Germany were eager to embrace National Socialism (*Adam,* p.112).

If theology is a way to explore the potential of prevenient grace, then religion is its pre-emptive betrayal by trying to anticipate solutions. *Home* shows how organized religion can become a faithless and secondary account of true belief, the spirit degenerated into the letter. In *Church Dogmatics*, from 1932, Barth famously found religion itself guilty of 'unglaube', a lack of faith: in its institutionalised development, religion ceases to be understood in terms of the revelation that founds it but rather makes revelation be understood in terms of religion. The great thing is now in the wrong place; the entire transcendent object of religion has become subordinated and diminished within its religious incorporation.

Twenty years before Jack comes back home he fathered a child out of wedlock to a young woman in Gilead and left town soon after. Now Glory thinks back to the moment she witnessed her father face this disgracing moment as a religious leader and as a father:

> But in those days their lives were lived so publicly, it had seemed to her they might as well just acknowledge what everyone would have known in any case. She had never had any reason to think her parents had other intentions, but she might have helped them, she thought, by giving them herself to worry about. They both believed firmly in the power of example. This would be a great act of moral instruction. They must act consistently with their faith. They must consider all its applications in the present circumstance. Yes! She watched as her father mustered his courage. 'The Lord has been very good to me!' he said, reminding himself that his obligations were correspondingly great, in fact limitless. This was a thought he always found

> exhilarating. Jack had left his car keys on the piano and taken the train back to college. She was almost old enough to drive, and she was fairly sure she knew how it was done. So she took her father out into the country to see that baby. It was disturbing to remember how happy she had been then, in the very middle of his deepest grief (*Home,* pp.18-9).

Glory watching her father as he 'mustered his courage' has a different viewpoint from Ames writing to his son. It is the 'must' and 'consistently' attached to 'faith' – 'they must act consistently with their faith' - that is the disturbing secondary use of language: all 'must'. Boughton's literal and formulaically pious reaction becomes a secondary force against any spirit of theology – the exhilarating thought that still bears its traces - which could have turned the distanced 'present circumstance' into what Glory so naturally feels: the happiness, despite the surrounding grief, in a new human life in that baby. 'Theology because it is anchored in pre-modern thought,' wrote Marilynne Robinson in a lecture on Happiness, 'not only accommodates anomaly but is devoted to its exploration' (*Happiness).* And this is so not only in happiness: in *Home* Jack himself is to others as well as to himself, an anomaly, not easily accommodated, but still a living fact. 'Philosophy, so long as it retained something of the character of religious thought, also remained open to paradox. It could still accept reality as "given," that is, as having a source outside itself.' That given may be a Jack as much as Jack's child, within a world of complexity and not just consistency. 'Insofar as it retains its character as complexity--that is, insofar as it resists ready assimilation to preexisting coherency--it is the world making a true report of itself' (*Happiness).* It is that 'of itself' that enables life to escape human control and prediction.

In the service of that report, I here bring together my first example, Glory and the food, with my second example, the father and the son, even as this kaleidoscopic novel does, with denser and denser overlaps, as the distance from the '0' at the centre of the problem decreases and decreases, unable to live with, unable to be held off:

> [...] Nothing to be said, nothing to be done. Her father, who hardly spoke at all, watched their comings and goings with irritation and distrust. She served dinner in the kitchen, careful not to stir memories if she could avoid it. When they were seated and she had said the grace, her father sat impatiently with his hands folded in his lap until Jack offered to feed him his mashed potatoes and gravy. These last few days his gentleness had been especially striking to her, and why should it be? She had always known he could be gentle. She would tell the others in case they had forgotten, so that they would all hope someday to know him as well as she did. Then if he ever came to any of them he would be deeply and immediately welcome, however

> disreputable he might seem or be. Finally her father gestured at the meal she had made and said, 'I guess this is goodbye.'
> Jack said, 'Not quite yet.'
> The old man nodded. 'Not yet,' he said bitterly. 'Not yet.'
> 'Teddy will be here soon.'
> 'I'm sure of that.' His head fell. 'With his stethoscope. As if that solved anything.'
> Jack cleared his throat. 'It's been good to be home. It really has.'
> The old man raised his eyes and studied his son's face, 'You've never had a name for me. Not one you'd call me to my face. Why is that?'
> Jack shook his head. 'I don't know, myself. They all seemed wrong when I said them. I didn't deserve to speak to you the way others did.'
> 'Oh!' his father said, and he closed his eyes. 'That was what I waited for. That was what I wanted' (*Home,* p.324).

In her characteristic situation of wanting to circumvent the infliction of more pain and hurt, Glory goes out of her way not to 'stir memories if she could avoid it'. This is still related to her housekeeping mission to 'speak to them in their weary sleep with the memory of comfort' (*Home,* p.264), 'awakening them with the comfort of a memory' (*Home,* p.265); but the desire to heal has to give way to the need to placate, to reduce harm, to avoid awakening of painful memories. It is not the full meaning of the old word 'comfort' with its strength, but is becoming (still unavailingly) close to the comfortable. It as if by now secondary emotions have taken the place, inadequately and still painfully, of unbearable primary feelings. And these secondary emotions are only emotions caused by damage to the primary ones. This time Glory knows she cannot save or divert the fallen feelings between her father and brother.

The first language again has a hard time existing here, where 'nothing' is to be said or done. When Jack, in a kind of apologetic secondary way close to Glory's own, says 'It's been good to be home, it really has', the 'really' is not '0', is a well-meaning tonal emphasis but short of the ultimate. It's the father who knows that in that home there was never a natural language and a familiar name spoken by that son. This is the terrible area, closer to the primary, where what should be natural, like the cry to the father when the child first needs to be picked up, just isn't there. It is what makes the book so awful in speaking what should hardly be said and yet cannot be wholly avoided, now that it is all a disaster. This is my method here when languages are lost or confused: to follow the implicit method of the novel itself and measure the relation to primary reality through the relative movements of the characters nearer or further from what only now remains– the pain. Thus, Jack moving into

Glory's secondary apologetic position, the father suddenly inhabiting the pain, then suddenly passing that on, instead of his faith. 'That was what I waited for. That was what I wanted'. Again it has to be a dumb; degenerated language of loss - 'that', 'what'- delivered only through the past tense.

The words said and heard between them not only look as if the first language cannot make any kind of transmission, it almost seems as if the first language now is being taken away entirely and silenced to death. The people can only point at the void: 'they' – all the words of connecting love – are things that both seemed wrong to Jack and were what he did not deserve; even while his father, the man who still said not to call him dad, waited for them with that primal 'Oh'. This is the mixture of profound mess and vicious circle that I have identified as the key shape of ironic form here. The damage goes both directions to father and son and back again, and even worse, they both know they have caused the damage to each other. It looks as if they are completely separated, yet wanting to make connections, while something between causes destructive reaction, one to the other in disconnection, over and over. Nothing can seem to stay in place for too long, even if it is trying to keep the peace. But it is all held in that moment of 'not quite yet': the terrible accumulation of feeling before departure again and death. It is like a bitter parody of redemption.

It is 'a matter of generations' Robinson said in an interview about father Boughton:

> –the fact that the most devoted father is finally powerless to protect his children, to soothe and reassure them. Boughton is restless with the awareness that in many senses his fatherhood has ended, and that he can only see and feel the sorrows of these children of his.[55]

'Not a thing to be done' 'Nothing to be said, nothing to be done', 'nothing to be done about it now': it is a continual failure to carry anything through to a future existence. The idea of something passing down through generations and 'the most devoted father is finally powerless to protect his children' could naturally belong in *Gilead*, the desire of Ames to give something to the son he knows he cannot be there for. But Robinson is speaking of another angle of generations, a more painful one of Boughton's powerlessness. To see the child you love throw his life away, is different from Ames' father to son story.

[55] Rebecca M. Painter, 'Further Thoughts on A Prodigal Son Who Cannot Come Home, on Loneliness and Grace: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson', *Christianity and Literature,* Vol 58, No. 3 (2009); hereafter cited as *Loneliness and Grace*.

Everything is tired out and exhausted now: 'All that old grief coming back on me. I'm tired now, though. It seems like I'm always tired.' And he settled into his pillow and turned onto his right side, away from Jack, toward the wall.' And still the novel is haunted by the old first language, there and not there: 'Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall'.[56] For both father and son, this is far from all that was there in the original parable of the prodigal son:

> I have changed the terms of the parable. In the biblical story the prodigal has squandered money and consorted with prostitutes, and he is brought home by sheer destitution. I really see this as a parable about grace, not forgiveness, since the father runs to meet his son and embraces him before the son can even ask to be forgiven. Or it is about love, which is probably a synonym for grace. The prodigal can leave his old life behind him.
> But Jack brings his old life with him back to Gilead, with loss and loneliness and despairing hope [. . .] Again, for me the issue between him and his father is not one of forgiveness. His father cannot absolve him of the pain and difficulty of his life, and Jack does not expect him to. He comes home seeking help [. . .] (*Loneliness and Grace).*

Help and forgiveness and absolution are no more and no less than unfulfilled desires, secondary again if without grace. 'Really', says Robinson of Jack, 'he is bringing judgment home with him, and he finds himself continually having to forgive his father and to love him graciously, that is, despite all'.[57] Only it does feel to Jack, in his own despairing guilt and self-damning unworthiness, as if he has quite lost and forfeited the right to forgive or even fully to love. That too is how and why the author knows that Jack cannot be his own narrator. He comes back still under the cloud of being shamefully known as the young man who years previously had abandoned the young woman with whom he had fathered a child out of wedlock. But he himself knows, in a hidden layer of consciousness, that in the meantime away from home, he has been secretly married to Della, a Black woman and has a son named Robert – the name of his own father. The condition of the Black people in Gilead is the greatest blind spot in the town's white religions, including its leaders both Ames and Boughton. But still the family line persists, through the repeated name, Robert, looking for a future.

Not long after he returns home, Jack receives a phone call:

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[56] The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments, Authorised King James Version, (Cambridge University Press, 1984), Isaiah 38.2.

[57] Rebecca M. Painter 'Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction.' *Christianity and Literature*, vol. 59, no. 2, (2010); hereafter cited as *Reality of Grace.*

> Jack was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall and his knees drawn up, rubbing his face. He stood up and smoothed back his hair. He was pale and his eyes were red. He said, 'It's nothing. A dog ran off. I promised someone I'd look after his dog.'
>
> 'Oh yes,' his father said. 'All that shouting was about a dog.' He shook his head. Her father woke up gruff sometimes, or confused. Sometimes he needed an hour or so to come to himself. Jack couldn't know that.
>
> 'It *was* about a dog,' he said softly, and he smiled at her, because they had spent those long hours together and she would understand the bitterness of his surprise. 'I can't be trusted with a *dog*.'
>
> She said, 'They do come back sometimes. I think you'd better sit down.'

It is Glory who still tries to provide the hope of return.

> He nodded and smiled, pale as she had ever seen him. 'I'll get past this,' he said. 'I'll be all right.' He took the chair she pulled out for him. 'Thank you.' She gave him a glass of water. 'Maybe I can make it up to him.' He shrugged.

The father then seems to come to, but in the midst of an offer of help feels the hopelessness of it and makes prayer no more and no less than a fall-back:

> 'At this point I'm pretty much reduced to praying for you. Of course I do that anyway. If anything else comes to mind, let me know.'
>
> 'Yes, I will.'
>
> When they were children their father had always avoided fault-finding, at least in the actual words he spoke to them. But there was from time to time a tone of rebuke in his voice that overrode the mildness of his intentions. She had not heard him speak that way in any number of years, and she watched Jack accept it now, patiently, as if he were hearing something necessary and true, something chastening. So she said, 'None of this is your fault, Jack. The phone woke Papa out of a sound sleep, and he's a little cross. That's all there is to it.'
>
> Jack said mildly, as if he found the fact interesting, 'It never seems to make much difference. Whether I'm at fault or not' (*Home*, pp. 87-8).

Again Glory is the attempted mediator and mitigatory; again the father betrays the letter by the spirit, the words by his tone. And so it all piles up in flashback and flash forward and varied repetition. This is more than a defeated son who has disappointed his father, it is a small glimpse of Jack also feeling the defeat as a father to his own son: 'I can't be trusted with a *dog*'. It is like a double blow from either direction. Jack is despairing of not only the old life, but also the new, passing on what feels like a travesty of tradition.

In her essay 'Givenness' Robinson wrote of what Jonathan Edward called a 'second self'. There are first of all feelings or affections that spring up regardless in life, almost of themselves, like pain and horror and desire and delight: the question is how to own and bear them, how to see and even re-use them:

> From the point of view of Jonathan Edwards, these 'affections' he names exist apart from any particular human being who might be their locus, no matter how much they are colored by temperament and by occasion. They are full of meaning intrinsically, as they are felt and expressed and as they are supressed and denied [. . .] [But Edwards] assumes that we are not passive in relation to our emotions. There is, experientially, a second self, a self who can wish we would not be afraid of what frightens us, that we would not be angered by what angers us, a self-awareness that regrets an incapacity for the kind of joy the best moments of life should afford us or the kind of compassion circumstance seems to demand of us. As intimate as our emotions are, we continuously stand apart from them, appraising. Why should one possibly snide remark by someone we hardly know ruin a whole day, even a week? Why do we talk too much when we are nervous? Drugs and therapies are marketed to the voice in our heads that is so alert to our failings, and so frustrated by them. It is this second self, always tacking against the impulses in us that are least acceptable to us, which makes us feel, quite rightly, that others never know us as we really are (*Givenness*, pp.80-1).

That inner and supra consciousness is a glorious gift, an added human dimension. But it is just those potentially redeeming second selves, meta-consciousnesses struggling to cope with the creature's first instinctive reactions, that neither the father nor the son can bring into full actuality. Nor can either help the other by getting that second self back on top of its own defeats, to make it, like a small version of God within, re-enter the world in the attempt to renew it. Instead that second over-self of Jack's, is like a further fallen version of the human capacity for self-reflection, lowered by its own guilty horror at his earlier life, and rendered almost helpless again by the conscious legacy of his own previous feelings and behaviour. The voice, the tone is defeated: '"I'll get past this," he said. "I'll be all right . . . Maybe I can make it up to him." He shrugged.' The shrug loses the 'maybe' of reparation: 'I can't be trusted with a *dog'.* And it is as though Jack's capacity for self-reflection depends upon looking at himself from almost a third-person perspective: 'Jack said mildly, as if he found the fact interesting, "It never seems to make much difference. Whether I'm at fault or not"'. The word 'interesting' is all his mind can cling to. When Marilynne Robinson was asked to differentiate the soul and mind, she said:

> I would not really differentiate them. For example, I think mind itself has many many levels almost to the point to where it should be called minds, but I think (this is very Calvinist) the mind is an instrument by which the soul is opened up. I think that they're one thing or they are two things that are so close together that distinction would be difficult. You can always use your mind drastically. And it is hard to think that you can misuse your mind without also harming your soul (*A Life in Writing).*

Jack's mind becomes something that only has had the ability to harm his soul, and now seems to have to exist apart from it. It has been like this from the very moment when Jack the prodigal returned, without the return of a second redeeming chance, and so it is again near the end as the father partially

recovers. This is the moment of long averted *crisis* that I called the crucial stage 4 in the introduction to this chapter, the moment when art takes over to point to what any other language cannot encapsulate. It is what David Summers called art's capacity for specific pointing, for indexicality.[58] Here as Jack re-introduces himself, he is like Cordelia trying to introduce herself again to the wreck of King Lear at the end of act 4:

> After a long breath, 'I'm Jack.'
> The old man turned stiffly in his chair to scrutinize his son. He said, 'I see a resemblance.' He reached out painfully and took hold of the candlestick, to move it closer to Jack, who put his hand to his face and laughed. His father said, 'There is a resemblance. I don't know.' He said, 'If you could take your hand away—'
> Jack dropped his hand into his lap and suffered his father's scrutiny, smiling, not raising his eyes.
> The old man said, 'Well, what did I expect. His life would be hard, I knew that,' and he fell to brooding. 'I was afraid of it, and I prayed, and it happened anyway. So here is Jack,' he said. 'After all that waiting.'
> Jack smiled at her across the table and shook his head. Another bad idea. Nothing to be done about it now.
> Glory said, 'It's been hard for him to come here. You should be kinder to him.'
> A moment passed, and her father stirred from his reverie. 'Kinder to him! I thanked my God for him every day of his life, no matter how much grief, how much sorrow—and at the end of it all there is only more grief, more sorrow, and his life will go on that way, no help for it now. You see something beautiful in a child, and you almost live for it, you feel as though you would die for it, but it isn't yours to keep or to protect. And if the child becomes a man who has no respect for himself, it's just destroyed till you can hardly remember what it was—' He said, 'It's like watching a child die in your arms.' He looked at Jack. 'Which I have done.'
> 'Oh. I didn't know that. I didn't— He put his hands to his face.
> Glory said, 'No. This is terrible. I won't let this happen.'
> 'Let it happen,' Jack said softly. 'I don't have anything to lose.' And he dropped his hands, like a man abandoning all his defenses.
> The old man was groping for his napkin, which had slipped to the floor. Jack gave him his. 'Thank you, dear,' he said, his voice ragged with tears, and he blotted his face with it (*Home,* pp.306-7).

The intensity taking shape in this passage is almost more than one – any *one* - can stand, especially as Jack allows it, with his response to Glory, 'Let it happen'. It is multiple. First, there is the father's pain; second, Jack's pain; third, Jack witnessing and imagining his father's story and pain, which then causes more pain to Jack; fourth, Glory, the sister and daughter watching and hearing in between. Here I want to concentrate for a moment on the third and fourth positions —the second-generation receptors when, remarkably, it is the father – so often the secondary religionizer – who inhabits '0'

[58] 'When we make art historical arguments involving works of art (as opposed, say, to documentary arguments about them) we in effect indicate their characteristics to our audience as we write or talk about them, just as we usually lecture with some sort of a pointer in one hand', in "Form," Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description. David Summers, Critical Inquiry, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Winter, 1989), p.394.

most fully. Because ‘0’ belongs to no one: it can become shockingly manifest anywhere, any time, in any one. And here the father occupies the position ‘0’: ‘You see something beautiful in a child, and you almost live for it’. It is the ‘almost’ that vibrates here. And the sentence goes on - ‘you feel as though you would die for it’ – ‘as though’ and ‘would’ only to hit but – ‘but it isn’t yours to keep or to protect’ – and then an ‘if’ which is more than hypothetical: ‘And if the child becomes a man who has no respect for himself . . .’ That is where Boughton loses the occasion of being the sort of father his faith would have wanted:

> Theologically grace is the idea that God gives you as a father. That you can transgress and he would judge you knowing the meaning and the consequences of what you've done [. . .] but it would be like one looking at one’s own child, and seeing this transgression from your own child. It's a certain aptitude that sustains over anything you might say about someone’s faults or errors or anything like that. And it should be something considered as a joy that makes criticisms and judgements peripheral (*A Life in Writing).*

So what has to be passed on in this passage, because the father cannot *hold* the grace through pain, but is not joy but the adverse effect on the children who have to hear this outcry instead of a blessing. Jack is brought again to imagine his father’s story and feelings of loss, even more deeply than in the book’s earlier experiences of return. Bringing again from Robinson’s voice from the previous chapter, ‘We are judged twice. Once for our actions and then again when the consequences of our actions play out’ (*What Are We Doing Here*? p.234). This time the father doesn’t say ‘you’, he says ‘he’, even with Jack physically right there in front of him, as though disinherited and gone. Jack has been brought so terribly close in hearing his father, but at the same time he looks across some kind of terrible distance. The distance feels more painful for Jack, to see the pain he has caused his father, witnessing all this also as a kind of third person who no one can quite ever be in this scene.

Glory cannot be it, again cannot be the holding mediator. Even as ‘he dropped his hands’ which had always been covering-up before, there is in this broken willingness now to see and hear, the sheer relation to unprotected truth which I am saying is the only primary reality left, even at risk of destruction to Jack’s already emptied soul. ‘It’s like watching a child die in your arms’ shows that primary area, with the added thought of the child of his own whom Jack never took responsibility for. What is extraordinary here is again the novel’s capacity to demand simultaneous compassion for both Jack and his father, at once, from both perspectives. It is no wonder that, as a human container of the

feelings of '0' in this place, Glory by now 'could hardly bear much of it'. This is her situation as witness: seeing Jack exposed to the full reality of their father, seeing that no one is pleading the cause for Jack, seeking to be the one to rescue, going between Jack and the father, or between Jack and the home. Her role must be the one to cry out for Jack, precisely because of the lack of compassion in the father's position. Her protest of crying 'No' in the midst of this devastating moment has a strong place here, out of a love that is lacking. She represents something like the choric heart in the modern mess of everything.

What is more, Marilynne Robinson's own position as the ostensible author of all this is also akin to something helpless in Glory herself:

> It's sort of double. On the one hand, I give my characters some pretty sad lives sometimes; at the same time, I mourn for them. Why don't I stop doing this? There's an odd way in which a fictional character who is really active in my writing has a great feeling of reality to me (*A Conversation With Marilynne Robinson*).

As she put it in another interview, 'I love my characters, which seems to me the only justice I can do them, since they have only the faults and failings I give them.' If the compassion overrode the willingness to invent the situation of these characters being hard or difficult or painful, then she would be avoiding '0' herself. The love is like the compassion from Lila to Doll. It is in mitigation of what's happened but it isn't going to prevent that happening: she is still going to 'let it happen' as Jack says, or even have to help make it so. But the pain that is in the compassion is partly to do with '0' and partly to do with the reaction of a human being seeing that these people are getting to '0' and hurting for that, for them.

So it is Jack's 'Oh. I didn't know that' which has to meet his father's sense of loss and becomes the most painful primary response to the primary space his father is speaking from. It is the unnamed 'that' which again is the encapsulated full reality – a word without a name any more, a product of something lost and laid bare even so. Now, at the level where full truth is completely unguarded and unfiltered is the 'that' which cannot be held back from being exposed. Nothing else – not Glory's loving sympathy, not the author's own tacit compassion – will do here. It is the 'let *it* happen' from Jack that comes to be the more fitting cry here, not Glory's 'I won't let it'. It is as if Jack is really saying that anything that would prevent this moment from being the most serious

version of itself, would be wrong, even though now it will leave things more despairing, more painful, more final. Even Glory, with her understanding and love would turn this moment into a fallen secondary if she tried to fix it. She is left suffering in pain with the other two, caught in between and stalled; it is almost the position of the novel itself as well as the novelist.

(ii) What can be done in the aftermath?

The following passage looks very fitting in relation to what goes on in *Home,* or what is needed from *Home.* But in the strange workings of time, it comes from Marilynne Robinson's *The Death of Adam*, without its author knowing it was to be illustrated more fully in her novel *Home* published a full ten years later:

> But we have forgotten many things. We have forgotten solace. Maybe the saddest family, understood, is a miracle of solace. It seems to me that our multitude of professional healers and comforters are really meant to function like the doctor in a boxer's corner, there to slow bleeding and minimize swelling so that we will be able to last another round. Neither they nor we want to think about the larger meaning of the situation. This is the opposite of solace.
>
> Imagine that someone failed and disgraced came back to his 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. And perhaps measures of the success of families that exclude this work from consideration, or even see it as failure, are very foolish and misleading (*Adam*, p.90).

'Imagine that someone . . .' It is significant that the novel comes later, not just because the essay looks like an original source for what is to be there in the coming imagination but more strangely because it signals what was also to be most missing and missed in *Home*'s plotline, not included, but thereby most needed. This 'forgotten solace' is the old word for the vital thing left out, or the mitigating ingredient never added, though implicitly cried for. But it cannot wholly find its way into being as that simpler revival and reordering which the old religious tradition might wish.

I have spoken about the waves and measures of primary feeling, and the state of the secondary which exists around the primary, and I have tried to indicate that that is the method of orientation necessary to the analysis of Robinson's novels. If it had sought to be peaceable through Glory's own good intentions, *Home* would be in danger of situating itself too close to that 'doctor in

the boxer's corner' - only to patch up wounds in secondary ways uncommitted to addressing the primary issue. Even at its best this is the sticking plaster of Glory's kindness, though it is a kindness that however ineffectual it is, is in memory of a more primary charity. This secondary plaster always turns out to be another form of pain, on the recoil from its own efforts. I have argued that it is not the genuinely second-first language of MacIntyre – the revitalization of the original tradition in new forms new suited to a changed world-situation – and thus not the language that this thesis shows its protagonists are often trying to find as a way not back, but forward and towards. The secondary feeling is best characterised as a loss of the primary religious force, when Glory herself would wish its transformation into a second-first language.

The lost and forgotten solace is the kind of primary feeling that is implicitly pleaded for, like the celebratory parable of the prodigal son, though finally absent in *Home*. 'Maybe the saddest family, understood, is a miracle of solace': it is that inserted word 'understood' situated at the centre of this sentence that is this key thing missing, because there is no one in the midst of this family who can act as intermediary or intercessor. There is only Glory desperately trying to assuage pain on either side of her, between father and brother, without the capacity to become a major holding figure. The rightly 'understood' is the primary space and it is only the language of the novelist that can occupy it in *Home*, as the readers receive it. Taking out the 'understood' now leaves the family in a sad continual cycle of misunderstanding.

In *Home* it is the loss of home and tradition, and then the lack of understanding, that prevents this second paragraph in the essay from being any kind of reality for Jack. 'Imagine that someone failed and disgraced came back to his 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 [. . .]' This is the very thing that the novel is falling just shy of but still needs, and is trying to live with anyway.

The reader might be constantly looking for any fulfilment of solace for Jack. But throughout the novel there are small traces of Jack being the one to show the solace to his father, just as he, the black sheep, is the one in the novel who arguably has the most powerful religious presence. Soon after Jack

arrives home, his father is working hard to make conversation during a dinner where Glory sees that Jack is very uncomfortable:

> When his father began to weary with the effort to talk—'Yes, yes,' he said, 'yes'—Jack cleared away the dishes and then he said, 'Sir,' and took his father's arm and helped him up from the table, a thing the old man never let Glory do, and he took him to the chair in his room where he napped. He helped him out of his jacket and opened his collar and loosened his tie. Then he knelt and removed his shoes. 'That old quilt—' his father said, and Jack took it from the foot of the bed and spread it over him. The manner of his doing all these things, things she had done every day for months, suggested courtesy rather than kindness, as if it were a tribute to his father's age rather than a concession to it. And she could see how her father was soothed by these attentions, as if pain were an appetite for comforting of just this kind.
> She did her best (*Home,* p.63).

Jack might feel awkward if it was he of all people who was speaking the first language, but the manner of serving his weary father has a more religious feeling than spoken language. And though it would seem as if his actions were simply kind to his father, Glory sees Jack as being more in the way of 'courteous'. Courtesy, like solace, a deeper, older, less familiar meaning, almost ancient and biblical-- meant for more than politeness. In it is Marilynne Robinson's love for etymology, something closer to courtly forms and ideals, chivalric respect that full of noble and gentle sentiments pays tribute and offers generosity. As courtesy is compared with kindness (a word that though old seems to have half-forgotten its own etymology through easy usage) so tribute is compared to concession: that is the re-orienting nature of the syntax.

The traditional word introduces tradition there - the sir, the act of service, the removal of the clothing - all of which is able to somewhat transcend or put aside a difficult personal situation by having a formal tradition that the son can lock into. The lovely manner of it all is mainly silent, as Jack only says 'sir', and then the old man says something about the quilt. In a book full of talk, often terrible, here for once they don't have to talk but are not merely repressing anything. Jack performs this function later in the novel after another dinner conversation: 'The old man was groping for his napkin, which had slipped to the floor. Jack gave him his. "Thank you, dear," he said, his voice ragged with tears, and he blotted his face with it' (*Home,* p.307). It is a small but courteous act from Jack to his father, in the midst of the most terrible primary moment for both. Again, it feels like an ancient function renewed, 'Thank you, dear' so like a husband grateful to a wife's ministrations.

In these tiny, transient ways, the tradition rescues Jack enabling him to be something that is not simply his history or his personality - even though he will not be able to maintain the tradition long enough or completely enough. Still, the function that Glory has become almost too habituated to carry out, suddenly becomes *renewed* when Jack can activate it, even for a moment. It is to do more with some purity of need: somebody has to respond to it, and here is where even the supposed sinner might perform the function of intermediary, or forgiver, or helper.

But there is one crucial moment when in the midst of misery 'understanding' is offered Jack, when the function of intermediary that Glory can wholly fulfil is undertaken by another female. It comes after a long controversial theological debate where Jack continues to press both his father and the reverend Ames about the doctrine of predestination versus salvation, and again Glory is stuck helplessly in the middle. But it is Lila the wife of Ames who takes a different approach towards Jack:

> Lila said, 'What about being saved?' She spoke softly and blushed deeply, looking at the hands that lay folded in her lap, but she continued. 'If you can't change, there don't seem much point in it. That's not really what I meant' (*Home,* p.236).

It is that last sentence that reminds us that this too is an outsider and what is more, a person who has not had easy recourse to a first language. She does not mean to take on the whole doctrine of predestination, she knows that is not for her. But closer to Barth's true faith as compared to rigidified dogma, she offers something of what Marilynne Robinson knows:

> Seen from that side, predestination is grace in a very radical form. Jack sees it from the other side, of course [. . .] he feels that the course of his life is determined, tending always toward 'perdition.' A good predestinarian would tell him he can't know that, that he might well be among those God loves no matter what (*Loneliness and Grace*).

And for a moment we might flashback to *Gilead*:

> 'It don't matter,' she would say, in that low, soft voice of hers. That was what she said when she meant she forgave someone, but it had a sound of deeper, sadder resignation, as if she were forgiving the whole of the created order, forgiving the Lord Himself [. . .] 'It don't matter.' It was as if she were renouncing the world itself just in order to make nothing of some offense to her. Such a prodigal renunciation, that empty-handed prodigality I remember from the old days. I have nothing to give you, take and eat (*Gilead,* p.149).

Prodigal there was the old language redeemed in that almost inarticulate 'don't matter' so far from the indifference it could be taken as. For Ames' sense of the prodigal here is not the wastage made by the

prodigal son but the liberality offered by a forgiving parent figure, as prodigal of good as the sinner had been of material resource. Too often this human grace has become forgotten, dismissed or taken for granted: 'The word "liberal" has been effectively stigmatized [. . .] as if generosity were culpable', 'the very phrase is a driven leaf' (*Givenness*, pp.97): there is 'the loss of interest in our actual past, the loss of interest in antiquity, as well as in Scripture' and there is no easy return back home to that language through mere nostalgia. 'We can't get there from here' (*Givenness,* p.137).

Jack and Lila have a moment when they talk about salvation meetings:

> He laughed. [. . .] 'And everybody singing off key—' They both laughed.
> '—to some old accordion or something—' she said, never looking up.
> 'And all them coming to Jesus. Except myself, of course.' Then he said, 'Amazing how the world never seems any better for it all. If I am any judge' (*Home,* p.236).

It is part of the terrible mess, without direction, that the clauses never flow from or toward each other, but each prevents any kind of future for themselves: 1, 'And all them coming to Jesus.' 2, 'Except myself, of course.' 3, 'Amazing how the world never seems any better for it all.' And 4, 'If I am any judge.' Throughout this chapter I have in mind a theological as well as psychological alternative that Jack himself knows he cannot attain. That is: what Aquinas calls the grammar of love in which the virtue of love unfolds from the Father and the Son through the Spirit as though spelling out the very essence of Love in action. It is, says Aquinas, as a tree flowers through its flowers (the verb achieving itself through the blossoming of the noun.[59] Or as Hopkins was to put it in 'No worst there is none': 'Comforter, where is thy comforting'.[60] As to say the Comforter should naturally spell out the Virtue of Comfort through the act of Comforting. Jack has no such syntax, receives no such grace, but is constantly self-interrupted by his unsolaced guilt and pain and despair. He is like a tormented creature trying to find some way to have refuge. 'Then he said' is the utterance left in the midst, in the place of what should be 'understanding'.

[59]Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologica Question 37." Christian Classics Ethereal Library <www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.FP_Q37_A1.html> [accessed 29th July 2020].
[60]Gerard Manley Hopkins, "'No Worst, There Is None. Pitched Past Pitch of Grief.' by Gerard Manley Hopkins." Poetry Foundation <www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44398/no-worst-there-is-none-pitched-past-pitch-of-grief> [accessed 29th July 2020].

But it is different for one such as Lila who has no nostalgia and no ready-made ease of meaning, and yet an original sense of the need for change and its possibility. In *Home* it now goes on to this:

> 'Mrs. Ames has made an excellent point,' Boughton said, his voice statesmanlike. He sensed a wistfulness in Ames as often as he was reminded of all the unknowable life his wife had lived and would live without him. 'Yes, I worried a long time about how the mystery of predestination could be reconciled with the mystery of salvation.'
> 'No conclusions?'
> 'None that I can recall just now.' He said, 'It seems as though the conclusions are never as interesting as the questions. I mean, they're not what you remember.' He closed his eyes.
> Jack finally looked up at Glory, reading her look and finding in it, apparently, anxiety or irritation, because he said 'I'm sorry. I think I have gone on with this too long. I'll let it go' (*Home,* p.236-7).

And again there in that last paragraph is Jack strandedness, in relation to Glory as the in-between figure, in the movement from worried sight to closed-off speech. And it happens again when the hopelessness and sense of danger are taken into his apologetic remarks to Mrs Ames: 'That's kind of you, Mrs. Ames. But I think Glory wants to put me to work.' But now Lila takes over from Glory here, to make 'let it go' closer to 'let it happen':

> Lila said, never looking up from her hands, 'I'm interested.'
> Jack smiled at her. 'That's kind of you, Mrs. Ames. But I think Glory wants to put me to work. My father has always said the best way for me to keep out of trouble would be to make myself useful.'
> 'Just stay for a minute' she said, and Jack sat back in his chair, and watched her, as they all did, because she seemed to be mustering herself. Then she looked up at him and said, 'A person can change. Everything can change.'
> Ames took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He felt a sort of wonder for this wife of his, in so many ways so unknown to him, and he could be suddenly moved by some glimpse he has never had before of the days of her youth or her loneliness, or of the thoughts of her soul.
> Jack said, very gently, 'Why, thank you, Mrs. Ames. That's all I wanted to know.' (*Home,* pp.237-8).

The position of Jack is always one of starting and stopping. His speech is interrupted by abrupt full stops in the midst of a position he never feels fully justified in either developing or quitting. The tired old father will not go onward; he cuts short the possibility of a future: 'No conclusions?' 'None that I can recall just now.'

But in the midst of these blocks and dead-ends, these starts and stops, it is the half-assimilated outsider, Lila, who is the one who will take up the position of understanding. She knows the words that come out of her are not quite what she's feeling implicitly, but that she must give something vital,

in a place or space, even without the fullest articulate content. It is as Newman argued: not everyone that *has* a reason can always *give* a reason.[61] But unlike Jack's tired and beaten father, she won't close her eyes or let the conversation die out without a conclusion - or without trying again to share a way forward that at least she knows from her own previous experience that she has found. 'I'm interested', 'A person can change. Everything can change.' That 'everything' is suddenly huge in that tiny moment, capable of what Newman, after Aquinas, called 'development': the spelling out of what was implicit and incarnate in the deepest utterances of the Word.

Lila's intervention here is important because it gives something more for Jack to carry on by. There is something beautiful in the way she won't let the moment leave, in the not knowing how to muster up the right words but still keeping a meaning present. And Jack in turns matches her own tone with his own, more formally:

Jack said, very gently, "Why, thank you, Mrs. Ames. That's all I wanted to know."

It is an internal virtue that she has tapped into, that she has found. The tone in her words and the flow in the way she speaks are directed into the space that Jack is speaking from, not against it. It feels like something primary appearing again in the world that is closer to grace than kindness: that is why it is the word 'gently' that the novelist herself picks up from Jack's changed voice. Things can change. And '*everything* can change' is met by his quiet 'That's *all* I wanted to know' This is the grammar of love. Lila doesn't make it far enough fully to sit and grieve and 'ponder the deep mysteries of human life' with Jack. But it is Lila who has the determination of faith to keep the difficult conversation going through its difficult time until she can give the 'all' Jack was wanting to know. what she offers has more in it implicitly than anyone else can offer. Her words, what lies behind and within them, have what the novelist elsewhere calls an overplus of meaning, a phrase close to William James:

> The mind is always in process, moving in time through the currents of possibility, realizing formally meaningful things in and from the flux of consciousness, paragraphs and poems that have an overplus of meaning even the writer would not have recognized if certain words had

[61] John Henry Newman, "Sermon 13. Implicit and Explicit Reason." *Newman Reader - Oxford University Sermons - Sermon 13.*< http://www.newmanreader.org/works/oxford/sermon13.html> [accessed 29th June 2020].

> not come together in a certain order. The ways in which they are satisfying—to the ear, to the senses, to cultural memory—fill them with meaning (*What Are We Doing Here* p.112).

This 'cultural memory' through ear and senses is what Jack is trying to find here. It is connected to all that has otherwise been 'forgotten', as Marilynne Robinson claims in *The Death of Adam*. The 'overplus of meaning' lies in what Lila says to Jack. Her struggle in getting it out is itself what adds to the meaning. She knows that for Jack, as with her past self, this is a difficult area from which it is barely possible to attempt to give any simple answers. But she is keeping the faith just about alive for Jack.

There is an under-privilege in how Lila speaks, the product of her damaged, uneducated and inarticulate past. But though it is different in origin from Jack's guilty utterances, it matches him and meets him through her spirit of determination, in a sort of love that need never worry Ames. How to bring about that overplus that Lila brings to Jack, how to sustain it, how to develop it into a more explicit future, a more embodied presence in the world, is the problem if solace is to exist more substantially. That is the central concern of this thesis.

But there is one further detail of great note in the density of this passage. It lies in the way that in the mobile geometry of the novel Reverend Ames quietly listening between Lila and Jack suddenly occupies an intermediate position, the witness usually held by Glory, and adding the background-dimension: 'He felt a sort of wonder for this wife of his, in so many ways so unknown to him'. Just as Lila is in the position of understanding Jack, Ames holds the position of understanding Lila, yet here with sudden and renewed amazement. This quiet but needful overplus from Lila's husband is what spells out her sentences. Out of the extra dimension of her hidden history, he sees the relation of her past to her soul: 'He could be suddenly moved by some glimpse he has never had before of the days of her youth or her loneliness, or of the thoughts of her soul' It is a soul that has thoughts, and has a growing relation to mind. 'In many ways so unknown' becomes 'never had before': it is the glimpse of a gift coming from the one who had been also, like Jack, the outcast or black sheep. The movement is not just grammatical, it is between Lila and Ames, Jack and Lila. And I have tried to show how these configurations and reconfigurations are themselves related to movement to and from the primary

reality. Here grace is only glimpsed between Lila, Jack and Ames. All three are needed to make the overplus happen.

That overplus of meaning is the biggest clue, constituting the 'it' or '0' somewhere in the language that yields a configuration around it. Within the overplus there is some space that creates a potential that is spiritual in so far as it is not material, not fully realized, but is capable of development against despair. If this configuration of the overplus cannot fully be embodied in the story of this novel, or in any character sufficiently to recue Jack, something of its part-absence and part-presence remains there, almost enough to bring it closer to someone or to bring someone closer to the primary feeling it represents.

So it is that the insertion, 'Ames took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He felt a sort of wonder . . .', is one of the places in this second novel where a reader can see the retrospective necessity for the third novel and its perspective. In the complexity of time sequence, the genesis of the whole of the third novel in this series – the backstory entitled *Lila* – comes as surely from this moment of solace as *Home* comes from the prescient paragraphs in *The Death of Adam*. The third is itself a product of that overplus.

In *Gilead* Lila first comes into being through the effect she had on Ames the first time she walked into his church, watching him while he was praying. It was a moment he wrote, when 'I felt the poverty of my remarks':

> [. . .] It wasn't so much her appearance as it was the way she seemed as if she didn't belong there, and at the same time as if she were the only one of us all who really did belong there.
> I say this because there was a seriousness about her that seemed almost like a kind of anger. As though she might say, 'I came here from whatever unspeakable distance and from whatever unimaginable otherness just to oblige your prayers. Now say something with a little meaning in it' (*Gilead*, p.24).

Lila, the outsider, becomes the anomaly, the test, that must also come into *Home* to give Jack the words, the language he needs. 'something with a little meaning in it'. She – the catalyst to renew the old man, the old language - herself had never had a first language, not even some ready-made vocabulary she could always fall back upon to paper over life's cracks. The third novel goes back behind her entrance into the first. As she knows through Doll, 'if you're just a stranger to everybody

on earth, then that's what you are and there's no end to it. You don't know the words to say' (*Lila*, p.79). Lila has always felt what was so powerful right back in *Housekeeping*: the experience of being a transient. Even after marrying Ames 'she knew it was a joke. People were still surprised at him, that he had married her':

> She could see it surprised him, too, sometimes. He told her once when there was a storm a bird had flown into the house. He'd never seen one like it. The wind must have carried it in from some far-off place. He opened all the doors and windows, but it was so desperate to escape that for a while it couldn't find a way out. 'It left a blessing in the house,' he said. 'The wildness of it. Bringing the wind inside.' That was just when she began to suspect she was carrying a child, so it frightened her a little to realize that he knew she might leave, and he might even expect her to leave [. . .] (*Lila,* p.19).

Lila knows nothing of dwelling inside a stable and trusting way of life. She might leave, he might expect her to leave—being a passer through, like a tramp in one way or the wind's spirit in another. Through her past she near-silently stands for something real – a version of the wild '0' - that adds to what her husband does not have. But at the same time from a different point of view, what she brings seems to her more like shame, something unassimilable. Repeatedly in the early stages of their relationship she returns his kindness with suspicion and meanness, as if her tough defensive insecurity has to test whether this can really be love and not a degenerated, secondary form of Christian charity. The language given her by Ames must be learned from almost nothing in a way that she can understand, in a way that renews the language itself

> The next morning she took out her tablet and copied, as neatly as she could, *You must have thought that it has never occurred to me to wonder about the deeper things religion is really concerned with, the meaning of existence, of human life. You must have thought I say the things I do out of habit and custom, rather than from experience and reflection. I admit there is some truth in this. It is inevitable, I suppose.* She wrote it ten times (*Lila*, p.74).

She is that challenge to habit and custom. The repetitive writing exercise turns into a deep reading exercise too, a meditation. She writes out the words of Ezekiel until they too give her a language, as if for the first time: 'she never expected to find so many things she already knew about written down in a book' (p.176). Their strangeness suits a stranger:

> [. . .] Strange as it was, there was something to it. Well, there was the strangeness of it [. . .] It was about the meaning of existence, he said. All right. She knew a little bit about existence. That was pretty well the only thing she knew about, and she had learned the word for it from

> him. It was like the United States of America—they had to call it something. The evening and the morning, sleeping and waking. Hunger and loneliness and weariness and still wanting more of it. Existence. Why do I bother? He couldn't tell her that, either. But he knows, she could see it in him. Why does he want more of it, with his house so empty, his wife and child so long in the ground? The evening and the morning, the singing and the praying. The strangeness of it. (*Lila* pp.74-5).

Lila hardly knew that what she had had, and in it all she had not had, was 'experience', that 'it' was 'existence', and could be 'something' from which 'more of it' might be made – a future. Now, in this new context, in this relationship, even the articulate Ames cannot 'tell' her, cannot explain, but she can see 'he knows'. This is so different from what Robinson laments at the beginning of *The Givenness of Things,* the modern neo-scientific assertion that everything is explicable':

> But without the power of explanation, there is almost too much to bear, to take in: There are so many works of the mind, so much humanity, that to disburden ourselves of ourselves is an understandable temptation. Open a book and a voice speaks. A world, more or less alien or welcoming, emerges to enrich a reader's store of hypotheses about how life is to be understood. As with scientific hypotheses, even failure is meaningful, a test of the boundaries of credibility. So many voices, so many worlds, we can weary of them (*Givenness,* p.14-5).

'It is inevitable, I suppose,' said Ames, of our human tendency to lapse into habit and custom. But this is '0' now for Lila and for him. 'What happens when somebody isn't herself anymore?' she says to that self or that somebody: 'I seem to be getting used to things I never even knew about just a few months ago' (*Lila*, p.172). She has had to lose her protective covering, her shell and sharpness, and as her author says:

> I think one of the poignant things about human beings is that they're so undefended, physically. And that there's an absolute relationship between the defenselessness and everything that's impressive about them. I think a lot of us would like to be turtles and porcupines, and I think that in a way one of the impulses of human beings is to defend themselves in a way that nature did not. But I think the other impulse is to just love the experience with nothing to protect oneself, and actually feeling in fact no barrier [. . .] Intelligence of the high human sort could be translated as defenselessness, because we can know many things that are very hard to bear.[62]

Perhaps the greatest, most vulnerable word Lila most powerfully learns is the one Ames used to write to his child in *Gilead*: the almost primal word 'you'. In *Lila* she says it herself to the that child still within her womb: 'You. What a strange word that is. She thought, I have never laid eyes on you. I am

[62]Thomas Gardner, *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), pp.68-9.

waiting for you. The old man prays for you' (*Lila,* p.243). She got it herself, as something more than vocabulary, more like realization, in the old man who is still almost a stranger as well as her husband. He wakes to find her uncomfortable in her pregnancy:

> He fumbled for his glasses. It always took him a minute to collect himself. That's what he would say. Let me collect myself. Give me a minute here. Everything seemed strange when she thought about it. Where had he been? Nowhere at all, even lying there beside her [. . .] He looked as though he had waked out of a dream or into one, that made him feel he had to do something important and couldn't take the time to figure out what it was.
> 'You' she said.
> He laughed. 'Who else?'
> She said, 'Nobody else in this world' (*Lila,* pp.244-45).

What is wonderful here – 'where had he been?' - is the newness of this waking. It is what Marilynne Robinson's brother, David Summers most loves about art: that it is to be seen, in William James phrase, in its making, in its doing – not life as secondary, not over-familiarly or habitually taken for granted, but in the act of (to use Ames's words) collecting itself. It is not like habitual language which 'has its own logic, because it wants to go its own way', filling in the gaps of meaning, on auto-pilot:

> There's always the drift toward self-invited order in language that makes resolutions that are too neat or too small or beside the point. This is what happens most of the time with most attempts to deal with anything in language.[63]

But with Lila, with Jack, language is broken into inarticulacy, is disrupted by anomaly and strangeness, has to re-awake like something out of Shakespeare's late plays, and collect itself in a renewed form, as if for the first time again. A viewer, a reader can see the elements coming together or moving apart or changing their direction and viewpoint. So when one of her old Puritans writes of body and soul being even more indissoluble until death than light from space, Marilynne Robinson says that though she has lived 'from birth with space and light, as we all do', she had 'never considered how they exist together' (*What Are We doing Here?* p.217). The taking apart, even when painful, is to do not with putting asunder but with no longer taking for granted. So the *Gilead* novels undo, collect and re-collect themselves in search of a right configuration or answer.

[63] Thomas Schaub, "An Interview With Marilynne Robinson", Contemporary Literature, Summer, 1994, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Summer, 1994), pp. 231-251.

But that is what the young orphans in the world, particularly Ruth, in *Housekeeping* could hardly do: collect themselves If Jack in *Home* feels as though he is living on damnably after his life is over, Ruth feels she has barely begun, cannot collect herself to become a solid person in the everyday world but is still, or rather hardly, in the making:

> It was a source of both terror and comfort to me then that I often seemed invisible—incompletely and minimally existent, in fact. It seemed to me that I made no impact on the world, and that in exchange I was privileged to watch it unawares. But my allusion to this feeling of ghostliness sounded peculiar, and sweat started all over my body, convicting me on the spot of gross corporeality.[64]

She is a strange spiritual orphan, a transient with scarcely a physical home even in her own body– with 'no particular reason to stay anywhere, or to leave' (*Housekeeping*, p.216). And this is a different version of what Lila envisions for her own child when Ames one days is lowered into his grave beside the grave of his first wife:

> [. . .] soon, before he was half grown, the boy would be standing beside her and he would ask where their places were, his and hers, because the plots were all taken up, and she would say, It don't matter. We'll just wander a while. We'll be nowhere, and it will be all right. I have friends there (*Lila,* p.251).

In between the two, Ruth and Lila, is something in the author herself. When Asked about writing *Housekeeping,* Marilynne Robinson said: 'When I was young I had fantasies all the time about going away. I was pulled two ways, one the one hand you can feel the security of a household, and the other the thought of: oh to have nothing and to belong nowhere' (*A Life in Writing).* This is in the very tradition of losing and finding.

Where Ruth is minimally existent, what Lila can manage is to begin again by being only like a normal woman, posing as a normal wife but with a barely admissible past, daring to be like a mother she never had, and then become those things, even as humans were made to be, she read, in the likeness of their creator. So it was gradually to happen, through writing out texts such as Ezekiel again and again until this becomes the spelling out of a tentative first language:

> *And out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one of them had four wings.* Well, she didn't know what to make of that. A dream somebody had, and

[64] Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux 1980), pp.105-6; hereafter cited as *Housekeeping.*

> he wrote it down, and it ended up in this book. She copied it ten times, still trying to make her letters smaller and neater. Lila Dahl, Lila Dahl, Lila Dahl. She had four letters in each of her names, and he had four letters in each of his. She had a silent *h* in her last name, and he [John Ames] had one in his first. There were graves in Gilead with his name written out on them, and there was no one anywhere alive or dead with her name, since the first one belonged to the sister she never saw of a woman she barely remembered and the second one was just a mistake. Her name had the likeness of a name. She had the likeness of a woman, with hands but no face at all, since she never let herself see it. She had the likeness of a life, because she was all alone in it. She lived in the likeness of a house, with walls and a roof and a door that kept nothing in or out. And when Doll took her up and swept her away, she had felt a likeness of wings. She thought, Strange as all this is, there might be something to it (*Lila,* p.68).

The 'likeness' is repeated until she can become more embodied and incarnate and collected and recollected in what she and her life have become. The negatives from which her life has begun – 'no face', 'never let herself', 'all alone', 'nothing' – give way to 'might be something', just as likeness as impersonation gives way to 'a likeness of wings', language taking off beyond the normal into metaphor and vision. It is as though there is something in Lila trying to work out a place for herself to dwell within the language she is taking in.

That language is itself like a clothing that begins to fit her. It had its inarticulate beginnings in her first life in the moment when Doll covered her as a child, with the loving warmth of a shawl. That little but crucial inheritance is almost lost in her second life. 'She was sorry there was nothing left of that shawl. It would have been a very different thing entirely to tell the old man Doll had left that to her [. . .] It was useless, except for the use they made of it, remembering together (*Lila,* p.134). But it is half-recalled in the wash she likes to do: 'In the water you could rinse things clean', one of those rituals Feuerbach would call at their best sacred. But then Lila had washed off the water of baptism Ames had given her with the river water in which she caught fish – for 'if I ever found Doll out there lost and wandering, at least she would recognize me" (*Lila,* p. 22). But still she becomes more at home:

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

It is easier to apply or understand religious ideas through more apparently natural or practical practices of life: that was the meaning of Feuerbach for Ames himself. The state of her clothes looking like 'creatures that never wanted to be born' turns to 'pure weariness and regret' but then, when hung in the wind, 'they began to seem like things that could live', filled with more of the spirit of life - as if she is inchoately trying to work out a process of understanding that, though painful, may lead to even small openings and possibilities. It is what leads to her love for that 'old black coat' which she puts on in love of her husband near the novel's end. That too is her language for growing into her life, finding a place in the world and its traditions that fits her without merely mechanical conformity.

But then there is this in *Home*, with Jack through Glory's eyes, as Ames and his wife come to dinner at the Boughtons:

> Just when his absence began to seem conspicuous and awkward, when she had gone into the parlor to tell them that Jack would certainly be down in a minute or two, they heard him on the stairs, and then there he was, standing in the doorway. He was dressed in one of his father's fine old dark suits. There was a silence of surprise. He brushed at his shoulder. He said, 'The cloth is a little faded. It looks like dust.' Then no one spoke until his father said 'I was quite a tall fellow at one time.'
>
> Jack was wearing one of the creamy shirts she had brought down from the chest in the attic and the blue striped tie, and his hair was parted high and combed straight to the side. He looked very like his father in his prime, except for the marked weariness of his face, his mild and uninnocent expression. Aware of the silence he smiled and touched the scar beneath his eye. But he would have looked elegant, after a decorous and outmoded fashion, if he had not been Jack, and if they had not thought, therefore, What does this mean? what might he do next? And there was something moving in the fact that the suit fit him almost perfectly, or would have if he were not quite so thin. He was the measure of the failure of his father's body, and also perhaps a portending of the failure of his own (*Home,* p.188).

In contrast to Lila learning to find life in old and tarnished clothes, or to fit into that old black coat that will be left her, Jack cannot 'quite' or 'almost' hold existence, unfaded, within an inherited language which should be more fitting for him.[65] 'Very like [. . .] except' – except for the weariness,

[65] Rowan Williams draws attention to differing ironies here. 'Lila's reconciled irony does not mean that her ability to pass for native is a muffling of the question; on the contrary, she is able, as Jack is generally not, to give voice to the possibility of change. She is able to speak, where Jack's paralysing awareness of the offence he may give leaves him silent' (Rowan Williams, *Christianity and Literature).*
Jack's experience presenting himself in his father's old suit is a manifestation of the painful *unreconciled* irony William describes in contrast to Lila's usage. Jack himself experiences her reconciled irony:
Another silence. He stuck a match. I could smell the smoke of a cigarette.
'Would you care for one?'

pale as one crucified but not risen, un-innocent. It is almost humiliating, almost a parody, almost ironic and awkward in its reincarnation, dust as these human bodies are. And it is more nearly these things when it is seen as such not so much by Jack himself as by others as he attempts to don and measure up to the tradition. 'What does this mean? what might he do next?'

When Glory asks Jack to define what a soul is, he replies 'On the basis of my vast learning and experience, I would say—it is what you can't get rid of' (*Home* p.287). It is not to do with what he might develop 'next' in the language of addition that Lila slows has learnt; it is about what is left after all the losses.

But it is Jack's forsaken need for a language, and for all that such a language would stand for, that Ames himself answers. If one bequest to Jack is Lila's belief in the possibility of change, the other is what Ames adds to what he saw with wonder in his wife, for all his earlier doubts and fears and jealousies, and amalgamates with what he received his own errant brother. It is the gift of Feuerbach as a bridge between secular and religious, and the blessing he gives with it.

> But the blessing Ames gives Jack is an act of recognition that blesses Ames, too. He is profoundly moved that he has had the occasion to do it, that Jack accepted it, wanted it. I really do believe that all blessing is mutual, and that the moment of blessing is when people rise to the very beautiful seriousness of what they are' (*Reality of Grace).*

Gilead, Home, and *Lila* cannot be complete without each other; they almost call out for the geometric turns, in their kaleidoscopic effects and combinations. They can be seen through each other, as Rowan William describes: 'There are [. . .] scenes in that sequence which are recapitulated in more than one narrative, as if no one telling of the story, no one perspective, can capture it all. I'm inclined here to open and closed a bracket and simply add that perhaps that's why there are four Gospel (close brackets) (*Balm,* p.159). 'No *one* telling', since it is the overplus of meaning that makes for four gospels without mechanical consistency or willed repetition.

'No, thank you.' She laughed. 'Sure I would. It just isn't seemly in a preacher's wife.'
'"It just isn't seemly"! I guess they've been after you.'
'I don't mind,' she said. 'Somebody had to tell me a few things sooner or later. Now I been seemly so long I'm almost beginning to like it' (*Gilead* p.227).

The configurations of the different characters across the novels of Marilynne Robinson become a gathering of anomalies. It is like an imagination so presented as if God could be moved by the workings of human beings when absolutely known and seen and felt. More than one limited version comes out of 'the feeling of an overplus of meaning in reality, a sense that the world cannot be accounted for in its own terms' (*What Are We Doing Here*? p.206). But those terms when given the right question in the right voice are what make for the need for a fourth novel, after Ames's attempt to bless Jack: 'What might he do next?'

3.

Marilynne Robinson's Shakespeare

'In writing I have always felt as though I am my mind's amanuensis, in reading its researcher, in repose its slightly dull companion' *(Givenness,* pp.217-8).

In moving back from Marilynne Robinson as novelist to Marilynne Robinson as researching reader and as writer about her reading, this chapter breaches simple chronology. Anyone reading this thesis might think that what follows could have been chapter one, in the service of educative background. In a different thesis that chapter would have concentrated on Robinson's reading of her old puritans, in particular John Calvin, John Flavel, and Jonathan Edwards, and the use of William James in keeping alive the value of religious experience in a world where what is given is not, for Marilynne Robinson, wholly explicable within modern terms. It might also include the influence of writers such as Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Melville. At any rate, it would outline Marilynne Robinson's education in relation to her reading both before the writing of *Housekeeping* and especially in the long immersed years between *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*.

In this thesis I have preferred to offer what are admittedly no more than glimpses of some of these writers and writings, particularly the theologians, in more immediate relation to the novels than background study allows. But whatever the form, it is important to keep in mind how powerful a force reading has been in this life and career. This is as evident in the essay on her girlhood experience of Psalm Eight in *The Death of Adam* as it is in the title essay of *What Are We Doing Here?* with its account of Keats reading Chapman's translation of Homer: 'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies/ When a new planet swims into his ken' (*Adam,* p.26). In that last she also speaks of meeting a cabman who had spent years in prison: 'He said he had no idea that the world was something he could be interested in. And then he read a book' (*Adam,* p.26). This is the same revelatory feeling – a new planet, the world – as the experience of Marilynne Robinson herself, described in *The Givenness of Things* at the age of 70: 'I thought these fevers ended with adolescence, and here they are, back again

and raging [. . .] Sometimes I am so struck by an image or an idea that I cannot sleep nights' (*Givenness,* p.217).

This chapter could have been sited more chronologically then. But, even so, we know that Marilynne Robinson has a complex sense of time, and that chronology may not be the best form of understanding how the movements, developments and returns of her creative thinking formed a complex working life. I want now to escribe why this is chapter three instead of being chapter one, in terms of the journey this thesis takes.

After writing about *Gilead, Home* and *Lila,* in chapter two, I concluded that it was as though the books were uttering almost prayer-like cries for what felt missing in them. It was like the inner plea of Lila at the end of her novel for her lost friends to be saved because she herself could not bear to be saved without them. Like many readers, as we shall see in chapters four and five, I was left feeling with Lila that need for a saving grace. Soon after completing my drafts for what are now chapters one and two, while reading Robinson's non-fiction work, I then came across the following passage which seemed to me more vital at that point than if I had read it earlier:

> I propose that, in his later plays, Shakespeare gives grace a scale and aesthetic power, and a structural importance, that reach toward a greater sufficiency of expression—not a definition or a demonstration of grace or even an objective correlative for it, but the intimation of a great reality of another order, which pervades human experience, even manifests itself in human actions and relations, yet is always purely itself (*Givenness,* p.33).

It is something in its 'reach' that grace may be able to incarnate in this world, which was important here: the 'purely itself' that can still return to earth as from 'another order' to 'manifest itself'. The vocabulary of 'itself' suits her earliest sense of unnamed presences and forces as described in 'Psalm Eight':

> It seems to me I felt God as a presence before I had a name for him, and long before I knew words like 'faith' or 'belief'. I was aware to the point of alarm of a vast energy of intention all around me, barely restrained' (*Adam,* pp.228-9).

At first she thought everyone else must be aware of this. Gradually she realized that she only found acknowledgement of her experience in church, in strange and opaque narratives and figures. But increasingly she dimly felt that if she was indeed some sort of 'mystic by vocation', then, despite

Presbyterianism, she 'suffered atrophy of my gift in a life where I found little use for it' (*Adam,* p.229).

Accordingly, in search of the forces Marilynne Robinson felt, and following her in looking for a place and use for them in an imagined life, I wanted to go back with the novelist to Shakespeare. With Shakespeare it felt as though Robinson had found a different way to sense and examine grace, outside of formal religion. It was as if Shakespeare could be a somewhat different sort of tradition, a literary tradition, for the author, her characters, and even her readers: a seemingly natural version of her religious tradition. However vital it was for her to supplement her education with the puritan theologians, it was Shakespeare who offered writings about grace and the need for grace through the dramatic revelation of grace 'itself' in the depiction of sheer life, especially in the late plays. Shakespeare's would be a way to pass on the sheer spirit of all that could be unnamed in the tradition, without it being deemed religious. If readers think of Edwards or Calvin, they are going to think they know in advance what they are going to get. But when they read art, and especially the art of Shakespeare, they don't know what they are getting. It is a 'pure' experiment in what might happen, dramatically.

But then I also realized that this was hardly Robinson's first encounter with Shakespeare. She first sought him out through her formal education in a doctoral study of one of his early history plays. I therefore decided to go back to her PhD thesis on Shakespeare, to her own attempt to start with works, the *Henry VI* plays, that she there argues have been neglected. Characteristically, even then, Robinson seeks to bring an *historical* understanding to Shakespeare's early histories. It is similar to her Puritan rescue work: she avoids the second-hand accounts and stereotypes, going straight to an actual, careful first-hand reading of scenes and sources and contexts, in an attempt to bring to life a greater realization of lost or neglected meaning.

This chapter will therefore present itself in two parts. First it considers Robinson's early attempt at thinking about Shakespeare through her still rather conventional doctoral thesis. Alongside it, supplementing what is intuitively sensed as lacking in the thesis itself, eventually comes the long list of extended similes and metaphors that formed the origin of *Housekeeping*. That list in itself

recapitulated, via Shakespeare's own linguistic inventiveness, a renewed and revived sense of the classical inheritance she describes as 'given' in *When I Was a Child I Read Books*:

> The things we learned were [. . .] merely given to us to make what meaning we could of them. This extended metaphor comes to you courtesy of Mrs. Bloomsburg, my high school Latin teacher, who led five or six of us though Horace and Virgil, and taught us patience with that strange contraption called the epic simile, which, to compare great things with small, appears fairly constantly in my own prose, modified for my own purposes. It was Mrs. Bloomsburg also who trudged us through Cicero's vast sentences, clause depending from clause, the whole cantilevered with subjunctives and weighted with a culminating irony. It was all over our heads. We were bored but dogged. And at the end of it all, I think anyone can see that my style is considerably more indebted to Cicero than to Hemingway. I admire Hemingway. It is simply an amusing accident that it should be Cicero, of all people, whose influence I must resist [. . .] [66]

Nothing was as straightforward in its time or shape as the syntax of Hemingway might apparently show it to be. 'Merely given', 'an amusing accident': Marilynne Robinson repeatedly calls herself lucky and fortunate in that the odd unworldly child found the way she did; but in the loops of her life-time there seems, in retrospect an unconscious and almost (what she would never dare say) predestined plan in her erratic education. That is why the second part of this chapter follows her return to Shakespeare, long after her formal education, in her later non-fiction essays on the late plays themselves, arguing that she is there implicitly in search of the spirit of their incorporation within her own fiction.

Again it turns out, in terms of the more complex movements of developing time, that this was an intuitively important forward-looking choice on my part. Although, in light of all that is missing in the first three novels of the *Gilead* sequence, it could have been Calvin or Edwards or even Milton that was a major presence in the upcoming fourth novel *Jack*, Marilynne Robinson reports in a recent interview that it was above all to Shakespeare that she turned to in her final novel:

> As far as my fiction is concerned I think that if you read Shakespeare deeply enough, attentively enough, he never leaves your consciousness. He becomes a sort of dialect of thinking. And you will see, I was going to make a bold separation of myself with this last novel and center it on Milton, but Shakespeare just creeps in.[67]

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[66] Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (Picador 2012) p 87; hereafter cited as *When I Was a Child.*

[67] Yale ISM, 'Yale Literature and Spirituality Series – Marilynne Robinson (w. Christian Wiman) – Feb 20, 2020', YouTube, 27th February 2020, 6:00-7:00, < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUNwdmVHZxc> [accessed 15th July 2020].

I had the same instinct: early in this writing I went to Shakespeare *for* Jack though I did not then know there would a further novel or that it would be called after Jack himself. My writing of Shakespeare *after* Robinson's novels turns out to be much more instinctively useful than I understood at the time.

(i) The Thesis

In a December 2015 interview with Robinson, the reporter speaks of the time she devoted to studying Shakespeare, and what it has led to:

> Marilynne Robinson, best known as a novelist (especially for her Pulitzer Prize–winning *Gilead* of 2004), is also a scholar. She received her doctorate from the University of Washington in 1977, with a dissertation on Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part Two*. She now admits, wryly, that she would not gladly read that dissertation. She also said, when she turned seventy, that she had neglected Shakespeare for decades, but was boning up on him again. I don't believe her. She clearly has been pondering the plays all her life. She thinks through Shakespeare. She does not try to draw meaning out of the plays, but brings her own intuitions to them for validation. Her novels have many indirect references to lines from Shakespeare, and the essays in her new collection, *The Givenness of Things*, discuss his works directly.[68]

In May 1977, Robinson completed doctoral studies at the University of Washington, somewhat revising the conventional perception of one of Shakespeare's neglected early history plays *Henry VI, Part Two*. The statement on the cover page written by her dissertation reading committee states Robinson's purpose:

> Marilynne Robinson calls her dissertation "A New Look at Shakespeare's Henry VI, Part II" and it is indeed just that, a fresh consideration of a play which has too long been taken for granted as apprentice work—promising work perhaps, but also awkward, uneven and inconclusive. By insisting on taking the play seriously, by giving it the close attention Shakespeare's later plays receive so regularly, Mrs. Robinson succeeds in demonstrating that it is more accomplished, subtler, more coherent, than has been suspected by those who have written of it either as a historical chronicle or as an expression of a political philosophy Shakespeare is assumed to have espoused. Other critics of the play receive their due in an appendix to the dissertation; the text itself focuses first on Shakespeare's use of his various sources, the changes and rearrangements which help to reveal his aims, then on his handling and development of the character of the king, of the character and particularly the events surround the death, of the "good Duke" Humphrey of Gloucester, and finally on the disintegration of the social order. In other words, Mrs. Robinson uses traditional methods of literary criticism; what is unusual here is not only the play to which she applies them, but the sensitivity with which she has used them.[69]

[68]Gary Wills, 'The Mind as a Beautiful Miracle', *THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS*, Issue December 17 2015,< https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/12/17/marilynne-robinson-mind-beautiful-miracle/?printpage=true> [accessed 20th July 2020].

[69] Marilynne Summers Robinson, 'A New Look at Shakespeare's Henry VI, Part II: Sources, Structure and Meaning', University of Washington, Ph.D., 1977, Literature, English (Xerox University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan), Cover page; hereafter cited as *A New Look.*

It is the 'insisting on taking the play seriously', the 'close attention', and her 'sensitivity' that usher in the 'fresh consideration' that becomes vital to Marilynne Robinson's development as a thinking writer, even while she remained within the traditional methods of literary criticism.

> My first two chapters are devoted to breaking the charm that has made wooden figures of Henry and Gloucester for the last several centuries. Once they are animated, everything around them comes to life (*A New Look,* pp.2-3).

The central orientation is the dramatic priority of discovering the life. That meant she needed to leave all earlier dismissive literary criticism out of the main structure of her thesis for its deadening effect, relegating it to an appendix:

> I wished to evoke the sense of dramatic movements in the play, and for that reason I chose not to take the argument outside the play itself. These critics are the ones I would have responded to in the course of my reading had I chosen to deal with criticism in the body of the text (*A New Look,* p.225).

> Henry VI, Part II has seldom been tested by actors and audiences under circumstances favourable to discovering shape, life and force in the play. And so there is no experience of dramatic viability to contradict the critics who consider the play a disorderly failure (*A New Look,* p.9).

In what follows I will examine the nascent attitude and the tools for potential future use that emerge from that study. If the first is the insistence on bringing to life, then the second is the orientation towards locating that life:

> I will suggest that the focal point, the compositional center of the first tetralogy, is the murder of the good Duke Humphrey of Gloucester. It is in his treatment of this rather shadowy event that Shakespeare is most precisely attentive to detail, and most meticulous in preserving the integrity of the historical accounts he is dramatizing. What precedes and follows these acts derives its logic and momentum from a view of English history and society discovered, as it were, in the circumstances surrounding Gloucester's disgrace and death. This is a large claim to make for the quietest part of the least-noticed of the first four histories, but as we have seen, Gloucester's death was a matter of great consequence to the Duke's own contemporaries, still fascinating in Shakespeare's time, and recognized by modern historians as a crucial blow to the Lancastrian dynasty, the collapse of which was Shakespeare's subject (*A New Look,* p.68).

It is the 'the quietest part of the least-noticed' that encapsulates this driving force that Marilynne Robinson recognises. She seeks to bring the play to life, but she is also working with a King who will refuse to come to life. Nothing will come after Gloucester's murder that will respect his death. The death of Gloucester is immediately turned into no more than the beginning of the oblivious disruptions that follow. What she marks is an end not a tradition or a succession: it is a place where

something should have happened, or almost happened, but did not. Amidst the ongoing opportunistic politics of his murder, there is no pause for Gloucester's life, which takes away the possibility of this play having the full impact of a tragedy.

She thinks hard about the subtle equivocal structure of the play — how it brings Henry and Gloucester together in one way through the resonances of cross-scene language, even as they separate in another, through the overall plot:

> In the best Shakespearean style, Shakespeare has paired the characters of Henry VI and Humphrey of Gloucester. Henry is king, if only in name; Gloucester has been king, in all but name [. . .] Humphrey has his staff at Henry's pleasure. Henry has his crown through Gloucester's restraint (Gloucester is the heir apparent) and his diligence. Both of them are fixed in the state that Henry V left them in—Henry still infantile and incompetent, Humphry still intent on keeping what he and his brothers seemed to have won in their glorious youth in France. Both of them aspire to a rigorous purity, Henry through spiritual virtue and Humphrey through public virtue. Both of them are self-deceived, because they take the purity to which they aspire to be purity that they have achieved. They are equally incapable of examining their motives (*A New Look,* p.135).

These characteristics that are paralleled together across differences are what Marilynne Robinson centres around. In that light, it becomes of compelling interest to her to examine the opportunities that arise or are neglected between characters. For example: 'Henry is king, if only in name; Gloucester has been king, in all but name.' Neither then has fully been, and each is always less than, 'the King' - as though no one can fully occupy a space of power here. The important discoveries will lie in examining the spaces that open up 'in vain' as lost opportunities for Henry and Gloucester in their fixedness.

Henry's presence is hardly felt in *Henry VI Part One*. As Robinson notes, 'He is dramatically a nonentity. Any appearance of the king on stage must make him the center of at least formal and ceremonial attention, and Shakespeare avoids this effect by keeping him off-stage until the fractiousness of his court, and his personal insignificance to their actions and calculations, are well established' (*A New Look,* pp.74-5*).* She continues to argue that as a centreless centre the King is 'altogether inadequate to holding together the deep schisms' in 'any kind of form that comes in front of him'(*A New Look,* p.74). He never presents himself as the bearer of Henry V's warrior tradition as king, but offers something more strangely negative instead: 'To say that Henry is unlike a king is not

to say that he resembles anything else. He does not fall short of his office, he inverts it. He makes of it a negative force, potent as a vacuum' (*A New Look,* p 90). Henry stands as a king, but in his actions appears as a son in denial of two fathers – Henry V and then Gloucester the Lord Protector. He is a place-holder in the midst of a politics he apparently seeks to escape, by his non-warrior-like religiosity – a purity about which the PhD candidate is rightly sceptical.

Here, in her first major example of the young ruler's position, Henry hears the grievous accusations against his protector uncle. Gloucester (who is not present) has been the main influence in reminding Henry of the ways of his father's would-be tradition:

KING HENRY VI
My lords, at once: the care you have of us,
To mow down thorns that would annoy our foot,
Is worthy praise: but, shall I speak my conscience,
Our kinsman Gloucester is as innocent
From meaning treason to our royal person
As is the sucking lamb or harmless dove:
The duke is virtuous, mild and too well given
To dream on evil or to work my downfall.

QUEEN MARGARET
Ah, what's more dangerous than this fond affiance!
Seems he a dove? his feathers are but borrowed,
For he's disposed as the hateful raven:
Is he a lamb? his skin is surely lent him,
For he's inclined as is the ravenous wolf.
Who cannot steal a shape that means deceit?
Take heed, my lord; the welfare of us all
Hangs on the cutting short that fraudful man.

Enter SOMERSET
SOMERSET
All health unto my gracious sovereign!

KING HENRY VI
Welcome, Lord Somerset. What news from France?

SOMERSET
That all your interest in those territories
Is utterly bereft you; all is lost.

KING HENRY VI
Cold news, Lord Somerset: but God's will be done![70]

[70]William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part 2* from The Folger Shakespeare, Ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine. Folger Shakespeare Library, III.i.67-87, <https://shakespeare.folger.edu> [accessed 9th November 2020]; hereafter cited as *Henry VI.*

Henry's immediate reactions to the accusation against his uncle and then to the loss of France leave in their aftermath the impression that something has been said in the wrong place and in the wrong way. In the last one-line response especially, it seems very strange that there wouldn't be enough room for any further sentiment: there is no fight, no feeling in the reception of 'cold'. '[B]ut God's will be done!' feels too jarringly easy a continuance. It is, writes Robinson, 'an expression not of resignation but of indifference' (*A New Look,* p.109). To Henry's 'shall I speak my conscience' Robinson responds:

> Henry's word 'conscience' will develop a curious history in the course of this act. Here it is enough to say that Henry's "conscience" is the moral self which he attempts to keep unsullied by preventing it from interacting with the world. Of course that has the result of rendering it ineffectual. Henry's words in this speech suggest that this result is not accidental or advertent. He refers to his uncle as a lamb or a dove, both sacrificial animals [. . .] Henry's words make it clear that Gloucester is without legal or royal protection. Henry claims for him not the innocence of an honourable man but the innocence of a martyr. Henry's conscience compels him to speak for his uncle, but the tendency of this kind of praise is to put the old man into his enemies' hands. All this indirection is designed to allow Henry to be rid of his virtuous uncle, and still to preserve his faith in his own purity [. . .]
>
> 'Cold news, Lord Somerset: but God's will be done!' (*A New Look,* p.86).

She does not make explicit here any comparison with Hamlet and his problematic use of conscience in the midst of disorderly succession. Nor is there any reference to what a religious conscience might more properly mean in Luther or Calvin or Edwards. Henry's conscience is 'unsullied' but also thereby 'ineffectual' at the same time. Henry's words are pointed to God's will, but it is the inactivity of Henry's action that he uses in place of war. Robinson observes: 'So long as his faith is not wagered it is, in a sense, secure' (*A New Look,* p.84). The space he occupies is like filling a vacuum with almost nothing, certainly nothing like what Henry V would have offered. His first response, though given in the present tense— 'The duke is virtuous, mild and too well given / To dream on evil or to work my downfall'—is coupled with the comparison to 'sacrificial animals' as Robinson says. It is almost a future memorial said in the present, as if Henry knows Gloucester's end is coming, and speaking as if it has already come. It becomes like a memory of a lost tradition that should be respected though no longer active. Gloucester is as lost as the land in France.

Henry lets his conscience stand ineffectual substitute for kingly action or true justice in the trial scenes of the play. Later in the same scene Gloucester enters the court and is arrested in front of the king. Henry gives his first response:

> KING HENRY
> My lord of Gloucester, 'tis my special hope
> That you will clear yourself from all suspense.
> My conscience tells me you are innocent.
> (Henry VI, III.i.140-42)

Again 'my conscience' is the permission Henry gives himself to appear stationary. What else will be lost in the passive faith of Henry's conscience in God's will? This is what Robinson brilliantly calls the false 'psychology of pietism preserving faith by denying truth' (*A New Look*, p.174): my wager is that where her language is energised, there are the possibilities of further future development of her thinking. But again, I remain in this section with where she is at the time of writing the thesis.

Again it is structurally subtle in the movements of absence and presence, that Henry finally does say something only *after* Gloucester leaves the place.

> KING HENRY
> My lords, what to your wisdoms seemeth best
> Do, or undo, as if ourself were here.
> (*Henry VI*, III.i.96-7)

That haunting line 'do, or undo, as if ourself were here' is more than the obvious direction of 'you can be my deputies'; it is a terrible moment of betrayal towards the first tradition.

> Henry's passivity is a perfect implement for the destruction of the world that his father made and his uncle preserved. While others in the play chafe bitterly at Gloucester's dominance, Henry speaks no evil. But there is evidence that his piety keeps him innocent of the motives of his own actions and of his crucial passivity (*A New Look*, p.79).

'Innocent' there is a brilliantly inappropriate word, a word twisted out of place like so much in the structure that Robinson describes. But then she begins to look further at the play's implicit inner shaping by putting together this mock-trial of Gloucester in III. i. with Gloucester's present-absence in a different, earlier trial in II. iii. '[The] 'speeches and scenes bear significant relation to one another as they would in a later play' (*A New Look*, p.13), thus making links in counterpoint to simple on-going chronology. In both trial scenes there is something vitally absent, something missing that does

'little to encourage hope of divine intervention in human affairs' (*A New Look,* p.97). In the earlier trial, Gloucester's own wife Eleanor has charges laid against her for conspiracy against the king. Though they are not technically proven, she is found guilty and banished. But it is the direct reaction of her husband in this moment of need that feels most out of place:

> DUCHESS
> Welcome is banishment. Welcome were my death.
>
> GLOUCESTER
> Eleanor, the law, thou seest, hath judged thee.
> I cannot justify whom the law condemns.
> *Duchess and the other prisoners exit under guard.*
> Mine eyes are full of tears, my heart of grief.
> Ah, Humphrey, this dishonor in thine age
> Will bring thy head with sorrow to the ground.—
> I beseech your Majesty give me leave to go;
> Sorrow would solace, and mine age would ease.
> (*Henry VI,* II.iii.16-23)

Instead of stepping in to exercise any political power or authority he might have in order to save his wife, Gloucester immediately makes it known that he stands pure, beneath the law: 'I cannot justify whom the law condemns'. It isn't until the after the duchess is gone, being condemned and taken away, that, like another more haplessly sincere version of Henry after Gloucester's own arrest, he grieves for her, ineffectually. Gloucester does not divorce her, but he will not take any action to support her either. He is standing in-between:

> Gloucester is so eager to disassociate himself from a crime that might seem to reflect badly upon him that, in effect, he joins his wife's accusers […] Gloucester is vulnerable because of his absolute faith in the law. After Eleanor has received her sentence, she must turn and look expectantly at Gloucester, because he says in justification of his inaction, "Eleanor, the law thou seest hath judged thee: /I cannot justify whom the law condemns" (II.iii.15-16). Angelo in Measure for Measure, tells Isabella, "It is the law, not I condemn your brother" (II.ii.80). Both of these rigidly righteous men mistakenly believe that the law operates independently of human agents and circumstances. It is only Angelo, the man with snow broth in his veins, who would actually impose the long-neglected statute against Claudio. In Eleanor's case, it is only through her husband's enemies that the crime occurs, and is discovered, and receives such a harsh interpretation. The law is always an instrument in someone's hands, subject to being used well or badly. But Gloucester is far too concerned with demonstrating his obedience to the law to examine the circumstances of its application. For this reason the first stage of the plot against him succeeds (*A New Look,* pp.159-60).

There is sufficient potential need and energy for something or someone to help or to save, and the space is the one that a good version of a founding tradition might have provided and filled. It is even a space that could be morally creative of something other than politicised law in the fallen mess of

things. But Gloucester does not undo the false semblance of law's absolute rule, in a situation become so equivocal as to be without any pure innocence, guilt or justice:

> We have seen Eleanor in her solitude, raging with ambition and intent upon advancing herself by any means, and now we see her treated as if she had acted upon her intentions. Once again there is a fairly close coincidence of guilt and punishment, but there is no justice (*A New Look,* p.152).

There is no Isabella here pleading for grace towards Angelo in the fifth act: 'His act did not o'ertake his bad intent,/ And must be buried but as an intent/That perished by the way. Thoughts are no subjects/ Intents but merely thoughts.'[71] Instead Robinson is especially perceptive on false secondary versions of the original good — 'legalism (never to be mistaken for lawfulness)' (*A New Look,* p.116). The examples she draws out from this play will continually point towards something needing and possible to be done, almost done, but in the end not done such that history then becomes set. Drama is here about that distorted, lost or excluded possibility. What will be of ever increased interest to Marilynne Robinson in the future is how something besides or above the law is needed, when it fails in relation to justice, and no tradition survives strongly enough to ensure its original integrity.

In *Henry VI Part II* it has to be the scenes themselves that 'comment intricately upon one another', and almost step in to do something that the characters will not It is the tacit juxtaposition of scenes that does the missing work here. She argues that later the mature power of Shakespeare's language will do even more to partly transcend the onward successiveness of time and outcome:

> Shakespeare has attempted to create the complexity and richness he later achieves through his poetry by the use here of scenes that comment intricately upon one another. The dramatic poetry he developed in later plays allow him to achieve a greater complexity of meaning with a simpler, subtler and more beautiful use of the stage (*A New Look,* p.12).

There is no redemption in *Henry VI Part Two* or in the third part that follows. But there was a minor moment in the first act of *Part Two* that offered an opening of some kind, for something simpler, subtler and more beautifully staged. Yet even that generous opportunity could easily be overlooked. A common character called Simpcox and his wife come before the king claiming to have been healed by a miracle. They were born blind, they say, but can now suddenly see. The saintly King seems

[71] William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* from The Folger Shakespeare, Ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine. Folger Shakespeare Library, V.i.516-19, <https://shakespeare.folger.edu> (accessed 9th November 2020); hereafter cited as *Measure for Measure.*

gullibly eager to hear how it all came about, but Gloucester soon steps in to expose the man's lie. What can he see? The man names the colours suddenly available to him:

> GLOUCHESTER
> What's thine own name?
>
> SIMPCOX
> Sander Simpcox, an if it please you, master
>
> GLOUCESTER
> Then, Sander, sit there, the lying'st knave
> In Christendom. If thou hadst been born blind,
> Thou mightst as well have known all our names as
> Thus to name the several colors we do wear.
> Sight may distinguish of colors; but suddenly
> To nominate them all, it is impossible.
> —My lords, Saint Alban here hath done a miracle;
> And would you not think his cunning to be great
> That could restore this cripple to his legs again?
> (*Henry VI,* II..i.137-47)

This is said as Simpcox suddenly takes to rapid flight. Robinson writes in defence of the underdog, the underprivileged and the outcast:

> Let us imagine this scene on the stage. These simple souls, on the point of succeeding at a scheme that is clearly ill-conceived and unpracticed and therefore no doubt desperate, are suddenly confronted by the mighty of the land. They are questioned, they invent, and man nervous, the wife doughty. Shakespeare has given this nameless man a last name that suggest "simple fool," and the same Christian name as the stalwart commoner Alexander Iden. The great Duke Humphrey, scholar and humanist, sets about to catch them in their lies, and he succeeds—no very great achievement, given the kind of malefactors Shakespeare has confronted him with. His exposure of the fraud is wise and pious in Foxe, and More uses the episode as a defense of the miraculous, proving that true miracles can be distinguished from false ones [. . .] But Shakespeare's Gloucester goes far beyond merely detecting and punishing a crime. The context in which the event occurs in this play gives it a different meaning, a different momentum. Gloucester is taking over the stage, making a demonstration of his noted perspicacity (*A New Look,* p. 93).

The central idea that will make all the difference here is that 'the context in which the event occurs in this play gives it a different meaning, a different momentum'. There is something here that cannot find its right context. It is not only that the simple souls cannot find any mercy. It is also about Gloucester's own language having a force *in excess* of what is strictly needed by the circumstance of this apparently minor incident, beyond the plot-relevance of his cleverly discovering and seeing through their trick. 'Thou mightst as well have known all our names as/ Thus to name the several colors we do wear./ Sight may distinguish of colors; but suddenly/To nominate them all, it is impossible.' If a blind person came to have sight which he hadn't had before, how would he know,

even with what he is given, *what* it was he was given. It cannot be magic, it requires experience for such quality. What the simpletons claim cannot be done by the application of literal and mechanical language alone. And what Gloucester suddenly seizes upon instead is the need for some other (as it were) blind or invisible inner dimension of mind in which to work out the subtler relation between word and thing, between language and meaning and experience. This is 'the more' amidst all that is given in unpredictable happenings, that later Marilynne Robinson would find further endorsed in the work of William James. And it is this dimension that the language of Shakespeare himself later and increasingly works within. It is the dimension in which Lear can use his mind to fear his mind is going mad. Or in which Hermione can see her innocence will be treated as guilt and yet still be innocent. But here this is no more and no less than a small part of the play that suddenly becomes more important than the whole it is placed in. It would have the given potential to leap out to something more, with more demanded from the language, if it were to be taken up. But it is not, no more than is the short and wonderful response from the simpleton's wife when Gloucester passes judgement:

> Alas, sir, we did it for pure need. (*Henry VI,* II.i.170).

It is one of Shakespeare's almost autonomous and incongruous moments, outside history, beyond or beneath public politics, like the drunken Barnardine refusing to be a convenient part of the plot in *Measure for Measure.* Robinson only mentions the wife of Simpcox when speaking of Gloucester's lawyer-like skills:

> He demonstrates that the king has been imposed upon. He proves that he is much too shrewd to be deceived by the likes of Saunder Simpcox. He wins the approval of Suffolk and the Cardinal, and the approving laughter of Margaret, with his own false miracle. In his triumph he orders the beadles to "follow the knave, and take this drab away" (II.i.149). The contempt of Gloucester's tone would be reprehensible even if Simpcox's wife had not commended herself to the audience by her sturdy readiness to help her husband, and by her appeal to mercy. The word "Drab" is undignified, ungracious, and unjustified. The punishment meted out to both Simpcox and his wife is terribly severe (*A New Look,* p.151).

The wife's line in the play is only known by 'her appeal to mercy', but actually, the language of her appeal in the play is out of '*pure* need'. 'Pure' in this play is usually only used to refer to Henry in

terms of his false religious purity. The 'pure' that the wife of Simpcox seeks to appeal to is a space that does not have the central place in this play that it might have.

But the young Marilynne Robinson is aware of the future that the writing of *Henry VI Part Two* would lead to, the opening of this history play into an artistic future for Shakespeare himself:

> Henry VI, Part II anticipates elements of a great many later plays. For example, the pairing of a saintly, passive ruler and his rigorous vicegerent occurs again in Measure for Measure, and a relationship of the same kind between Prospero and his brother hovers behind the action of The Tempest. The surrender of the responsibilities of kingship by the anointed king begins the tragedy of Lear. The preoccupations of Part II with the weak king and with problems of justice and law will recur in Shakespeare's most complex and brilliant work. Parts I and III, which are often produced with just enough of the second play to make the transition from one to the other, have no similarly distinguished progeny. Part II opens upon Shakespeare's subsequent career to a much greater degree than the other Henry VI plays do, and yet it is left in obscurity, relative even to them (*A New Look*, pp. 11-12).

It is like the Simpcox scene writ large: the whole play called *Part Two* is not given sufficient room for development in the temporal sequence in which it is placed. But the creative process not only brings about this production but, under-fulfilled, will go forward to be used in other variations of the same kind of story, crucial material to be used again to bring about or open up another dimension or shape for what the story could become. Robinson is constantly sharing the importance of the idea of feeling one's way into seeing what else a given situation might be about or related to or capable of, in further revisions or unforeseen sequels. In *Henry VI Part Two* this potential is about what is lacking or not put finding a place for itself in the world, not just because this is still early work but because history will not allow sufficient room for justice or grace.

It is significant, in respect both of the power of an excess of language in prompting development and in the search for a place for what is missing, that as she was completing her thesis, Marilynne Robinson began to write (as it were with her other hand) a list of extended similes and metaphors that was to become, to her surprise, the basis for a novel of her own: *Housekeeping.* In one way it seems to be an alternative to her thesis, just as after the publication of *Housekeeping* she took a long period of reading to advance what she then considered to be the deficiencies of her prior education. In another, it took up what she had learnt both from Shakespeare's 'dialect of thinking' and from her own earlier education, the syntax of Cicero rather than Hemingway.

(ii) The Late Plays

a) *Hamlet* and the movements towards the late plays

Marilynne Robinson's later writings on Shakespeare themselves develop out of her own youthful sense that '*Henry VI, Part II* anticipates elements of a great many later plays'. In a 1992 interview, the interviewer on two different occasions had observed Robinson sitting directly in front during a screening of *Hamlet*. Robinson admitted to going four times to watch the play:

> 'I'm in my Hamlet phase right now,' she confided. 'You know, I've been thinking recently that Hamlet has been misinterpreted. Don't you think that Claudius actually gives Hamlet exactly what he wants? I don't think that Hamlet really wants to be King of Denmark. He just wants to read his books.[72]

Being with her books is what Robinson was doing between *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, especially in relation to the Renaissance and Reformation. Her experience in watching the play is similar here to that of William James at a performance, April 13 [1868]:

> Good God! I never felt the might of it so before. The endless fullness of it— How it bursts + cracks at every slam. Here again is the problem which I have had before me for the last few days. Is the mode of looking in life of who Hamlet is the expression a final one or only a mid stage on the way to a new + fuller classical one [. . .] — the fullness of emotion becomes so superior to any possible words, that the attempt to express it adequately is abandoned, and its vastness is indicated by the slipping aside into some fancy, or counter-sense— so does action of any sort seem to Hamlet inadequate and irrelevant to his feeling.[73]

Hamlet exists in that middle period of not knowing one's way, of thinking within what may or not may be a gestation period. 'Final one or only a mid stage . . .?' It's part of a sort of middle period for Marilynne Robinson too. In a later essay significantly entitled 'Grace', finally published in 2015, *Hamlet* is what she calls 'a hard case' (*Givenness,* p.40) – a son, a lost father, a struggler for justice in a world without it. Prince Hamlet is the one singled out by ancient tradition to 'set things right' in what would be the making of revenge tragedy:

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[72] Anne E.Voss, 'Portrait of Marilynne Robinson' *The Iowa Review* 22.1 (1992): 21-28, <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4088> [accessed 30th July 2020].

[73] "A Guide to William James's Reading (P-S)," *The William James Society* <https://journal.wjsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/PS.pdf> [accessed 5th November 2020].

> But Hamlet does not want his traditional roles, as king or as avenger. He really does want to return to his life as a student [. . .] Hamlet is a classic Shakespearean character, a king who is and is not a king (*Givenness,* p.41).

What makes Hamlet a study in psychology is that he cannot fit himself with the role and actions of a traditional figure. He truly is a man in-between the old world of revenge and a role in a possible future for himself that he cannot grasp yet. Hamlet's conscience (unlike Henry VI's) is playing a legitimate role between the ways and functions of these two worlds. In what William James describes as a fullness that is perhaps superior to any possible world, Hamlet's is an unplaced existential dilemma.

Hamlet is restored to himself, or can create a matured and magnanimous version of that self, only on his return from England, after the graveyard scene of the fifth act.

> His world would compel him to an act of homicide that, thoroughly as he can rationalize it in the world's terms, and despite continuing provocations of the darkest sort, he finally seems to have put out of his mind. And when he does this, he is restored to himself. He will die because he is a generous, uncontriving man in a world where these virtues are fatal vulnerabilities. Since he seems to have forgotten to despise Claudius and to condemn Gertrude, his mother toward whom he acts with great courtesy and tenderness, he should also be called a gracious man. He would seem to have freed all faults (*Givenness,* pp.42-4).

'There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come The readiness is all.'[74] This is 'the intimation of a great reality of another order' that Robinson associated with grace, changing the experience of time itself. It has its own special note within the Shakespearean dialect:

> I tell my students, language is music. Written words are musical notation. The music of a piece of fiction establishes the way in which it is to be read, and, in the largest sense, what it means. It is essential to remember that characters have a music as well, a pitch and tempo, just as real people do (*When I Was a Child,* p.130).

With that music, that new sense of time's rhythm, comes the creation of the role as 'a gracious man' that is in place of all the other roles he refused – as if grace is precisely what is called for in a world that refuses any place for what does not conform to it. The over-fullness becomes generosity. Again in Marilynne Robinson speaks of 'a matter of inward experience' (*Givenness,* p.80) when humans accept what they are given with that good grace:

[74] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* from The Folger Shakespeare, Ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine. Folger Shakespeare Library, V.ii.233-37, <https://shakespeare.folger.edu> [accessed 9th November 2020]; hereafter cited as *Hamlet.*

> The reality we experience is *given* in the sense that it is, for our purposes, lawful, allowing hypothesis and prediction, or available at least to being construed retrospectively in terms of cause and effect. It is *given* in a deeper sense in the fact that it is emergent. The genome accomplishes its microteleologies, a thought elaborates itself, finding its way to conclusion, recruiting memory, bias, and mood among other things all more or less persistent, most of them unconscious and unarticulable. Our singularity lies above all in the negotiations the mind makes with itself, of which we ourselves know very little (*Givenness,* pp.90-1).

The small micro-movements are now not lost but gathered together, beginning to form a new combination of the human being which is, above all, emergent, fulfilling and concluding the past and its potentials. 'The readiness is all.' It is a structural breakthrough.

> The dying Laertes says, "Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet: / Mine and my father's death come not upon thee, / Nor thine on me." Hamlet replies, "Heaven make thee free of it! I follow thee." The efficacy implied here for simple human forgiveness is to be noted. These two right noble youths pass into eternity together, as if the madness of earth had never contrived to make them enemies (*Givenness,* p.44).

Something other than the law of the world or the revenge of the aggrieved has come in to make a difference to the outcome of *Hamlet*. It is called 'simple' because it makes things more simple, resolving them - though only through the still-young men dying into eternity together.

'I propose that, in his later plays, Shakespeare gives grace a scale and aesthetic power, and a structural importance, that reach toward a greater sufficiency of expression' (*Givenness,* p.33). What feels vital in all this is how to get the grace notes out of the midst of the problem plays as Isabella tries to do in *Measure for Measure*, and beyond the tragic end in death in *King Lear*. It is to do with 'structural importance' as emerging, as suddenly and wonderfully given, despite all the earlier problems and obstacles. It would be like trying to make the end of act 4 outlive the end of act 5 in *Lear*:

> I know you do not love me, for your sisters
> Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
> You have some cause; they have not. 85
>
> CORDELIA
> No cause, no cause.[75]

[75] William Shakespeare, *King Lear* from The Folger Shakespeare, Ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine. Folger Shakespeare Library, IV.vii.83-6, <https://shakespeare.folger.edu> [accessed 9th November 2020]; hereafter cited as *King Lear*.

This is the right music, the signature note, in the dialect of Shakespeare, simple, loving, changing everything – if that is possible:

> The interpretation of Shakespeare plays that I'm doing is suggesting a different way of turning the question of grace than I myself would have thought of without pondering those plays [. . .] From the human point of view, I think that when you participate in grace, you're elevated above worldly considerations— grudges, fears, resentments—all those things that you accumulate in the clutter of self-protectiveness that arises as you develop in life. The moments of grace are the moments in which your vision of reality is, for the moment, actually free. You are out of the trenches. And I think that is something that people very often feel they have experienced, that experientially it is true. I often talk to people who have no theological vocabulary, but the minute the concept of grace becomes available to them, they recognize it. They love it. It could so easily be the core of any sort of reconstruction of our religious sensibilities.[76]

I shall be turning to 'people who have no theological vocabulary' in my next two chapters, to test the response of readers who may not have a formal religion to the religious novels of Marilynne Robinson herself. And I shall be considering how she there conveys extraordinary moments of reality that feel 'experientially [. . .], true' and freeing without a label for themselves. I am here arguing that she clearly felt that she learnt this creative possibility from her later reading of Shakespeare in his final phases. For in that phase, new possibilities emerge despite all that is held back or held down by heavier and darker worldly passions – 'grudges, fears, resentments'. As Simone Weil puts it in Gravity and Grace:

> All the *natural* movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception [. . .]
>
> *Gravity*. Generally what we expect of others depends on the effect of gravity upon ourselves, what we receive from them depends on the effect of gravity upon them [. . .] What is the reason that as soon as one human being shows he needs another (no matter whether his need be slight or great) the latter draws back from him? Gravity.[77]

Like a creative scientist in the arts, Shakespeare can make 'the concept of grace' available dramatically without conceptualization, offering a human way of finding the experience of grace outside of a formal religious language. In place of one human being drawing back from another, there

[76] Marilynne Robinson, 'Grace in Shakespeare', Santa Clara University Ignatian Center, 26th September 2016 <http://scu.edu/ic/media--publications/explore-journal/spring-2014-stories/grace-in-shakespeare.html> [accessed 31st July 2020]; hereafter cited as *Grace in Shakespeare*.

[77] Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (1947), p.1, (London: Routledge, 2003) <https://doi-org.liverpool.idm.oclc.org/10.4324/9780203168455> [accessed 10th November 2020].

is this alternative from Shakespeare, writes Robinson, as he recomposes the materials of his earlier work:

> Out of it all, I propose, he drew a powerful vision and aesthetic, of a grace that transcends even the most embittered differences. The great scenes of reconciliation that conclude so many of his plays are moments of Shakespearean grace (*Givenness,* p.224).

b) Grace in the end

It has to come at the end: 'It is the movement toward reconciliation, toward act 5, that makes many of Shakespeare's plays exemplify the kind of drama we call Elizabethan, and might as well call Shakespearean, since I at least am not aware of any other playwright who shaped his plays in this way' (*Givenness,* p.40). It has to be not forced but emergent:

> 'Grace is grace, despite all controversy.' These words are spoken by the character Lucio in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Lucio is a fool and a scoundrel, a fantastic, according to the dramatis personae. But he is also a loyal friend [. . .]

And so what is said half in jest in a minor key within the play nonetheless becomes vital:

> 'Grace is grace' – simply itself, not accessible to paraphrase. This would indeed put it beyond controversy, since there is no language in which it can be controverted, and it would give a special character, most notably in the Shakespearean world, where associations between words, figures, similes are constant and central *(Givenness,* p.33).

Shakespeare showed it happening as no one else could for Robinson: outside the language of controversy, abstract argument or debate, and with a 'special character' and a 'structural importance' within his music and his dialect. It is as Weil says, 'Grace is the *only* exception' Robinson goes on in words I first read only after reading and thinking about *Home*:

> I propose that, in his later plays, Shakespeare gives grace a scale and aesthetic power, and a structural importance, that reach toward a greater sufficiency of expression—not a definition or a demonstration of grace or even an objective correlative for it, but the intimation of a great reality of another order, which pervades human experience, even manifests itself in human actions and relations, yet is always purely itself (Givenness, pp.33-3).

When parts suddenly become more important than the whole that they are expected to be placed in, when a person hits a notes or a situation effects a small turn of language, which make an unpredictable different, then there must emerge a new kind of orientation.

It is the sort of orientation that I needed to employ by the use of Bion in Chapter 2. Only for Bion '0', the really real, is most often what is most terrible. It is a psychoanalytic confrontation with the almost unbearable presence of trauma and tragedy, of what is missing and distorted, or only

momentarily good. I used that sense of '0' to work through the agonising relations between Father Boughton and Jack, with Gory as an intermediary helpless to prevent the pain. These are once again profound structural issues in the very shape of human relations. But here, in the context of locating movements away from the tragic and closer to the unprarphrase-able presence of grace, it is as though Robinson's William James is needed from his Varieties *of Religious Experience.* For James, the suddenness of some key thought or encounter becomes central to attention, creating around it a new gravitational field. This field may or may not hold, as the individual in crisis moves between different possible worlds. There is no clear explanation or paraphrase available at some points, only a sense of the movements in process:

> Now if you ask of psychology just HOW the excitement shifts in a man's mental system, and WHY aims that were peripheral become at a certain moment central, psychology has to reply that although she can give a general description of what happens, she is unable in a given case to account accurately for all the single forces at work. Neither an outside observer nor the Subject who undergoes the process can explain fully how particular experiences are able to change one's centre of energy so decisively, or why they so often have to bide their hour to do so. We have a thought, or we perform an act, repeatedly, but on a certain day the real meaning of the thought peals through us for the first time, or the act has suddenly turned into a moral impossibility. All we know is that there are dead feelings, dead ideas, and cold beliefs, and there are hot and live ones; and when one grows hot and alive within us, everything has to recrystallize about it (*Varieties of Religious Experience,* p.196*).*

What Robinson sees in Shakespeare is a sudden difference *because* of grace. Everything else must 'recrystallize' around its presence. A reconstruction of what becomes revealed as a religion or faith would take place in the recrystallizing. Suddenly the whole thing has changed because the centre has changed, because something is suddenly hot and live and central. So at the end of *The Winter's Tale* when a seeming statue comes to human life, in a way that the inert figure of Henry VI refused to. Then to Paulina's 'It is required/ You do awake your faith [. . .] [*Music sounds]* 'Tis time. Descend. Be stone no more', Leontes cries 'She's warm'. This is that moment where grace is enabled and allowed to enter, where the pain of all that was before, sixteen years' worth of suffering, suddenly does not seem to matter anymore. This process is all about movements being effected in the right direction, at the right time, it taking time to do it right. Grace feels slower here, gradually borne: 'Descend', 'Be', 'Approach', 'Strike', 'Come', 'Stir', 'Bequeath' It is an experience that changes the whole world. But Paulina's 'required' faith is like calling for something prevenient that must first be

summoned, ahead of any guarantees, before more wonder can take place. 'Dear life redeems you.'[78] And in this, it is what Glory could not manage. She cannot intervene structurally as Paulina could. Nor is she in any position to be able to say 'No cause, no cause' as Cordelia can. Glory can only be pained mediator in the asymmetrical relation between Jack and Father Boughton.[79] If Boughton could understand Jack as much as Jack understands his father's point of view, there would only need to be two people instead of three, Glory's helpless pain giving way to the presence of grace. Here is where Shakespeare is vital to Robinson:

> Shakespeare, my theologian, never asserts but often proposes that we participate in grace, in the largest sense of that word. Beauty masses around the moments in which these thoughts are spoken and enacted. In the words of the Geneva Bible, love "is not provoked to anger; it thinketh no evil" (*Givenness,* p.49).

It is a new form made out of the old world by this natural theologian in action. In the ending of *The Winter's Tale* or, even more, *Cymbeline,* scenes and losses earlier in the play speak to each other finally as in a great opera. Unlike *Henry VI* where scenes may tacitly or ironically communicate, but cannot come into combination, in the late plays there is a suddenly harmonious build-up into a final scene. It is where all parts not only speak to each other, but become something wholly graceful in their formation. This exceeds argument or explanation. As James himself puts it, the 'given' in the world is such that 'Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it'.[80] And no one produces what Marilynne Robinson calls 'an overplus of meaning' (*Givenness,* p.213), more than Shakespeare in his language. It is what Robinson calls 'an overplus of meaning' (*What Are We Doing Here*? p.206), beyond control, concept, narrow senses of meaning or relevance or desert. 'Richness of meaning always overflowing from the

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[78] William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* from The Folger Shakespeare, Ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine. Folger Shakespeare Library, V.iii., <https://shakespeare.folger.edu> [accessed 9th November 2020].

[79] Jennifer L. Holberg argues that Glory '[. . .] embodies a biblical representation of service and strength, wherein the first is last and the last is first' but goes much further in claiming she is 'the real presence of God to her family' (*This Life, This World,* p.145). Although this is something that would be wonderful in the story, this thesis argues that Glory (no matter her human goodness), can only be a secondary help in her family and to Jack.

[80]William James, "Lecture 5 'The Compounding of Consciousness,'" in *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).

text' (*Givenness*, p.194). It is the late plays that the overplus instead of falling by the way, as in a minor scene with Simpcox in Henry VI, is redeemed to achieve more than character or spectator could ever have expected.

What Shakespeare is able to do in his later work is precisely what could not come about in his earlier plays, Equally, Marilynne Robinson could see in her early writing on Shakespeare developed much further developed in her own later understanding the later plays. And most importantly, perhaps she can further develop moments of overplus in her own later novels. If they could get into the right circumstances or get into better luck or better form, to be capable of that sort of development. They are moments where the reader would think 'oh, this is very beautiful humanly', offering at least the potential of a better world, much needed. That is why Robinson examines closely the extraordinary structural process as an education in her own journey towards a different way of turning the question of grace than I myself would have thought of without pondering those plays.

So it is that in *The Tempest*, Prospero himself struggles to find the note of grace, the most benign '0'. It comes to him from his spirit-servant Ariel, speaking of Prospero's enemies, including his own brother, so wretched now:

> That if you now beheld them, your affections
> Would become tender.
>
> PROSPERO
> Dost thou think so, spirit?
>
> ARIEL
> Mine would, sir, were I human.
>
> PROSPERO
> And mine shall.
> Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
> Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
> One of their kind, that relish all as sharply
> Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art?[81]

[81] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* from The Folger Shakespeare, Ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine. Folger Shakespeare Library, V.i.23-31, <https://shakespeare.folger.edu> [accessed 9th November 2020]; hereafter cited as *The Tempest.*

‘Mine would, were I *human*’: that is the special character that comes as bare word to Prospero from outside, re-making him humanly within. But it is still a struggle to incorporate it even in this final play, as Robinson herself notes:

> Among the most striking sentences in the English language is one spoken by Prospero to his treacherous brother, Antonio, in the fifth act of The Tempest. He says, “For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother / Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive / Thy rankest fault—all of them.” The shock is in the language itself, the stark sequence of contempt and forgiveness. Prospero has already told his attendant spirit, Ariel, of his intentions toward Antonio and the others:
>
> Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th’ quick,
> Yet with my nobler reason ‘gainst my fury
> Do I take part. The rarer action is
> In virtue than in vengeance. They being penitent,
> The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
> Not a frown further
> (*Givenness,* p.31).

She goes on as to how ‘he will treat his brother who has slandered him and usurped his dukedom, who must have assumed that he had caused Prospero’s death and his child’s death as well’:

> He is at Prospero’s mercy, and the mercy he receives is perfect, insisted upon in these repetitions, qualified only by that fact that in no case does it forget, minimize or extenuate his crimes (*Givenness,* p.32).

As Montaigne argues in a passage that seems to have influenced those formulations, ‘struck to the quick’, ‘nobler reason ‘gainst my fury’, and ‘the rarer action. Is in virtue than in vengeance’:

> I fancy virtue to be something else, and something more noble, than good nature, and the mere propension to goodness, that we are born into the world withal. Well-disposed and well-descended souls pursue, indeed, the same methods, and represent in their actions the same face that virtue itself does: but the word virtue imports, I know not what, more great and active than merely for a man to suffer himself, by a happy disposition, to be gently and quietly drawn to the rule of reason. He who, by a natural sweetness and facility, should despise injuries received, would doubtless do a very fine and laudable thing; but he who, provoked and nettled to the quick by an offence, should fortify himself with the arms of reason against the furious appetite of revenge, and after a great conflict, master his own passion, would certainly do a great deal more. The first would do well; the latter virtuously: one action might be called goodness, and the other virtue; for methinks, the very name of virtue presupposes difficulty and contention, and cannot be exercised without an opponent. ‘Tis for this reason, perhaps, that we call God good, mighty, liberal and just; but we do not call Him virtuous, being that all His operations are natural and without endeavour.[82]

[82] Michel de Montaigne, “11. Cruelty” <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/montaigne1580book2_2.pdf> [accessed 10th November 2020].

In this sense 'virtue' is greater than natural goodness by the very efforts it has to make to create mercy. And so likewise from mercy to grace. Virtue is like a prevenient path from a fallen state to manifesting anything graceful. Marilynne Robinson said, 'I think that when you participate in grace, you're elevated above worldly considerations'; but Prospero's *participation* here is no easy process but a struggle towards virtue as prevenient grace: 'Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury/Do I take part.' Human beings have to take the hard way round, where God is simply good. But human beings have to transform what is often too easily a natural goodness, through virtue and mercy, to a renewed version of itself called grace. Robinson loves the ending of *The Tempest* where Proposero steps forward, almost out of the play to seek the audience's final participation:

> Now I want
> Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
> And my ending is despair,
> Unless I be relieved by prayer,
> Which pierces so that it assaults
> Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
> As you from crimes would pardoned be,
> Let your indulgence set me free
> (*The Tempest*, Epilogue.13-20).

This prayer, she concludes, 'opens on something purer and grander than mercy', an overplus which is 'something that puts aside the consciousness of fault, the residue of judgment that makes mercy as lesser thing than grace' (*Givenness*, p.34).

Always for Robinson the music that yields grace is at once emergent *form* and loving *voice*, the two together. So it is perhaps most of all for her in the signature notes of long final scene of *Pericles*.

> The Prologue to the strange play *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* says the tale it tells is an old song, sung, among its other benign effects, "to make men glorious." Again, this tale ends in recognition and restoration. Pericles is stirred from his trance of grief by the voice of a daughter he has not known, whose voice he had never heard. Thinking her dead, he is given way to utter sorrow. So her being restored to him is like resurrection. He sees her as he might never have seen her—miraculously herself. The tale "makes men glorious" by allowing plausibility to drop away in profound deference to human particularity, human love and loyalty and worth (*Givenness*, p.224-5).

It was voice – Ames' voice - that first prompted the writing of *Gilead*; it is the continuance of Lila's voice and Jack's voice that has required its continuance. So Pericles to Marina, the daughter he has never seen nor heard, who yet gradually resembles to him something of her mother:

> Prithee, speak.
> Falseness cannot come from thee, for thou lookest
> Modest as Justice, and thou seemest a palace
> For the crownèd Truth to dwell in. I will believe thee
> And make my senses credit thy relation
> To points that seem impossible, for thou lookest
> Like one I loved indeed.[83]

Credit the impossible: this is the overplus, going on and on and on in this long scene of gradual triumph. The dialogue becomes all about comings and goings, backwards and forwards, openings and closings, a process where a third presence of something more can only be felt in the music of tones and voices. It was important that even Christ himself spoke in a human voice:

> Jesus spoke as a man, in a human voice. And a human voice has a music that gives words their meaning. . .Christ's humanity is meant to speak to our humanity. We can in fact imagine that if someone we loved very deeply was restored to us, the joy in his or her voice would anticipate and share our joy (*When I Was a Child*, p.129).

That is the force of the subtle structural 'participation', as all the lost, separate or broken parts begin to come and flow together in a crescendo that is like a natural religion:

> O, come hither,
> Thou that beget'st him that did thee beget,
> Thou that wast born at sea, buried at Tarsus,
> And found at sea again!—
> (*Pericles*, V.i.228-31).

For Pericles it is the voice of the grown child he has never heard that first makes this begin to sing. For Ames, in Marilynne Robinson's own later world, it is the voice of the boy he will never live to hear as he grows. But his own voice in writing to him so itself carries notes that feel graceful or lovely because of a dying father's love:

> Why do I love the thought of you old? That first twinge of arthritis in your knee is a think I imagine with all the tenderness I felt when you showed me your loose tooth (*Gilead*, p.239).

[83] William Shakespeare, *Pericles* from The Folger Shakespeare, Ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine. Folger Shakespeare Library, V.i.136-42, <https://shakespeare.folger.edu> [accessed 9th November 2020]; hereafter cited as *Pericles.*

In *Home*, if we gather together the novels, the parts and echoes, the father feels more fallen in his inability to speak graciously. And yet there is a moment where love abounds in father Boughton's tone, overflowing in the very midst of the most painful passage:

> 'You see something beautiful in a child, and you almost live for it, you feel as though you would die for it, but it isn't yours to keep or to protect' (*Home* p.307).

And the voice that has the most potential for a graceful overplus will rest upon what Lila can say to Jack as a consequence of all she has known through her life with Ames and before him:

> 'A person can change. Everything can change' (*Home* p.238).

It is something very close to what the late plays are wanting to put right. Jack cries to Glory 'Let it happen' when she tries to stop the flow of their father's pained and painful reproaches: 'let it happen' is there a tragically resigned note, letting what must be have its voice; but unconsciously it looks for what may come out of all that through a different tonal version Paulina manages at the end of *The Winter's Tale*. It is as though Marilynne Robinson has learned that if an artist can create these signature tunes, these dialects, these emotional notes and music, then a voice is kept alive that can partly redeem the human race. It is glimpsed from Lila in her lovely, ungrammatical resolve: 'It don't matter,' she would say, in that low, soft voice of hers. That was what she said when she meant she forgave someone, but it had a sound of deeper, sadder resignation, as if she were forgiving the whole of the created order, forgiving the Lord Himself [. . .] (*Gilead,* p.149). It is like creating something after paradise lost, to get what is left of that more beautiful voice out of the ugly feelings and pained situation, with the hope that the language might be able to redeem its own users. In Robinson's novels, there may not be the miracle of the late plays, but she can try to find the signature tunes that are as close to the '0', to the overplus of grace that wipes away past difficulty. It is the living voice I will be looking for in her final novel, *Jack.* All we know is that there are dead feelings, dead ideas, and cold beliefs, and there are hot and live ones; and when one grows hot and alive within us, everything has to recrystallize about it.

What Marilynne Robinson is looking for, even if she cannot fully find grace in her own novels, are moments of what calls generosity:

> I do think it's true that one of the things that is true about the human situation is that we do have a sort of unlimited capacity for generosity. That whatever you do, if you do it well, is an act of generosity towards everybody and anybody who would feel the benefit of your generosity. And that means any work that you do, it certainly means any artistic work that you do. We have that capacity to create a society around us by acts of generosity towards the society. And of course the repayment of that sort of choice is very clear: you can make the society you want to live in. For many people this is not a tolerable model because they don't like the idea of giving something up, even in the possibility of having it returned. . . Nevertheless, if you accept a discipline of generosity in every circumstance where the word could come up, whether its generosity of imagination, generosity of seriousness, actually putting good thought into everything that you do and so on. That's my advice. That's what everybody ought to do. [84]

Generosity, like mercy, is prevenient grace, a readiness for more. The overflowing of life beyond its conditions, circumstances and restrictions is something that is generous. It justifies art. Seeing how human beings manage with her novels becomes the next part in this thesis.

[84] The Trinity Forum, 'Online Conversation Story, Culture, & the Common Good with Marilynne Robinson' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQt3Tc4NhSk&mc_cid=3610eb3af9&mc_eid=d564b603d4> [accessed 26th July 2020]; hereafter cited as *Story, Culture, & the Common Good.*

Part II: The Readers of Marilynne Robinson

Chapters one and two contain my reading of Marilynne Robinson, in humanly revivifying religious tradition within her novels. Chapter three investigates how Robinson's own reading contributed to that writing. To her there was never a question of merely choosing that religious emphasis or wondering about its fate with readers who rejected religion or were indifferent to it (*Story, Culture, & the Common Good.)*. Chapters four and five are experiments in turning to readers of Marilynne Robinson, with particular emphasis on whether or how far a form of religious thinking can be passed on to readers who may be in various ways non-religious.

Chapter four concentrates on *Home*, as discussed in chapter two, and in it as the leader of the reading group in question, I both deploy and test some of the thoughts and techniques that went into the writing of that earlier chapter. In chapter five I turn to interviews with more experienced individual readers, and their thinking in relation to *Gilead* as well as *Home,* and to questions that arose out of my own concerns in chapter one as well as chapter two.

Grounded theory analysis was selected as the primary analytical methodology in both experiments due to its realistic evaluation in 'the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research'.[85] It should be acknowledged that particularly in chapter four there is a potential tension between the use of grounded theory and the role of the researcher also acting and intervening as the group facilitator, with prior assumptions and experience. But the tension between grounded theory and an a priori perspective may serve to test the a priori in the way that literature itself so often does and that William James also considers vital to pragmatism. James knew there was no grounded empiricism that did not implicitly include assumptions, and in acts of deep experience an investigation of the empirical included challenging assumptions and principles as they came to the

[85]Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research.* (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Co, 1967), p.2.

fore. Similarly, principles and assumptions asked questions of the empirical information in the midst of the complicated mix of human considerations.

Similarly, the dual role of group leader and research observer created a dense testing area within the reflections involved in this thesis. The group leader in shared reading is not simply in control - not when the text is complex and the group is both diverse and busy. It would be almost impossible for any leader to be wholly neutral in influence, but it would be useful on another occasion to compare this case-history with that of another group studying the same text with a different group leader, though the variables even so are considerable. On this occasion, the only way of testing the researcher's reading was to bring it into the group praxis, where it could not be wholly registered at the time but was available for analysis afterwards. There is tension in this realistic mix, but it is the site for honest preliminary investigation as a basis for further research. This would include further investigation into passages that are distinguished by what I, after Bion, signal by '0', marking increased intuitive proximity to the deepest forces in the text. There were some signs of consensus as to these key passages across individual readers in this study, but again it would be useful to test the choice of passages and their effect within other groups and in relation to other individuals.

The experiments in the following two chapters were planned and conducted by the approval of the University of Liverpool's ethics committee.[86] Participants all signed consent forms and were informed that they had the right to cease their participation in the experiment at any time. The names of participants in chapter four have all been anonymized, however, individuals in chapter five bear their real names where they expressed willingness for that to be so. There are transcripts from the group sessions together with my own report-diary reflections, and individual interviews.

[86] University of Liverpool Ethics Committee application reference #5578.

4.

The Shared Reading Experiment

I formed a group by advertising for volunteers from the University of Liverpool and The Reader community to read aloud together the novel *Home* by Marilynne Robinson. The group consisted of seven women aged 45-85 from around the Liverpool community, and took place over 16 weeks. The main research question I took in with me was to test whether through a shared reading group, the participants could learn any different ways of thinking from reading a novel as emphatically religious as *Home* and from doing so within a community-group setting. Of the seven women, as I discovered only indirectly and through the course of actual discussion, four were to any degree what they themselves would call 'religious.' five of the seven members had previously taken part in a shared reading group I conducted in relation to my MA work, in reading George Eliot's *Silas Marner*.

I used a consensus group to check my selection of the best moments recorded in the written transcripts of the sessions. The consensus group consisted of my supervisor Philip Davis, Professor Josie Billington of the University of Liverpool, Dr Jane Davis the founder of The Reader Organisation, and three other individuals who are the readers discussed in chapter five were also consulted at different points regarding key passages.

The Group-reading of *Home*

I list below crucial moments and thematic concerns, mainly in chronological order of development.

(i) Secondary Motions

The continual initial challenge I encountered with the group was a recurrent inability to really get anything primary or personal from out of the text when we would pause from reading. This was a surprise to me, as many of them who had been in my reading group before didn't shy away from getting into the depths of *Silas Marner*. The novel *Home* goes into emotional areas that often felt too hard to handle, the participants at times explicitly indicating that these were places that were uncomfortable to speak about. Contrary to my initial hypothesis, it was not the religious element that

seemed to be inhibiting my readers but rather that the religious setting so far from comforting or curing the pain was allowing if not requiring its full force in the Broughton family. In my own mind, I kept the idea of Bion's '0' as a guide or indicator, as discussed in chapter two: the 'thing itself', the 'it', the most real and often unbearable reality, the ultimate such as Kant's noumenon. Where passages would come close to '0', the group would move discussion away from it. The group would most often default into speaking more about the characters, often externally and judgmentally, or offer a commentary *on* the story rather than actually feeling, thinking and imagining *within it*. Here is a particularly telling example from one of the painful passages of the novel. It comes near the end of the session at week 9, when largely the work was getting better, but because it failed so badly in relation to a vital passage, it stands as a regression back to and a summary of what had been going not-so-well in the first month.

Week 9

> The old man said 'You take your time. But I want you to give me your hand now.' And he took Jack's hand and moved it gently toward himself, so he could study the face Jack would have hidden from him. 'Yes,' he said, 'here you are.' He laid the hand against his chest. 'You feel that heart in there? My life became your life, like lighting one candle from another. Isn't that a mystery? I've thought about it many times. And yet you always did the opposite of what I hoped for, the exact opposite. So I tried not to hope for anything at all, except that we wouldn't lose you. So of course we did. That was the one hope I couldn't put aside' (*Home,* p.121).

Kate: The father is apologising and then the big turn against his son. It changed.

Lily: It is difficult because I almost feel for the father.

Kate: I did, before the *end*.

Lily: Yes that is true, and also the father is doing what he said Jack did. The opposite, the exact opposite of what was hoped for and needed. He cannot blame his son, he says, when he is still judging him so much that he cannot let anything go.

Margaret: But as the father says, he has known all of Jack's life that his son hasn't felt joy or happiness. And that would be hard to know that and carry that as the father.

Elizabeth: But if you really cared or loved your son, you would express concern, but you would do anything you possibly could to hold back your own feelings, or how it might have impacted yourself. He could have just left it there.

Lily starts out in the right area with 'difficult' and 'almost' because she is recognizing that more than one feeling is happening, more than one family point of view or one easy direction being followed here with the father feeling real pain. However, it gets cut off by Kate, and then Lily joins her in

commenting *on* the father, rather than trying to be *with* the father, or at least imagining what the father might be going through. Margaret makes a good attempt to get into the moment with the father, 'that would be hard [i.e. painful] to know', and in going on to a further deeper level of imagining in 'hard to know and ***carry*** that as the father' – not only to know it but to have it, bear it, feel it. the syntax and emphases show her really getting closer to '0' here. But it is not to be sustained: the secondary idea of a parent holding back feelings itself holds Elizabeth back: 'He could have just left it there.' But this book is never about 'just leaving it there'. Nor is it about making blame for the father a way of avoiding the worst; it seeks the primary '0'.

As discussed earlier in chapter two, the character of the father and even Glory are also frequently falling into this secondary feeling instead.[87] The group itself will read about the movement from secondary to primary movements, and as leader I may point to them, but in their own discussion they will mainly stay within secondary – which literature itself is meant to overcome. They will speak about the excusable complexities of being Jack with such a father, using a sort of humane compassion, but not more sympathetically imagining what it would be like to feel the damnation Jack is experiencing.

My initial conclusion at this first difficult stage of the group trying to 'get into' the book was this: That the pressure to seek recourse in the secondary is often naturally too strong, especially in the first month or so. When left to their own devices, the group will characteristically end up in that mode, especially when *Home* is felt as almost unbearable. The reader leader could remain a mere facilitator. But often The Reader urges a leader to step in and take part (like a sort of version of Shakespeare's Paulina), to model a braver response and do more justice to the text; doing everything possible at least to point to the places and traces of the real, and not just their paraphraseable aftermath, to point to the inside and not just the external. In a wider sense, getting out of the secondary mode is the first thing that has to be done emotionally in reading; nothing of value can take place otherwise.

[87] See earlier in this thesis pp. 62-3

Crucially this novel in particular is not designed to be satisfied with commentating and explaining away every human suffering. It cannot seem to settle for any understanding achieved by retreat or by means of a safety barrier in between reader and text.

(ii) Areas of Potential

The group experience was not simply linear: there were stops and starts, and returns and jolts. Here I offer two moments of real potential from the early weeks.

a) The group got out of default responses as soon as they began to feel they had, as it were, bitten off more than they could chew: that the feeling arising out of the language was more than they could easily categorise by single names or attitudes. In the following passage read to the group in week 2, Glory is thinking back to when her father and mother found out that Jack fathered a child out of wedlock:

Week 2

> They both believed firmly in the power of example. This would be a great act of moral instruction. They must act consistently with their faith. They must consider all its applications in the present circumstance. Yes! She watched as her father mustered his courage. 'The Lord has been very good to me!' he said, reminding himself that his obligations were correspondingly great, in fact limitless. This was a thought he always found exhilarating. Jack had left his car keys on the piano and taken the train back to college. She was almost old enough to drive, and she was fairly sure she knew how it was done. So she took her father out into the country to see that baby. It was disturbing to remember how happy she had been then, in the very middle of his deepest grief (*Home,* pp.18-9).

Elizabeth: That is a big sentence, that last sentence.

Audrey: I think she just sees it simply as a baby, which is a gift from God. She doesn't see all the other scenarios.

Kate: And he is sad because he looks at this the other way and sees all the bad things attached to this child. So she can be happy because of the simplicity of her, focusing on the child, whereas he is focusing on another picture or what some would say is the bigger picture, and that makes him sad.

Lily: Hmm, she is better, more innocent

Kate: But he probably felt he had to set this 'consistent example' didn't he?

Jackie: Forgiveness.

Group Leader: 'This would be a great act of moral instruction. They must act consistent with her faith.' Consistent is the dangerous word there.

Kate: But also, Glory who was part of that same home—she was happy about this and probably has always wanted a child of her own. She sees nothing but the joy of the child.

Audrey: What a beautiful thing to only think of that thing.

Lily: Have you read Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*? A young girl has a baby out of wedlock in the book. And when the pastor's sister is upset because the child is illegitimate, the Pastor replies that the baby is different from the sin. And a lovely thing happens when he is just so happy about the birth of the baby and what it will do for the mother. But talking about Glory's father, 'in the very middle of his deepest grief' *deepest grief!* Because a child has been born! And he can't see the joy of a new life at all because it's such *disgrace.*

Jackie: Yes, but his deepest grief? Much worse things can happen. No one has died!

Kate: The opposite that's happened. Nobody has died, more life has come.

It's Audrey's thought that brings in the language of the 'beautiful', then Lily develops it more into 'lovely', which seems suddenly more important than the language of the morality of the 'consistent'. The group is on the verge of discovering a language (I was thinking a grace) which is more fitting to what the novel may be crying out for. Lily also illustrates the variation from one reverend 'in his deepest grief' and another pastor who is 'just so happy about the birth of the baby'.

The non-conformist minister, Mr Benson, in Mrs Gaskell's Ruth (as Lily says) finds himself defending to his sister Faith, on religious grounds, what he also believes, in his deepest religious self to be a sin - Ruth's conceiving a child out of wedlock:

> 'The sin appears to me to be quite distinct from its consequences,' he says to his sister, Faith.
> 'In the eye of God, she is exactly the same as if the life she has led had left no trace behind. We knew her errors before, Faith.'
> 'Yes, but not this disgrace – this badge of her shame!'
> 'Faith, Faith! Let me beg of you not to speak so of the little innocent babe, who may be God's messenger to lead her back to Him. Think again of her first words – the burst of nature from her heart! Did she not turn to God, and enter into a covenant with Him – "I will be so good"? Why, it draws her out of herself! If her life has hitherto been self-seeking, and wickedly thoughtless, here is the very instrument to make her forget herself, and be thoughtful for another. Teach her (and God will teach her, if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin, - will be purification'[88]

[88] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (1853) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.97.

It is the significant variation between Mr Benson and his sister that makes the difference between what is beautiful and what would be 'disgrace'. Sometimes the group can unexpectedly go to the verge or the area of the 'lovely' with a desire bring out love, almost against theoretic consistency.

b) In week 3 something had started to happen to individuals in the group and then in the workings of the group as a whole that continued to challenge default reactions.

Week 3

Jack has written he will be coming home. Here Glory has just informed the family friend John Ames:

> As he followed her down the walk to open the gate for her, he said, 'It might be best if he [her father] doesn't get his hopes too high.' Then they laughed. He said, 'Well, there's not much we can do about that.' But Glory had her own hopes, which we also too high—that this visit would happen at all, that it would be interesting, and that Jack would not remember her as the least tolerable, the most officious, the least to be trusted of his brothers and sister. She thought and hoped he might hardly remember her (*Home,* p.27).

Group Leader: She thought and hoped he might hardly remember her!

Kate: This is strange, she was always the super sensitive one wasn't she?

Audrey: Yes, remember when she wouldn't tell on Jack when they were children! Why should she not want Jack to remember her?

Jackie: I also think it is sad that straight away you are assuming that things are not going to turn—that things are going to go wrong.

Group Leader: There is something about turns here, aren't there? And hopes and fears all too human – though the most interesting thing is how austerely low Glory sets the bar in hoping he might NOT remember her.

Jackie: It is as if everyone is excited, as if everyone is wanting to shout 'Jack is coming home…but' and it is that 'but' that makes the difference here.

Group Leader: There is always a feeling of that 'but'.

Audrey: Perhaps if we look back at the last three lines 'least tolerable, most officious, the least to be trusted of his brothers and sisters.' Did she end up doing something wrong? This doesn't sound like our Glory.

Kate: Yes, but she has never had a good opinion of herself either.

Michelle: What if…because there seems to be a tradition or culture in the family of all the siblings being against Jack or assuming the worst in him, perhaps she is saying this is a different way than we are assuming. Maybe Glory's thinking is more 'that Jack would not remember *her'*—I mean, maybe he remembers everyone else being unkind, but maybe he will not remember *her* as being the one that was intolerable. I don't think she wants Jack to associate her with the rest of her siblings. Just like she wanted him to know that she would be the one to keep the secret about not going to school.

Audrey: But I wonder why she doesn't turn it around and just say with a hopeful love 'I hope he remembers that I was the one to want to help him'.

> **Group Leader**: Ah, interesting, Audrey. I think that is the right question to be asking here. I wonder if she thinking 'Could a fresh start for Jack be like a non-continuance of all the bad stuff?'

There are beginnings of thoughts around the group, some out of confusion, and some almost like a half thought: 'but' says Jackie; 'why . . . not . . . just?' in Audrey. Though the half thought does not feel complete on its own, there is a liveliness in its start, especially as a conjunction or as a question. it should seem to have to develop into something more. Jackie's point to that feeling of 'but. . .' is something felt more than seen in the language, in relation to something harder to pinpoint or articulate than standard default attitudes allow. Welcome him home; hope he remembers you fondly: these are the model. But some prior pressure is working on these easier sentences, turning them round. Here William James in *The Principles of Psychology* on 'The Stream of Thought' suggests how to interpret the style of moments like this one above:

> There is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought [. . .] We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not, so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other case.[89]

Michelle hadn't shared anything at all with the group up to this week, but she ventures in to attempt to pick up the half thoughts that have been shared by the others. '*What if*…because there *seems* to be a tradition or culture in the family'; *'perhaps* she is saying this is a *different* way than we are assuming '*Maybe* Glory's thinking is *more* . . .' Michelle creates openings to these possibilities: the apparent unsureness in her language is actually the imaginative beginning of the group's thinking finally coming together. Audrey can now move into these new openings from Michelle, not only to build on her thought – 'I wonder why' - but also to bring it back to Glory's thinking: 'I wonder why she doesn't turn it around and just say'. The crucial turn from sequentially forwards to imaginatively back-thinking from the group, the turns to and fro that are no longer straightforward, is now bringing the thinking closer to the reality of the family-formed configuration of the novel that underlies Glory's thoughts. What is happening is that these half-thoughts are becoming clues potentially capable of

[89] William James, *The Principles of Psychology (*Henry Holt and Company, 1890), pp.245-6.

development. What I mean by development comes from the nineteenth-century theologian John Henry Newman writing in a theological context but it bears application to human meaning stimulated by literary resonances:

> This process, whether it be longer or shorter in point of time, by which the aspects of an idea are brought into consistency and form, I call its development, being the germination and maturation of some truth or apparent truth on a large mental field. On the other hand this process will not be a development, unless the assemblage of aspects, which constitute its ultimate shape, really belongs to the idea from which they start… .The development then of an idea is not like an investigation worked out on paper, in which each successive advance is a pure evolution from a foregoing, but it is carried on through and by means of communities of men and their leaders and guides; and it employs their minds as its instruments, and depends upon them, while it uses them. And so, as regards existing opinions, principles, measures, and institutions of the community which it has invaded; it developes by establishing relations between itself and them; it employs itself, in giving them a new meaning and direction, in creating what may be called a jurisdiction over them, in throwing off whatever in them it cannot assimilate. It grows when it incorporates, and its identity is found, not in isolation, but in continuity and sovereignty.[90]

This is when the group leader knows we will have a chance at making a movement towards '0', because this is no longer character-judgment or story-opinion but a sense of 'shape' emerging this way round or that way round from the family relationship form of the novel.

(iii) Form

a) 'Double Listening'

One of the significant transformations is when a reader is not just commenting upon what is *in* the text, but working out a thought that springs from the text and is bigger than its immediate occasion.

In week 6, the group has just read how Jack has been helping Glory in the garden all day. He got a splinter from using the gardening tool, and the reverend made a big fuss to make sure he helped Jack with the small wound. Now they are sitting at dinner where father Boughton is carefully avoiding any possible questions that could be uncomfortable for Jack. Glory watches the situation:

Week 6

> Through supper Jack was patiently restless, hearing out his father's attempts at conversation. . . . Jack watched him with the expression of mild impassivity he wore now that the embarrassments of his arrival were more or less behind him. She felt sorry for her father, happy as he was. It was hard work talking to Jack. So little in his childhood and youth could

[90] John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/index.html> [accessed 10th November 2019].

> be mentioned without discomfort, his twenty-year silence was his to speak about if he chose to, but they were prepared to appreciate his discretion if any account of it might have caused more discomfort still. Then there was the question 'Why are you here?' which they would never ask. Glory thought, Why am I here? How cruel it would be to ask me that (*Home*, pp.65-6).

Jackie: So uncomfortable. Why are they always so uncomfortable around one another?

Group Leader: Yes, very uncomfortable. Which parts do you think are the most uncomfortable?

Jackie: You wonder if they will ever be at ease with each other. Before dinner the father acts as if he is really worried when Jack gets a splinter, he wants to be the one to help it, but it feels awkward…his concern feels awkward. He has been trying Jack's whole life to build bridges, and it's never natural! Why do they keep trying? It feels so uncomfortable the more they try. It feels like underneath all these attempts it just always makes things more uncomfortable for everybody.

Group Leader: I think this unspoken underneath is important. What area of the text did you feel it the most?

Jackie: It's just that on top of this feeling they seem to be only acting out the parts of a family relationship, you know? Only on top. 'So little in his childhood and youth could be mentioned without *discomfort*' then later '*more discomfort still*'

Audrey: Hmm, more discomfort …but I think Jack is more *sincere* in his trying! He may feel uncomfortable, but he is also showing the respect by listening. And earlier that day it said that he 'rolled up his sleeves' and helped with the gardening. I think he is listening sincerely, even if it is uncomfortable.

Kate: Ah, I know, it looks like Jack is just surviving the moment…

Group Leader: Hmm yes, 'restless'.

Kate: Yes, and 'mild impassivity' But I wonder if there is more going on underneath Jack that we just can't get to…or we just can't know about. [She pauses] See here: 'Jack was patiently restless, *hearing out* his father's attempt at conversation' I wonder if Jack is not only trying to get through it, but underneath it all actually, I wonder if he might be listening to them…I mean listening maybe about what it would *be like* for them—Glory and especially the reverend—to see him and talk to him. Maybe he knows he is bringing back a difficult situation in himself.

Group Leader: Wow, that is interesting Kate, to be able to imagine how the people around you are listening to you, and what it is like for them on the receiving end.

Michelle: That's like double listening.

Group Leader: Yes! Like more than one thought happening at once, in different directions too.

Kate: It is, and I don't know how to always exist in that, or if that is what's happening here, but I wonder what that would be like for Jack if it was happening.

The group are now making something together, adding layers to each other's sentences, getting momentum from each other's thoughts. Certain group members fall into instinctively performing certain functions: Jackie's questioning, Audrey looking to pull out anything sincere in the midst of awkwardness; Kate doing the digging in, the working out of something implicit, and Michelle

bringing everything together to try to seal the exciting thought. Those functions are not permanent: though temperamentally or intellectually one person may be more suited to one particular function than another, the functions can move around from person to person in the light of a particular context and occasion. It is, at any rate, the most imaginative move in developing thought that has come about in this group. They begin to imagine not only what is *not* said but, via Kate, what it is like to imagine how others have to deal with one's own presence and silence. Michelle's powerful 'That's like double listening' clinches it. For Jack is both subject and object here. Jack #1 as subject has his own feelings, but as Jack #2, especially on his return home, imagines the others' feelings about him as (so to speak, grammatical) object, and then has to take 2 back into 1, subject and object at once, with a rebounding effect on his own feelings, as Jack #3. He listens to them in pain, and in more pain he imagines how they listen to him and what they hear inside their own heads in response. In that position he has to bear that double consciousness of being a creature in the world who is both an 'I' and a 'you',[91] being alone and consciously feeling that loneliness, even amidst others, with the added guilt of a new realization of his long-continued effect upon them. It is a terrible complex overload to 'carry', to use a favoured term of the group members.

And this twist and turn of shape, this shift of centres, applies to the novelist as well as to her character, as she uses something like human geometry to mark the turns: 'I think of Fiction of having dimensionality: you don't make a simple statement, you rotate an idea and look at it from various sides.'[92] Double listening for Jack is like that rotation of ideas, another instance of form taking the place of simple narrative, of linear straightforwardness. If regular form is one point of view to start with, then double listening is that form altering in the midst of itself. The moment the form has changed and densened in that way, the novel is closer through Jack to imagining '0', listening to what George Eliot called the roar on the other side of silence.

[91] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (New York: Scribner, 1958).
[92] Hope University, 'Dr Marilynne Robinson', YouTube, 11th August 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l28G2b13bh4> [accessed 25th June 2020].

b) Ancient formal functions rescued or renewed

Right after the group's emerging idea of double listening, we continued to read the following passage that carries on directly from the moment at dinner:

> When his father began to weary with the effort of talk—'Yes, yes,' he said, 'yes'—Jack cleared away the dishes and then he said, 'Sir,' and took his father's arm and helped him up from the table, a thing the old man never let Glory do, and he took him to the chair in his room where he napped. He helped him out of his jacket and opened his collar and loosened his tie. Then he knelt and removed his shoes. 'That old quilt—' his father said, and Jack took it from the foot of the bed and spread it over him. The manner of his doing all these things, things she had done every day for months, suggested courtesy rather than kindness, as if it were a tribute to his father's age rather than a concession to it. And she could see how her father was soothed by these attentions, as if pain were an appetite for comforting of just this kind.
>
> She did her best (*Home*, p.66).

Jackie: Right when you are thinking Jack isn't being sensitive, look what he does for his father?

Elizabeth: This last paragraph has a biblical tone to it. You know the way Jack treats his father.

Group Leader: Yes. I felt it most from the phrase 'Then he knelt and removed his shoes.'

Elizabeth: Not unlike Jesus washing the feet of the disciples at the last supper.

Group Leader: Yes! Though it says 'courtesy'. That language sounds more loving than anything that has happened before. I don't feel any kind of discomfort from this.

Kate: Maybe just a bit surprised that Jack has done this after being so restless in the dinner. You wouldn't expect it from him.

Elizabeth: Yes, you wouldn't expect a religious tone to come from Jack out of nowhere.

Lily: But 'courtesy rather than kindness' seems like it might be more formal and still out of duty more than anything…but it still feels tender and beautiful to me.

Group Leader: Here in these kind of familial actions, it does feel more beautiful, even out of duty.

It is right when Elizabeth speaks of the 'biblical tone' felt here, it is a feeling more beautiful like unto the language in the last passage. Elizabeth trusts the tone, as if she has felt it before and know where it should belong, and Lily tries to ride upon it. Though the group cannot explain the feeling or tone easily with the text, it remains felt and trusted 'but it still feels tender and beautiful to me' from Lily. The implication here is that deeper, older meaning of courtesy that would be better than kindness (put forth near the end of chapter 2 of this thesis). As courtesy is compared with kindness, so tribute is compared to concession; that is the nature of the syntax. The group members work out the idea that this formality rescues Jack, though one might already know when reading that he will not be able to

maintain the tradition long enough or completely enough. It is to do more with some purity of need. In other words, somebody has to do it, and here is where even the sinner might perform the function of intermediary, or forgiver, or helper. Sometimes there are needs that felt called for. And if one heard the need, one had to be the thing. Then suddenly, the re-discovering of the ancient, is something like getting the tradition back.

(iv) Feeling '0'

When vocabulary can be loaded with too many inherited implications, Bion wanted to try to use notations, letters, algebraic indicators, instead of premature nouns and categories, to navigate feeling. As a psychoanalyst he sought to give intensity a blind point, without giving it a name that begins to impose interpretation. This helps steer a humane agnostic pathway (religious or not) between a silenced first language and its possible re-creation in a second form in common life: i.e. it implicitly asks 'Am I nearer or further away from the really real, when this happens or that is said?' Reading with Bion's dumb pointing tools within the experimental model of human existence called literature, and moving this way and that within its complexity, helps find a language for the densely mixed-up considerations and entangling circumstances within which the group must function. As with Bion and his patients, I think we can tell from the transcripts, as from the novel itself, when people are using certain elements of themselves that are routine or defensive, and then some other elements are coming in that are more unconscious and disruptive of defaults. Because of what happened below in week 8, I subsequently shared some of these thoughts about Bion with the group, in terms of pointing towards powerful places. Even though (as Bion says) the sense of total reality or truth can never be fully available to us, I told them, his 'it' or '0' of the really real marks the great moments in human beings - even if they're terrible, no matter: holding-places for the primary secrets of existence in birth, family, marriage, crisis, ageing and dying. I was interested to see how the tool might help the group itself to be able to point initially to unbearable areas rather than explain them secondarily.

Week 8 (where in the following the 'she' in the graveyard is the little girl Jack fathered out of wedlock)

When she came back into the kitchen, Jack was standing in the porch. He said, 'It's nice out here. Dark.'

She went out and stood beside him.

He cleared his throat. 'Can I ask you something?'

'Probably.'

'It's nothing personal.'

'All right.'

'Say you do something terrible. And it's done. And you can't change it. Then how do you live the rest of your life? What do you say about it?'

'Do I know what terrible thing we're talking about?'

He nodded. 'Yes. You do know. When I was out walking the other day I took a wrong turn and ended up at the cemetery.' He said, 'I'd forgotten she was there.'

'She was part of the family.'

He nodded.

'All I can tell you is what Papa would say. He'd say repent, and then—you can put it aside, more or less, and go on. You've probably heard him say that as often as I have.'

'More often.' Then he said, 'Regret doesn't count I suppose.'

'I don't claim to know about these things. It seems to me that regret should count. Whatever that means.'

'But if you just found out about it, no matter whether I regretted or repented—what would you think of me?'

'What can I say? You're my brother. If I were someone else, and I knew you and thought you were all right, then that would matter more to me than something that happened so many years ago.'

'Even though I had never told you about it. And I should have told you.'

'I think so.'

He nodded. 'You're not being kind.'

'I don't really know.'

'Well, I might have a chance. Things could work out.' He said, 'It will be bad at best. A miserable thing to have to hope for. Pain all around. Ah, little sister. It's no wonder I can't sleep.'

The television set stayed on the lamp table. Jack turned it on for the morning, noon, and evening news, and turned it off again if there was nothing about Montgomery. His father ignored it completely (*Home,* pp.103-4*).*

Audrey: What about the questions to Glory from Jack?

Group Leader: Yes, those are big, let's look at those: 'How do you live the rest of your life? What do you say about it?' 'What would you think of me?'

Audrey: Yes, those are the ones. It is like the first time he is thinking aloud about the way others see him. Jack is scared, but this is a nice moment with his sister.

Lily: He cannot say Dad, but here he is able to say 'little sister'.

Group Leader: Yes, and a bit of desperation too, I think he really is sincere in wanting to know.

Kate: The story is not moving the novel is it? It feels like it's what goes on inside under it all that...well it doesn't move it, but it makes something happen.

Jackie: It's the feelings I think. All we have are feelings, and sometimes you can only feel a small portion of the feeling, and sometimes you can really feel it. It is like it's a closed or more open feeling. It feels like a more open feeling from Jack here.

Kate: Yes, more alive.

Group Leader: Yes, sometimes it feels like this novel only has feelings to work with, and the intensity of the feeling is what will navigate the novel, not the story.

Kate: We feel more alive when the feelings are intense. The story becomes more real to me the worse it gets. I really felt more when he said 'Well, I might have a chance, things could work out' and then 'It will be bad at best. A miserable thing to have to hope for. Pain all around' This starts hopeful and then ends so badly, so hopeless. I felt more alive when I read those words. That sounds terrible.

Group Leader: But it is a fuller measure of feeling there, because again it blends hope and hopelessness together in one place. It's like the place is called 'more alive'. Kate, I think you're on to something.

The group's discussion is suddenly no longer starting out by following the story. Lily's note on 'little sister', though little is what makes it bearable for Jack, also helps the group to get closer to what Kate then describes as feeling instead of story. It is Kate's abrupt movement away from narrative— 'The *story* isn't moving the novel, is it?' - that almost literally moves the group to imagine another formation of the novel's processes. Jackie then has that electric idea of 'feelings' being the navigating force: 'sometimes you can only feel a small portion of the feeling, and sometimes you can really feel it'. The sense of 'closing' or 'opening' is a vital instinct towards finding a way through the book. There are areas that feel alive, adds Kate, so she can then say 'more real'/'the worse it gets'.

Earlier in the few weeks, it had just seemed that things were getting worse, and the readers could hardly bear to encounter that. Now 'the worse' was also an index of something else even so, the more real, as my Bion or my James would put it in my own earlier chapters. Hence Kate's last two sentences, where she knows she is in a different realm of being: 'This starts hopeful and then ends so badly, so hopeless. I felt more alive when I read those words. That sounds terrible.' Blending hope with hopelessness, and 'more alive' coupled with 'terrible' is a sure sign of recognising the closer proximity to '0'. The feeling is pain, but there is also a feeling that while or because one may not want this pain, it somehow must make itself acknowledged. I will remind the group that what they are developing here are some tools to get them further: they need these ideas as instruments, and equally they will be more aware of them as instruments rather one-offs if they do use them again. The test now becomes how far the group will be able to follow through with the feeling.

(v) Backwards to Primary

One of the most exciting discoveries in this project came about just when the group seemed blocked towards primary feeling. We have already seen in week 9 an especially moving yet painful passage managed by the readers' default of blaming Jack's father. Time was short and we didn't have the opportunity at that point in the session to revisit and dig deeper, so at week 10 instead of moving forward despite the disappointment, I chose to go back and try again to find another way forward to a feeling that would reach the centre of the pain felt in *Home*. Going forward linearly would have felt like going away from and completely ignoring the failed feeling; turning backwards felt like the only hope to move forward:

Week 10

From group leader's weekly write up diary:

> *As the group members came in, each mentioned something about last week's reading. Since the group didn't have a lot of time to get into the passage the week before, I thought it would be important to go back to it.*

Group Leader: Before we start this next section this week, I wanted to ask if there has been any more thinking from last week? I know we ended on that really painful moment with Jack and the father. We didn't have very much time to get into it. Any more feelings from it?

(silence for about 20 seconds)

Kate: I was thinking about how Jack laughs earlier in the passage. He laughs. Why does he laugh? I've been wondering.

Michelle: It's like a nervous laugh he has isn't it? He doesn't mean to laugh, but he does.

Group Leader: Yes, why does he laugh?

Michelle: It's like when…when something awful happens you just…

Audrey: He puts his hand over his face.

Lily: Yes, throughout it keeps saying 'and Jack laughed', and it is usually during very serious times. But I don't think he is genuinely laughing, do you?

Kate: It's just a way of deflecting it, don't you think?

Group Leader: Ah, deflecting it. Deflecting it…what is it that he is deflecting, do you think?

Kate: Well it's…it's becomes too much for him.

Audrey: Can we read that bit again?

> 'And why am I talking to you about this? But it was always a mystery to me. Be strict! People would say that to me. Lay down the law! Do it for his sake! But I always felt it was a sadness I was dealing with, a sort of heavyheartedness. In a child! And how could I be angry at that? I should have known how to help you with it.'
>
> 'You helped me. I mean, there are worse lives than mine. Mine could be worse.' He laughed and put his hand to his face.

'Oh yes. I'm sure of that, Jack. I see how kind you are now. Very polite. I notice that.'

'These last years I've been all right. Almost ten years.'

'Well, that is wonderful. Now, do you forgive me for speaking to you this way?'

'Yes, sir. Of course I do. I will. If you give me a little time.'

The old man said 'You take your time. But I want you to give me your hand now.' And he took Jack's hand and moved it gently toward himself, so he could study the face Jack would have hidden from him. 'Yes,' he said, 'here you are.' He laid the hand against his chest. 'You feel that heart in there? My life became your life, like lighting one candle from another. Isn't that a mystery? I've thought about it many times. And yet you always did the opposite of what I hoped for, the exact opposite. So I tried not to hope for anything at all, except that we wouldn't lose you. So of course we did. That was the one hope I couldn't put aside.'

Jack withdrew his hand from his father's and put it to his face again. 'This is very difficult,' he said. 'What can I do--I mean, is there something I can do now?' (*Home,* pp.120-1).

Michelle: You know, something else from last week…I was thinking about the father actually. I think, I think the father is really being sincere. At the end there, the father was just baring his own soul. I don't think he is wanting to harm Jack with his words.

Audrey: Well I took it home and re-read it as you know, and it sounded to me exactly like that. You know, he was apologising to his son for not giving him what he probably needed, or not investing in what he needed. In reading again, I think there is a different way to look at the father and what he is feeling in this moment.

Lily: Yes, I think I am usually pretty hard on the father because I cannot believe how he is sometimes, *but* that last part of the paragraph there, I have a hard time working it out.

Group Leader: That is interesting Lily. Yes I think it would be the easier thing to do to just say Jack is somehow good and the reverend is actually bad, but that doesn't seem to get to the right feeling here. As you say Michelle, the father is being very sincere in what he shares. It feels like he knows it might hurt ('you'll have to forgive me for this Jack'), but he knows he needs to say it! It's been twenty years. I also think what you've said Lily is really interesting too about the last part of the paragraph. Shall we look at it again?

'So I tried not to hope for anything at all, except that we wouldn't lose you. So of course we did. That was the one hope I couldn't put aside.'

Michelle: Yes, I don't think you can really give up on the father from this.

Lily: But I just can't get around this! The last three parts: 'except that we wouldn't lose you. So of course we did. That was the one hope I couldn't put aside', I really struggle with it. It doesn't make sense to me, I feel like it is contradicting.

Group Leader: Yes, trying to count the thoughts, the three clauses, is another good way of trying to follow the thinking.

Margaret: He's saying he can accept anything from him, 'but don't leave'. He has been carrying grief with hope all along. And the more hope he has had, the more grief comes back to him. But he can't stop having hope for his son. It's really sad. The father is trapped. The father is trying to tell the son that he is trapped because of his love for him.

Kate: You almost want to take out 'so of course we did' so that it would read 'except that we wouldn't lose you. That was the one hope I couldn't put aside' It looks less complex that way.

Group Leader: Ah, that would feel more straightforward, wouldn't it? What do you think that middle bit means 'so of course we did'?

Elizabeth: Well it is the most hurtful thing of all that they lost Jack, isn't it. And so if he set aside everything, except that hope…it would almost be like 'so of course it would be that one thing that would be taken from me, wouldn't it?' It's a bit cynical. I hear men say this sometimes, but really there is pain behind it. Yes . . .

Audrey: Yes, I think there is a lot of pain behind these statements.

Margaret: And at the end there, you need to understand, it might have taken a lot out of him. To be able to say he is sorry, and he would've forgiven his son for anything, so why leave? Why leave? He would have forgiven him for anything! Like 'you could have done anything, but I would have still wanted you to stay' That's why he turns away from Jack. He is tired and embarrassed I think.

Group Leader: Ah, thanks for that Elizabeth and Margaret. I think it really does change things to step into what it might be like to feel these hard and painful things as Father Boughton. And that last bit of the paragraph is really something to try to work out. It is interesting that it is placed right there in the middle, as if we have to go though it in order to get to the end of the sentence. I think the word 'except' sets it up to make 'of course' and 'couldn't put aside' even more painful to have to get through.

Michelle: Yes, I go to think one thing, and then another thing, and then even another big thing again. That's how I feel when we read this story. Sometimes the sentences in each paragraph just keep adding one thing on top of another and until it almost feels too much.

Audrey: Yes.

Group Leader: Yes! Too much! More than you can carry. I think in this moment the father is someone I cannot have ill feelings towards, because I feel too much of his own pain. We've spoken about the father almost passing on this grief and pain to his son, but as we read it, it feels like it is passing on to us as well! It can feel unbearable.

Lily: That is exactly it. *Unbearable.* But it is hard enough to carry what Jack is feeling.

Kate: Yes, that's it, a complete loss of words, or not knowing how to carry it all himself:

'Jack withdrew his hand from his father's and put it to his face again. "This is very difficult," he said. "What can I do--I mean, is there something I can do now?"'

Michelle: It's like, before we could feel more what Jack is feeling, but now we are feeling more what the father is really feeling.

Group Leader: Yes, but to be the person that all these unbearable feeling are attached to, on top of the heavy reality you already feel on your own.

Audrey: And those words from Jack. Ooh it's like he still wants to help or make amends.

Group Leader: Yes, instead of going away, he is wanting to do something, or anything: 'is there something I can do now?' to try to make it better, or to take this pain away that he's caused.

Michelle: This is what I mean. It is all too much in different ways.
(she laughs)
It is more than you usually handle in one story, isn't it?

Now that we had come back to the right spot, it was important to hold this open as long as possible in order for anything to break through. The most important part comes in Michelle's discovery:

'Sometimes the sentences in each paragraph just keep adding one thing on top of another until it

almost *feels too much*.' That is the closest the group has ever come to '0', especially in terms of the uses of sentences. It is a moment of real reading. Then Lily speaks in a tone closer to '0' in 'That is exactly it. *Unbearable.'* Going with the currents of 'too much' becomes the way for the group to finally get into '0'. There are no longer single thoughts or separate feelings, even from the moment Lilly spoke of the father 'carrying grief with hope all along', and then counting the way three thoughts combined and morphed.

This feeling of passing on but carrying the weight of what is passed feels like the last thing anyone actually wants in the story. It is as if the novel and group must express the pain of not only carrying the pain, but also the other pain of Jack's question 'What can I do—I mean, is there something I can do now?' This is about trying to convert or translate the weight into action. It is a point where grace feels the most needed, and it is nowhere to be found in and around this passage: this marks the exact point where it needs to be, but the father's pain cannot give it, Glory is not in the position to give it, and the readers in the group have to bear both pains without taking any part in answering Jack. This, I conclude, is about transmission, but the wrong kind of transmission as compared with the laying of hands in a family. 'My life became your life': transmission take place in *Home*, but it is the last kind of transmission the father is wishing to pass on. Pain, grief, and only the unbearable things come through. It is the tradition of family heartache with layers and echoes attached.

My final conclusion comes out of the way the group moved right back at the end of session 9 but re-found their way by the middle of session 10: an epitome of what is at stake across the sessions as a whole. The best moments in the group feel like the nucleus for a reviving and developing a reading tradition, in the past often associated with biblical exegesis (hence my reference to Newman) but here a sort of mini-tradition of reading tools developed in the sessions themselves by this group. Tools are being spontaneously found here that will be needed in the future to navigate through secondary responses. Memory claims a crucial part here, turning back in week 10 rather than going on sequentially: at the beginning of the session readers remembered and reclaimed what had been too quickly or automatically in the week previous. Memory then looks to be more forward pointing than backwards, as it goes back in order to make a forward motion in search of a future for itself. It results

from getting closer to '0' from which development is able to create meaning and a future for itself. When the feeling suddenly becomes alive again, then memory feels more like grace, coming when most needed, and rather beautifully rescuing and reviving meaning. I am interested to hold open the possibility of the group being able to re-create something that the tradition of Marilynne Robinson herself salvages from the breaking of religious tradition in the home of this novel, the novel and the group working together.

I later contacted five members of the group for any final thoughts on the experience of reading *Home* in the Shared Reading group. Two were particularly significant.

Kate:

> You know, after reading *Home* I was left with a deep sense of a sort of anti-religious feeling. I felt like I could see all the destructive things that religion stands for in its structure. At this same times, at almost a deeper level, I felt a growing desire to be a very Christian person, you know—really genuinely Christian. I wanted to do more for others and treat them with kindness. Yes, that's it, I just wanted to be kind. Jack sometimes felt the most religious in the story. Also Glory, I keep thinking about those simple words she gave to Jack 'I like you the way you are.'

This is like what Karl Barth would mean by rejecting religion at one (more superficial) level and finding it more deeply at another. It is also what MacIntyre might identify as renewal into a second-first language, which here is rightly by no means comfortable or untroubled. It also points to how Lila as it were takes over from Glory at the end of Lila to seek for more-than-kindness for her own people, else lost.

Elizabeth:

> It clarified some things…this thing of religion, where people think because they go to church and they beat the drum and say 'I'm a practising Christian', they don't always carry it through into their everyday life. Like the father minister, although he got the adulations of being a kindly minister, I don't think he was a kindly person. And I think my husband doesn't carry through everything from life as well as he should because he thinks 'Well, you have to be a practising catholic, and I know a man who doesn't even go to church!' and I think, that's not Christian. He has this front, but really is he carrying it through to everyday living? It really made me think of my husband. And I think this is really something that happens to people who are 'religious' in name . . .they don't carry it through. It isn't Christianity as it should be. I confess, I was left quite troubled by that.

This again is the way in which a novel can offer a reality greater than the literal or nominal.

When I asked the group members if they felt by reading *Home* in a group rather than on their own made a difference to their experience, Kate said that when she was in the original *Silas Marner* group

experiment, there was such a strong feeling of family and love from the book and the group, she was delighted to come every week; but with the *Home* group, it felt more intense week to week, and though she did not feel so delighted, she recognised a powerful compulsion to continue the reading . Elizabeth (not part of the original *Silas Marner* group) felt the group had helped her reach difficult thoughts afterwards in private and was sorry that she could now take them back into the group and think them with the group to get reactions and try to go further. There was this keen sense of wanting to go on with *Home* despite and because of its relentlessness.

Conclusion: Consultative Interview with The Reader founder Jane Davis

After the shared reading group experiment I interviewed the founder of The Reader, Jane Davis on shared reading and her own experience of reading *Home* which she considers her book of the century. Jane hosted Marilynne Robinson at The Reader Organisation's headquarters in Liverpool in 2011 at a reading for wellbeing conference. Robinson spoke about the poetry of Walt Whitman and did an informal session on *Home.* I showed her a draft of the findings reported above, to test them against her reaction.

Jane offered three conclusive points in relation to shared reading groups, arising from the data in light of her own expertise:

1. **Emotional Connection**

As a university student, Jane was deeply influenced by reader and tutor Brian Nellist, who she studied under at the University of Liverpool:

> **Jane**: He would just come in with a book, and his way of teaching was to love the book in front of you. He would just love it and read bits of it to you and love it more, and make you get into it.
>
> I remember saying to him after we had graduated, 'You really helped me to love James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* it because *you* loved it' and he said right away 'Oh I don't love it! That's just teaching!' And I thought wow, that's teaching is it? Not pretence so much as creative duty. And that was great for me because it was exactly what he taught me to do, which I think has become the basis of The Reader: to find a way to love the thing, and if you cannot love it then either don't do it or imagine you are someone who loves it, and love it. You can imagine itself *into* loving the text and caring for every detail as it emerges. It's like being the writer. Because that is the only way to do it properly, to find its best, or some part that matters most.

The members of the reading group are able to do what is discussed above when they started to learn to love what was more painful, or rather to see the love or value, however distorted, within it.

2. Emergence and Breakthrough

The emergence of felt detail in the act of careful reading was, said Jane, part of a reading tradition that stemmed from first respecting the word within biblical texts. In that sense literature was a (perhaps fallen) part of that tradition. The detail and its expression could break down over-generalized responses, and the live reading groups were intended to produce such live thinking, talking over from set opinions. She believed that there were tools discovered in this group experiment that could help to get through certain prejudicial barriers that had previously been formed, such as anti-religious feeling, as if 'religion' was a clear and known thing. But the role of the group leader in stimulating the liveness, the felt detail and the alertness to a challenging language that was not just the language of the day, was vital, and it was the group leader who must not be afraid to remind the members of precisely when they had got somewhere, and to show them how to re-use the ideas and instruments that they had discovered together.

I summarised, with Jane Davis, the tools and aids discovered and practised in the group as discussed above. They worked to overcome the initial default-mechanisms of the group:

a) Over-concentration on linear story
b) Continually looking at the characters as separate from each other, and as objects for over-simplified like or dislike, and often blame
c) Prejudicial use of strong opinions in relation to stereotyped summaries rather than careful specific reading

The following reading instruments and practices were developed, in summary:

- **Pointing to places that matter emotionally:** This included a sense of when things were 'lovely' as well as 'painful'. Pointing is about instinctively locating specific places, as a primary action prior to any secondary articulation or explanation.
- **Feeling '0':** This goes with pointing as a form of mute orientation. Without having a formal language. and without trying to avoid encounter, one can just point to 'it', the place of most

reality. In *Home* it may be a place that is terrible, but also accepted as somewhere worth going to. It can mark a development from 'this is too painful' to something more like 'the truth, at all costs.'

- **Connecting**: about making links between two things (places, persons, ideas). It is most powerful when it is the links are made backwards, in sudden excited retrospect. It is a higher development of pointing which is to do with mobility of mind, and the capacity to re-make the thinking of the novel by re-creative memory.

- **Form in place of story or single character analysis:** This involves thinking of *more* than one thing at a time, of more than one character or one scene at a time. It is related to connecting backwards and seeing how the novel is getting made again in the act of reading it.

- **Group becoming one mind:** The group members begin to form a sort of relay between each other, handing on thoughts to take them further. The group is working and picking up on each other's individual points, almost as though one co-operative mind. Just as the characters are not separate in the novel, so the members are not separate in the group.

- **Getting away from defaults:** a movement from simple defaults and assumptions in order to get into real reading— specifics that may not conform to what participants may have previously wanted but whose force, when attended to, takes readers into a new situation. This is related to Marillynne Robinson's (theologically inflected) sense of the newness of occasions.

- **Attention to language and detail:** This is not only about words that are unexpected (as in getting away from defaults), but also about discovering an older language (e.g. courtesy, grace), recalling older functions and traditions of being.

All of these tools were used and re-used over the course of the shared reading group experience, becoming trusted practice. 'Pointing and Feeling '0' and the 'Group becoming one mind' became as it were mini traditions that by the end became more like naturally felt processes. But some of them the group leader would need to bring back into the group, reminding them of their being useful ideas that had arisen out of practice and, converted into tools, could further inform it (e.g. 'double listening', 'linking backwards'). It is important that good moments of praxis are not just left in time, as one-offs: if they can become created mini-traditions of the practice of shared reading, then something that happened in the past can be useful in the future, consolidating confidence and aiding creative development.

3. Development

For Jane, some of the details that emerged would find a way forward through more study:

> **Jane**: I knew while I was working with him as an undergraduate that I wanted to work with Brian Nellist on a PhD. And I even knew what I wanted to do it on, which was to do with religious vision, through literature, without formal religion. And in those three years together it soon became more rigorous than just 'loving it'. He made me construct an argument which I'm not very good at. I learned so much about detail, the specificity of knowing why that comma, or that line ending, or that thought at that time. But it is the condition of feeling the importance of an emerging idea, knowing that something is there, and not having the way or the language to make it explicit, that requires an argument if it is to be a sustained and lasting idea or fully achieved and earned belief. I was better at the end, though it was not what I could do best. However, The Reader was about transmitting the beginnings, the inklings of what might be available, not constructing or ensuring the end of the whole journey in conceptual terms.

That is why she was committed to the idea of pointing at key passages *before* one knew why. She was sympathetic also to the informal use of Bion's '0' as a strong measure towards the reality of the unnamed feeling or thing that is significantly existent, or William James' felt distinction between hot spots and dead areas, especially for those readers who were not articulate or had no traditional language. Such openings are privileged in reader reaction ahead of, and often instead of, the capacity to develop these findings in formal argument. If not argument, at least development: the development of the emotional entry-point is important as an unfolding of where a literary work might take a reader.

4. Tradition renewed through Shared Reading

I asked Jane Davis to appraise the concluding idea of a mini-tradition of reading, renewed through the shared reading groups. She agreed on these grounds:

1. The group-leader is the passer-on of the tradition, partly through 'doing it', modelling the act, but also recognising and encouraging its emergence.
2. The aim is that, ideally, everyone in the group should become a reader in some deep traditional version of that term, as a seeker for meaning through its signs, seeing the spirit through the letters.
3. But in between 1 and 2, it is not possible simply to pass on the tradition of being a reader: it has to be re-discovered and re-invented in living and spontaneous practice by a group carrying out live collaborative work, without guarantees of its success or lastingness.

5.
The Individual Readers

My next reader-experiment centred upon interviewing individual readers on their solitary personal experience in reading the novel *Home*. These readers first sent me brief accounts of their reading experience, including whether it was their first read or a re-reading of the novel, and what were for them key passages. Some had also read *Gilead* and were invited to include comments on that too.

The broad aim was to try to see the relation between their reading and their personal lives, with particular regard to the effect of Marilynne Robinson's work on their religious or non-religious orientation. At one end of my spectrum of concerns about the reading of religious literature was the implicit question: What might get in the way of reading this literary work with all its religious concerns? At the other extreme: How far could a literary work act as a connector to re-new or re-create a religious tradition?

I contacted twelve volunteers, of which five described themselves as church-goers, four as formerly religious (though more agnostic than anti-religious), one firm non-believer and two anti-religious. In all cases, belief and non-belief could get in the way of open-mindedly reading and responding to the novel, sometimes through dogmatic appropriation, sometimes through reactive rejection.

From nine of the twelve reader diaries and follow up interviews, the outcomes of their experience fell into three ways of thought. The first was a religious response, complaining that what the novel offered was not a correct account of religion. The second was an anti-religious response, putting the blame upon the chains of religion with particular relation to Jack's father. The third was somewhere in the middle as a psychological response, asking how far it was possible for someone like Jack to ever 'change'.

None of these was of startling individual interest because they remained within their peopled opinions, away from the text. They seemed to be extrapolating from what they already thought, talking in terms of what the book *should* be like, with a kind of insistence. It hardly mattered if it was

the dogmatism is of religion, or the dogmatism of anti-religion, or the dogmatism of the required psychological change and growth. Their default positions prevented any powerful investigative engagement: there was no sense of surprise, of the life in the book overflowing conceptual containers, in the way that Marilynne Robinson sought and William James described.

These rather inert case-histories form a relatively simple background to my selection of the three most rich and subtle case-histories chosen, in consultation with my supervisors who acted as a consensus group, not on the basis of their beliefs but on the depth of their reading. Again, of the nine other individual readers not featured in this chapter, the dogmatic responses by both religious and non-religious were alike characterized by static repetitive opinion at some distance from the text, rather than individualized movements. These stock responses are characterized by repetitive features of opinion and by stylistic signals (e.g. 'Well, I still think . . .'). Representative examples of a kind of stuckness are offered, but it was felt that extensive quotation would be only emphasising the repetitiveness noted in chapter four. The three most experienced readers turned out to represent a spectrum: the first a non-believer, the third a formal believer, the second occupying a less easily defined area between the two.

For interview I chose always to use three passages, ones that the readers had all mentioned in their diaries as important, and which I noted were also rich moments in the reading group: this offered consensus as to specific focal stimuli. It was also helpful that, roughly speaking, the first passage came from towards the beginning of the novel, the second near the middle, and the last close to the end. There was also the opportunity for the interviewee to include other instances. These are the emotionally powerful passages that will be referred to in each case-history following.

PASSAGE 1

The first passage is near the beginning of the novel before Jack arrives back home. Here, Glory is thinking back to the last time Jack was home, twenty years earlier. Jack had fathered a child out of wedlock and had gone back to university with no intention of taking responsibility for the child. But Glory remembers how excited she was at the thought of a new baby in the family:

But in those days their lives were lived so publicly, it had seemed to her they might as well just acknowledge what everyone would have known in any case. She had never had any reason to think her parents had other intentions, but she might have helped them, she thought, by giving them herself to worry about. They both believed firmly in the power of example. This would be a great act of moral instruction. They must act consistently with their faith. They must consider all its applications in the present circumstance. Yes! She watched as her father mustered his courage. 'The Lord has been very good to me!' he said, reminding himself that his obligations were correspondingly great, in fact limitless. This was a thought he always found exhilarating. Jack had left his car keys on the piano and taken the train back to college. She was almost old enough to drive, and she was fairly sure she knew how it was done. So she took her father out into the country to see that baby. It was disturbing to remember how happy she had been then, in the very middle of his deepest grief (*Home,* pp.18-9).

PASSAGE 2

Not long after Jack comes home, father Boughton seeks to have a long conversation with his

son, in hope of gaining more understanding:

'I feel I didn't do right by you. I wasn't a good father to you.'

'What? Really?'

'No, it's a feeling I have always had, almost since you were a baby. As though there was something you needed from me and I never figured out what it was.'

Jack cleared his throat. 'I really don't know what to say. I always thought you were a very good father. Much better than I deserved.'

'No, but think about it now. You were always running off somewhere. Always hiding somewhere. Maybe you don't remember why you did those things. But I thought you might be able to give me some idea.'

'I can't explain it. I don't know. I was a bad kid. I'm sorry about all that.'

The old man shook his head. 'That isn't my meaning at all. You see, I feel as though you haven't had a good life.'

Jack laughed. 'Oh! Well, I'm sorry about that, too.'

'You misunderstand me. I mean your life has never seemed to have any real joy in it. I'm afraid you've never had much in the way of happiness.'

'Oh. I see. Well, I've been happy from time to time. Things are a little difficult now--'

'Yes, because you wouldn't be here otherwise. That's alright. I just never knew another child who didn't feel at home in the house where he was born. All the others, you know, they come back for the holidays. It was always like a big party in here, all the games they would play, all the noise they made, and your mother laughing at the endless pranks and the nonsense. And if you could find a way to leave, you'd be gone.'

'I can't explain that. I'm sorry about it--'

'And then you really were gone, weren't you. Twenty years, Jack!'

Jack drew a deep breath and said nothing.

'And why am I talking to you about this? But it was always a mystery to me. Be strict! People would say that to me. Lay down the law! Do it for his sake! But I always felt it was a sadness I was dealing with, a sort of heavyheartedness. In a child! And how could I be angry at that? I should have known how to help you with it.'

'You helped me. I mean, there are worse lives than mine. Mine could be worse.' He laughed and put his hand to his face.

‘Oh yes. I’m sure of that, Jack. I see how kind you are now. Very polite. I notice that.’

‘These last years I’ve been all right. Almost ten years.’

‘Well, that is wonderful. Now, do you forgive me for speaking to you this way?’

‘Yes, sir. Of course I do. I will. If you give me a little time.’

The old man said ‘You take your time. But I want you to give me your hand now.’ And he took Jack’s hand and moved it gently toward himself, so he could study the face Jack would have hidden from him. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘here you are.’ He laid the hand against his chest. ‘You feel that heart in there? My life became your life, like lighting one candle from another. Isn’t that a mystery? I’ve thought about it many times. And yet you always did the opposite of what I hoped for, the exact opposite. So I tried not to hope for anything at all, except that we wouldn’t lose you. So of course we did. That was the one hope I couldn’t put aside.’

Jack withdrew his hand from his father’s and put it to his face again. ‘This is very difficult,’ he said. ‘What can I do--I mean, is there something I can do now?’

‘That’s true,’ his father said. ‘Not a thing to be done. I’m sorry I brought it up. I thought it was troubling my sleep. I guess it was. Why did that make me think it was important? I don’t know. All that old grief coming back on me. I’m tired now, though. It seems like I’m always tired.’ And he settled into his pillow and turned onto his right side, away from Jack, toward the wall (*Home,* pp.120-1).

PASSAGE 3

Here at dinner is an occasion near the end of the book, not long before Jack will leave again. Father Boughton seems overcome with grief and old age. He has trouble recognizing Jack at the table, and Glory has to be there as the voice of a kind third presence, almost helplessly witnessing the scene as the novel’s internal reader and listener:

After a long breath, ‘I’m Jack.’

The old man turned stiffly in his chair to scrutinize his son. He said, ‘I see a resemblance.’ He reached out painfully and took hold of the candlestick, to move it closer to Jack, who put his hand to his face and laughed. His father said, ‘There is a resemblance. I don’t know.’ He said, ‘If you could take your hand away--’

Jack dropped his hand into his lap and suffered his father’s scrutiny, smiling, not raising his eyes.

The old man said, ‘Well, what did I expect. His life would be hard, I knew that,’ and he fell to brooding. ‘I was afraid of it, and I prayed, and it happened anyway. So here is Jack,’ he said. ‘After all that waiting.’

Jack smiled at her across the table and shook his head. Another bad idea. Nothing to be done about it now.

Glory said, ‘It’s been hard for him to come here. You should be kinder to him.’

A moment passed, and her father stirred from his reverie. ‘Kinder to him! I thanked my God for him every day of his life, no matter how much grief, how much sorrow--and at the end of it all there is only more grief, more sorrow, and his life will go on that way, not help for it now. You see something beautiful in a child, and you almost live for it, you feel as though you would die for it, but it isn’t yours to keep or to protect. And if the child becomes a man who has no respect for himself, it’s just destroyed till you can hardly remember what it was--’ He said, ‘It’s like watching a child die in your arms.’ He looked at Jack. ‘Which I have done.’

> ‘Oh. I didn’t know that. I didn’t--’ He put his hands to his face.
> Glory said, ‘No. This is terrible. I won’t let this happen.’
> ‘Let it happen,’ Jack said softly. ‘I don’t have anything to lose.’ And he dropped his hands, like a man abandoning all his defenses.
> The old man was groping for his napkin, which had slipped to the floor Jack gave him His. ‘Thank you, dear,’ he said, his voice ragged with tears, and he blotted his face with it (*Home,* p.306).

*

Case History 1: Natalie

Natalie is an experienced university-trained reader, aged 29. Though once of a more professionally theoretical persuasion as a result of her undergraduate training in Copenhagen, she learned in the course of her postgraduate masters studies, with the Centre for Research into reading Literature and Society (CRILS) at the University of Liverpool, to try to recover what she has come to think of as a more natural or personal practice of reading. In Liverpool, in the process of re-starting, she was encouraged experimentally to bring into her studies the most important autobiographical experiences whenever they were triggered: this particularly centered on the loss of her father as the largest event in her earlier young life. Whenever she mentions anything to do with her father, it is accompanied by a certain personalized reverence. But Natalie professes herself non-religious, and did not grow up in any faith. She is now employed by *The Reader* both in group delivery and in training volunteers, as a professional reader whose aim is to overcome the wrong sort of academic professionalism as she would now call it, for the sake of reaching ordinary readers in the outside world, often in hard-to-reach communities.

I interviewed Natalie on her response to *Home*. We started by speaking about her educational background before reading Marilynne Robinson:

> **Interviewer**: Can you tell me a bit more about your education in Copenhagen?
>
> **Natalie:** So I went to university to study Danish Literature and Language for both an undergraduate and a masters, and then I came here for the British masters.
>
> **I:** What would you say would be the difference in the way they were presented?
>
> **N:** Well it would be easier to say that it was formal in Denmark and here at the University of Liverpool with CRILS it was a living thing. But it’s more difficult than all that. Because in Denmark I still think that I had many incredibly beautiful moments, personally, in my own

degree, I'm not sure they came from the education, they felt like they came more *from me*. . . which I didn't quite have a language for until I came to study in England. Does that make sense? I feel like it has always been in me to, I don't know, take words to a depth inside, and live through them, and find ways forward from them. But back home, I am not sure that during my education there was a language for that, it was more about getting through a curriculum and secondary texts and theories, and then if you were lucky enough to try to learn yourself how to get involved emotionally and personally, you could. Whereas here, I feel more as if the emphasis was on that.

I: What then drove you to look for another MA over in England if you could still function with these personal beautiful moments on your own in Denmark?

N: I think it would be the feeling of it being more important in England. So coming to England and knowing CRILS was in a way the research and teaching arm for The Reader, taking literature out into the wider world . . . it's almost like reinforcement in some way to say 'Yes, the thing you sometimes do in Copenhagen, that's what we do here full time with lots of people, and you do have a reason to believe in that because it's right.'

And it is this thing about getting the language for it. Because as I say, CRILS didn't give me a new brain. . . it's always been in me--that way of relating with it, and believing that words can do more than just be there on a page if you like. But to learn more about *why* it happens, *how* it happens, getting a language for it, it is deeper than I would maybe be comfortable with on my own, sat at home with my dad dying next door. It's that type of thing, isn't it, being pushed a bit further than maybe was comfortable at times. That's what it's given me. But I guess what I am saying is, I travelled and studied in a new land for something that was already partially in me.

Natalie is always very rational, thoughtful and articulate even in her second language. Here she begins by going back to the first connection she had with Robinson's work:

N: Reading *Home* was sort of the opposite of *David Copperfield* in some ways. I had read *David Copperfield* and written on it and also on *Gilead* and made a comparison between John Ames and David Copperfield, respectively an ageing father and a castaway son. You know, even in their troubles, that healthy way of having things out, and not being scared of the truth. Then I realized we needed the flip side of things, which would be Jack in *Home*.

I: What was your experience in reading *Home*?

N: Well, because I had written on *Gilead,* and was so moved about *Gilead,* and I was just beyond affected by it, I think I thought *Home* could never do that to me. So I wasn't expecting anything big. And also I think on a personal level with my Dad being dead, *Gilead* was almost like receiving a letter from my Dad. But the weird thing was that when I was writing about it I couldn't really . . . it felt like I couldn't get beyond me being the son in *Gilead*. The emotional rawness of it, I just couldn't. I tried to imagine I was John Ames, but I just couldn't. And I wonder if the pain is not so much being me having lost my Dad, but more the pain is imagining what my Dad would have felt like in leaving this life. I could imagine a situation like this, like my Dad being Ames…but I couldn't want to imagine my Dad leaving. I don't know, I wonder if the connection needs to stay and live on in the imagined world that cannot quite be explained; it would be wrong to try to put the connection into words. It would almost *force* the connection to be outward. You see from David Copperfield, it's not from his Dad's perspective, it's from *his own* perspective. So I wonder if it was easier because it was from the child's perspective, so I came to open myself to relate to David more. Anyway all this is to say is that I never thought something could move me as much as *Gilead*, but with *Home* I think I really managed to

connect with it because in many ways it wasn't my story, one-to-one. So it was sort of coming out of that *Gilead* personal mirroring, to just being able to love the experience of reading *Home*.

I: I am curious on a personal note because you don't profess to be religious at all or have a faith in a certain way. Did the two Robinson novels cause you to think about religion - the good or the bad?

N: I don't think I thought about religion to be honest. No I definitely didn't think 'Oh, this shows what bad religion can do to Jack.' No I didn't. If anything, it more just made me think of complicated father/son relationships: whatever you want to pass on, when it doesn't work out, why is that more when there is religion as a reason, and so on.

Natalie couldn't begin speaking about *Home,* without first sharing her experience and difficulty in reading and trying to write about *Gilead.* In every repeated 'I couldn't . . .' there seemed to be evidence of the difficulties about her father's death and his leaving her aged 14. *David Copperfield* mirrored some of that experience, though Copperfield's father dies even before he is born. But with *Gilead* it seemed she was saying, 'If I turn all this too quickly about it being *about* my father or *from* my father, I would be mocking the feeling I have nurtured and protected *towards* him.' There was something quite challenging yet honorable here, on her painfully not being able to translate fully from her father something that might become more *for* her, than *from* him. Her own father, dying of cancer at age of 67, did not leave her anything written. And, making the reception of the novel even harder, it hurt her to imagine him now thinking of her, in an afterlife she did not believe in. Dickens was easier, as in *Oliver Twist,* chapter 12 – another passage that she said helped her get past her earlier more theoretic training in what constituted reading literature:

> 'Save us!' said the old lady, with tears in her eyes. 'What a grateful little dear it is. Pretty creetur! What would his mother feel if she had sat by him as I have, and could see him now!'
> 'Perhaps she does see me,' whispered Oliver, folding his hands together; 'perhaps she has sat by me. I almost feel as if she had.'
> 'That was the fever, my dear,' said the old lady mildly.
> 'I suppose it was,' replied Oliver, 'because heaven is a long way off; and they are too happy there, to come down to the bedside of a poor boy. But if she knew I was ill, she must have pitied me, even there; for she was very ill herself before she died. She can't know anything about me though,' added Oliver after a moment's silence. 'If she had seen me hurt, it would have made her sorrowful; and her face has always looked sweet and happy, when I have dreamed of her.'
> The old lady made no reply to this; but wiping her eyes first, and her spectacles, which lay on the counterpane, afterwards, as if they were part and parcel of those features, brought some cool stuff for Oliver to drink; and then, patting him on the cheek, told him he must lie very quiet, or he would be ill again.[93]

[93] Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1838) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.84.

Her tone was full of unanswered feelings for her father, in the afterlife of her memory and imagination of him. When Natalie spoke in this tone, this seemed to be the core of who she was now, even in loss. I have checked these impressions with her, subsequently, and she confirms their reliability. The father and child relationship seemed to be the central concern of Natalie's reading; her thinking and feeling. It was the right place to start, and everything that followed in the interview had some kind of connection to this first tone concerning the father. *Home* would still mean her going to a father and child relationship, but not as so simply mirrored as in Dickens or so half-blocked as in *Gilead*. It was to be a different way of trying to find a bridge to a father, in the difficulties of 'whatever you want to pass on, when it doesn't work out'.

I then took her to Passage 1:

> **N**: I do remember that last line now: 'how *happy* she had been then, in the very *middle* of his *deepest grief*'' Hmm . . . it was disturbing not just how happy she had been, but really the memory of it . . .
>
> **I:** In the shared reading group, at this part someone said, 'Here no one has died, more life has come!'
>
> **N**: And maybe I think, that is this book in a nutshell: that what you think is the end point—like grief—the deepest you can get if you've lost someone—well this book takes it further and makes it more densely mixed. What is the deepest low you can get that's beyond grief, after losing someone?
>
> **I**: The aftermath, left after grief.
>
> **N**: Yes. What if someone is still there? Jack is still there. What if there are even more people, but it's lost anyway—the connections are lost. That feels deeper and something more painful than a loss of one person. Grief over who is still alive, almost asking 'What would somebody look like who has been grieved for already?'

Natalie continued her last thought by reaching to another part of the novel 'It makes me think of the very last interaction he has with his family before he leaves, remember that?' We immediately turned to the closing section of the novel. Father Boughton is dying, and Jack decides to leave before the rest of the siblings return home. Glory assures Jack she will keep the house ready with his belongings if he should ever return:

> 'I'll keep the rest for you. Call me. Or write to me.'
> 'Will do.' He picked up his suitcase, and then he set it down again and went into the parlor, where his father was sitting in the Morris chair. He stood there, hat in hand. The old man looked at him, stern with the effort of attention or with wordless anger.
> Jack shrugged. 'I have to go now. I wanted to say goodbye.' He went to his father and held out his hand.

> The old man drew his own hand into his lap and turned away. 'Tired of it!' he said.
>
> Jack nodded. 'Me, too. Bone tired.' He looked at his father a minute longer, then bent and kissed his brow. He came back into the kitchen and picked up his suitcase. 'So long, kiddo.' He wiped a tear from her cheek with the ball of his thumb.
>
> 'You have to take care of yourself,' she said. 'You have to.'
>
> He tipped his hat and smiled. 'Will do.'
>
> She went to the porch to watch him walk away down the road. He was too thin and his clothes were weary, weary. There was nothing of youth about him, only the transient vigor of a man acting on a decision he refused to reconsider or regret. No, there might have been some remnant of the old aplomb. Who would bother to be kind to him? A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their face. Ah, Jack (*Home,* p.331).

N: This is just such a painful paragraph, right?

I: This brings back that stirring thing you said before: What happens after the grief, what are you left with? Then this reaction 'tired of it'.

N: Yes, and Jack's 'me too, bone tired' in response to his father. But they are doing the same things over and over again, and they know it. And you know, I think they feel the same in those two sentences, they're both tired of it...but yet they're really not feeling the same or together, do you know what I mean?

And when she looks at him walking away, that is what we are left with in the aftermath of this beyond-grief. And the 'who will bother to be kind to him?' I really felt it where Glory says 'if you ever need to come home, I'll be there.' It's wonderful of her to be that voice in the book. But need to come home? It's almost like, that's the one thing he won't do, he won't feel that need because it's always about getting away.

I: Yes, that should almost be the comforting phrase.

N: Yes, but that's always been the problem. As I was reading it I thought how wonderful it would be if my mom told me 'I'll be here', but her own home has shifted so many times so I think for me, I would want that Glory phrase in my life. But with Jack, it is worse, I feel he is constantly fighting against it and just can't get this bit right.

For Natalie this was about not being able to speak the same language, 'feeling the same…but yet they're really not feeling the same'. She did not pick up on the astonishing reference to 'the man of sorrows', as if Jack was closer to Jesus than his father's faith seemed to realize. But she did have a strong feeling of dispersal, of losing home, of her wanting and Jack not-wanting someone to be at home waiting for you.

Natalie was interested in the interactions between son and father often without that third voice of the daughter, so we went on to Passage 2:

N: Yes, I remember this bit. And I can see that it is one I have clearly marked in my own copy as well. It's interesting because in some ways I feel like the Dad is doing an alright . . . I mean I feel the Dad's frustration here. But yet, I still feel like he's a preacher, not a father. It's just

heartbreaking the amount of times Jack says sorry and laughs. He doesn't want to be exposed and all the father is doing is trying to get it out of him.

I: But the more the father speaks the worse it becomes.

N: But it does also make you think, what else should the father do?

I: Yes, that is a good question, almost a desperate question.

N: Yes, and I think there is cruelty from both the father and the son here, in double and redoubled feelings... 'the opposite, the exact opposite'. Those two opposites are different I think. One is cruel to the father, and then the other one feels cruel to the son. Again, 'tired of it' like we said before, but different positions or directions.

I: Yes, I am very interested in that perhaps unavoidable cruelty, even when the father is talking about Jack being kind or (not quite the same) polite. Kind and polite don't do it.

N: But do you think, as a father he says that last bit: 'that's true, not a thing to be done.' I don't know, as a father, does he just let go here in that crucial moment here where…I don't know how to phrase it...it's almost like, how does he actually end up saying 'not a thing to be done'? It just feels beyond repair...where at the same time the whole discussion starts it seems...no I can't get to it in my head . . . something happens here and the father doesn't follow through, he pulls back. Even out of despair he pulls back. And I cannot tell you what else he should have said here because maybe there isn't anything, but it's almost that...yes it's that pull away when the father was the one walking towards the intensity in the first place.

I: Yes, but the percentage of that intensity did increase, before he pulled back.

N: Maybe it was because it increased.

As a benchmark, Natalie characteristically doesn't feel or speak as if she was an instant thinker, but more confidently takes time to allow the motions of thinking to take place: to think, to hesitate, then to go on from the thinking and then moving back round again to the first thought. So she analyses brilliantly the two cruelties, and it is a fine example of what she can do at her best, and how the novel itself, in painful irony, creates these broken relationships as also family-linked. She is very good on what she calls that double feeling, sensing the way that the father hurts Jack and is hurt by Jack. But increasingly within those tenacious syntactic returns ('Something happens . . . and . . .; . . . even . . . And I cannot'), she is still struggling semantically ('I can't get to *it*', 'I don't know' 'what *else*', '*maybe* there isn't *anything'*). It seems unusual for someone as intelligently articulate and rational as Natalie to know something and yet not know the right words, or be able to complete her thought. This seemed related to something left uncompleted in the situation described, the story having nowhere further to go, forward or back it seemed. Here were moments in which Natalie tried to create space for herself to think in, or to try to get the thoughts out that the novel is not saying explicitly. I know now

from the shared reading group that this is where it can become exciting in the novel, the moment when a reader is having great difficulty getting their thought out or seeing a way forward. And this was all the more striking as a block, because this was an expert reader, only now in an area of painful and inconclusive aftermath without clear outcome. I had mentioned Bion's theory of '0' and asked if it helped here:

> **N**: 'This is very difficult,' he said. 'What can I do--I mean, is there something I can do now?' Do you think the whole book is a movement from 'what can I do—' which is on the outside of that '0' you speak of, to the moving in to 'what can I do now?' which is almost willing to step into that unknown intensity of real '0'. There are the questions and the breaks or broken dashes to begin with, where Jack is still in a conversation around things, but then you go to the end and it stops being a question, it stops being a dash, it's complete reality. I mean that place where he says that thing about letting go? Where is that bit, 'Let it happen' do you know what I mean?

The idea that felt so important to her seemed to be about pulling back or not being able to get through. There is no handing on, as Ames sought to hand on something to the son who will never fully know him. But as a reader, Natalie could still get her thoughts to continue to approach the center of the pain where it usually would feel most difficult to be. When she drives on, it makes me think that this is a young woman still trying to find a way to build a kind of narrative or story for *herself*, an intellectual movement that takes her further in thought and feel beyond loss and disinheritance. But the identification here is not so much with the individual characters as the situation created through them and the process it both stimulates and thwarts.

The last passage we visited was the most painful passage in terms of complexity, almost going on with Natalie's formulation of being stuck when approaching '0' and not being able to follow through to anything to be done, to any future. So we go backwards to the stuttering place Natalie recalls in Passage 3:

> **N**: Yes, I definitely remember reading this bit. And I think it will always be the bit that moves me the most. It's that paragraph from the Dad ('Kinder to him! I thanked my God for him every day of his life, no matter how much grief, how much sorrow--and at the end of it all there is only more grief, more sorrow, and his life will go on that way, not help for it now') which goes further than kindness but then as it were too far. He's been talking around it all these years, and now he is there finally saying it. He was there to be the Dad that Jack should have been. And watching the child die is watching Jack die plus the despair of watching his child die. And Jack even says 'oh!', 'Oh. I didn't know that. I didn't--' He put his hands to his face. and then 'let it happen'

I: 'Glory said, "No. This is terrible. I won't let this happen."
"Let it happen," Jack said softly. "I don't have anything to lose." And he dropped his hands, like a man abandoning all his defenses.'
Yes, I recall you saying you were interested in that phrase, why is that?

N: I think it's because I feel there is so much pain in it, but also a tiny bit of relief. The dashes aren't there anymore. There isn't the repetition 'I didn't know that--I didn't'. It's just, it's almost like giving into the fact that this is a situation that can never be resolved, or at least not without the full pain. And then being open to *that*. I have always liked that phrase 'let it happen' because it is incredibly brave. As soon as Jack feels that double feeling, for both of them, after feeling the too-muchness of it, he can willingly step into '0'. . . Jack has been pushing at it and up against it the whole book.

I: What is it about reality, or willingly stepping into a fuller reality that makes it 'incredibly brave' to you? Can you say any more on that?

N: Good question. With that passage I have compared that a lot with the things I have done in my own life, that are fairly similar. So you know, going into my father's room for the last time saying goodbye...and knowing it. . . I just remember what that took for me to do that. Because for such a long time I just neglected that he was going to die. . .well not neglected, but forgot about it and done many things to distract myself from it. But to go from that distraction in pretending that everything is okay, to actually physically stepping into a room and doing the thing, I actually think of myself very brave for that. And always in my life where I feel like there are things that I cannot do or where I feel that I am not strong enough to do, that is always the moment that I think back to, you know 14-year-old girl going in alone. . . my mom wasn't there, no one was there to do that. When you asked that question this is the thing that immediately springs to mind. It felt brave in the moment. I really had to prepare myself for it. And I feel like language doesn't do it justice here, it's not the beautiful moment of 'oh, I'm at peace with it, I'm sending him off', you know it's way more complicated and painful. And it's knowing that it's going to be that way.

So I say it is incredibly brave because *I know* it is, the feeling is so similar. And it's so hard because when I read about it in *Home*, I don't think it's that thing of 'I wish I could do it' I think it is more the thing of 'Oh. I've done it once, and I'd do *anything* to not have to do it *again*.'

It is so interesting thinking about that passage again. . . you know Jack hitting rock bottom, if you like. Because once you know 'rock bottom' exists, you've felt it, you've willingly almost stepped into it as Jack does, it's almost like even if you climb up or get out of it, you will always know that it's down there and you can fall in again. And maybe that is the thing, I can say what I think is my 'let it happen' moment, I've felt it, and I can say that I never want to do that again, but most likely I will have to! And that is what scares me the most I think.

She took a strong pause after 'brave', because she is interested in the exploration of the willingness to be there, and how it happened. Natalie's readerly way of thinking didn't start from confessional psychology; it began from intellect and verbal analysis, and worked back into psychology. Then it was her admiration of this 'willingness' to go to '0' as a new stage for Jack even in despair, that brought out a real feeling from her thinking. It is as though she has learnt to use her intellect as a primary tool to *go back*, to find the feeling and then the thoughts underneath the feeling. She has

learnt to use her strong intellect as a function in wanting it to be the servant towards building a formulation of the feeling rather than being the master of it. And the feeling around her moments of thinking has a sincere purity to it: the almost formal word 'pure' is most fitting to her intelligence as a reader. I found her best form of intelligence is when she is dealing with the most painful things.

This made me think of an earlier conversation where Natalie had shared some pages of her writing from her MA work with CRILS at the University of Liverpool. What she found there was connected with what she called 'the healthy way of having things out, not being scared of the truth'. For Natalie, what was most important to her in *David Copperfield* is the outcast boy showing up at his Aunt Betsy Trotwood's home, after running away. David just says a naked version of 'here I am aunt', able briefly to tell a compressed version of his story:

> 'I am David Copperfield, of Blunderstone, in Suffolk – where you came, on the night when I was born, and saw my dear mama. I have been very unhappy since she died. I have been slighted, and taught nothing, and thrown upon myself, and put to work not to fit for me. It made me run away to you. I was robbed at first setting out, and have walked all the way, and have never slept in a bed since I began the journey.' Here my self-support gave way all at once, and with a movement of my hands, intended to show her my ragged state, and call it to witness that I had suffered something, I broke into a passion of crying, which I suppose had been pent up within me all the week.[94]

That for Natalie was an extremely large moment, because there is a sort of openness from the inside to the outside, and the ability to hold it there for the outside person to see. She could see someone starting from feeling and able to *be* it. She could then start from the same feeling. It is a sort of total appeal that is helpless, but that also has authority in holding its declaration. For Natalie this example was the maximum of what someone coming from a state of vulnerability could be, on the verge of his aunt's acceptance: it was a huge achievement to her.

But Jack's is, so to speak, the unhealthy counter-version, the guilty type, doing its best in saying 'let it happen' to Gloria. Speaking of it brought an aliveness that felt more personal to her than anything talked about before, perhaps only matched by the tone used in speaking of the difficulty of reading the position of her father in her thoughts about *Gilead*. At the conclusion of the interview, I

[94] Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1850) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.187.

asked her what she thought might come next in the fourth of the series of novels. What could the future hold for Jack?

> **N:** Well in some ways I think it can never go beyond this point. I think it'll be going back to the twenty years he wasn't home and then coming home from this perspective. I would be very surprised if she goes beyond this. Unless it's just going towards '0' in the future, which would even be worse, wouldn't it?
>
> And also, just as we often speak about religious and not being religious...if I were asked 'what's the way forward for Jack?' I seriously wouldn't know. You know, it's almost like there's a language missing. I think what *you* call grace, what would be…what is my word for that? What would even be my thinking of that?
>
> **I:** Marilynne Robinson speaks of people not always calling it the same thing but everyone would know it when it happens.
>
> **N:** That is true, but if you only know it when it happens, and you don't have the language, how can you ever think it will come? I don't know, it's just...it feels like there is something less available to me if I don't have the language of a religion.
>
> **I:** Do you mind if I read you the full quotation? I would love to know if anything would ring any bells for you:
>
> > From the human point of view, I think that when you participate in grace, you're elevated above worldly considerations—grudges, fears, resentments—all those things that you accumulate in the clutter of self-protectiveness that arises as you develop in life. The moments of grace are the moments in which your vision of reality is, for the moment, actually free. You are out of the trenches. And I think that is something that people very often feel they have experienced, that experientially it is true. I often talk to people who have no theological vocabulary, but the minute the concept of grace becomes available to them, they recognize it. They love it. It could so easily be the core of any sort of reconstruction of our religious sensibilities (*Grace in Shakespeare).*
>
> **N:** That's quite lovely isn't it, if that is the case, that the moment the concept of grace becomes available to them, they recognize it. No matter if they have the vocabulary for it or not. What might be another word for it? How else could I maybe see it? I can only think about it as linked to love. Having moments of feeling loved. I think about meeting my partner, and despite all my . . . everything I am and struggle with, having moments of being loved despite all I struggle with. So those moments of love where nothing is blocking the way, where someone loves you when perhaps they shouldn't or you don't feel as if you deserve it because of what you have gone through. It feels very closely linked to love. And I cannot think of any kind of idea of grace (of whatever way it's described really) as something that happens without other humans. It feels like there needs to be a relationship involved. And it doesn't have to be romantic, but there needs to be some sort of connection between other people in order for it to happen.

Natalie's definition of love feels important to her future. This is a study in how a young person might try to go forward in search for felt meaning and belief after loss of a passing on. It is the still psychological story of intellect in relation to feeling, of feeling in relation to its future continuance, of what needs to be recovered or translated or got into a better order and sequence. She can work within pain for the sake of finding orientation for herself.

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Case History 2: Brian Nellist

Brian Nellist (mentioned by Jane Davis in the previous chapter) is a retired university teacher of English Literature from the University of Liverpool who is now in his 80s. He has received an MBE in recognition of his services in teaching English Literature. BN as I shall call him has a religious background, but is not a practicing believer of religion now.

I interviewed Brian on his experience in reading *Home.* When I asked if he would be willing to chat about *Home,* he jumped right in with his fascination for this Christian author as he called her, and especially for the first novel in the series, *Gilead:*

> **BN:** I was astonished by *Gilead* because you don't normally think as novels being religious, yet somehow she manages to actually write a religious novel. Most religious novels are sort of tracts and not really worth reading as novels, but it is a triumph as a novel, and yet it is also a religious book. I thought it was the most Christian book I'd ever read!

I told BN that in a previous reader experiment I had conducted with *Silas Marner*, the reception seemed warmed and easier than in reading Marilynne Robinson:

> **BN:** Well, she's a very Christian writer, and I think most people are so far from religious today, that they don't want to get into that area. I think it doesn't mean as much to people now. Whereas with *Silas Marner* they can accept it because it's not really intrusive and he loses his religious faith and then finds it as a way of life later. But Marilynne Robinson will talk about belief, and even challenge it. Yes, it is uncomfortable, and they don't want to talk about it. I think about three generations back most people in England had some sort of religious belief, but I think it's now disappeared practically.
>
> **I:** Why do you think that *Gilead* is the most Christian book you had ever read?
>
> **BN:** Because books that really address seriously Christian issues were written in the 19th century, but they were basically tracts. We don't really have any 20th century books that address religious issues very seriously from a believing point of view. In other words, you get books like late 19th century novels that address the issue, but from the other side as it were, from people who have lapsed out of any faith at all. Whereas, to actually read a book like *Gilead*, which was very much about beliefs but taking them seriously from *inside,* was most peculiar for me. Because it's as though earlier Christian books had been written as though 'anybody was a Christian', whereas *Gilead* is written in a time and for a readership that is not fundamentally believing, and then she takes believing very seriously and writes, as it were, from inside it.

The position from which the novel is written is important for BN, in that with *Gilead* religious issues are addressed '*from* the believing point of view', from inside the faith and yet as a human novel,

father transmitting to son, as if to make room somehow for everyone to be there. I was interested that BN likened Marilynne Robinson to a nineteenth-century novelist, because Robinson has been referred to as American's modern George Eliot.[95] The works of George Eliot seem profoundly important to BN, as he frequently refers to her works and how ideas look from her position. I talked about the role of Feuerbach in both novels: whatever Feuerbach meant to George Eliot involved the ability to translate religious concerns 'from the other side' into human concerns felt emotionally. But *Gilead* insists on staying on the religious side, however much made human, and instead Feuerbach serves as an explicit figure in the novel, offering Ames' older brother the chance of something Ames himself recognises but does not need. It is as if the George Eliot way is debated in that novel but not yet adopted. The reason I had gone with *Home* rather than *Gilead* in my shared-reading group was to see if *Home* could do what *Gilead* perhaps could not: reach people in a way that *Silas Marner* had, albeit Marner did it through the giving of love in a way that *Home* cannot. BN said he had a background in Christian faith without now being as formal believer, and reading literature was part of that change. I asked him if it was that religious as well as literary background which made *Gilead* more accessible to him:

> **BN:** I think in *Gilead* it is because of the engaging personality of John Ames, who is not a Calvinist in the strict sense, he is a Congregationalist and much more open. He is so genuine and warm hearted. And yet he faces the problems that his brother doesn't believe, and yet continues to love his brother.
>
> It is interesting about people that leave the tradition of their family. I think it is good when the family can continue to love them, it is important to stay with the family as George Eliot would have wanted when as Marian Evans she almost broke with her father in her un-conversion from Christianity. Very often this thinking that you do not believe is a result of the discovering of individuality, and individuality means that you have to rebel against something, so of course you rebel against the family position as it were. But it probably really isn't real, they probably just need time to adjust into their own way back in, as it were, to a relationship with the divine.
>
> Years later, when she had become George Eliot the wise novelist, she could look back and say in a letter – let me look it up - 'The first impulse of a young and ingenuous mind is to withhold the slightest sanction from all that contains even a mixture of supposed error. When the soul is just liberated from the wretched giant's bed of dogmas on which it has been racked and stretched ever since it began to think there is a feeling of exultation and strong hope.' Some of your readers in your group will have had something like that reactive resistance, it is not only young, it is modern. But she goes onto say that this is just as much proselytizing as the religious indoctrination was, and regretted she had not been more gentle with her own father for the sake

[95] Leslie Jamison, 'The Power of Grace', The Atlantic, 18th September 2018 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/10/the-power-of-grace/379334/> [accessed 11th November 2020].

> of the human feeling she cares about so much in, say, *Silas Marner*. But I am also reminded of Dorothea: what does she believe at the end of *Middlemarch*? 'I don't pray as much as I used to'. But it's not a lack of belief, but a changing of habits. She asks Will not to define her religion, it is more of a feeling than a belief.

He spoke finally of what he called a personalized 'time to adjust into one's own way back in, as it were, to a relationship with the divine.' He did not define what that adjustment was or how it took place.

Turning to *Home,* Passage 1 looked familiar to Brian:

> **BN**: 'She had never had any reason to think her parents had other intentions, but she might have helped them, she thought, by giving them herself to worry about': I love 'by giving them herself to worry about': that might have helped them, that way round. She is not the rebellious young woman George Eliot was. But it is extraordinary isn't it because there are so many things going on at the same time. This is for her an extraordinary adventure in taking her father out in the car. But also that she is thrilled that there is this new baby; not that it is supposed to happen this way. This is a young woman's response to what has happened--so she cannot really see it from her father's point of view that this is a terrible disgrace.
>
> **I**: Was a member of my group right to think of Mrs Gaskell's *Ruth* in this connection?
>
> **BN**: Yes, that's right. Mr. Benson and his sister are distracted as to how to respond to it. But Mr. Benson thinks it might be the best thing that's happened to Ruth--the birth of the baby. It is his sister who is much more conventional than he is, who thinks something like 'oh dear, how are we going to do this?' Whereas he thinks that this might *be the saving of* Ruth: he is a wider, deeper Christian, trying to follow Christ less predictably, as Ames might want to be. And Ruth up to now has been like a child, which is one reason why it happens. When people ask her about it many years later, she says 'Well, I was so young then'. But when she becomes a mother she also says 'Oh, I will be so good' as though she glimpses that it could be the saving of her, I suppose.
>
> Glory is so naturally good herself, that just for her to be with Jack is good for Jack. There is a natural sort of belief in her. But here with Glory, she is seeing it from the baby point of view, whereas for her father...well his baby *was* the son who caused all this. The disgrace is something, as it were, that therefore comes home *to him*. Yes, he spends far too long thinking about this 'consistent' habit and what other people think. But he is a minister so he will always be in the public eye.

BN would speak about a passage of literature, but it seemed as if he was always speaking and connecting more than one thing at the same time. He would have multiple positions to stand in, and it felt important to him to be able to address the moment from more than one position, going on at the same time. It was partly to do with what a life of wide literary reading had offered him. But it was also to do with the life depicted here: the different points of view going on in life simultaneously in the way the father and the daughter could be looking at the same thing at the same time, yet formatting it in a different order, age and framework. BN had a method of staying inside the language,

yet seeing where the language might be re-formulated by different positions, as if re-description and translation into another perspective have become natural to him:

> **BN**: 'The Lord has been very good to me!' he said, reminding himself that his obligations were correspondingly great, in fact limitless.' And I love 'in fact, limitless'. It's a very strange phrase, because if something is limitless then it is unimaginable, isn't it, sort of infinite as it were. But then to use that with something like 'in fact' a phrase that is saying 'actually yes, well you have to have this knowledge', in other words to be sensible about it, it's not sensible: it is rather a strange paradox that is part of the reverend's religious mind.
>
> Yes, it's a very exclusive family tradition with the Boughtons., whereas with Lila--how Lila absorbs it, it just sort of seeps into her, as untutored wife, through her life with Ames. I love this fact that she keeps writing out these different passages from the bible, she writes them down many times! It's as though she is both practising her writing skills and also memorizing the words. And sometimes they are very unexpected passages from the bible that she's writing down. It's as though she is absorbing things in her skin, rather than in simply her mind. It's as though they become a habit—part of a tradition that she is somehow finding entry to. Because she has no traditions herself of course. George Eliot would love that.

The passage he mentions is from the third novel, *Lila* where the Reverend Ames notices his wife continually reading the book of Ezekiel in the Bible. It is important that she was a fallen castaway before she met Ames – BM and I read this together:

> The old man had said, 'Why Ezekiel? That's a pretty sad book, I think. I mean, there's a lot of sadness in it. It's a difficult place to begin.' She said, 'It's interesting. It talks about why things happen.' Well, the old man said, and cleared his throat. That was a special situation. God had a particular relationship with Israel, certain expectations. *Moreover I will make thee a desolation and a reproach among the nations that are round about thee, in the sight of all that pass by. So it shall be a reproach and a taunt, an instruction and an astonishment, unto the nations that are round about thee, when I shall execute judgments on thee in anger and in wrath, and in wrathful rebukes.* She copied the verses ten times. Her writing was getting smaller and neater. Lila Ames. The old man worried over her reading the bible just at that place. So she told him she had looked at Jeremiah and Lamentations and thought she probably liked Ezekiel better. He nodded. 'Also very difficult.' Then he told her that it is always important to understand that God loved Israel, the people in these books. He punished them when they were unfaithful because their faithfulness was important to the whole history of the world. Everything depended on it, he said.
>
> All right. She was mainly just interested in reading that the people were a desolation and a reproach. She knew what those words meant without asking. In the sight of all that pass by. She hated those people, the ones that look at you as if they want to say, Why don't you get your raggedy self out of my sight. Ain't one thing going right for you. Existence don't want you (*Lila* pp.125-6).

BN: Yes it goes on about her and the mother-figure who gave her some help: 'In those days it seemed to Lila that they were nothing at all, the two of them, but here they were, right here in the Bible. Don't matter if it's sad. At least Ezekiel knows what certain things feel like. That voice about firmament. He knows the sound of it. *There is no speech nor language.* But it was asking a hard question all the same, something to do with the trouble it was for them to hold up their heads, and where the strength came from that made them do it no matter what.'
'She copied the verses ten times' as if she is absorbing a new language where before she was outcast and illiterate. But it cannot be safely controlled by Ames, which is right 'She knew what

> those words meant without asking', 'but here they were, right here in the Bible', 'As least Ezekiel knows what certain things feel like', 'he knows the sound of it'. Lila knew that this was the right place to *start*, because she already recognized and felt recognized or known by the language.

It is that idea of start or re-start, a place for a life-narrative to go on from, that interested me in case history 1. But when we opened Passage 2 with Jack and his father, instead of Ames and his son, or Ames and Lila, or Gloria and Boughton, Brian said 'Oh, but with *Home,* it is sad!':

> **BN**: Jack doesn't have many conversations with his father, and when he does, they almost always go wrong. And you think that really what he should be doing is talking to John Ames. But Jack's response here is *'*Is there anything I can do *now'* because what the father is talking about is what it's been like in the past. And it's as though Jack can't suddenly turn into a different person: 'No, not a thing to be done'
>
> 'The opposite, the exact opposite'. Yes. It's as though the father can only stay in that area of thinking for so long, hence the tiredness even though his sleep bothers him with dreams. It's as if in his old age he doesn't want to think it out as it were. Because somewhere deep inside himself there is a knowledge that he has failed in relation to Jack. And there's nothing to be done about it, and yet it's a terrible responsibility because that was his child. All the other children have turned out okay, but then Jack is called after his great friend John Ames, as if he wanted it all to work for John Ames' sake. Maybe if he could always talk in terms of that painful paragraph that starts out so well 'My life became your life' but he can't.

This seemed connected to why BN himself wanted to talk more about *Gilead* than *Home*. He would continually go back to *Gilead* when I asked about *Home* and here he wanted the Ames of *Gilead* to be able to help the Jack of *Home*. In talking about Passage 2 BN was pained and spoke in a voice that felt like the missing presence in the passage - as if he recognized the language that should have been there and couldn't help but speak it himself. It is as if BN must bring in help from other works of literature, that might be a helpful way through these painful moments:

> **BN**: But Jack cannot tell a lie! He must be what he is. But this is a curious thing, he exaggerates himself because he knows he is not what his father wants him to be. He has to be a terrible exhibition of unbelief, but that actually is a different sort of lie. He does believe something, but he cannot say what it is. There's no language. Because there is only his father's language. And the language no longer works across the generations. Only for Jack it is not enough, he is morally bound to demonstrate that the language doesn't work. Because Jack is his most honest child! There must be no mistake from Jack's point of view. So he even hurts John Ames' feelings because there must be an absolute honestly.
>
> And soon the children will be coming home, but Jack will be leaving before. The only good thing is when you think *back* to the end of *Gilead*, and you can think 'yes, well he is going to go the bus station, and there he's going to be blessed by John Ames.' He says 'oh Lord look down on this beloved son' and he lays his hand on Jack's forehead to bless him formally. And it is wonderful, that sort of blessing. Even when John has held things against Jack. But when he blesses him he calls him 'this beloved son!' And he gives him Feuerbach's book, which I

> thought was lovely because I think George Eliot and Marilynne Robinson use him well, though as I say they use Feuerbach differently. It's reading things the other way around. In one sense, George Eliot needed release from the rather oppressive family tradition, so she took refuge in Feuerbach. Whereas, for John Ames, he reads it with a believing eye and thinks it wonderful what Feuerbach says about water and baptism, why water naturally deserves to be held sacred. Ames may not formally accept Feuerbach, and Feuerbach is not a formal religious believer, but Feuerbach can understand the belief, and Ames can feel for that. It serves both ways. It's how far you spell it out. I think that's wonderful!

As a teacher, especially one trying to help the young in a modern world, BN could never be too fussy, he said, about the means that got people starting or moving or feeling.

Again BN went back to *Gilead*:

> **BN**: John Ames sometimes walks around at night and passes the houses of those he knows and will bless them in his mind—it's that wonderful sense of blessing. Then there's that wonderful poem right at the end of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, where trying to think of the name of God, he says something like 'he, it, they, whatever we choose to bless with'.[96] We need God because we need to bless people, God is the agent for blessing. God isn't simply a being surrounded by theology out there—but a force as it were that you need to invoke when you need to wish good upon the world or a person: 'God bless you!' The force lies in the blessing, but in order to bless somebody you need to have a power behind your wish as it were; that power is called God. And that is like John Ames, he's not a big one for definitions. What he believed sat easily with him, and he simply took it for granted and didn't want to spell it out, as it were, in any specific way. He doesn't openly define it, whereas Mr. Boughton is all about defining the traditions. He must have everything defined.

This seems close to what Feuerbach might say – that John Ames is someone who can use God as 'the agent for blessing'. But it also seems very close to the spirit of what Marilynne Robinson would admire in Ames. And this was very close to what has lain at the core of this thesis, that in BN's terms, 'it serves both ways' – the religious in the human, the human in the religious. But what was also important was the mobility required. Going backwards to something that was presented or shared in *Gilead* before *Home*, though chronologically in time it takes place after *Home* was important here for BN. But he also seems almost to hate the pain in *Home*, and says later he would like the fourth volume to bring the end of *Gilead* back into *Home*, so to speak. Three different forms of tradition help BN around the distressing image of Jack as seemingly damned, even by himself: Glory is the 'natural

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[96] Alfred T. Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (London: E. Moxon, 1850). CXXV.

CXXV
That which we dare invoke to bless;
Our dearest faith; our ghastliest doubt;
He, They, One, All; within, without;
The Power in darkness whom we guess

sort of believer', and Jack is better just for being naturally near her; Lila must develop ways to 'absorb' her way into the language of the tradition; Ames finds greater ways of invoking the force of belief by the way he will not 'define' things.

We came to the last passage together where Jack will again leave home, and tries to have one more conversation with the reverend and Glory at dinner:

> **BN:** Glory is right, it did take him a lot for Jack to get here: 'You should be kinder to him.' Hmm, kindness is such a strange sort of term. You wouldn't have thought it was used very much in this household, but Glory uses it. Well I think kindness to Glory is an *enormous thing*, whereas to Jack it isn't much, and to the father I think it is scarcely addressed. She has more of the George Eliot heart here, though she cannot make sufficient difference. I think this is one of the most terrible parts of the book, but that 'let it happen' it's a curious thing. Almost like 'finally, this *needs* to happen, Glory'. Glory is such a good woman, but in one sense she can't understand that level of total response which is the father and which is also in Jack. She wants there to be more 'kindness.' Whereas that absolute, where they are facing across the great abyss as it were, the great sort of gulf that is between them . . . it's because they see the gulf, they belong together in a sort of way.
>
> **I**: So sometimes kindness seems enormous, and sometimes not enough?
>
> **BN**: Well, here, 'The old man was groping for his napkin, which had slipped to the floor. Jack gave him his. 'Thank you, dear,' he said, his voice ragged with tears, and he blotted his face with it.' Jack is doing a Glory thing there, and it's a little moment of kindness, tenderness as it were by Jack giving his father *his own* napkin. There is such a great gulf between them, and yet he can say to his son 'thank you dear' so it is a terrible moment, but also it is as though even in those terrible, abyssal moments, where there seems no connection at all, there is a slighter, lighter, smaller language that can cross it. The language of ordinary human kindness and tenderness that is not adequate as it were to the occasion. But then maybe the occasion is so terrible that you cannot stay in it, and maybe to get out of as it were, therefore into something which is more lighter, less powerful, less demanding, is the only way forward….*if* there is a way forward.
>
> **I**: You are so good on the mobility – Jack and the father being together in absoluteness, closer together than Gloria with either in a way. And then suddenly Jack taking over Gloria's kindness, and it changes again. I am thinking about Marilynne Robinson talking about the novel as a form of mobile geometry, always turning around. But can you say anything more about either trying to stay in 'it', the really real, the terrible '0' that Bion talks about; or about a way forward?
>
> **BN**: Staying in it doesn't do any good at all. That is why I say the sister still, even though she is not involved in the most critical moments of lack of meeting, that Glory is the...*a* way forward. And the way forward as George Eliot might say, is the way back home, home is where you start from but in some sense you never quite leave it. George Eliot left the church but then went back to church *with* her father, accompanying him though she was no longer a believer, because of love. Coming back on her own terms. It's as though you take what you started out with as a fact and you turn it into a metaphor. I know a lot of people that believe today that formulate 'it's *as though* I believe' because that seems as close as it were to the truth as one could get. And I know I use here the formulations, as it were, so speak, as though they are literary. Whereas the old literalism of believe maybe wasn't belief.

Brian has been the only reader in this research who went on to that last part of the passage, and spoke about the action of Jack giving his father the napkin. All the other readers (including those in the shared reading group) stopped with absolute painful devastation at Jack's 'let it happen' and abandoning all defenses. 'Let's see what happens in novel four,' he says:

> **BN**: These terrible moments, finding a lighter language will almost shield those moments. They are not simply there to be explained in a theological analysis: that would be the wrong language, getting in between to mask, rather than genuinely interceding. The actual sort of bare factuality must remain intact without an interceding explanation as it were. And so yes they are broken cruel jagged hurtful moments, and yet I think Glory is also right to say that one cannot live at that level, and what one needs is kindness, gentleness, thoughtfulness. But there is power in those moments to 'let it happen' because that seems to be where truth is in a sense, but then we can't always live in truth like that, we need a certain sort of veil that sits over it. People like Glory and John Ames have the ability to make those moments of what you and Bion call '0' easier to bear if they will do it right. Absolute reality is moved to a conditioned reality we have to live with. So your group can get to '0' for a moment, but then they will have to go to a place that is more bearable for them. Particularly in a group because that degree of intensity is fine on your own, but in a group I think it's very difficult to share that level of apprehension as it were, and people then sort of back away from it into a sort of something. It is a fine line between cowardice and amelioration.

BN knows he has been on that fine line in this interview. I thought at this point that even assuming the individual readers can stay in '0' longer than the group, that staying in '0' is not possible in the interviews either unless we to go back into the novel to feel it again and not just explain it in retrospect. It is not clear whether that inability to stay in '0' is due to the natural limits of endurance BN describes or whether it is also due to the lack of a second language to re-create at least a sense of '0' later. But the ability to go back into the language of the novel is at least a minor tradition, offering an alternative to the breakdown in reality that happens when talk in the aftermath becomes disconnected from the sources and the inauthentic.

> **I**: What do you think will happen in the fourth book?
>
> **BN**: Oh I don't know. So it's about Jack, it might be the future response to his father's death, the death of the minister, because he is obviously very close to death at the end of *Home*. It will also probably go back too and re-live a bit of *Home* and *Gilead*. But what I would want her to do is write about Jack because I think that is the other side of her beliefs. Jack's a sort of puzzle, you don't know where he is really. He's a very, very good character that she has created, because brought up in that household and in that faith, then in one sense he is rebelling against it, but in another sense it soaks through his skin really, it's in every pore of his body. And of course he's the different generation.

The way Brian spoke of Jack's character feels like a cross between what he said near the beginning about rebelling into individuality, and being brought up in a tradition as if it 'soaks through his skin really, it's in every pore of his body', as it did with Lila in her more explicit learning of it:

> **I**: Do you have a guess as to what a way forward might be for Jack?
>
> **BN**: Well, literature has religious feeling sometimes, and when you read religious literature, then it is (as I have said) 'as though' you believe. As though a religious situation would be important - which is not like pretending - it means you know from the inside the feelings and thoughts and connections that belief makes possible. And you want thoughts and beliefs and connections, and you shouldn't be so upset or agitated in demanding from yourself a sort of formal declaration. I think that is what literature can do for you in bringing you to that position. You recognize a cast of mind and you think 'oh that's wonderful, that cast of mind' and then it becomes your cast of mind. Art is like doing faith in a different way and a different medium.
>
> Do you know the poetry of George Herbert? His later work: 'after so many deaths I live and write' because in some sense he is in the same area as your research. He is a devotional writer, and there is a difference between devotion and theological writing. Devotional writing has more to do with the effect of belief upon the mind and how you see the rest of the world. And devotional writing is a recommendation to a certain attitude to the world rather than concerned with the definition of things.

This 'as though you believe' is like the language of Marilynne Robinson's admired William James with all his use of 'as if' in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This is why William James might be as important a mediator between atheism and formal religion as Feuerbach was for George Eliot: it is not a fiction and we don't know it is absolute truth, but it rings a bell, finds a way that feels to the right way to '0'. Literature can be a holding place for what may become a cast of mind, almost a way forward 'from the inside.'

BN knew that perilous fine line between cowardice and amelioration, summarised in the interview. Only, he believed, you could not play games or be really other than you are, whatever or wherever that was. And this he explicitly related to William Tyndale's protestant theology, against the idea of anyone being able to will or create a great change in themselves, a change that finally depended on God not themselves:

> **BN:** Marilynne Robinson's novels dramatize belief from the inside so that you suddenly see what it is as it were. The feelings that come out of her essays aren't always the same feeling as in her novels, and I think they are almost more like Mr. Boughton than John Ames! No wonder John Ames needed to present himself to her, in that voice, as if to say, 'Have you forgotten about me? Or what can better be done will be by writing through me'.

When Marilynne Robinson speaks of starting to write *Gilead*, she said the Rev. John Ames 'presented himself' and she started hearing the 'voice of a good man.'[97] There was a lovely tone in BN's idea of the 'have you forgotten about me' voice. John Henry Newman was always interested in the tone or temper in which we believe, that inner thing that represents the spirit of what a person says.

I asked BN about the status of 'as if' as a sort of in-between state where literature and religion could meet. He thought all beliefs were rather more like 'as if' than people often supposed. Though literature could help to begin to create from within a cast of mind, you had to be patient in hope of finding something to speak to you, from within you, out of need. BN said still found himself worried that he could no longer pray – that though he believed in a power supporting the universe that was for good, which he called God, it felt more like an idea than a person. He hoped it might become a person again one day.

Within this interview (and in the reflections of Jane Davis from chapter 4) BN demonstrates both temperamentally in his own history and in his vocation as a teacher, a more intermediate position. It is as though much of his work has been dedicated to being within that middle area where the mix of life is most dense and intervolved, in solution. In his work, especially with young people, BN sought to make his students neither religious nor dismissive of religion. This middle position he took enabled readers to experience the richest possibilities, making of what Alasdair MacIntyre might describe as a Babel-like confusion a holding-ground for agnostic investigation, especially for those without moorings or direction or ways forward. To use shorthand, it is as if Natalie, my first case-history, might have been an ideal representative student of BN's: young, intelligent, emotionally serious, readerly, developing insight in the thick and difficulty of things, while needily looking for some way forward in the modern age. This he saw as part of his function as a teacher: to encourage the experience of forms of seriousness whether supported by religion or not.

[97] Jim Naughtie, 'Bookclub: Marilynne Robinson – Gilead', Interview by Jim Naughtie, (Jim Naughtie Presents Bookclub on BBC Radio 4, BBC, 4th October 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/radio4/entries/cb95772d-9f7f-32d5-ac52-7da30cdf3202.> [accessed 15th May 2018]

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Case History 3: Katie

Katie, aged 36, is an avid reader who has had many years of professional reading practice as an employee at The Reader. She studied at the University of Liverpool for both her undergraduate and her part-time MA degrees in the early 2000s, with the teachers who later would be part of the CRILS department. Katie professes to be a church-going Christian.

Katie shared how she came to know about Marilynne Robinson's novels:

> **Katie**: Someone told me about *Gilead* and strongly recommended it. I struggled a bit to get into it initially, to the voice of it, but very soon in I couldn't put it down. But you know, I love *this* one even *more* (pointing to *Home).* I am actually re-reading *Home* yet again right now. I'm taking it very slowly because the first time I remember thinking 'I want this to last, but I can't stop reading it!' So it has been really good to read it again at a slower pace. Although it is so sad, every page is so painful, and yet beautiful as well.

I asked Katie if she could tell me more about her religious background:

> **K:** So in terms of my religious background in the experience reading the novel, I was brought up in the church. My dad was a Vicar, so I was a preacher's kid in that same sense, which I suppose is interesting in thinking of my reading of Jack and his experiences as well. So I think mainly feeling the empathy, not towards the relationship with his father (mine was quite different), but that sense of the congregation maybe and the added expectation that they have of him as the pastor's son, I can empathize with that.
>
> As for myself I grew up in a Christian home always going to church. I would say though that I didn't come to believe until I was an older teenager, and then I would definitely say that the university years were quite important for me in terms of making that decision that I trusted the Bible. And I took hold of that for myself, independent from my family. And I think that when you are brought up in the church, that can be harder to do because you're always seen as you would believe naturally because you go to church with your family. I moved quite far away from my family for university, so it was quite an important time for me to either sink or swim with it, and it could have gone either way. For me, I got involved with a church here that really helped me.
>
> **Interviewer**: Why do you love *Home* more than *Gilead*?
>
> **K**: I think it's probably to do with *Home* feeling more relational; the relationship between the characters both in the family and in the form of the novel. *Gilead* felt more introspective to me, reflective and inward looking. The thing that draws me more to *Home* is the interplay between Jack, Glory and the father. It's that idea of how our inward journey can have effect on other people as well. Particularly with Jack, there's a lot of him coming to terms with what he's done. And there's this realization you see him go through now back at home, as he sees how he has had an effect on his father and sister. It's that thing that we are bigger than just ourselves, you know? So it feels like there is a personal journey to be gone through, but also *how* it has to be done with the other people around you as well.

What she said of the relational form of *Home* was true also of the way she read it. Watching Katie work through a passage was like watching someone build a relationship with the words and phrases, and then working back and forth to see how they might relate to each other, as if there were feelings underneath that were waiting to be discovered and brought into combined thought. So with Passage 1 she sought to know how things fitted together when it was no longer easy to do so:

> **K**: 'They both believed firmly in the power of example. This would be a great act of moral instruction. They must act consistently with their faith. They must consider all its applications in the present circumstance.' It's interesting, as you were reading it out, it's this section of 'they *must* act consistently with their faith', they *must* consider all its applications in the present circumstance.' It feels…it's like that word *must* and then 'consistently' feels like it's kind of clinging on to a solid something. But then rightly adapting or applying to the 'present circumstance' feels different from that. It doesn't feel like the two musts can fit into 'the present circumstance' they're coming towards. And it's strange 'the present circumstance', it feels so vague, like the way it's spoken of there. It's a strange way to try to describe something that is so personal to him.
>
> **I**: Yes, especially as you think of it connected to the last word in the passage 'It was disturbing to remember how *happy* she had been then, in the very middle of his deepest *grief*'.
>
> **K**: Grief, yes, and happy. Because you are holding the two things together. So it's that feeling of your own happiness for Glory but also that feeling of, well, actually the father was experiencing something so very different from that The very middle is important to Marilynne Robinson: 'the very middle of his deepest grief'. Yes, and that part before, 'She watched as her father mustered his courage. "The Lord has been very good to me!" he said, reminding himself that his obligations were correspondingly great, in fact limitless.' That 'correspondingly' takes a man beyond himself, though he can't be to others as God can be to him – limitlessly. And yet, again, that movement to 'this was a thought he *always* found exhilarating' that kind of 'always' as if again, needing to fall back on something solid that's gone before. As though you have had that thought before, and there is maybe a comfort in that. Yes, when you are thrown with something that is new, unexpected and unwanted, that idea of bringing in something that feels familiar in order to try to be a comfort seems right for him. It is disturbing to hold all this together, in search of some form, or some re-forming beyond the usual limits to the imagination of the limitless. I would call that Tolstoyan – that sense of much going on simultaneously and incongruously, so much out-pouring beyond the intentional or controllable that it seems to define itself as life.

I barely said a word here, and Katie didn't need any kind of prompt or guidance to producing meaningful thoughts from the text. It was more as if I was there witnessing her exploratory moment of one thought and feeling trying to lead to or connect with the other. She possesses a much-learned practice of reading but it enables her to stay in 'the present circumstance' to see what is inside and beneath its cover. It is as if Katie was trying to manage the complexity in Mr. Boughton from both the father and the reverend's perspective, by getting into the language to understand more of the feeling underneath the language. And then she also went on to try to *hold* Glory alongside that, *and* go in to Glory's own difficulties of holding her feelings alongside her sense of her father's. Her language of

forming and reforming made me think of what the novelist said of the Reformation at its best: 'the reformed church was itself to be always reforming' (*Balm,* p.168), so as to maintain the spirit of the tradition and not let it harden into the letter.

Of reading the four gospels, Marilynne Robinson speaks of a 'richness of meaning overflowing from the text and the tradition and from experience itself, a glorious plenitude, that to my mind bears the mark of divine origins far more unmistakably than any scrupulously self-consistent teaching can do' (*Givenness,* p.194). But in this painful human context Katie uses the word 'outpouring' rather than 'overflowing' against the word 'consistency', and uses it again also in relation to Passage 2:

> **K**: It feels like there's so much in it. And still a kind of missing of each other, kind of at the centre of it, like a real attempt here. 'He took the hand to study the face that would have been hidden', and then taking the hand to the heart, you know. But then 'you always did the exact opposite' and all this…it's all in the same paragraph! That's almost too much. You get so close, and there is something so close to something here, but then what is it? It's like magnets or something here, something that kind of resists that final . . . At first I thought the father was saying these little things to hurt Jack, but I don't know if he realizes the impact that those words would have on the hearer, it's kind of just like an outpouring of what he's feeling. And it feels like he wants to make it right, it seems like he wants to explain the past in a new way. I feel like he wants Jack to explain it so that some of the focus is not on Jack, but on him as a father and everything else from the past reflecting back on him. Yes, it's like he is wanting something to attach Jack's actions to, even if it is back on himself as the father. I thought the bit was really interesting, that struggle as a parent, what to do with your child, and to hold that with the awareness of the onlookers. Myself, I am in the middle, a parent and a daughter.

Katie will look upon the father first with an eye of understanding, or at least wanting to understand. This is very different from other readers that took part in the reading experiment, who first felt that blame needed to be given to the father right away. Katie looked to hold the father's thought as long as she possibly could, not to blindly take his side, but to try to find more felt connections. 'He's not throwing his hands up saying "I just don't know why he's doing this." His intentions feel pure here. Again it is the area that occupies the very middle of his deepest grief. So when Jack cannot give him the answers, or he Jack, it is almost like a second grief or a double grief upon him.' Her own father has been a minister:

> **K**: And Jack's response 'This is very difficult,' he said. 'What can I do--I mean, is there something I can do now?' What can I do *now*? That realization of what's gone before, and then almost understanding it in a new way for the first time, whilst *also* realizing 'it's gone, I can't

> actually change that', and *also* yearning for 'though time might be limited, is there *something* I can do *now*?'. And that limitedness is tied up in that earlier limitlessness of obligation isn't it. '--I mean, is there something I can do now?' is not quite future, it's more in-between, it's as though Jack is in-between it all, in a middle that is actually a sort of purgatory. But the father is too drained at this point by this redoubled grief, he must turn away toward the wall; the father can't stay in the in-between. In this moment here Jack is being so lovely, he is home, he carries the father up to his bed, he plays and sings the hymns to comfort his father, Jack is here with him. And yet. It always makes me think, how do we think about the past and what we do with that? Because it feels like that is the big barrier!

Again, she seemed to be struggling with the characters for some way through here, each thought a further extension of another, all with their own weight and pain on top of each other. And Katie's last comment is about the father having to go back into the old grief again but it would be a second or double grief, because it was made new without a new way forward. These are the live thoughts and feelings-on-top-of-feelings that Katie is able to manage all at once. It is what is called in *The Givenness of Things* 'this mental overplus' (*Givenness,* p.218). Katie is better at occupying some in-between state, that won't give up on either side of past or future, that won't give up on the opposing characters, than most people. She can see how things can be closed off, but I think she can see how things can be held onto somehow. And she believes in holding on, as if it were a mixture of form and belief, in the midst of things not going well. So after reading Passage 3:

> **K**: Oh it's just so awful, that big paragraph there, and then Glory coming in-between, trying to stop the terrible. 'You should be kinder to him': kindness doesn't seem to fit here, like it is not enough here. And then 'no help for it now'. So again it's the memory of the thing, what has already passed rather than the future of things.
>
> There is something in that thing the father says, about the 'it' that's lost. It's that 'it isn't yours to keep or protect' then also 'it's just destroyed till you can hardly remember what it was'. I ask myself why he says 'it', I suppose some sort of generalized distance to be able to talk about Jack to Jack. But it is close to what you were saying to me about Bion's '0': this terrible reality without a name. I don't know what that would feel like to have something that felt so strong that you feel as though you would die for it, and then it's destroyed. And he feels as though the destroyed is the destroyer as well; so there's a bitterness or an anger towards Jack. It's so strange that it would be the same person as thing that was so beautiful, that was in him, that would also be the destroyer of it all. And then on top of all *that* 'watching a child die in your arms', so the destroyer brought about the situation of the child as well.
>
> And Jack didn't know about any of it. Yet there is so much power in that 'let it happen', that let *it* happen – the 'it' again, whatever it is . . . it's not all new to Jack. Maybe some of this is already in his mind, but this now being said is solidifying; there is an acceptance in it here in 'he suffered his father's scrutiny.' When I'm reading in those moments of pain and the moments when they are hurting each other, I feel such sympathy from every view.

Thinking of how she can have so many thoughts, I went back later to find a passage in Robinson's essay 'Grace and Beauty': 'When I write, I make it a rule never to do anything – choose a name or a detail of any consequence, for only one reason, or two reasons. Or three, ideally. This is, for me, an important scruple, on the grounds that things are simultaneous and reciprocal; in their nature' (*What Are We Doing Here?* p.113). Katie adds, 'Readers feel such sympathy from every view - as if that is, implicitly, an image perhaps of what God and Christ would be like.' That is what makes her emotionally a naturally Christian reader, she feels.

I asked Katie about her experience going through the pain within the novel, and if it was ever too much:

> **K:** I am just thinking of those parts towards the start of the book—You see glimmer of 'okay, well this could get better', where he tousles her hair; little moments of the beautiful. Could they get bigger, come at the right time? Well, I think there are just those moments that are interwoven in the painful. And maybe there is just enough to get to the next page or the next day.
>
> And I think it's that just getting to the next step that's important in *Home*. Because I think often those moments don't come in a big moment, where one day changes everything; getting to the next step feels quite realistic to me.

I asked Katie what she thought might happen in the next and final novel *Jack* when there might be no more next days:

> **K:** I'm not sure, will it move forward? will it move back? I feel like in this, Jack is so reined in, so really it will be seeing the inner. And can he do anything about it *now?* Is it even about what you can *do*?
>
> I just keep thinking about the past--I think it's on my mind because my shared reading group is reading *Silas Marner* right now, and we have just been reading that passage where Silas has Eppie who is going to get married soon to Aaron. And Silas has basically reached a point, with this 16-year gap, where he is finally able to have these conversations with Dolly and can finally tell somebody what happened to him before he came to Raveloe.
>
> So Dolly has this conversation with him now where she basically looks back and she says 'I cannot understand what's happened to you, especially with the drawing of the lots, but I think what we've just got to do is trusten', you know, if he would have just come here and trusted people here. But Silas says 'Ah, but that would have been very hard to trust *then*'. And we were talking today about how there is this big long period inside *Silas Marner* where it feels like nothing new, you know he needs something new and he needs to open up to people, but it's almost the feeling that nothing new can happen to him. But also Silas during that time is not reflecting on what has happened to him, it's like the memory is closed off to him, but also the possibility of anything new is also closed off to him, and he's just in that middle limbo state of nothingness and kind of dark shadows fall upon him. But then when he opens his heart to Eppie, and that's like a new thing that comes in, it not only enables all these new things to come in, but it enables him to go back and look at this memory---this really painful memory that had been closed off.

I: It is very much like that Newman saying, reflecting on his own conversion to another version of the tradition, 'Great acts take time.' One of the main differences is that Silas is more in a limbo, where Jack would be in purgatory?

K: Yes, and the child for Silas and for Boughton and for Jack – all different. And I have been thinking a lot about how you know when something really awful happens to us, and then how much it dictates for us in going forward. How much do we say 'you know what, I am a damaged person because this really awful thing happened and I can't ignore that, and I can't pretend it didn't happen.' But then how does that limit us from kind of opening ourselves up to *new good things* that can happen as well? And how can we prevent ourselves from becoming hopeless and bitter, which I feel like the Dad here in *Home*, that's what's happened to him.

And that love that a parent has for a child, it can be so strong, and you can see that in what he says, but also that it would just be too difficult for him to have that natural grace. Because the father is in need of it too. It's too difficult.

This is where, in her mind, Katie is bringing Silas to help Jack. I talk to her again about being a naturally Christian reader.

I: You say, 'natural grace'. Marilynne Robinson speaks a lot about grace and the need for grace. I notice that often what you say naturally reminds me of what she herself says elsewhere in her non-fictional writings, as if you belong closely tuned to her tradition. I will go back afterwards to check on this, perhaps. About 'Grace and Beauty', say, in *What Are We Doing Here?* – the shiftings of multiple points of view, the hearing of a voice, the overplus of relations, the following of an Ariadne thread through the maze, the trying to be an image of God. I notice you often are able to hold together various thoughts and directions for each character, holding multiple things at the same time without judgement. Would you say that is like something God would be able to do?

K: I haven't read those other writings by Marilynne Robinson, but what a good question, I think I could think for ages about this. My first thought is that I think the Bible tells us that because God created us, he knows us perfectly and all the inner workings of our hearts and minds; a kind of thing that as humans we can never do no matter how well we know a person. And I think that what really amazing writing does, it helps us get inside and really work through the inner workings and see what enables us to empathize with the characters. And I think also the Bible talks about the importance of Jesus being born as a human and live as a human. So not only is God able to sympathize with our weaknesses, he absolutely knows that because he's lived that. That's something that I always try to do when I'm reading.

I think the difference that you get from *Home* compared to *Gilead* and *Lila* is that it's not just told from one person's point of view, you really get this kind of symphony of these three very different people all from one family. There is a shared history, but even so, paradoxically, they can't quite tune in with each other, even if there's that love there, and that affection for one another and the desire to want to help one another in so many ways, it's still imperfect. So I definitely think that is something that God *can* do when looking and working with all of us together as humans. It's something as humans we really struggle with, and so that is one of the main reasons why I love reading, and why I love this book, because I can try to do that. And holding opinions without placing judgement. . . I think as humans it isn't ever *our* place to judge in that way, in the place that God can. But it is right that it is only he can judge us in a way that it wouldn't be right for us as humans to judge one another, if that makes sense. And therefore his mercy and especially his grace is more than we can imagine as well.

I: Would you know how to explain or define your understanding of grace?

K: I think it's that idea that grace is freely given, something that we don't deserve, and it is never earned but a gift. That is what I meant by saying it may not even be to do with what you can do, especially when you realize you can't. So it must get away from that feeling and sense of having to be better, and more given from looking at us *as we are*. My view of grace very much comes from the Bible. It's a gift we don't deserve but is *poured* upon us by his goodness. Yes, poured upon us.

I: This makes me remember you spoke earlier of all that poured out of the humans in *Home*.

K: Humanly speaking, grace is a very difficult thing to give. You see in many places with the father, he really wants to give it, and intends to give it, but it's a struggle and it never feels like it's perfectly done because its *mixed* with other things. And the kind of contrast from the Bible's picture of God being able to pour it from buckets and it not feeling as restricted in any way. That feels different for *us*, it's not an easy thing for us humans even if made in God's image and even as Christians trying to do Christ's work. It is even difficult for Glory to give it to Jack, even though she would want to! It's too complicated for humans to try to fix things . . . yet there is a call to humans to give what grace they can.

I: Have these thoughts influenced your own belief from reading *Home?*

K: Yes, I think with the hope and the guilt of past wrongs, there is so much of me that just wants that grace to come because of how much pain shows we need it. So yes, I am always looking for the better-than-hope for Jack and wanting to believe that he will be able to find that. And in reading the father too, the frustration with him that he cannot communicate to Jack, or believe for him, that there might be a way forward for his son.

For her, the Ariadne thread is always to do with the next step in time, the next word, next page, next book.

Katie's feeling of something next again reminded me of Marilynne Robinson's non-fiction writing. I asked a follow-up question to Katie after the interview, showing her a few passages from Marilynne Robinson on hope:

> But my subject is hope, the theological virtue, which I would distinguish very sharply from what I have called optimism. Hope implies a felt lack, an absence, a yearning. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. The father of the prodigal son hopes for his return. We know that he watches for him. Nothing in the parable implies that he has any grounds for confidence that his son will return, certainly nothing we know about the young man's character or affection for his family. In fact, the father's hope is based solely on his love for his son. . . . Hope is loyalty. It seems that earthly love is always compounded with hope (*What Are We Doing Here,* p.225).
> I said we can hunger and thirst. I mean we do hunger and thirst, because we bear a likeness to God. We are part of this ultimate reality and by nature we participate in eternal things--justice, truth, compassion, love. We have a vision of these things we have not arrived at by reason, have rarely learned from experience, have not found in history. We feel the lack. Hope leads us toward them (*What Are We Doing Here,* p.232).
>
> Hope shapes intention. It leaves improbable possibilities open, which means that it influences the unfolding of future time (*What Are We Doing Here,* p.233).

I: Marilynne Robinson speaks of Hope in these excerpts. Does this chime with anything you were feeling with a way forward for Silas, and a potential hope for Jack?

> **K:** Wow, this has really got me thinking. . . these passages on hope. I am really struck by this idea that hope is loyalty, and the connection of loyalty to hope, and then the connection with that to trust, and also that hope can still exist when there isn't trust. I am thinking back to *Home* with Boughton and his hopes for Jack. I am also thinking about Jack and his own hope for himself and for his future too with his relationship with Della, it feels like it is still there, it is almost as if it won't be extinguished. And that idea of hope being connected to the lack, and actually that being so distinguishable from optimism, and that hope starts further back from optimism, it's a deeper, more raw thing and more resilient because it will exist in a kind of arid dry place. Whereas optimism feels more cheery, but it can more easily be battered, that's really interesting. That all feels definitely true to me. Oh, I look forward to seeing what might be able to happen, I do hope that there will be hope.

Though she does not define it, Katie has a sense of hope that lingers, keeping the future as a still possible reality.

*

All conclusions here have to be tentative, given the complex individuality of the case-histories, chosen precisely for that quality.

- *Agnostic and Religious*: As with BN, Katie would want a way forward for Jack but only without willed insistence. It is a patient hope, in lieu of grace, that welcomes the process of time. In the cases of BN and Katie, the difference between an agnostic (to use the in-between term loosely) and a more formally religious person when both are capable of human sympathy and careful reading, becomes minimal. This is in contrast to the 9 other individual readers, in the background of this chapter, whose deamnds and expectations were imposed upon the text and upon future time in the sequence.
- *Agnostic, not reactive*: Natalie did not have the framework of belief that Katie inherited from her parents. She has less of a formal tradition and would say herself that what she inherited included issues that she called psychological and existential, in particular resulting from her father's death. She has managed to begin half to create, half to find a story for herself going forward, and is determined to try to maintain that story through what she defines as love. Hers is what William James might call a religious quest without formal religion: her intuitive involvement in *Home* was evidence of her willingness to see what she could find there, such that by the end she was more agnostic than antipathetic, and willing to search within old terms

such as ‘grace’ for translated meaning that might offer ways forward in a life still forming itself.

- *Reading as exploration*: BN, Katie and Natalie are as individual readers closer to, or even models for that search for meaning that the reading group achieved in chapter 4, and are further away from the 9 other individual readers. It is as if the reading group helps its group members become less dismissive than those 9 and get closer to the 3. The group members might not have the readerly experience, but they are able to have instead the forming of good practices together through the help of the mini-traditions revived by the reader leader.
- It is BN’s sense of experiencing a religious situation from the inside, via literature, without having to define it as religious that is crucial here. Jack would not call himself religious, indeed his problems partly arise out of his inability to do so, but he is the locus for what the readers feel, seek and achieve in the experience of human need. BN’s position is central to this thesis: a densely rich as well as needily troubled middle ground of human predicament, neither wholly secular nor clearly religious, is what literature offers as a testing holding-ground, from which if there is to be any meaning, meaning has newly to emerge. There is no pre-knowledge of what will come or how it will develop: this thesis argues that that is itself a religious-like position, in light of Marilynne Robinson’s own account of newness, unpredictability, faith, hope and grace.

Looking towards the fourth novel:

Katie and BN have a complex sense of time, not wholly expectant of clear redemptive outcomes but concerned with possibilities for hope often arising in ways they will not predict or specify: small openings, changes of form and perspective, unexpected but much-needed goodness.

As might be expected, given her own raw situation in youthful relation to a much needed future, Natalie is more anxious that there will not be a way forward for Jack and is sure it needs to come through human love, in a man/woman relationship.

6.
Jack: Conclusion

AN EXPERIMENT IN PREDICTION AND POSSIBILITY FOR *JACK*

Between writing chapters three and four, news reached me of Marilynne Robinson writing a new novel. In January 2020 between my writing of chapters four and five, I discovered that the fourth novel was to be called *Jack*, obviously implying its relation to *Home* in particular. It was only in April 2020 that I discovered from a published interview with Marilynne Robinson that the influence of Shakespeare would be important in the new novel, due to be published late September 2020.

What this chronology meant was that my chapter on Shakespeare and grace was written ahead of knowing there would be a fourth novel and that Shakespeare and grace would somehow figure in it. The readers' sense of the need for grace or forgiveness was already established in chapter four, again prior to anyone's knowledge of a possible sequel. But the early notice of *Jack* enabled me to question readers in chapter five as to what they hoped and expected from it. I decided to ask myself explicitly the same questions as a form of predictive readerly experiment, to test against a late reading of the new novel as the culmination of my thesis in its real-time development.

What follows are my predictions at 8 August 2020. One caveat: though I believe that the *Gilead* novels are in one sense a sequence, albeit with a complex chronology, and that they make up one great novel between them, I acknowledge that each of the novels is also relatively autonomous and can be read in its own right without reference to the others. Marilynne Robinson would see it as an un-reverential affront to the life imagined in the novels and to the creativity of their art if the content did not have the capacity to overflow any determinedly set schema at any point. Moreover, the complex time scheme made the need for *Lila* and the backstory brought forward there a possible model also for needing *Jack*, likewise going back into the protagonist's past, without anything as simple as forward planning on Robinson's part. She speaks of only beginning a new novel when the voice of a preceding novel will not be silenced or abandoned. Therefore what follows in the way of 'predictions' is not implying that what may happen in *Jack* is in some way predictable. I am just as interested in using these anticipations in order to see what may change and surprise, giving insight

into the writer's artistry in process. What I am offering, from myself and from the readers discussed in the previous chapters, are actually less predictions than what William James might call needs and cries arising out of a response to the *Gilead* novels. There is (to use the word Robinson takes from James) 'data' in these novels which seems, through its readers, to be unfinished or in need of further development: what I am concerned with here is the imagination of the human material in the novels that seeks another experiment in *Jack.* In this way, the 'predictions' or 'possibilities' are this reader's inferior imitation of what Marilynne Robinson herself must have been thinking about in adding a further novel, before the reader could know of her artistic decisions there.

1. A FUTURE

Chapters four and five show readers hoping, even against hope, for something better for Jack in the fourth novel. Based on their previous reactions while reading *Home*, it is reasonable to believe that if there isn't some realization of that hope in *Jack*, it will be very painful for those readers. As Andrew Cunning puts it in his interview with Marilynne Robinson, considering the relation between compassion and the sheer time of immersion involved in the value of the *Gilead* sequence:

> Cunning: Jack, for instance. The more we see of him, the more inevitable forgiveness becomes. Writing three novels about the same place and same group of characters seems in this sense to be a kind of experiment in grace.
>
> Robinson: Yes, I think so.[98]

This may be more a desire than a prediction on my readers' part, but theirs is a strong sense of the need for some future for Jack in particular. It is not surprising in light of this that the fourth novel has indeed turned out to be about Jack, following more from what was left hanging at the end of both novels 1 and 2 (*Gilead* and *Home*) than from novel 3 (*Lila*). Some readers ask of novel 4: 'Will this take us past the desolate end of *Home*?'

[98] Andrew Cunning, 'Reflections on the Ordinary: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson', <https://journals.sagepub.com/pb-assets/cmscontent/CAL/Andrew%20Cunning%20Conversation%20with%20Marilynne%20Robinson%202017-1547563427643.pdf> [accessed 27th June 2020].

2. THE ROLE OF SERIOUS READING

Based on the ending of the first novel and related to chapter one in this thesis, my hopeful prediction is that (a) the blessing and/or (b) the book given to Jack at the end of *Gilead* will be picked up again and used in the fourth novel.

a. Ames: 'I told him it was an honor to bless him. And that was also absolutely true. In fact I'd have gone through seminary and ordination and all the year intervening for that one moment' (*Gilead* p.276)
b. At the same time Ames gave Jack his own errant brother's copy of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*

If Jack does not explicitly read the Feuerbach in novel 4 (and that also depends on chronological issues discussed below in 3), I still predict that serious reading will play a part in the fourth novel, including Shakespeare (see 5 below), the Bible and theology, and perhaps more poetry. Some of the evidence comes from how much Jack has already read. In *Gilead* and *Home* Jack quotes various theologians and philosophers, and Glory tells Jack she sees 'how well-read you are' (*Home* p.172*),* to which Jack replies that he has spent many hours in the library. This prediction also comes at the conclusion of my writing of chapter 2 of this thesis, wondering if there could be a way forward for Jack through reading. Della is not a librarian but she is said to be a teacher, and she may have a part to play in Jack's reading.

3. ABOUT TIME

I predict that in *Jack,* time will shift back, and his story with Della will be a large part of the book. I also assume that much will depend on whether or how far the fourth novel will follow on, chronologically, from the end of 1 and 2 I am predicting that *Jack* will have to do something in relation to either *Gilead* or *Home* and take time just a little forward.

But if *Jack* does not go further into the future than any of the other novels, then for the fourth novel to be in any way redemptive, it will have to involve a more complex sense of time than simply outcome. When Ames said, 'I'd have gone through seminary and ordination and all the year intervening for that one moment', the moment of blessing is valued for itself, though poised between

past and future. In chapter one I have written about Robinson's imagination of God's time where time is not linear as it mostly is for humans, but simultaneous. If after going back to the story of the relationship with Della, novel 4 does not get to a future with her that is ahead of the endings of 1 and 2, something will have to be suggested that is transcendent of simple chronology. This is also related to point 9 below.

4. JACK AND HIS FIRST CHILD

I predict that in some part of the fourth novel, Jack will have to think of his first child whom he never knew, and lament her death.

Two factors go into this prediction.

First, at the end of *Home* in the most painful confrontation between Jack and his father, it is the knowledge that his first child died in the arms of his father that causes Jack to say to his father in reply, 'Oh. I didn't know that—I didn't', and then, when Glory tries to close down the continuing dialogue, says 'Let it happen' (*Home* p. 307). More still may have to be let happen in *Jack*.

Second, Lily, one of the readers in chapter 4 during a group session expressed strongly the view that she was very upset that Jack never even acknowledges the fact that he abandoned his first child. She said it didn't matter that Jack had come back seeking hope through his second family (Della and his 2nd child, Robert), if he didn't have a strong enough character to take some kind of responsibility for the first child and for the mother of that child who must have survived.

I do not believe that the mother of the child will appear as such in novel 4 but without the thought of her and of the dead baby, it is hard to see how Jack could move towards any source of forgiveness or redemption, even if he cannot actively seek it. I do not see this as a moral bargain – the book should move beyond such considerations of debt - but emotionally that woman and child cannot be forgotten. One remaining issue is whether Jack will explicitly confess all this to Della, as between his old life and the chance of a new one.

5. SHAKESPEARE LEADS TO *JACK*

The writing of chapter 3 was entirely a structural wager on the fact that the importance of Shakespeare comes out of *Home,* and would figure in terms of Robinson's future thinking with regards in particular to the idea of grace so felt as needed in the sequence. That is another reason why the content of chapter 3 came after chapters 1 and 2, rather than before it. *The Givenness of Things* was published in 2015, a year after *Lila* ends with the hope of somehow redeeming Lila's own lost people.

6. DELLA SAVES JACK

Given my previous prediction that *Jack* must go back to the story of Jack and Della, just as *Gilead* went back to Lila's story in *Lila*, my prediction is that Jack and Della's relationship will be comparable to that of Ames and Lila. In the latter relationship, in one way it is Ames who saves Lila, but it is also part of what marriage means in this sequence that Lila saves Ames. Lila is like Jack an outsider, even an outcast: that is why she is the one who can answer his question about whether change is possible for such as he. But in *Jack* it looks as though Della must be more unequivocally the saviour of Jack.

That said, there is evidence that Jack has the deep desire to be something for Della and his son Robert: in *Home,* Jack has come to Gilead to see if it might be a possible safe haven for his Black 'wife' (whom the law will not allow him formally to marry) and his mixed-race son. This is in the context of the acts of abuse he sees on the news towards the Black people in the south and the past burning of the Black church in Gilead.

7. STRUCTURE OF GRACE FOR JACK

Chapter three demonstrates Robinson's interest in grace as a structural principle in Shakespeare's late plays, in terms of how it comes about as a thing in itself, an entity from a higher dimension within this earthly one. In novel 4 I have predicted that there will be the presence of grace, but structurally will it come more from *something* (as in the end of *Cymbeline* where the parts become whole without any one part entirely commanding it) or from *someone* (for example Marina, though she hardly knows her power in *Pericles)*?

I predict it will be from someone, namely Della, and consciously so in terms of trying to save the man. There is already some evidence in *Home* as to her influence, while Jack waits desperately for further word from her. Grace will be to do with her love and his in response: thus the key figure of love is not going to be a child as often in Shakespeare's late plays, but a 'wife'; since as in 4 above, there are problems with children in this sequence. But in *Jack* Della will be what Glory (as of course a mere younger sister) cannot be in *Home* - where Glory could not act as a catalyst either, in the way Paulina could in *The Winter's Tale*. All that said, grace will have to arise between the two, it cannot simply be given by one (see therefore 8 below).

What is more, we already know from *Home* that Della, another child of a minister, is religious: in terms of grace manifested through *someone/something*, it remains to be seen how far religion, or some alternative version of that felt thinking, will have its place in Jack's life. These are issues not just about the relationships but about the *form* of the novel in depicting them. What shapes will the narrative have to take in order to overcome Jack's despair? In all this I am thinking of what Marilynne Robinson has had to say about them mental 'geometry' of her novels, the shifts in perspective and dimension.

8. PROBLEMS IN GRACE FOR JACK

If Della is the source of grace, I predict that even so Jack will have an extremely hard time accepting grace. One of the great problems Jack faces is overcoming his own self-condemnation, his recidivism, and his fear of harming others that leads to self-harm and distancing instead.

In the fourth novel I predict that in terms of form Jack will continually face these factors: his drunkenness, his proneness to steal for more than material reasons, his record of breaking promises. It is possible that he will break from Della before coming to any kind of acceptance of her grace: that again is a structural issue. He might just repeat himself out of his own despair, though readers of the previous novels will know the outcome of their early relationship, so the issue will not be one of conventional suspense.

As a minor indicator, I also want to predict that the vital word 'prevenient' will be present in the novel, as prevenient grace alone will allow Jack to accept grace itself. This is related to an overall

theme in this thesis: the possible renewal of an old theological language and its tradition in modern circumstances

9. *JACK* DOES NOT HAVE TO BE THE LAST OF THE *GILEAD* NOVELS

Jack is said to be the last of the *Gilead* novels, but there is no essential reason why the series could not go forward.

This is not just about the possible future of the son of Ames and the son of Jack, both named Robert in their parallel worlds. It is about other more theological issues to do with time. Robinson quotes her puritans on judgement: 'We are judged twice. Once for our actions and then again when the consequences of our actions play out' (*What Are We Doing Here*? p. 234). The story of Ames and Jack and Lila and Robert Boughton, the dying father, and his forbearing daughter Gloria: all these will work themselves out in decades after the end of novel 4. There *could* be another novel, even if it is never written. This is related to what I heard Marilynne Robinson reply in response to a comment someone made against father Boughton: 'We cannot judge father Boughton, it isn't over yet. We just don't know' (*A Life in Writing).* That sense of 'it isn't over yet' in the complex working out of human life itself - and the added thought that perhaps it is never over - means that though the four novels are also one great novel like *Middlemarch*, that novel is never finished and always could have more, backwards as well as forwards. In terms of the essential nature of existence in her vision (rather than the accidents of Robinson's ageing), there is never a complete end or clear conclusion on earth.

(submitted to supervisors on 8th August 2020)

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I now turn to my reading *Jack* on its publication, and my first responses. I will occasionally put in bold brackets where my response keys in with the 'predictions' above – for example **(no.1),** but this will initially be by the way, since my aim is not primarily to prove these predictions correct but to note their presence and with what artistry and grace they are managed or transformed.

In the back of my mind throughout is the theology and poetry of such as this, 'Love III' by George Herbert, so admired by Ames in *Gilead*:

> Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
> Guiltie of dust and sinne.
> But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
> From my first entrance in,
> Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
> If I lacked any thing.
>
> A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
> Love said, You shall be he.
> I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
> I cannot look on thee.
> Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
> Who made the eyes but I?
>
> Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
> Go where it doth deserve.
> And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
> My deare, then I will serve.
> You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
> So I did sit and eat [99]

(i) It *is* Della who saves Jack (no.6)

The first important passage where Della can do something for Jack is when they are walking in the graveyard together. It is especially important because the last time they were together, Jack deserted Della at dinner, leaving her in complete embarrassment. Because of the legacy from their last meeting, just another example of the damage Jack leaves behind, her words here carry more weight:

> 'You are living like someone who has died already. . .'
> 'So you're saying what? I'm a ghost of myself? The mere shadow of a man—and then the moon went down.'
> 'Yes.'
> 'No. That's pretty disheartening. I have to object.'
> She said, very softly, 'I don't think it's disheartening. I think it's kind of—beautiful.'
> 'Did you say "beautiful"?'
> She nodded. 'Beautiful. In a way.'
> He laughed. 'Well, that's a surprise.'
> She said, 'Something happened that made you decide you'd had all the life you could stand. So you ended it there. Except you have to stay alive, for your father.' Her voice came very close to that annoying lilt of realization you hear when people go spiralling off into some supposed insight. They become inaccessible to common sense, to distraction, even. She said,

[99] George Herbert, "Love (III)," in *The English Poems of George Herbert* (London: J.M. Dent, 1991), p.192.

> ‘You don’t feel like part of the world anymore. Maybe you’re more like most people than you think.’
>
> ‘I can’t quite persuade myself that I’m like most people. And I certainly can’t persuade anyone else that I am. If you find any of this beautiful, it’s all right with me. Which is not to say you should. I must have misled you somehow. I’m pretty sure I’ve told you that I lie. I lied as a lisping child. So whatever you think I’ve told you probably isn’t true. If it’s actually what I said.’
>
> She nodded. ‘That’s interesting.’
>
> ‘No, it isn’t. It’s a damned nuisance, most of the time.’
>
> Quiet.
>
> She said, ‘I think most people feel a difference between their real lives and the lives they have in the world. But they ignore their souls, or hide them, so they can keep things together, keep an ordinary life together. You don’t do that. In your own way, you’re kind of—pure.
>
> He sighed. ‘No no no no no. Your poetical impulses have overwhelmed your good sense. Miss Miles, I can’t let that happen. Within five minute I’ll have come up with a way to disillusion you, and we’ll both be unhappy.’
>
> She nodded. ‘That’s how you defend yourself. That’s how you keep yourself at a distance. Anyway, we’re both unhappy as it is, so I’m not putting particular confidence in my illusions. If that’s what they are.’ She said, ‘I’m just trying to tell you that there are reasons why you should, you know, keep body and soul together’[100]

The important feeling is in what Della is trying to articulate ‘I don’t think it’s disheartening. I think it’s kind of—beautiful.’ These are words I have been waiting for someone to say to Jack, fully seeing what he is. It is not a comment out of pity or moral obligation because of Jack’s ever despairing nature; it is from someone who didn’t need dutifully to say it. ‘Beautiful’ is a word, a sense, that belongs with Marilynne Robinson’s reading of her old puritans and their religious aesthetic; and what goes with it, from Jack himself, is another word close to that tradition: ‘surprise’. But this is not merely thematic: it is felt, live and spontaneously incarnate, in the soft measured tone that she chooses to speak it from, as if it is a place of pure kindness. Della’s words fall more meaningfully than anything that can be said by the well-meaning Glory, and they take more time and carry more articulacy in them than even Lila manages.

‘Something happened that made you decide you’d had all the life you could stand’: Jack will confirm this later in the novel when he ‘sometimes called this life he had lived prevenient death’ (*Jack,* p.250 **no.8**). But then Della adds, ‘Except you have to say alive, for your father’: I am interested in the force of that ‘Except’ and even the delicate unstraightforward pause of the comma, as she treads knowingly on difficult ground. This is a language primed for something other than consistency: it recognises anomaly, paradox, conditionals as part of both a novelistic and religious

[100] Marilynne Robinson, *Jack*, (Virago 2020) pp.72-4, Hereafter cited as *Jack.*

visions. It is related to Ames and to what he admired in Herbert: 'For Preservation is a Creation, and more, it is a continued Creation, and a Creation every moment' (*Gilead,* p.126). It is that preservation that is the ground of what is to become their unconventional cross-race marriage for the sake of an America that was always meant to be a new world.

This leads me to reconfirm the usefulness of Bion's orienting notation of getting nearer to or further from an unnamed '0' in moments like this one. 'Except' is a shift away from the '0' of death, while the language of 'beautiful', 'surprise', 'interesting' and even 'pure' brings Jack close to an '0' which is not trauma and deathliness but their opposite. Only for Jack, this is unbearably too close: he cannot simply take what she gives (with an 'annoying lilt'), and must immediately begin to insert despair (**no.8**). 'That's how you defend yourself', Della rightly notes, though the defence is really another punishment. The second half of the passage will be a turning from grace, back into guilt, prevenient death, and distancing by despair: all this is movement away from the '0' which is too dangerously easy to name as 'grace', though that is its reality. The passage is a representation of all that stands before Della, and in her way.

There are two main obstacles. The first is despair which seems to always accompany him as a way of life. Earlier in the graveyard conversation:

> She said, 'I believe we have souls. I think that's true.'
> He could deal with that. 'Interesting,' he said. 'Yes, I suppose I agree. A pretty thought, in any case. Basically. Depending.' Reprobation. Then he thought, You be my soul. But at least he didn't say it (*Jack,* p. 43).

That is Jack's use of the language of religious tradition – 'reprobation' – most usually to damn himself with. But 'interesting' moves closer to a good '0', in sheer power of mind regardless of personal past. It goes with Della's own use of the word in my main passage:

> 'I must have misled you somehow. I'm pretty sure I've told you that I lie. I lied as a lisping child. So whatever you think I've told you probably isn't true. If it's actually what I said.'
> She nodded. 'That's interesting.'
> 'No, it isn't. It's a damned nuisance, most of the time.'
> Quiet.

Now the word 'interesting' switches over into her. But for Jack immediately the heavy name 'Reprobation' silently speaks itself in the disquiet within him. That is why grace must not have a

sanctimonious name or easy presence here: it is the terrible stuff that most seeks names in set Judgment. But there is another voice in Jack that says, again unspoken within him, 'You be my soul', in reply. It is as if there is a thing so mild in her words or presence that gets under Jack's skin, though he may always have that reprobation to face that causes him to turn away, again and again.

The second related obstacle comes from the deep-seatedness of the sense of damnation, inherited even from his father's theology and his father's fears:

> 'Well, my father suffered considerably over the doctrine of foreknowledge. He was uneasy with the thought that there might be dark certainty in the universe somewhere, sentence passed, doom sealed, and a soul at his very dinner table lost irretrievably before it had even stopped outgrowing its shoes, so to speak. If the Lord chose not to know, then—that eased the Reverend's mind. Though it would in no way alter the fact of the case. Once, I pointed this out to him, and he just looked at me, tears in his eyes. Everyone else left the table. No more arguments for weeks after that' (*Jack,* p.37).

This is where traces of *Home* can be felt in *Jack*. It is like a tradition of despair passed down to Jack, an avenging angel that will never depart. But it is complicated by not being merely discountable by blaming the Reverend, as readers in the group wanted to do early on in their sessions. It is humanly complicated by the father's own horror and sorrow at the sentence, imaginably there whether we know it or not. In this novel it will not be the overpowering presence of his own father that stifles possibility, but the institutions that Father Boughton and Della's father as well as Jack's pastor in St. Louis help enforce. Della then, will combat Jack's despair by bringing the religious tradition she still lives by against these secondary versions of it:

> She shook her head. 'I just think there has to be a Jesus, to say "beautiful" things no one else would ever see. The precious things should be looked to, whatever becomes of the rest of it. I hope that doesn't sound too harsh' (*Jack,* p.74).

The 'beautiful' with 'whatever becomes of the rest of it' is like Della saying to Jack that even their fathers' tragic pain at some level does not matter as much as that does. But it will take more than one or two utterances from Della for Jack to have any power to change or believe.

Much of what Della brings from her own religion needs to be reinvented through MacIntyre's idea of a second-first language in order for it to speak to and reach Jack (**no.8**). Through the

experience of Della and Jack speaking all night in the graveyard, Della will introduce and almost formulate (through small moments again and again) a new world to Jack:

> Finally she said, 'Sometimes I do wonder. If we were the only ones left after the world ended, and we made the rules, they really might work just as well. For us, at least' (*Jack,* p.44).

> She said 'When the world ended, nothing would matter but what you wanted to matter.' She was talking into the darkness. 'No more dragging around all the things you regret. Just regretting them would snuff them out.' She made a gesture with her hand, like a bubble bursting. 'That's a new rule' (*Jack,* p.52).

> Stillness. A presence in a dream always seems to mean something. It has threat or guilt or grief like an atmosphere around it. Her stillness felt strangely like assurance. It felt very like loyalty, if he was not mistaken It was as if she had said, we ended the world, don't you remember? Now it's just the two of us.
>
> He was reminded of something. 'Easier that air with air, if Spirits embrace, / Total they mix, union of pure with pure' (*Jack,* p.72).

One of the things that enables any religious tradition to be renewed through Della, is this thought of presenting a new world. I had not anticipated the combination of poetry and theology in the use of *Paradise Lost* in this novel which is mentioned at least five times, though it was for me a source of the original meaning of provenience. But the thought of a relationship, or even the idea of a marriage, arising anew out of the Fall brings Milton's *Paradise Lost* (angelic 'union of pure with pure') and its garden into relation with the graveyard scene from *Hamlet* (which is to do with the serious use of serious reading **no.2**). It is what allows them to imagine a self-constituting relationship between the two of them ('For us, at least') that is out of and beyond the current social world. It has to be newly created, but then has to survive back in the old world outside the garden: that is the crucial to the developing form of this novel in its continual, testing realism. But what is equally vital is that Della's voice remains inside Jack, just as her characters' voices haunt their novelist:

> Della was speaking to him sometimes in his thoughts, or she was quiet, simply there at the edge of his vision. In her gentle way she was making everything easier. What would she find becoming in him? That was what he did. And by putting himself in the way of survival, not to put too fine a point on it, he was doing as she had asked him to do, so forthrightly. Can these bones live? Oh, Lord, you know. But for you, Miss Miles, I am eating this sandwich for you I am smiling at this stranger, for you I am trying to sleep. He could not imagine an occasion when she might acknowledge any of this. No matter. Their lives were parallel lines that would not meet, he knew that, he would see to that. But they defined each other, somehow (*Jack,* pp.83-4).

'Becoming' and 'in the way of' and 'somehow' are themselves more gentle by denying despair's finality. It is the beautiful possibility of a new reality for Jack that Della has the power to help not only when they are together, but in moments when they are apart. Della is speaking to Jack as if she is his angel. In the novel's geometry, it is still in 'parallel' not in union, and still Jack is resisting the actualization of the potential and sabotaging the consummation of it: 'lines that would not meet . . . he would see to that'.[101] 'In *her* gentle way she was making everything easier' is an indication that it is possible for Jack to have a companion other than hard despair: it is the greatest surprise that this would be 'easier', not something achieved by ever harder and harder efforts.

In an interview following the publication of *Jack*, Marilynne Robinson was asked to explain why it is so difficult for people like Jack to be good:

> Marilynne Robinson: It's not as if they can only exist if we can explain them, they exist and then they interest people [. . .] One of the things that was interesting to me when I had finished was how many people [. . .] would say 'I have a Jack' and tear up. Or in letters someone said 'my brother has been dead for 17 years and I'm beginning to understand him.'
> The categories that people bring to bear on this story that I invented about being saved or changing, I don't really see them as the real questions [. . .] I don't think the issue is salvation or any of these things, I think it is simply the great beauty and complexity of human beings in all its manifestations. And I hope all these people who talk to me about *their* Jack love him so. I wanted to create a character that frankly made a case for itself in its own terms, without reference to being saved or anything like that.[102]

Grace here might be simply having to be alongside one who is *not* changing, through somebody loving one who cannot seem to change - we may never know why - but offering something greater than the human, all too human positive psychology of self-improvement. Change is part of Jack's

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[101] Marvell, Andrew, 'The Definition of Love' Poetry Foundation <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44679/the-definition-of-love> [accessed 16th November 2020]:
As lines, so loves oblique may well
Themselves in every angle greet;
But ours so truly parallel,
Though infinite, can never meet.

Therefore the love which us doth bind,
But Fate so enviously debars,
Is the conjunction of the mind,
And opposition of the stars.

[102] Guardian Live, 'Book Club with Marilynne Robinson', YouTube, 19th October 2020, <https://youtu.be/LAXOX3F49aA> [Accessed 18th November 2020]; hereafter cited as *Book Club with Marilynne Robinson.*

despairing obsession, part of Lila's concern and achievement; but in this new turn in the novels, it is not part of Della and her love. She is the change.[103]

(ii) A renewed language of faith (nos. 7 and 8)

What Della offers is what she sees in him – a language not of biography but of 'soul', and that is how the old language re-enters the novel to this radical effect:

> She said, 'I think most people feel a difference between their real lives and the lives they have in the world. But they ignore their souls, or hide them, so they can keep things together, keep an ordinary life together. You don't do that. In your own way, you're kind of—pure.
> He sighed. 'No no no no no.Your poetical impulses have overwhelmed your good sense.

This is where I need to refer more explicitly again to **no.2** in my list of predictions and possibilities. When Jack feels he has to dismiss what she says as 'poetical', that is what has become second nature to him: defence by reduction of the good things. Even poetry here, which he loves, is reduced. But the language and thought Della offers is more than poetry even at its best: it is not fallen second nature but first; it is a language of soul as if in expression of what God sees, radically regardless of 'the rest of it', even of the errors and the sins that are worse than mistakes. If it is poetical, it is theologically poetical; Calvin at his most beautiful, free of deserts; Hamlet's beginning in magnanimity through 'Use every man after his deserts, and who would 'scape a whipping?' (*Hamlet,* II.ii.467-8). Shakespeare is referred to at least 19 times in *Jack,* mostly from *Hamlet* and also sonnet 30 (**no. 5).** With regard to my prediction about the role of Shakespeare in signifying the grace that is lacking in *Home* (**no.5**), it was a surprise to find *Hamlet* figuring more than the late plays. Jack begins with its own graveyard scene, where *Hamlet* ends, but remains with all its questions in the middle of things. It is Della, like a version of Isabella in *Measure for Measure* who tries to take the story further towards the late plays, cancelling past guilt:

> His act did not o'ertake his bad intent,
> And must be buried but as an intent
> That perished by the way.
> Thoughts are no subjects
> Intents but merely thoughts
> (Measure for Measure, V.i.448-51.)

[103] See p.136, Kate: 'Also Glory, I keep thinking about those simple words she gave to Jack 'I like you the way you are.'

So it is that when Jack thinks he will have to end their relationship in protecting the harm he might cause Della's future, she will keep introducing a new language to Jack:

> After a while, she said, 'If you make a sound it's just a sound, unless it belongs to a language, and then it's a word. It means something. It can't not mean something.'
> '"Day to day pours forth speech, / and night to night declares knowledge. / There is no speech, nor are their words; their voice is not heard; / Yet their voice goes out through all the earth, / and their words to the end of the world." Is that what you mean? I used to memorize things. I was pretty good at it. I've forgotten the rest. The sun, "like a strong man runs its course with joy." And so on.' He said, 'Did you just come up with that? The thing you were saying about words? It was pretty interesting.'
> 'Oh no. I believe I came up with that about a week ago. You and I argue in my mind all the time. Often I win.' She laughed.
> 'I'm serious, though.'
> 'So if I were to grant what I can't grant, everything would begin to make sense.'
> 'Well, put it another way. If, certain things being granted, the word began to make sense, that would be a reason to have some respect for the—hypothesis.'
> He truly did respect the hypothesis, and yet, feeling that old thrill of dread and compulsion, he knew circumstance had once again put him too close to a fragile thing. He said, 'Look at the life we live, Della. I have to sneak over here in the dark just to steal a few words with you. Is that language or is it noise?'
> She said, 'It's noise that you have to do it and language that you do it, anyway.' She said softly, 'Maybe poetry' (*Jack,* pp.176-7).

This has to do with the structure of grace for Jack (**no.7**) in which religion and poetry are best related (**no.2**). Now Jack is no longer calling Della too poetical but quotes Psalm 19. Della is able to use literature as a way for a second-first language to bring about religious feeling (as Brian Nellist argued) from the inside. For here it is as though we experience the very evolution of language – from noise to sound to meaning, to something closer to '0' (the silence these words try to reach and realize). And meaning here involves the geometry of being able to 'put it another way', to make the sound and the word come to life again:

> 'So if I were to grant what I can't grant, everything would begin to make sense.'
> 'Well, put it another way. If, certain things being granted, the word began to make sense, that would be a reason to have some respect for the—hypothesis.'

'If', ''begin to', 'began to', 'make sense': the generous tentativeness here is close to the figure always implicitly present in Marilynne Robinson when still on the very verge of the religious: William James and the respect he offers for the risk, the Pascalian wager, the 'if' and 'may be' of there being 'more' in his own careful spelling out of a language:

> There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. *And where faith in a fact can help create the fact* .[104]
>
> But "*may* be! *may* be!" one now hears the positivist contemptuously exclaim; "what use can a scientific life have for maybes?" Well, I reply, the 'scientific' life itself has much to do with maybes, and human life at large has everything to do with them [. . .] Not a victory is gained, not a deed of faithfulness or courage is done, except upon a maybe; not a service, not a sally of generosity, not a scientific exploration or experiment or text-book, that may not be a mistake. It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result *is the only thing that makes the result come true* (*Pragmatism and Other Writings*, p.238).

'Faith beforehand' is 'preliminary faith': what would not be true if your belief did not help to make it come into the human world and be so.

After they decide to be together, against all odds, Jack comes to the house one night to find Della waiting for him:

> 'We all have souls, true?'
>
> He laughed. 'Please go on.'
>
> 'We do. We know this, but just because it's a habit to believe it, not because it is really visible to us most of the time. But once in a lifetime, maybe, you look at a stranger and you see a soul, a glorious presence out of place in the world. And if you love God, every choice is made for you. There is no turning away. You've seen the mystery—you've seen what life is about. What it's for. And a soul has no earthly qualities, no history among the things of this world, no guilt or injury or failure. No more than a flame would have. There is nothing to be said about it except that it is a holy human soul. And it is a miracle when you recognize it.'
>
> Her eyes were lovely with seriousness, he knew, though she didn't look at him. Still, he had to laugh. 'Am I to understand you are speaking here of one Jack Boughton?'
>
> She nodded. 'I learned this from you. From meeting you. It wasn't as immediate as I've made it sound, but I began to realize—'
>
> 'So I am immune from all judgment, on account of my celestial nature?'
>
> 'Other people are, too, or they should be. But since it's your soul I've seen, I know better than to think about you the way people do when they judge. The Lord says 'Judge not,' because when He looks at people, He just sees souls. That's all. I suppose I've seen a few others. Kids at school. Yours is the brightest' (*Jack,* pp.208-9).

'I learned this from you' – just at the point where she might seem the teacher, the beneficiary is unbeknownst to himself a cause. That is why it has to be marriage: it is a complex reciprocity of two beyond simple grammar, logic, science, or mathematics. Here is the manifestation of remarkable thinking, completely different from the mundane biography of guilt and despair that Jack only knows.

[104] William James, 'The Will to Believe' (1897) in *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, (London: Penguin, 2000), p.214; hereafter cited as *Pragmatism and Other Writings.*

'There is nothing to be said about it *except* that it is a holy human soul': that is the re-working of '*Except* you have to stay alive, for your father'. 'You see a soul' with 'no history among the things of this world'; 'I see your soul before I see you'; God . . . looks at people, He just sees souls'. I am reading this early in the publication of *Jack* and late in this thesis. What is clear is that this is bare luminous matter with a future in it, that re-forms and re-news the idea of God, with 'more' in it than can be simply settled at one reading. It reforms and picks up what Jack said in *Home* when he spoke of soul as what you can't get rid of. It is close to what Robinson writes in *Housekeeping* 'Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it. God Himself was pulled after us into the vortex we made after we fell' (*Housekeeping,* p.194). It is also to do with what Bonhoeffer says in the *Letters and Papers from Prison, of which* she wrote in *The Death of Adam:* the need to keep the gaps, to maintain the losses and separations and the sense of something missing, and not try to fill their space with a second-rate, false or desperate substitute.

What Mark Edumundson writes about the self and the soul offers a clue for further thought. He describes a choice pertinent to Jack:

> There are ideals of the Soul and there are desires of the Self . . . Some will be drawn to Soul, but they will see that they cannot commit themselves all the way. Some defense, some carapace of Self, will be necessary. So Walt Whitman, greatest of American poets and a true High Romantic, cultivated the persona of one of the roughs. He presented himself as a worldly man, full of desires: 'Disorderly fleshy and sensual, eating drinking and breeding' as he puts it. Without that tough shell of masculinity—that shell of Self—Whitman's Soul might have perished early. For one sees quickly how delicate and tender the poet was [. . .] If this being, neither man nor woman, neither child nor adult, had been exposed fully to the world, it would probably not have survived.
>
> Whitman's Soul is a being of amazing delicacy, and Whitman needed to do all he could to protect it. He needed to surround it with a potent armor of Self, and then his Soul could expand into the poems and into American life. Socrates and Jesus seem to have been beings without Self—they were undefended in the world. It is a miracle that Socrates lasted as long as he did; it is rather a shock that Jesus could preach even for three years, given his absolute Selflessness.[105]

[105] (Mark Edmundson, *Self and Soul*, (Harvard University Press, 2015), pp.257-8.

This attempt at a toughened vulnerability, soul protected even by a self that might distort it, feels close to what Jack has been going through, without being in full control. It also marks Della's great achievement with Jack: to see the barely conscious strategy, to recognise the soul within the self that can hardly bear it or *protect it.* For Marilynne Robinson through Della it is as though psychology, if it goes deep enough in a novel, becomes something else more ontological, moving from self down to soul. And it is very interesting that that soul feels deeper than self, less implicated in time and story, where deeper in some way can also be not more complex but simpler, in the sense that it can hold together as one thing. It is fitting that Whitman is used as an example as Marilynne Robinson herself values him for the way he constantly renews a language closer to soul than, 'identity – yours for you, whoever you are, as mine for me:

> Language like this makes clear how far our vocabulary has drifted over the generations. So far from the sense of radical uniqueness Whitman evokes here, identity seems now to imply membership in a group, through ethnicity or affinity or religion or otherwise. Rather than acknowledging the miraculous privilege of existence as a conscious being (and, considering the overwhelming odds against anyone's existence, the word 'miraculous' is an appropriate superlative), it has reference now to knowing one's place, culturally and historically speaking. And this is taken to be a good thing. Whitman himself has been charged with rampant egoism for pondering and celebrating the centrality of the perceiver, that 'hardest basic fact' It seems fair to conclude that certain of his critics have no grasp of physics or of metaphysics. In other words, in changing, our vocabulary has not always advanced (*When I Was a Child,* p. xii).

Whitman's is not merely an ego: his large self is really a soul. That Della can recognize in Jack the soul beneath the self and its history constitutes a promise as well as a connection to it. That connection is not achieved through membership of a particular group – it happens across apparent social and racial divides – but through an unpremeditated link that betokens marriage in its deepest sense. Soul and Marriage are old terms, but here they are given some new power.

Della sees that pure suffering want in Jack, despite his urge to fill the emptiness and the distance with the surrogates of drink and theft, and fulfils it. That is how Della is able to invent (in terms close to Feuerbach) what they have chosen as still a marriage *and* a sacrament, though they are not married legally or in a church. So Della creates a continuance of a religious tradition *within* their love. 'Now you're a married man! You have a wife!' (*Jack,* p.224). The obstacles put in their way will come from two decent men of the church in the understandable disapproval from her own father and Jack's pastor

in St. Louis: all this is mundane. She says, 'This man is my husband. If he leaves, I go with him (*Jack,* p.304), echoing Ruth: 'Entreat me not to leave you, Or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go'.[106] It is sacramentally what Jack gets through to only via an anger he almost immediately represses when, faced with rejection by the St Louis pastor, he writes in a letter he never sends him of 'denying a man a simple blessing' (*Jack,* p.232). Religion is not living up to itself, even as Karl Barth described. But what it has to live up to is almost impossible, the impossible that Della herself brings, something like a miracle if it really can come about. 'I have seen your soul, it is pure, and it doesn't have a history like you do': those utterances are not noise but language, not just language but something close to poetry in the world. And not because poetry is a fancy way of doing it, but because poetry here is like a breakthrough, where the words really matter as if for the first time again. They are like an achievement, not by Marilynne Robinson, but by Della.

Robinson says of Della's achievement, in her Guardian interview:

> I do think theologically speaking, that that grace is the freedom of God. And I think in terms of human behaviour, that kind of freedom is a part of acting graciously. If you are going to act in a way that people call gracious you are acting outside the range of the kind of determinacy that is involved in revenge or calculation of any kind, you are actually acting freely (*Book Club with Marilynne Robinson).*

That freedom despite or without a magical solution is achieved when Della sees the soul in Jack even *amidst* the heavy pain he is feeling in his biographical life. It is where '0' feels at its strongest in the story, a full measure of reality on both sides. It is not as if grace sweeps everything away or that change is simply enabled; it is more that space is given for this soul despite the human biography. It is the novel that, like Della within it, can work as art's way of finding space for Jack, whatever happens within it. That is its overall caring form.

(iii) Form

There is an important series of counterpoints that arise in the tests and experiments this novel carries out on itself. They are geographical shifts of scene I had not anticipated.

[106]The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments, Authorised King James Version, (Cambridge University Press, 1984), Ruth 1.16.

When Della is required to return to face her family, Jack similarly leaves St Louis, only again in despair. The couple have already talked of how *Hamlet* contains many stories, none wholly hidden, some just not taken up. This may be true of the *Gilead* series, and why it is a series with other stories always possible and potential and ongoing, but it is certainly also true of *Jack* itself. The move away from St Louis was a formal surprise I had not anticipated, a sort of trial in the desert, and a strong threat to the structure of grace Della has worked for (**no. 7**). The reader is then in the realm of ghost stories, stories that did not happen but could have. Anyone who has read *Gilead* and Home knows already that the separation will not be permanent, that Jack will not succumb to the temptation to give up and destroy a possible future by this substitution of place. But remarkably, in relation to time (**no.3**), the fear that in some possible world or story the reconciliation and reunion might not happen is powerfully generated. But Jack still gravitates to echoes of the second-first language by working immediately in a bookshop surrounded by poetry. He begins to imagine the possibility of Della and himself making a home there someday in the nice boarding house he finds. It is as if Della is *still* speaking to him, or acting as a presence in his thoughts. And it is only when the possibility of Della's presence is rejected – the otherwise wholly decent landlady is horrified at the idea of his wife being a Black woman - that he leaves the imagined possibility to find wherever Della is.

It was while Jack was still thinking of keeping Della safe from him, of even praying God to help him do so, that the other structural instance of leaving St Louis comes back to his mind. Years earlier, he travelled to Chicago in search of the woman from Gilead (**no.4**), to try to make some kind of apology. He wore clothes she might recognise him in; but unsurprisingly, in counterpoint as it were, he never found her.[107]

Finally, after finding Della in Tennessee and facing her family, Jack and Della are together again on their way back to St. Louis. The last of the novel is not a 'happily ever after'; it would feel

[107] In relation to prediction **no. 4.:** Lily from the shared reading group contacted me after reading *Jack*. She was surprised at the natural compassion that she felt towards Jack's voice in this fourth novel, and satisfied by the heart-breaking feelings Jack experiences in thinking of his past even in this failed attempt.

wrong if it was so. It is the continuation of what Della has created, the tradition of a marriage working transformatively within the bloodstream of the old Jack like an old Adam:

> And this was had grandest larceny by far, this sly theft of happiness from the very clutches of prohibition. True, it was also the theft of a beloved daughter from her proud family, with the damage this involved to their honourable hopes, and with a secondary though much greater damage that would come with the diminishing of those hopes. This might be felt for generations. It would touch his own child, too. Then there was the theft of every good effect she would have felt from her education. Over time she might decide that she was not in possession of her happiness as she might have believed, even, dear Jesus, of her own self-love. How would she live with that divine anger of hers when mere he, so far as he could, and not her father, stood between her and the insults and abrasions of the world? (*Jack,* p.309).

This brings back *Paradise Lost* and the glimpse of the Garden of Eden offered when Della envisioned in the great graveyard what it might be like to be the last two people in the word, creating new rules for themselves. Well, now that they must seek to find and maintain their vision in the outside world. It is as if they need and thus have to create a reformation in seeking refuge and survival in their marriage. It will be put to test over and over: 'felt for generations. It would touch his own child, too' (**nos. 1** on the future and **9** on no final novel).

It is close to thinking of what might happen to Ames and Lila's son in the future. Jack decision to return and to go down to Della's home in Tennessee is a huge achievement in seeking to create paradise re-gained. It is again a radical idea in this novel that if the experience in the garden produced the knowledge of evil in the world, it also produced with it the knowledge of good. Again it is what they are doing in society outside the garden:

> The knowledge of good. That half of the primal catastrophe received too little attention. Guilt and grace met together in the phrase despite all that. He could think of himself as a thief sneaking off with an inestimable wealth of meaning and trust, all of it offended and damaged beyond use, except to remind him of the nature of the crime. Or he could consider the sweet marriage that made her a conspirator with him in it, the loyalty that always restored them both, just like grace (*Jack,* p.309).

It is what William James would call a feeling of 'or'[108]: The meeting of guilt and grace together in Jack and Della is like accepting a language of religion in a form regenerated by the blending by marriage, which Marilynne Robinson said Calvin himself had invented in its modern form (*Adam,*

[108] 'The word "or" names a genuine reality' (*A Pluralistic Universe*, 1909, 'Conclusions').

p.212) The accomplishment of the second-first language has the hope of surviving through the forms of religion in love and poetry together (**no.7)**. It is like changing the religion whist staying in the religion. Della is the one who can be the figure of grace through her experiences in that rich mix of being a Black woman, highly educated, poetic, and the daughter of a reverend, choosing an outwardly unpromising white man. It is the journey from 'Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back' to the beginning of 'So I did sit and eat'. Only Marilynne Robinson does it this way round in the attempt of Jack himself to create for Della another space beside the outside world, a bit of Paradise that simply redeems the meaning of 'Home'

> His option [. . .] was to bring Della upstairs to his room. There would be the smart remark as they passed the desk, then smirks and stares if other inmates of the place happened to be around, then his room with the door closed, his very orderly room with some kind of curtain thing on the window and two chairs he'd find somewhere. He could push the bed to one side to make room. for the chairs and put the wobbly little table beside his bed between the chairs so that if he could think of something to offer her to eat or drink he could do that. It would mean moving the little Bible his father had given him when he found him sitting by the river early one Sunday morning and told him he might as well consider himself confirmed (*Jack,* pp.154-5).

> On his way home one evening, he bought a small geranium plant with a red blossom on it and set it on his windowsill. This was a first step toward improving the impression his room would make on Della, if he ever actually nerved himself to bring her into it. But the plant deeply changed his own impression of the room (*Jack,* p.163).

> Here he was, again imagining Della stepping into his room, quietly, tentatively. She would glance around to see what kind of room it was, and be charmed by something, reassured. At first it was the stack of library books on his dresser, all of them poetry. Then it was the flower and the books. (*Jack,* p.171).

It is very specific and ordinary, but it is pure and it is a renewed confirmation, as we might imagine that his father might have put it in a better world.

(iv) Time

The prediction that led me the greatest surprise to me after finishing *Jack* was to do with the hope about time (**no.3**). I was hoping that perhaps *Jack* might be carried a bit forward in time, to try to glimpse some kind of future for him (**no.1**). But if it didn't move forward in time, I was wishing that there would be *some kind* of understanding about time. Well, *Jack* finishes before the first two novels end, and indeed it could seem to be a prelude or back story, not addressing the final feeling of heartbreak felt in *Home* or the traces from *Gilead* and *Lila*.

The surprise after reading *Jack* was that it had in itself, again, a kaleidoscope effect on the other three novels, such that now they cannot be seen in the same way. Reading *Jack* caused and almost required a re-reading of *Gilead* and *Home*, as it suddenly felt to me that it had been re-written. There is more understanding in what Jack is bringing home *with* him, and the real anxiety he must have felt the entire time about losing what Della and his son had given to his life.

Near the end of *Gilead* Jack spoke to Ames, in place of his father:

> '[. . .] I came here, thinking I might find some way to live with my family here, I mean my wife and son. I have even thought it might be a pleasure to introduce Robert to my father. I would like him to know that I finally have something I can be proud of. He's a beautiful child, very bright. And believe me, he's being brought up in the church. He wants to be a preacher. But now I see how feeble my father is, and I don't want to kill him. I really don't. I have enough on my shoulders as it is' (*Gilead,* p.269).

It is of Ames Jack asks, remembering the fire at the negro church, 'If we came here and got married could we live here? Would people leave us alone?' Ames doesn't know for sure, but hopes so. Jack says Ames could use his influence to help. 'I said that might be true, but I couldn't promise to live long enough to make much use of it. I mentioned my heart' (*Gilead,* p.264). Heart ought to be able to guarantee a future, a happy ending, but it cannot.

But the hope renewed in the fourth novel drew me to a new reading of the end of *Home* when Della comes looking for Jack, with her won heart:

> Glory said, 'Wait! Please wait,' and the woman stopped and turned. 'You're Della, aren't you. You're Jack's wife.'
>
> For a moment she did not speak. Then she said, 'Yes, I am. I am his wife, and I sent him that letter! And now I don't even know where to find him, to talk to him.' Her voice was low, broken with grief. She looked at the boy, who had taken a few steps from the car to lay his hand on the trunk of the oak tree (*Home,* p. 333).
>
> Della nodded. She looked past her at the orderly garden, at the clothesline, and again at the porch with its pot of petunias on the step. Her eyes softened. It was as if a message had been left for her, something sad and humorous and lovely in its intimacy. Glory could imagine that Jack might have drawn them a map of the place, orchards and pasture and shed. Maybe there were stories attached to every commonplace thing, other stories than she had heard, than any of them had heard. A mention of snowflake. . . (*Home,* p.334).
>
> Della put the boy in the backseat, and then she took an envelope from the glove compartment and wrote on it, some number and some names. Her sister had started the car. Della handed her the letter. 'It was a pleasure to meet you. I hope your father will be feeling

> better. If you have a chance to get this to Jack, I'd be grateful. Then she closed the door, and the car pulled away (*Home,* p.336).

What felt like an ending of 'too late' or an overly resolved vision in Glory's commitment to wait for Jack's son someday, has new meaning. And it is significant that the son, the child is there, as a child always is in Shakespeare's late plays, as Jack always wanted his son to meet his grandfather. These are 'other stories' (**no 9**), messages, attempts again at finding a place and a beloved. Della coming to find Jack means so much more.

*

Two of the readers from Chapter 5 have read *Jack*. Both Katie and Natalie founded it a very emotional experience, Natalie reported herself 'overjoyed' that a love story turned out to be the path given for Jack. Neither were yet ready to offer further thoughts at this stage. Here I offer instead a last account of the translated form that grace can take in the human world, through the experience of one final reader.

A Final Reader Case History: Angela

Angela Macmillan has been involved in The Reader Organisation from the very beginning. She has produced anthologies which act as a working basis for much of The Reader's work and is thus another representative of its ethos.[109] She reported as follows:

> **Angela:** I've just finished *Jack*. The ending was overwhelming and I have this thought that needs to be shared before it all escapes me, about something that I have found interesting and puzzling. It is about Loyalty and it may be entirely obvious to most readers, I don't know. I noticed that it keeps cropping up through the book until that very last sentence.
>
> I started marking it in the graveyard when Jack thinks that *'Changing his life meant changing himself. Could it be some misbegotten loyalty that made him so intractably Jack Boughton, when so many better options must be available' (Jack*, p.69). This is a strange negative loyalty, related perhaps to a conventional Calvinistic sense of inevitable damnation.
>
> But then a few pages later: *'Stillness . . . Her stillness felt strangely like assurance. It felt very like loyalty, if he was not mistaken. It was as if she had said, We ended the world, don't you*

[109] For more background on Angela Macmillan, see Philip Davis, 'Chapter 10, The Anthologist,' in *Reading for Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 224–47.

remember? Now it is just the two of us' (*Jack*, p.72). I think that now that better option has almost miraculously presented itself. Her assurance *felt* like loyalty.

Later when Della tells him she is pregnant, he is almost overwhelmed again by shame and the negative side to his sense of loyalty is obviously and inescapably still part of him; he is even 'assured' by it: *'He was even a little loyal to it, as if it assured him there was justice in the universe'* (*Jack*, p.298). But on p.300, in Della's house, assurance and loyalty become positive forces once again when she takes Jack's hand:

'Another theological question, how one human being can mean so much to another human in terms of peace and assurance, as if loyalty were as real as gravity. His father said it had to be that real, because the Lord is loyal. Jack was just then feeling the force of the idea.'[110]

This makes me realize: there is in Jack's loyalty even to a bad self, a mixture of despair and a certain sort of integrity. It may be psychological recidivism or despair in lieu of change, but it also feels close to a theological Calvinism resistant to pretending or presuming that of your own will you can wholly and instantly change from what you are. Jack is not going to add on some positive psychology of being a changed man. Yet at the same time what Jack thinks he is, is less than Della understands him to be. The novel is what can hold together these different discourses, realms and possibilities in one human being and his relationship with another.

A: Loyalty, he acquaints with a 'theological question'. But I looked in Cruden's Concordance and there is no Biblical reference to the word, so what does his father quite mean by this? Perhaps this: one of the references to Jack's brother Teddy and his unshakeable loyalty to Jack: *'"What's wrong with you Jack?" A real sad question. And Jack took in the fact that his brother's unshakeable loyalty to him was illusionless compassion'* (*Jack*, p.212). I wonder if that 'illusionless compassion' is the human version of grace.

That brings me to the final paragraph of the book where guilt and grace meet in 'the knowledge of good'. The last sentence says, he could think himself a thief; '*Or he could consider the sweet marriage that made her a conspirator with him in it, the loyalty that always restored them both, just like grace'* (*Jack*, p.309).

As the word loyalty is absent from the Bible, and therefore, *perhaps*, not a dogmatically Christian word as such, could it be that loyalty, in this book, is the *earthly form* of heavenly grace? Is that blindingly obvious and I am just being slow? And what of the *assurance* which has always accompanied loyalty for better or for worse?

I know Angela, not in her culmination seventies, she is an exceptionally loyal person who has not always received loyalty in her life; she is also a person with religious feelings but without formal religious belief, and worries about what anything might make for permanence.

A: There are also a few more passages that felt important as I came across them:

[110] This is also Marilynne Robinson's thought: 'God is loyal to us' (*Absence*, p.25).

> *Della took a step toward him, so that she was standing almost beside him, and he could actually feel her loyalty to him like a sort of heatless warmth emanating from her (Jack,* p.109*).*
>
> But then Jack takes his half-step back:
>
> *Granting that the marriage was only an agreement between them—not 'only,' as if it were diminished by secrecy and illegality and the rest. Those were the things that made it pure, or proved that it was pure. He did take a kind of comfort from the fact that there seemed to be little more than loyalty involved, which might come very easily to him in this case. And as for her, if sometime she decided she wanted another kind of life, he would forgive her on account of her youth and love her, anyway, at the same sanctified distance they had agreed to. That moment could come at any time. She would go back to her family and her life with his blessing, with no new experience of sorrow or guilt, uninjured in his care. He would never have imagined that harmlessness could be so sweet and so protective of them both, or that solitude could be the proof and seal of marriage (Jack,* pp.218-19*).*

'Only' also means 'pure', just as 'harmlessness' can also mean 'protective', and protected 'solitude' seals 'marriage' in that mix of vulnerability and resilience that culminates here:

> Jack said, 'Della is loyal to me and I'm loyal to her. I never intended things to work out this way. I couldn't have imagined it. Neither of us meant any harm, I promise you' (*Jack*, p.306).

Marilynne Robinson is presenting a great experiment in time in the *Gilead* novels. Della's loyalty is a tough enabling value that allows other seemingly higher values to endure and continue in a fallen world through time. With Della her loyalty sustains her love. As 'fidelity' and 'faith' comes from the same word in Latin, loyalty is the earthbound thing that looks to survive through ordinary human time. It is one of those older words that Marilynne Robinson cherishes:

> [. . .] something has passed out of the culture, changing it invisibly and absolutely [. . .] there are too few uses for words like humor, pleasure, and charm: courage, dignity, and graciousness; learnedness, fairmindedness, open-handedness; loyalty, respect, and good faith (*Adam*, p.106).

And again for her there is Shakespeare's natural theology in support:

> 'Love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds,' in the words of the sonnet, which I can only interpret to mean, love is loyalty (*Adam*, p.87).
>
> In light of the dependency of anyone having servants on their loyalty and discretion, that is, in light of the master's vulnerability to the effects of a servant's disloyalty and indiscretion, or his uncritical obedience, these relationships must have been at least as complex as marriages. Servanthood is strongly foregrounded in *King Lear, Cymbeline,* and the *Winter's Tale.* In each of these plays, disobedience motivated by a higher loyalty is central to the drama (*Givenness*, p.70).

So, under great test Della's love will also need to go into the form of loyalty. It is what brings Della back at the end of *Home* on the porch with Gloria: 'Yes, I am. I am his wife, and I sent him that letter!

And now I don't even know where to find him, to talk to him.' It is as though her love is clinging on only through her loyalty to Jack. This is how loyalty is a wonderful austere thing, even when one may have lost some initial feeling for a person. During those hard times when one runs out of the best sorts of ecstatic feeling, that is when loyalty comes in, in place of the temporary.

> I love loyalty and trust, and courtesy, and kindness, and sensitivity. They are beautiful things in my mind. They require alertness and self-discipline and patience. And they are qualities that sustain my interest in my characters (*Loneliness and Grace).*

There, beauty that accompanies these things in the way they can sustain themselves in testing circumstances and even against the lessening of feeling Angela is right to look at loyalty as a resolute and modest form of grace on earth. Because it has to be earthbound, and do its work within the trials of the mundane, loyalty is close to the promise and fidelity and permanent sacramental commitment of pure marriage. Like Aristotle's courage or Calvin's prevenient grace, it is an enabler of values greater than itself.

This thesis has been able to do what in Marilynne Robinson's work has enabled thoughts and feelings and values, considered religious, to survive and do their work in various forms within the modern world. In it I have sought to examine how a religious tradition may be creatively translated going into a second language by means of the novelist's art. That is not just to do with secular translation, as Feuerbach argued. It is also how, for the religious like Marilynne Robinson, things that are divine may be translated into human versions of themselves. Loyalty is one such meeting place, where the earthbound is a *translation* of religion on earth, and an *imitation* on earth of things divine. The *Gilead* novels hold together these movements, versions and combinations of the human and the religious.

Marilynne Robinson was asked about the chronology of her four novels, and if Jack was meant to be doomed — to which she replied:

> Well, it has to be said, the thing that he wants is the love and the loyalty of Della, and the love and loyalty of his son. And they're looking for him. If he could know that he was so cherished by them, he would not say his life is sad, he would not say his life is futile. Because he is what he hopes to be for them, a beloved father, husband (*Book Club with Marilynne Robinson*).

If Jack had known Della had come looking for him in Gilead at the end of *Home* . . . it did happen. The grace within it remains still possible. It is the syntax of ‘if he could know’ that feels as if it belongs and brings meaning to prediction **no.** 9: the sense that these novels need never end.

Bibliography

The first section of the bibliography consists of (1.1) the primary works written by Marilynne Robinson and (1.2) writings about Marilynne Robinson (including interviews). Secondary works are presented in two further subsections: 2.1 Primary works of Psychology, Theology and Philosophy that have informed my thinking and 2.2. Works of Literature that have offered me significant relation to Robinson's work and thought.

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