

“DESCENDING INTO US FROM WE KNOW NOT WHENCE”:
MARILYNNE ROBINSON AND THE EMERSONIAN TRADITION

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Thesis Abstract

İpek Kotan, “Descending Into Us From We Know Not Whence”:

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This thesis argues that contemporary American writer Marilynne Robinson’s fiction is informed by the Emersonian tradition, and accordingly seeks to trace and establish this influence in her three novels, *Housekeeping*, *Gilead* and *Home*. Placing Emerson in his American Transcendentalist context, it is argued that even though he perceived and presented his thought as independent from and uninfluenced by his intellectual predecessors, it was nevertheless very much informed by them. Robinson, by means of fictionalization, explores the origins and implications of this disjunction in her novels. The thesis traces this process within the context of American Transcendentalism.

Tez Özeti

İpek Kotan, “Descending Into Us From We Know Not Whence”:

Marilynne Robinson and the Emersonian Tradition

Bu tez, çağdaş Amerikan yazar Marilynne Robinson’un kurgusal eserlerinin Emerson geleneği tarafından etkilendiğini savunmakta; bu etkiyi romanları *Housekeeping*, *Gilead* ve *Home*’da tespit ve takip etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Emerson’u Amerikan Transandantalizmi bağlamında ele almak suretiyle, kendisinin fikriyatını entelektüel öncüllerinden bağımsız olarak algılaması ve sunmasına rağmen, esasında onlardan oldukça etkilendiği savunulmaktadır. Robinson, kurgusallaştırma aracılığıyla bu tutarsızlığın kökenlerini ve sonuçlarını romanlarında keşfetmektedir. Tez Robinson’un bu sürecini Amerikan Transandantalizmi bağlamında ele almaktadır.

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CHAPTER I:
INTRODUCTION

“If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.”
R.W. Emerson, “Brahma”

“Revolutionary changes in sensibility or style are rare,” says W.H. Auden, and of the few examples he gives of these phenomena, one is the emergence of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century (Auden 15). Literary critic M.H. Abrams’ pivotal idea regarding Romanticism, that it signifies “a new conception of the mind, one that emphasizes creative activity rather than the reception of external impressions,” traces Auden’s observation to a revolution in epistemology (qtd in Löwy & Sayre 4). Presented in such terms, revolution implies a break in continuity, however: it attributes a new point of origin and a new direction to its revolutionary subject. It is this particular presentation of Romanticism as a revolutionary movement that Marilynne Robinson challenges when talking about her favorite American Romantic: “[t]he thrill of imagining consciousness freed of limitation may have been the impetus that moved Emerson to reject the church, but it is nevertheless an impetus he could have taken from that same religious tradition” (“That Highest Candle” 133). Pointing to the possibility of transformation rather than revolution in Emerson’s case, Robinson simultaneously transforms the linear perception of revolution into a circular one.

It may be said that Robinson also has a personal stake in establishing the circular nature of the impetus for she says, in answer to a question about her literary influences, that “[i]f to admire and to be influenced are more or less the same thing, I must be influenced most deeply by the nineteenth-century Americans -- Dickinson,

Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, Emerson and Poe” (qtd in Ravits 142). It is a curious statement in one aspect: these American Romantics, chief amongst them Emerson, subscribe to a view of themselves as revolutionary subjects whose origins are located not without but within themselves and whose direction is different than that of their predecessors. In other words, Robinson apparently claims to be influenced by the uninfluenced. Yet it is also evident from her conjecture on Emerson’s “imagining consciousness freed of limitation” that she does not perceive the American Romantics in such a way. To answer the question of how she does perceive them, then, the question of influence itself is a plausible starting point: by tracing this influence in her fiction and finding out what purpose it ultimately serves, it would be possible to reconstruct Marilynne Robinson’s position on the American Romantics in the context of tradition and influence.

Taking Auden’s statement at face value, then, it is indeed possible to say that Robinson was influenced by the uninfluenced. To paint Romanticism in such a revolutionary light as a movement which did away with the old order and brought in the new is telling only one half of the story, however. M.H. Abrams’ body of work regarding Romanticism is most renowned for his “Mirror and the Lamp” theory, in which he argues that Romanticism signifies a “new conception of the mind”. This theory accounts for the “revolutionary change in sensibility” that Auden identifies in Romanticism. Yet among Abrams’ works is also *Natural Supernaturalism*, whose title refers to “the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking,” as he explains in the preface (12). Taken together, the theories put forth in *The Mirror and the Lamp* and *Natural Supernaturalism* continue to be remarkable in how they account, in a consistent manner, for the threads of influence that Romanticism carried forward, as well as the radical changes it brought about. Even if the

conception of the creative mind and how it connects to the outside world underwent a drastic transformation during the period, the questions faced by this creative mind were more resistant to a such a sea change, despite the revolutionary air characteristic of the time: “Secular thinkers have no more been able to work free of the centuries-old Judeo-Christian culture than Christian theologians were able to work free of their inheritance of classical and pagan thought,” observes Abrams. “The process... has not been the deletion and replacement of religious ideas but rather the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas, as constitutive elements in a worldview founded on secular premises,” he claims. This answers, to some extent, questions of unity and cohesion raised by some, and illuminates in particular the perceived contradiction in representations of past and future discussed by Arthur O. Lovejoy in “On the Discrimination of Romanticisms” (13). According to Lovejoy, the problem with the term “Romanticism” is that it is used to denote not just different concepts, but ones that would appear to negate one another: it is at the same time “the cult of the extinct” and neglectful of the past, “affected with an inferiority-complex” and “a too confident assertion of the will-to-power” among other contradictory definitions (231). Abrams’ formulation of assimilation and reinterpretation answers this issue raised by Lovejoy. The formulation is also crucial in identifying the American Romantics that Robinson cites as her influences and in accounting for their apparent paradoxes with regard to tradition and individuality: what is old is new, even if it is so on different premises.

American Romanticism, in the form of Transcendentalism, has conventionally been conceived and represented as a revolutionary movement within American letters and culture at large, signaling a break of monumental significance from the overwhelmingly Protestant culture of the era. Kevin Van Anglen, in

“Reading Transcendentalist Texts Religiously: Emerson, Thoreau and the Myth of Secularization,” describes this tendency as seeking to “give a largely secular account of the movement, either by allying it to the freethinking tendencies of its own age or by treating it as the forerunner of later, explicitly nonreligious intellectual developments” (Van Anglen 152). In his introduction to “Nature,” Ralph Waldo Emerson famously poses this revolutionary question: “why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?” (5). Emerson is not condemning a particular religious tradition so much as he is marking off tradition as grounds to be tread carefully.

The argument that follows is one very much in line with Abrams’ conception of Romanticism as a movement that held on to Judeo-Christian ideas of the past and reinstituted them on more secular, or less doctrinal grounds. There is a general tendency, both among contemporary critics, as Van Anglen reveals, and also among American Transcendentalists, as Emerson’s question exemplifies, to see Transcendentalism as a revolutionary movement that swept away the old value system and then replaced it by new concepts of its own. Looking at the changes in sensibility and style through the lens that Abrams proposes, however, reveals quite another picture insofar as the continuity of influence and inheritance is concerned. Transcendentalism, although today mostly observed as a literary movement, had important religious and philosophical implications in its day. The idea of reformation that the Transcendentalist movement sought to bring about was in nature, if not in its particulars, not very different from the development of Protestantism as a movement growing out of and turning away from its predecessor, Catholicism. A nineteenth-century New England writer and critic Orestes Brownson draws attention to this

parallel in his essay 'Protestantism Ends in Transcendentalism' where he illustrates that the very schism resulting in the birth of Protestantism in fact mirrors how

Transcendentalism grew out of Protestantism:

The essential mark or characteristic of Protestantism is, unquestionably, dissent from the authority of the Catholic Church, in subjection to which the first Protestants were spiritually born and reared. This is evident from the whole history of its origin, and from the well known fact, that opposition to Catholicity is the only point on which all who are called Protestants can agree among themselves. (Brownson 212)

Although Brownson himself eventually converted to Catholicism and wrote a condemning essay on Transcendentalism entitled "Transcendentalism, or the Latest Form of Infidelity," he had been in and out of Transcendentalist circles in the 1830s and had first-hand experience of the movement as it was born (Wayne 33). After identifying the core tenet of Protestantism as dissent from authority, he goes on to say that 'in Transcendentalism itself, or rather in the Transcendental movement, we discover [...] the logical and historical termination of the Protestant movement' (Brownson 212). There are, then, two different approaches to the process at work: one is Emerson's vision of a movement unto itself, as witnessed by his call for emancipation from tradition. The other one, voiced by Brownson, however, sees Transcendentalism as a 'logical continuation' of Protestantism. Brownson himself might be considered a reactionary figure in some aspects, especially considering how in his equation of Transcendentalism and Protestantism the former functions not as a favor to the latter, but rather works to its detriment. He is not alone in his judgment, though: scholars in contemporary criticism, such as Tiffany Wayne, also espouse this approach. These apparently contradictory attitudes are actually reconcilable in light of Abrams' formulation: from Catholicism to Protestantism, from Protestantism to Unitarianism or to Transcendentalism, all are shifts of the ground on which similar ideas are rearranged, appropriated and restated.

To observe this movement in Emerson's particular case, it is important to read it within the context of the abovementioned passage from Emerson, and then to look at "Nature" as the product of a particular turning point in Emerson's intellectual life and allegiances. This particular passage in "Nature" comes, in fact, at its very beginning and starts with a comparison between times gone by and Emerson's day:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? (Emerson 3)

In advocating a new "poetry and philosophy" as distinct from that of older generations, Emerson also very explicitly says that those older generations had a model of thinking and creating similar to the one he proposes, one "via an original relation to the universe". His argument to break away from the tradition is therefore based, in part, on what originally constituted that tradition. "Nature," considered to be the watershed writing of the Transcendentalist movement, was first published in 1836 –four years after Emerson's resignation from his post as a Unitarian minister and two years before his controversial "Divinity School Address" (Wayne 296). As such it is encircled by two events that embody the reason for his dissent against the orthodoxy of his father's Unitarianism. Firstly, his resignation came about because of "disagreements about the offering of the Lord's Supper, which was, in [his] view, an act that constituted blind obedience to the traditions of historical Christianity" and secondly, the "Divinity School Address" was controversial because he publicly acknowledged his opinion on this particular matter (296). His stance on the subject of the Lord's Supper echoes his call for an original relation to the universe – in his resignation sermon of 1932, he criticizes not the act itself, but how it was interpreted as a ritual rather than a particular, historical act of Jesus: "Two of the Evangelists,

namely, Matthew and John, were of the twelve disciples, and were present on that occasion. Neither of them drops the slightest intimation of any intention on the part of Jesus to set up anything permanent” (Emerson 108).

Unquestioning observance of rituals is the final break between Emerson and his formerly reformist faith of Unitarianism. But what of that which he carried over to Transcendentalism from this former faith? Elizabeth Mensch sees it as a juxtaposition of elements from both the Calvinist and the Unitarian/rationalist modes of thought dominant in the intellectual life of the U.S. during the first half of the nineteenth century:

The Calvinist view of the natural world was not one of Newtonian cause and effect, but of nature transfigured – nature as constant communication of God’s grace in a fallen world. [...] [Emerson] reinvigorated the transfigured view of nature from New England Calvinism, but refused to give up on the Harvard celebration of free human agency. God became expendable because, Emerson argued, the unaided individual human agent could, by his or her own powers, apprehend nature as transfiguration. (Mensch 403)

William James in *Varieties of Religious Experience* also observes this process in Emerson’s thought by which God becomes “expendable.” According to James, transcendentalism, which he alternately refers to as “Emersonianism,” “seems to let God evaporate into abstract Ideality. Not a deity *in concreto*, not a superhuman person, but the immanent divinity in things, the essentially spiritual structure of the universe” (James 31). On the one side of Emerson’s equation, then, is an abstraction of God to the point that his separate existence becomes doubtful; and then, on the other side is an ‘Edwardsean reality’ of transfiguration as Mensch posits it (403). And in Jonathan Edwards, the leading figure of Calvinism in the U.S. in the eighteenth century, can be seen the inklings of Emerson’s transcendentalist vision of nature: “God’s excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything: in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass,

flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind” (Edwards 12). Or to quote Terry Eagleton’s succinct appraisal in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* where he argues against the reductive approaches towards the logic of Christianity, “God and the universe do not make two” (Eagleton 8).

One other observation made by William James regarding transcendentalism, and specifically that of Emerson, is that it is, in the final analysis, evasive or resistant to formulations at the very least:

The universe has a divine soul of order, which soul is moral, being also the soul within the soul of man. But whether the soul of the universe be a mere quality like the eye’s brilliancy or the skin’s softness, or whether it be a self-conscious life like the eye’s seeing or the skin’s feeling, is a decision that never unmistakably appears in Emerson’s pages. It quivers on the boundary of these things, sometimes leaning one way, sometimes the other, to suit the literary rather than the philosophic need. (James 33)

James’ attitude towards the elusive essence in Emerson can in fact be countered by noting the literariness of his enterprise, which is what James drifts towards in his conclusion. Although it might appear as if James is dismissive of Emerson in this instance, another way to see this passage is to read into the stress that James places on the literary aspect of Emerson’s work rather than its coherence as a philosophical system. And it is equally important to see how in so doing, he drifts towards metaphors (“skin’s softness”, “eye’s seeing”) that Emerson uses profusely in his essays. James’s instinct is right in locating the true strength of Emerson’s (and the Transcendentalist movement’s) writings with their literary rather than systematical features. Their language has a seeping, penetrating quality to it that can inform the language of even those who discuss it critically. This quality can also be defined in terms of the “democratic culture” that Robinson attributes to these nineteenth-century writers, Melville, Thoreau, Dickinson and Emerson.

Robinson uses the term “democratic” to denote these writers’ understanding of literature as a perpetual, ongoing dialogue that is all-inclusive (qtd in Galehouse 130). She positions her work to that of the American Transcendentalists in such a context, and it is argued in this study that her contribution to this dialogue is mainly through her fictionalization of the concerns of these writers regarding issues of tradition, influence and individuality. As such, Robinson openly acknowledges the links of influence and tradition that Emerson may not have owned up to openly, but which are there all the same. These are links that enable the conversation to continue more than a century and a half later.

Reading Marilynne Robinson’s three novels with an eye on her nineteenth-century American Romantic influences would therefore be not only an exercise in locating similarities between those texts and Robinson’s, but also a way of outlining and providing a context in which such parallels and appropriations work towards building Robinson’s vision in dialogue with her predecessors. Literary influence or partaking in a tradition as dialogue is an idea shared both by Marilynne Robinson and T.S. Eliot whose *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, although contested in more recent times for its Euro-centrism and approach to the canon as an essentially hierarchical structure, remains, nevertheless, one of the most influential critical texts on literary influence of the twentieth century.

Eliot’s definition of how the concepts of tradition and individual talent can work together focuses on their seemingly contradictory but in fact complementary nature: “the most individual parts of [the poet’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (Eliot 37). Artistic creation for Eliot does not take place in a vacuum but rather in a conversation that the writer establishes with her predecessors, and Marilynne

Robinson herself cites this conversation as the reason that compelled her to write her debut novel *Housekeeping* in the first place: “I feel very strongly that, for some reason I’m not sure of, there has been a rupture in the conversation of this culture, and that all sorts of things that were brought up in the early conversation were dropped without being resolved, and that nothing of comparable interest has taken their place ... I was consciously trying to participate in the conversation they had carried on and that I felt had been dropped” (Hedrick 3). This, in turn, both supports and illuminates Eliot’s point about literary tradition: a writer is influenced by her predecessors not only as a result of mimicry and willful appropriation, but also because their concerns and the conversation that they want to carry on is the same.

Expanding upon her list of literary influences, Dickinson, Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, Emerson and Poe, Robinson further addresses the issue by delineating just what it is that draws her into conversation with these writers:

Nothing in literature appeals to me more than the rigor with which they fasten on problems of language and of consciousness -- bending form to their purposes, ransacking ordinary speech and common experience, rummaging through the exotic and recondite, setting Promethean doubts to hymn tunes, refining popular magazine tales into arabesques, pondering bean fields, celebrating the float and odor of hair, always, to borrow a phrase from Wallace Stevens, in the act of finding what will suffice. (qtd in Ravits 645)

It is significant that Robinson identifies “problems of language and of consciousness” as her point of departure. For while Abrams’ conception of a change that retains the particulars but does away with their initial premise and constitution is able to explain the connection between Romanticism and the movements that preceded it, it is not sufficient to establish the nature of the connection between the American Romantics and Marilynne Robinson. First and foremost is the fact that Robinson does not claim to move away from the American Romantics – to the contrary, she says that she is trying to carry on their conversation. More important is

the fundamental difference of genres: the major literary output of the American Romantics, especially those with whom this study concerns itself, is either poetry or nonfiction. Robinson, on the other hand, writes novels – a genre that has been identified by Mikhael Bakhtin primarily in terms of “the specific demands it makes upon language and the specific possibilities it opens up for it” (Bakhtin 43). What makes the novel as a genre categorically different from all poetic forms, Bakhtin argues, is the indirectness of it. Elaborating on a passage he pulls from *Evgenij Onegin* where Pushkin “characterizes” one of his characters’ (Lensky) poetry, he observes that:

The poetic images, specifically the metaphoric comparisons ... do not have any direct poetic significance at all. They cannot be understood as the direct poetic images of Pushkin himself (although formally, of course, the characterization is that of the author). Here Lensky’s song is characterizing itself, in its own language, in its own poetic manner. (43)

According to this view, what we have in a given novel as its distinctive constitutive element is the “novelistic image,” which is “the image of another’s language” (44). Lensky’s song is meant to be serious and lofty for him, yet this is not how it is represented by Pushkin in the text and no digression or asides are employed to maintain this disjunction. That end is achieved by the function of novelistic language itself, Bakhtin argues: “The poetic metaphors in [Lensky’s] lines in no way function here as the primary means of representation; rather they themselves have here become the object of representation” (44). Yet the process is not one of mere ridicule, or distancing; the author is actually engaged with these images he represents: “The author represents this language [of the character], carries on a conversation with it, and the conversation penetrates into the interior of this language-image and dialogizes it from within. And all essentially novelistic images share this quality: they are internally dialogized images – of the languages, styles,

worldviews of another.” (46). If T.S. Eliot’s theory of literary tradition accounts for the reason why there is an ongoing conversation between the author and her predecessors, Bakhtin’s theory of dialogical imagination further provides an answer to the question how: it is a constitutive element of the novel to contain and polemicize (“dialogize”) different voices and opinions.

“Problems of language and consciousness,” then, is as good a starting point as any for a writer who claims that she is “an Emersonian”: “I think of language as the creature, and genius, of collective humankind,” says Robinson in “Let’s Not Talk Down to Ourselves.” Ruth, the adolescent protagonist of Robinson’s first novel, *Housekeeping*, will try to decipher the world around her as a set of signs that would give her back her family if only she can manage to interpret them correctly. She does so in a less assured and serene manner than Emerson’s self-assured claim in “Nature,” that “nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design,” but along the same lines nonetheless (Emerson 2). Elsewhere such parallels to the Emersonian vision of the world as a set of signs occur: the way, for instance, words open up whole new vistas in the mind of one of the principle characters in *Home*, Glory, and shape her consciousness as she learns them: “[w]hen she was small she had confused, in fact fused, the words ‘secret’ and ‘sacred’ ... But ‘hope to die’ and ‘if I die before I wake’ also became linked in her mind” (*Home* 15). Claiming as she does that “every word is a poem at root” in her *New York Times* article, Robinson displays how this works by “ransacking the ordinary speech” of Glory and tracing the bends of her consciousness via the associations that language makes possible. In another instance we are told that in Glory’s mind, the word “waft” is interlinked with the image of the moment her wayward brother Jack taught the word to her by blowing on a feather. If not exactly “celebrating [its] float”, the

passage still has the meditative quality akin to that of “pondering bean fields.”

Robinson’s semiotics closely resemble those of Emerson, at least in their general outlook, in that she too shares his vision of a universe invested with meaning, ready for people to decipher.

Robinson also says of the American Romantics, “I believe they wished to declare the intrinsic dignity of all experience” – and this focus is also evident in her fiction, in such seemingly small moments as that of Glory and the feather, or when, for instance, Reverend John Ames, the principal character of *Gilead* who is writing a book-length letter to his son to be read after his imminent death, recalls, in Whitmanesque fashion, playing catch as a youngster with his brother: “that wonderful collaboration of the whole body with itself and that wonderful certainty and amazement” (*Gilead* 115). The intrinsic dignity of all experience also informs the concept of grace that pervades both *Gilead* and *Home*, especially with regards to the Presbyterian minister Robert Boughton:

In destitution, even of feeling or purpose, a human being is more hauntingly human and vulnerable to kindnesses because there is the sense that things should be otherwise, and then the thought of what is wanting and what alleviation would be, and how the soul could be put at ease, restored. At home. But the soul finds its own home if it ever has a home at all. (*Home* 282)

It is a grace which renders meaningful everything in existence that it touches, not excluding pain and misery – and it is through this concept of grace and meditations upon it by her characters that Robinson also explores what it means to be human in relation with the external world and other human beings. This, also, is a key element in the conversation that she establishes with the American Romantics and especially Emerson for whom the relation of human beings to the universe is always waiting to be redefined.

One other point of observation made by Robinson on the American Romantics is that she believes “[they wished to] declare the senses bathed in revelation -- true, serious revelation, the kind that terrifies” – and this pertains to Robinson’s own style as much as to her previous points on how her predecessors reflect her own thematical concerns. Critic James Wood similarly attests to Robinson’s own habit of “using metaphor as a kind of revelation,” especially when “secular meaning has exhausted itself and is being renovated by religious meaning” (Wood 1). An excellent instance of this exact moment occurs in *Gilead* as Ames observes the moon and its light:

The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of the morning. Light within light. It seems like a metaphor for something. So much does. Ralph Waldo Emerson is excellent on this point.

It seems to me to be a metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within the great general light of existence. Or it seems like poetry within language. Perhaps wisdom within experience. (*Gilead* 119)

Here the metaphor precedes the determination of its exact meaning: looking at the moon, Ames is persuaded that there is the possibility of a revelation in it before knowing what that revelation may entail, and it is such a reversal in the order of knowing, or the belief that true knowing will somehow follow, that exemplifies what Woods chooses to term as “religious meaning,” and what Ames rightly attributes to Emerson, who observes nature as a set of signs to be deciphered by man.

Robinson’s fiction abounds in examples that further the point that she is very much informed by, and in a conversation with her nineteenth-century predecessors. The examples also provide an insight to the workings of such an influence. However, what merits her fiction as an object of this study is not only the connection they have to their precedents, but the very common nature of that connection. *Housekeeping*, *Home* and *Gilead* revolve around families broken and united, individuals drifting away from and returning back to their families, all in exploration of these familial

bonds, their extent and their nature. A discussion of influence in *Housekeeping* may look at how Emerson's conception of nature and Thoreau's ideas about individualism figure in it through the bonds established between the principal characters Ruth and Sylvie, and their lost family. Talking about tradition with regard to *Gilead* is not only to see a reworking of Jonathan Edwards' concept of grace and Emersonian metaphors in it, but also to observe how the bonds between father and son hold, and how values are carried on to the next generation despite all the turmoil. And in reading *Home* as a text informed by Robinson's dialogue with Biblical and Romantic narratives of exile and reconciliation, one finds the prodigal son Jack also attempting to come to terms with his father's legacy by establishing a conversation with him, however thwarted his attempts may prove to be in the end. The formative concerns of the Transcendentalists or the American Romantics, namely the opposition between tradition and influence, and individualism and creativity, are fictionalized in Robinson's novels. This intertextuality is made possible and contained by the novelistic language itself, as Bakhtin argues it has the sole capacity among literary forms to do.

Emerson talks of the "circular or compensatory character of every human action" in "Circles" and goes on to add, "[o]ur life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn" (127). Analyzing Robinson's nineteenth-century influences, and the themes of influence and tradition in her fiction is partaking in this circular exercise, or the ongoing conversation that Robinson attributes to the nineteenth-century American Romantics –for Emerson, "conversation is a game of circles" (132).

CHAPTER II:

THE BETRAYING SURFACES OF *HOUSEKEEPING*

“And now We roam in Sovreign Woods -
And now We hunt the Doe -
And every time I speak for Him
The Mountains straight reply --”
Emily Dickinson, “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun”

“My name is Ruth,” begins *Housekeeping* and commentators on the book have often drawn attention to the allusive quality of this first sentence while simultaneously acknowledging that the allusion is superfluous in itself, since one cannot help but hear echoes of the opening of Melville’s epic novel upon reading it. Sarah D. Hartshorne focuses on the relative passivity of “My name is Ruth” in comparison to the imperative “Call me Ishmael,” while Laura Barrett says that one sentence is so reminiscent of the other that “the [similarity] need hardly be mentioned” (Hartshorne 133, Barrett 83). Marilynne Robinson herself confirms in an interview that “when [she] wrote that first sentence, what [she] was specifically thinking of was ‘Call me Ishmael’” (Hedrick 6). She further conjectures that Melville, in turn, might have had Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* in mind when writing *Moby-Dick* for “[it follows] a characteristic pattern of so much American literature where people go through a journey that leads to a kind of realization that is just at the limits of their ability to comprehend or articulate, and you’re abandoned into a new terrain without being able to use your old assumptions about how to find your way (qtd in Hedrick 6) This allusion to *Moby-Dick* thus places *Housekeeping* in the tradition of American Romantics in the manner that Robinson describes; it is a narrative with a transformative quest at its core. Yet the alteration also points towards the other strand that Robinson incorporates into her novel, and that is the Biblical narrative.

Maggie Galehouse calls *Housekeeping* “in part a devotional text,” pointing out that “its frame [follow]s the Book of Ruth of the Bible” (118). Marilynne Robinson herself also explains this influence by saying that the central question in both narratives is what makes them so similar:

[O]f course the Book of Ruth is in there. . . . The issue in the Book of Ruth—the question is—who to follow. And the decision that Ruth makes is, “Where thou goest I shall go; thy people shall be my people and thy God, my God.” It seems to me that in a certain way the Ruth in my book makes that kind of radical choice about whose terms of reality will she accept. When she follows Sylvie, she’s passing from one civilization to another. (Hedrick 2)

Observed in the light of these two quotes, *Housekeeping* reveals itself as a narrative that revolves around questions of influence and tradition: “whom to follow” is the driving question Robinson posits for her protagonist Ruth in her quest for her own family history. The same question, as observed above, is of the utmost importance for Emerson and one that constantly surfaces in his essays. In her exploration of this question in the text, Robinson consequently engages another interconnected one: just how much can the answer be determined by the individual asking this question? The analysis of *Housekeeping* simultaneously as the narrative of a transformative quest and a devotional text is inevitably tied up with this question; that is, how these forms enable Robinson to pursue the answer to this question.

The peculiar family history that Ruth projects for herself at the beginning of her narrative is all the more interesting for this reason: in its evasions and understatements, she appears to be building herself a history which is, as Abrams claims for the Romantics, highly selective in what it stresses and what it leaves out. After introducing herself, she sets about recounting a genealogy that seems to be inclined to the matrilinear side: “I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia

Fisher” (*Housekeeping* 3). Only one man appears in this introduction, and that is Ruth’s grandfather Edmund Foster, whose main function in Ruth’s life initially appears to have been “[putting them] down in this unlikely place” (3). The house that Ruth lives in is thus one inhabited by a continuous line of women, and it is furthermore specified as being “[Ruth’s] grandmother’s house, built for her by her husband” (3). This, it may be argued, is not merely a feminist critique of women being confined to domestic spaces. Critics have elsewhere noted that “[*Housekeeping*] does not, at least overtly, take up feminist concerns with writing or with female subjectivity,” and that “[*Housekeeping*] is not univocally or unproblematically feminist”(Hedrick 138, Kaviola 670). For Edmund Foster himself has a “runaway” history and the house that is to Ruth something she will eventually break away from is to him something else altogether:

He had grown up in the Middle West, in a house dug out of the ground, with windows just at earth level and just at eye level, so that from without, the house was a mere mound, no more a human stronghold than a grave, and from within, the perfect horizontality of the world in that place foreshortened the view so severely that the horizon seemed to circumscribe the sod house and nothing more.
(*Housekeeping* 3)

In light of this, it makes sense that Edmund Foster wanted to build his house “at the edge of the town on a little hill”, even if the town is in the middle of nowhere (5).

The description of his old home resonates with the beginning of Emerson’s 1841 essay, “Circles”: “The eye is the first circle, the horizon which forms it is the second, and throughout nature this primary picture is repeated without end” (Emerson 127). Emerson’s imagery of circles, which to him embody the principle of limitlessness in nature and explain it in various manifestations in “Circles,” are transformed in Edmund Foster’s case into the symbol of his early sense of entrapment. And just as Foster’s symbol of freedom is for Ruth transformed into an oppressing presence, so is Emerson’s vision of a nature that gives its meaning up readily, transformed into an

entity that is indifferent at best and withholding at worst in *Housekeeping*. Like Ishmael, who to some extent embodies Melville's discontent with Emerson's position on nature, Ruth too is Robinson's challenge to the set of ideas Emerson espouses. The novel thus fictionalizes the conflicted nature of influence and tradition. It is an ongoing, circular conversation between characters that never ends.

Another way to see Edmund Foster in this position of influence over his family members is to notice that in his lifetime he was employed by the railroads. Befitting a man so eager to travel, to get away, "read[ing] what he could find of travel literature, journals of expeditions to the mountains of Africa, to the Alps, the Andes, the Himalayas, the Rockies," Foster works as "a watchman" for the railroads (*Housekeeping* 5). He dies in an accident where the train is derailed over Lake Fingerbone with no witness to see the event, which makes it, according to Ruth, "not, strictly speaking, spectacular" (6). It is not just a witty remark on Ruth's part to notice this: she is, throughout the narrative, extremely preoccupied with notions of what is and what seems to be, and her grandfather's death is no exception. What makes this death important is, ultimately, the way it signifies a principle about nature to Ruth – a signification through an absence, which will presently be discussed in more detail with regards to Emerson's ideas on the signification of nature. Part of this death's complexity, as it stands for Ruth, derives from the heavily-laden images of the railroad and the lake; these images, at such a junction where they are unified by the death, lend their signification to it to some degree. Thus when critic Elizabeth Mitchell talks of the lake's presence in the novel as "[something] which one hesitates to identify as a symbol for fear of simplifying what is incalculably complex," the same would also apply to Edmund Foster's death by means of association (qtd in Hartshorne 50).

There are instances, of course, where Foster's death is approached in a less complex way. One example to this is Hartshorne's reading of it: according to her, it is Robinson's way of "send[ing] him and all the past worlds and fables he represents to the bottom of Lake Fingerbone" (Hartshorne 51). This may well be valid from one point of view, but reading Edmund Foster only as a "latter day Noah" in whose form Robinson "disposes of pre-history" early in the narrative, also runs the risk of making *Housekeeping* the "univocally or unproblematically feminist" text that it isn't (Hartshorne 50, Kaviola 670). A more comprehensive way to look at Edmund Foster's life and death is to see them as a path that his offspring more than occasionally tread even in their disavowal of it. Later in the narrative, out on the lake in a boat with Sylvie, Ruth thinks of her grandfather and openly acknowledges this connection: "it was he who brought us here, to this bitter, moon-pulled lake, trailing us after him unborn" (*Housekeeping* 149). Therefore, the tension between this "unspectacular" grandfather with his invisible hand seemingly directing Ruth along a path, *his* path, from beyond the grave, and Ruth's initial incomprehension of and eventual struggle against his absent presence is the context in which Foster and his death can most comprehensively be analyzed.

Edmund Foster's escapist life and "unspectacular" death indeed provide a blueprint for his three daughters: Molly becomes a missionary and leaves for China in a re-enactment of her father's dream of exotic places; Sylvie becomes a drifter who spends as much time on trains as her father used to; and Helen drives off into the same lake that her father's train crashed into. These repeating patterns further suggest that Edmund Foster is not simply a vessel of pre-history or a figure of patriarchy to be done away with so that history can begin anew. In a novel identified by its author as revolving around the question of who to follow, and subscribing to

traditions that concern themselves with passage between what have been conventionally constructed as mutually exclusive domains, it is hard not to read the character of Foster as contributing to a discussion about the nature of influence and tradition. In this respect, he is a figure in the same league with John Ames in *Gilead* and Reverend Boughton in *Home* – characters which, through their paternal and filial relationships, enable the author to consider the effects and limits of connections between individuals, in all their possibilities and shortcomings.

In trying to understand the relationship between ancestors and their offspring, the railroad and Lake Fingerbone provide an imagery which, as noted above, has been perceived as complex enough to not be reduced to a symbol. These two images in the novel literally constitute a crossroads or a junction where the railroad goes over the lake, and also form the crux of the better part of the novel's events. Chronologically speaking, the train accident in which Edmund Foster dies is the first, decisive event.

Thoreau, in *Walden*, sets out to describe trains as “moving off with planetary motion,” only to rectify himself instantly as follows: “or, rather, like a comet, for the beholder knows not if with that velocity and with that direction it will ever revisit this system, since its orbit does not look like a returning curve” (Thoreau 43). His initial impulse is to ascribe a circular movement to the trains such as that of planets, since “railroad fashion” is the “byword” of the era and it is a certainty that “at a certain hour and minute these bolts will be shot toward particular points of the compass” (44). He further draws attention to the deified status of the railroads and trains in the eye of the public by saying that “[w]e have constructed a fate, an *Atropos*, that never turns aside” (44). All this is in the one hand social commentary and critique offered in the face of a rapidly transforming society, but on the other

hand, it is difficult to overlook the element in his descriptions that also transcends the specifics of nineteenth-century rural America. That element is the identification of the train with a man-made fate or inevitability, embodied in the figure of Atropos, one of the Three Fates in Greek mythology whose duty is to cut off the life thread of mortals. In *Housekeeping*, this fate or inevitability is explored in the employment and death of Edmund Foster, and its consequences in the lives of his children and grandchildren. If the railroad, on the one hand, stands for Edmund Foster's yearning for the faraway and the exotic, then, on the other hand it also functions as the emblem of this inevitable path laid out by him when Thoreau's reading of the image is taken into account. His reading of the image adds another dimension to the question of "whom to follow": does it have a predetermined answer, or can it be, at least partially, answered by the individual asking the question? For Ruth, as much as for Emerson and his iconoclastic Transcendentalism, as he understands it to be, it appears that influence is not as self-made and chosen as they would understand—or wish, even—it to be.

Another case in point for the demonstration of this creeping influence which is embodied by the railroad would be the death of Sylvia Foster, Edmund's wife. Ruth's grandmother dies of natural causes, yet her obituary in the newspaper includes pictures of her late husband and information about the train accident rather than any personal photographs or information. In order to explain this, Ruth says: "For my grandmother's passing had brought to mind the disaster that had widowed her. The derailment, though too bizarre in itself to have either significance or consequence, was nevertheless the most striking event in the town's history" (*Housekeeping* 40). Yet the derailment is anything but without significance, the railroad anything but without consequence, despite Ruth's dismissal of them as

“unspectacular.” In fact, throughout the narrative, the meaning is pared down to slowly reveal its denotative core: it is “unseen” rather than “unimportant”. This invisible influence extending over all members of the family is explored by Ruth after she has a disturbing dream:

The dream and the obituary together created in my mind the conviction that my grandmother had entered into some other element upon which our lives floated as weightless, intangible, immiscible, and inseparable as reflections in water. So she was borne to the depths, my grandmother, into the undifferentiated past. (*Housekeeping* 41)

The joint imagery of the railroad and the lake becomes more intelligible in light of this musing that presents the lives of the individuals in the family as being mixed (“immiscible,” “inseparable”). Just as the train which once “slid into the water like a weasel sliding off a rock” embodies the inseparable fates of the family members, so does the lake which claims and contains their lives regardless of how they died, or lived (6). Yet another case in point is Ruth and her sister Lucille’s mother Helen, who, after leaving her children in her mother’s porch, drives off “from the top of a cliff named Whiskey Rock into the blackest depth of the lake” (22). The recurring patterns of death and loss and their very specific locus, that is, the lake, are unmistakable. These patterns give their particular significance to the perceived levels of the lake in Ruth’s mind. In her mother’s case, Ruth sees her as being borne to the “blackest depth” of the lake, and similarly for her grandmother she says, “she was borne to the depths” (41). After her grandfather’s accident, the lake eventually “seal[s] itself over,” and talking of the lake in general she says “that one is always aware of the lake in Fingerbone, or the deeps of the lake, the lightless, airless waters below” (8, 9).

The lake, perceived thus by Ruth, is a repository for her fragmented family. Here it is whole, or at least contained, yet the constant references to its inaccessible

depths also signify how disconnected she feels from them. Martha Ravits attests to this as follows:

To Ruth all generations, everything that lives and dies, seem to converge in the lake. The flux of the seasons, changes in weather, and the water that rises in basements and in plowed fields outside Fingerbone always remind her of the secret darkness that hides her mother, and, though she is inland, she asserts in Whitmanesque manner the connection among water, the mother, and the inevitability of death and change. (Ravits 649)

There is an Emersonian –or more broadly speaking, Transcendentalist– aspect to Ruth’s equation, Ravits argues, wherein not only her lost family but everything in the external world is signified through nature’s surfaces; in other words, nature is not something that gives itself readily and as it is, but rather as a set of signifiers waiting to be deciphered: “The shimmering surfaces of nature, like the lake that can be viewed from almost anywhere in Fingerbone, reflect back images without revealing what lies beneath, beyond or beneath them” (650). Ruth’s vision diverges from Emerson’s notion of nature as readily signifying its own meaning: “For you the phenomenon is perfect” (“Nature,” Emerson 36). Phenomenon is instead remote and indecipherable to her, the meaning sealed over by the lake. In *The Over-Soul*, where Emerson argues for the transcendental and spiritual unity of all humanity, he likens mankind to “a stream whose source is hidden... When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water” (Emerson 262). Water is the common element and it is represented in Emerson’s imagination as a flowing river, implying connection between individuals and the origin. Ruth’s body of water, on the other hand, is the “moon-pulled lake,” its connection to its outer sphere either furtive, “When the ground is plowed in the spring, cut and laid open, what exhales from the furrows but that same, sharp, watery smell,” or invasive in the form of a flood, “at the end of three days the houses and hutches and barns and

sheds of Fingerbone were like so many spilled and foundered arks” (*Housekeeping* 9, 61). Robinson thus transforms the image that presupposes unity in Emerson into the mark of fragmentation in Ruth’s personal mythology. Like her use of the image of the railroad, she subverts his perception of the individual’s self-determination.

Another pattern that enforces this theme of the fragmented family while subverting notions of Emersonian and Thoreauvian self-determination, that tendency described by Abrams as perceiving not only the future but also the past as malleable via a belief in a selective heritage, is the several separate narratives of “lost children” that are recounted in the novel. These narratives are also myth-like in the archetypal qualities they display: the first one is an anecdote told to Ruth by her grandmother, whose mother “knew a woman who, when she looked out of the window at night, often saw the ghosts of children crying by the road... She put out soup, which the dogs ate... [B]ut she thought she might have pleased [the children] in some way because they grew more numerous and came more often” (25-26). The second one foreshadowed by this initial anecdote is of Ruth and Lucille, who go to the lakeside one evening, notice too late that dark is falling, and decide to stay in a makeshift hut until the morning (114). This ordeal, which is traumatizing for Ruth making her feverish the following day, also gives vent to her feelings about the illusory and inaccessible nature of the external world: in the dark, she thinks to herself “[e]verything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world’s true workings” (116). In this instance, Ruth sees herself and Lucille as “children lost in the dark,” and it is one critic’s assertion that with this claim “Robinson plays on the haunting ballad which is mentioned so often in nineteenth-century American literature: the ‘Babes in the Woods’” (Hartshorne 54). According to this critic, “Robinson dispels the gothic romanticism of the ballad because unlike the dead

‘babes’ whom the birds cover gently with leaves, the girls survive” (54). While this second claim may hold in part, the girls’ survival does not necessarily equal the dispelling of the “gothic romanticism” and its implications. The narratives of the other “lost” children, such as those in the great-grandmother’s story, or the children of Sylvie’s stories who are lost through more judicial and earthly processes to their drifter parents, are a testament to the possibilities evoked by this allusion to the ballad (*Housekeeping* 67). What this repeated allusion rather appears to serve in the novel is to draw attention to the catastrophic state of affairs when children become separated from their families. Indeed, for a long time in the narrative, far from the certainty that the girls are “saved”, there is always the possibility that they will not be: even their aunt Sylvie’s arrival is not, initially, the restoration of bonds among the family. Ultimately, the sense these parentless, stray children evoke is not the triumph of the individual finally free from the shackles of parental influence and connection.

Sylvie’s arrival, prompted by the elderly Lily and Nona Fisher who do not want to stay in Fingerbone and look after Ruth and Lucille, is not the sharp turning point in the narrative or Ruth’s perception of the world, but it is the prelude to her bonding with Ruth, which eventually elicits that point. She is anticipated, in her absence, as a substitute mother for the girls as they are encouraged to believe by the maiden great-aunts. “She would be our mother’s age, and might amaze us with her resemblance to our mother. She would have grown up with our mother in this very house, and in the care of our grandmother,” Ruth recounts their expectations as they wait for Sylvie to arrive (41-42). When Sylvie finally arrives, what Ruth notices foremost about her is “a quiet that seem[s] compounded of gentleness and stealth and self-effacement” rather than any affinity to Helen (45). What happens next is that,

perhaps in part due to this “self-effacement,” but also because Ruth wants to restore her family so eagerly, Sylvie morphs into Helen in Ruth’s mind. “[A]s I watched Sylvie, she reminded me of my mother more and more. There was such similarity, in fact, in the structure of cheek and chin, and the texture of hair, that Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to displace it,” Ruth muses (53). The girls also probe Sylvie with questions about their mother, wishing to have an intimate view to her personality and life, but all Sylvie is able to offer to them are mundane facts such as “She was pretty,” and “She was good in school” (51). Although this is exasperating for Lucille, Sylvie’s answers provoke Ruth to consider the nature of memories one has of people intimately known, and this line of thinking brings her back to the lake again. Specifically, she thinks of the “dark afternoons” she spent with Lucille watching the trains that pass over the lake:

[The trains were] full of people eating and arguing and reading newspapers. They could not see us watching, of course, because by five-thirty on a winter day the landscape had disappeared, and they would have seen their own depthless images on the black glass, if they had looked, and not the black trees and the black houses, or the slender black bridge and the dim blue expanse of the lake (54).

The quality that she most attributes to the lake, that of indecipherability, is in this instance transferred to the passenger train speeding above it, as Ruth imagines these passengers inside as not being able to see what is outside. It is also possible to read this as a mirroring of Ruth’s feelings with regard to the lake and all it stands for in her mind: as Ravits also suggests, the lake’s surface reveals nothing to her of what is beneath: it only reflects her “own depthless image,” almost in a mockery of the perceived depths it contains. In one particular incident where she decides with Lucille to follow a passing train on foot, she fixates on a woman inside, “a young woman with a small head and a small hat and a brightly painted face” (54). Although the physical description does not provide much in the way of establishing a similarity

in appearance, it is difficult not to see this woman as a maternal figure who “looked at the window very often, clearly absorbed with what she saw, which was not but merely seemed to be Lucille and [Ruth] scrambling to stay beside her, too breathless to shout” (54). The event is colored in an almost nightmare-like light in Ruth’s remembrance of it, in which figures are trapped behind glass, and one is unable to find their voice and speak. And just as the train makes way for the bridge crossing, they are separated: “We could walk across the lake,” says Ruth, only to realize that “[t]he thought [is] terrible” (55). Thus the lake establishes itself as a separating entity once again, and Ruth goes on to have dreams of this incident, remembering the woman “neither less nor differently than [she] remember[s] others [she has] known better” (55). Loss and inaccessibility are so ingrained in the lake for her that, but for her age proximity to Helen, an almost random stranger crossing over it is imbued with the same qualities normally preserved for her intimate ones. It is as if the lake has, in addition to its withholding and unrevealing nature, a pervading, infiltrating aspect – which is particularly manifest in the flood episode. The constant yearning, furthermore, on Ruth’s part to reconnect to her mother by any means possible, no matter how illusory they may be in essence, is yet another challenge to Emersonian ideals of self-authorship and self-determination: the lost children are not happy to be lost, and Ruth does not revel in her unmooredness. On the contrary, she is actively seeking to rebuild the connection.

The overture of Sylvie’s relationship with the girls, especially with Ruth, is wrought with similar bouts of anxiety and fear of loss on the girls’ part. On the first morning of her arrival, when she informs them that she is going to walk around the town for a little while, not omitting to say that “[she] will be back soon,” the girls are thrown into a state of panic, and feeling certain that they are being abandoned once

again, decide to follow her (55). Although they catch up with Sylvie, who assures them that she was really going to come back, her heading directly for the railroad station is no consolation for them, and their fear is even manifest in the fact that when they get back home, they placate the aunts by saying that it was them who left and Sylvie who came to look after them (56-58). A snow-woman they build together in these early days is a monument to the fragile state of affairs: they set out to make “a sort of statue,” which in the course of their work becomes “a figure of a woman in a long dress, her arms folded” (60). Attention is drawn to the “accidental” nature of this snow-woman:

It was mere accident—the snow was firmer here and softer there, and in some places we had to pat clean snow over old black leaves that had been rolled up into the snowballs we made her from—but her shape became a posture. And while in any particular she seemed crude and lopsided, altogether her figure suggested a woman standing in a cold wind. It seemed that we had conjured a presence. (60)

Ruth and Lucille’s attempts to find a maternal presence in random forms, as displayed in the episode with the woman on the train, is perhaps carried to its zenith here: this time they “conjure” the figure themselves, at first accidentally, then in the hope that “she [will] stand long enough to freeze” and thus become permanent, but the snow-woman’s head topples off and she eventually falls apart (61). It is a mockery, almost, of their efforts to reconstruct a parental figure and by extension, a past, for themselves: yet again, the Emersonian principle of self-authorship fails them.

In another such reversal of Emersonian conjectures, the unstable, undisclosing nature of the waters are underscored yet once again when the town of Fingerbone is flooded. “The water was so calm that the sunken half of [a] fallen tree was replaced by the mirrored image of the half trunk and limbs that remained above the water,” observes Ruth (63). With this flood, all the qualities hitherto ascribed to the lake

seem to emanate towards the town as if a Pandora's Box has been unleashed, all the same while the lake sits indifferent and unchanged in the middle of it. "Under all the weight of the flood water it sagged and, being fibrous rather than soft or brittle, wrenched apart, as resistant to breaching as green bones," says Ruth, testifying to the effecting but unaffected nature of it and transforming Emerson's symbol for unity into one of fragmentation.

The flood-waters penetrate the house as well, cutting them off from the rest of the town and enforcing a camp-like procedure on their movements around the house. Sylvie, going downstairs where the floor is covered with water to get some chairs and heated bricks, becomes silent at once and does not answer to either girl's calling out: "When we did not move or speak, there was no proof that we were there at all... Deprived of all perspective and horizon, I found myself reduced to an intuition, and my sister and my aunt to something less than that," (71). It is as though the water claims for itself those who come into contact with it, making them one with the "weightless lives" contained in the lake, closing off communication. Sylvie becomes unresponsive not once but twice throughout the course of the night, both times she is not upstairs but down on the partially flooded ground floor (72). Another episode where she appears to be "hypnotized" by the water, as it were, coincides with Ruth and Lucille's truancy days. They observe her from afar by the lake-shore, and again, the train is not absent from this crucial scene:

She stood looking at the lake for a very long time, her hands deep in the pockets of her big, drab coat and her head to one side, and lifted, as if she hardly felt the cold at all. We heard a train whistle across the lake, and then we saw the train creep out of the woods and onto the bridge, its plump white plume tilted and smeared a little by the wind. From such a distance it seemed a slight thing, but we all watched it, perhaps struck by the steady purpose with which it moved, as methodical as a caterpillar on a straw. (80)

Sylvie's figure resembles the snow-woman that the girls once built and even adorned with a coat, considering her uneven pose and impervious stance. "[T]he air is full of invisible bolts – every path but your own is the path of fate," claimed Thoreau speaking of "the purposeful train" (44). As if following the path that Thoreau is describing, Sylvie walks to the middle of the bridge along the tracks and stands still looking at the water, as if compelled to do so, only coming down when she notices the girls watching her. She tries to console them by saying that she only wanted to know what it felt like up there, but this incident triggers another bout of anxiety for Ruth, giving way to thoughts of the lake waters yet again. "A flow of damp air from the lake can make any house feel empty," she muses, "[s]uch currents pull one's dreams after them, and one's own dread is always mirrored upon the dread that inheres in things" (*Housekeeping* 83).

Perceiving water as an elemental force, indifferent or even threatening towards the individual, as Ruth does here, is a far cry from Emerson's general tendency to read into it signs of a benevolent universal unity and connectedness. This same counter-reading of Emerson regarding matters of interpretation is taken up by Melville himself, one of Emerson's fiercest critics in this respect: he is recorded to have said, in response to Emerson's having written "the poet... disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts": "[s]o it would seem. In this sense, Mr. E. is a great poet" (qtd in Braswell 8). In *Moby-Dick*, the narrator refers to the sailors who man the mast-heads of so many ships as "absent-minded young philosophers" (Melville 171). Because they stare into the sea for purposes other than spotting whales, Ishmael warns them of the "Descartian vortices" over which they "hover":

[L]ulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absentminded youth by the bleeding cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of the deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen,

gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. (171)

In *Housekeeping*, like *Moby-Dick*, water occupies so central and complex a part in the narrative that reducing it to a particular symbol is not possible without being grossly reductive – it is, however, possible to trace the common qualities ascribed to it in both texts. The all-pervading yet reluctantly revealing waters (“mystic”, “eluding”, “dimly-discovered,” “elusive”) are also immensely dangerous: “with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise forever” finishes off Ishmael in his warning to young sailors (Melville 171). His warning almost comes true for himself—however, he rises eventually from the waters. Ishmael’s baptism by and rebirth in the sea, in which “buoyed up by [a] coffin, for almost one whole day and night, [he] float[s] on a soft and dirge-like main” does not occur until the very end of the novel, and then he is finally saved by a ship named *Rachel* (Melville 561). Melville is not persuaded by Emerson’s conception of water as an ultimately benevolent entity: it may even be argued that for Emerson, the imagery of water, connecting one individual to another and to the universal over-soul as he claims it does, is a substitute family, assigned by himself and not random, “inevitable” fate – a self-made source of influence. Yet this conception is questioned by both Melville, and also Robinson in the person of Ruth, and thoroughly subverted.

Melville’s challenge of Emerson’s interpretation is thus helpful in understanding Robinson’s reappropriation of it. Yet their visions diverge: compared to Ishmael, Ruth’s “rebirth” takes place under different circumstances. Although both their characters’ Biblical namesakes are essentially exiled figures, the Biblical Ishmael’s story focuses more on the isolated nature of his exile :–“he will be a wild man; his

hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him," it is prophesied of him (Genesis 16:12 KJV). The Biblical Ruth's story, while also being about exile, focuses on Ruth's connection with her mother-in-law Naomi above all. When Naomi's sons die, Naomi urges both Ruth and her other daughter-in-law Orpah to return to their families' homes: "Go, return each to her mother's house: the Lord deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me" (Ruth 1:8 KJV). Ruth declines this offer two times, saying to her mother-in-law, "[e]ntreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1:16 KJV). And so it is with *Housekeeping's* Ruth: while Lucille chooses to leave Sylvie and goes on to live with her home economics teacher Miss Royce, Ruth stays with Sylvie. Throughout her "rebirth", which the burning of the house and the crossing of the bridge over the lake can be understood to suggest, Sylvie is with her. They are exiles, perhaps, from conventional society, but they are together and thus not exiles in the sense that Ishmael (both of Bible and of *Moby-Dick*) is (*Housekeeping* 140). "There is no transcendent ground where the painful contradictions of the human dilemma are reconciled. There is no life through death. There is only life and death, and for any individual a momentary choice between them," says Richard Chase for *Moby-Dick* (Chase 116). And even if the totality of this assessment may be argued, the contrast it holds with *Housekeeping* is still evident. Melville thus disowns the Emersonian perspective wholesale, not admitting to either the possibility of a benevolent, Transcendental universe or self-authorship and freedom from influence. Robinson's approach, as it is slowly revealed, is not outright rejection but rather a sort of negotiation: she imbues Emersonian concepts

with new meanings, positioning them at an angle to, rather than directly opposed to, Emerson's original conceptions.

It is with the onset of puberty that Lucille begins to grow apart from Ruth and Sylvie, in a trajectory which ultimately lands her under the care of her Home Economics teacher, a woman whose housekeeping is far removed from Sylvie's who lets "leaves gather in the corners" (*Housekeeping* 84). Lucille wants to be a part of the "civilized" world, so to say, and not be among the exiles anymore; to this end she begins to keep a diary in which she records not the day's events but rules of etiquette, she sews clothes for herself and reads books that will be "improving" for herself (132-133). When Lucille finally departs, Sylvie and Ruth are left with no one but themselves, and Ruth has not made the kind of crossing that Lucille has, still "watching and listening with the sharp attention of children lost in the dark," apart from human society at large (130). How to read Lucille's departure exactly, though? Is it an affirmation of the Emersonian faith in one's ability to write oneself into a tradition of one's own making, disowning what is already present? Or is it rather no choice at all but the necessary drive of Lucille's character? It is difficult to determine, not only because Robinson does not ultimately decide on one answer, but also because Lucille's consciousness is not as central to the narrative as Ruth's is. This ambiguity, however, is an intimation of the resolution that Robinson will arrive at for Ruth.

The rite of initiation for Ruth is very different from Lucille's: it is a crossing of the lake with Sylvie on a "borrowed" boat (145). They set out in early morning, and Ruth imagines becoming one with Sylvie as they walk in the dark hours before sunrise: "[A]ll at peace, and at ease, and I thought, We are the same. She could as well be my mother. I crouched and slept in her very shape like a child" (145). It is at

this crossing that Sylvie reveals herself truly for the first time in her role as psychopomp, literally as the guide of souls. For the first time, in Sylvie's guidance, Ruth is able to see the lake and its hidden depths as something within her reach, some place accessible:

We would make a circle, and never reach a shore at all, if there were a vortex, I thought, and we would be drawn down into the darker world, where other sounds would pour into our ears until we seemed to find songs in them, and the sight of water would invade our eyes, and the taste of water would invade our bowels and unstring our bones, and we would know the seasons and the customs of the place as if there were no others. (149-150)

Sylvie is presented here not unlike Charon at the oars, guiding newly dead souls to the underworld, and the permanence of the transition she initiates is attested in the way every bodily sense is painstakingly replaced by a new one in Ruth's imagination: new ears, new eyes, a new everything for this new life "underwater", where she also imagines that her grandfather is waiting for them, "reclined how many years in his Pullman berth, regarding the morning through a small blue window" (150). It is not only the permanence of this transition but also its circular nature that is stressed, for Ruth imagines her future path not along the unchangeable tracks of Atropos but rather as a circle, going round and round; as Emerson says, she is learning that "around every circle another can be drawn... there is no end in nature, but every ending is a beginning" (Emerson 157). What is noteworthy here, however, is the fact that Emerson is describing a spiral rather than a circle: the lines run adjacent to their precursors rather than following the exactly same tracks; the divergence is contained within the pattern. In such an instance of repositioning Emerson's ideas against themselves, Robinson thus invests his image with a dual meaning, showing Ruth as both following and not following her "fate".

This is the kind of assessment and expectation that Ruth has not been able to indulge in up to this point in the narrative. Earlier, Ruth's night by the lake where she

“simply let[s] the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in [her] skull and bowels and bones” is frightful (*Housekeeping* 116). In this former instance, the darkness becomes part of the body just like water is imagined to be in the latter, but it has a severing, alienating effect, where “specters loose their hands from ours and walk away, the curve of the back and the swing of the coat so familiar as to imply that they should be permanent fixtures of the world, when in fact nothing is more perishable” (*Housekeeping* 116). Compared to this, the consequences of becoming one with the water do not seem to be so terrifying for Ruth, only final; this unification even implies a chance of being reconciled with her lost family. Sylvie becomes the difference between the two states of mind for Ruth. With Sylvie, Robinson is able to affirm the Emersonian ideal of self-authorship on the one hand, for Ruth does choose to follow her, not because she has to but because she decides she will; but on the other hand Sylvie *is* family, and in that sense, Ruth is always already following her. This is Robinson’s answer to Emerson: she does not reject him outright but through the conversation she engages in with him, she reveals that his ideas contain in themselves their own antitheses.

Sylvie’s crossroads position is recognized by Paula E. Geyh, who calls her a “liminal figure: she crosses back and forth between worlds, and her transgressions make all boundaries (temporal, spatial, social, and symbolic) visible, exposing their vulnerability and ultimate untenability” (Geyh 115). Her name, furthermore, associates her with the woodland, and by extension, with nature. Even her last name stands in a stark contrast with her maiden name: Fisher against Foster, both implying different sorts of relationships with nature, where the cultivating, engaging connotations of “foster” are absent from “fisher”. Maggie Galehouse sees Sylvie in this capacity as the main character in the novel through which Robinson maintains

her dialogue with the American Romantics: “Robinson shares with the American Romantics –Emerson especially—a reverence for the land and its spiritual, restorative qualities,” she claims, “[i]ndeed, nature’s part in *Housekeeping* is easily read as a response to Emersonian transcendentalism” (Galehouse 130). To back up this claim and also to observe Sylvie’s position as an appropriation of Emerson’s perception of nature, going back to the source is elementary; and in this case, Emerson’s essay *Nature* is that source.

Emerson famously defines the understanding, or misunderstanding, of nature as “all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body” (Emerson 4). Several dichotomies are at play: nature is conceived of here as the external world minus the subject or the soul. In this false separation, the subject’s physical body is distinguished as the “not me,” thus reducing the assumptions of Cartesian duality to something bordering on the absurd. In contrast Emerson’s Transcendentalism offers a unified vision of the individual subject and nature. However, from this unified vision there periodically emerges the implication of a set of hierarchies between men and nature: “serve” and “subserve” are terms that occur repeatedly in his essay “Nature” whenever Emerson is describing the relationship between people and nature.

Emerson’s definitions tend to shift according to the needs of an argument at hand. But the importance of connection and interplay in Emerson’s conception of the universe cannot be stressed enough. If Robinson seems to be reappropriating Emerson, it is not this conviction but its particulars such as these hierarchical assumptions that she is reworking. Galehouse observes the parallels and the divergences in both writers’ perception of nature as follows:

Like Emerson, Robinson views nature as a force distinct in its ability to mediate experience and to elicit an expansiveness and expressiveness of feeling within the individual. (...) Yet for Robinson, nature is not a worthy subordinate who upholds man's dominion over the world. Rather, it is a protean force which can be harnessed on a small scale (people can build houses to protect themselves from the elements), but which, nonetheless, lives according to its own design. Nature is not something to be kept, like a house. It is something that keeps in another sense: it waits, it holds, it maintains. Robinson revises Emerson's notions of the dominion of man in her presentation of Sylvie, who is conducted by nature as often as she conducts it. (Galehouse 131).

A moment which offers this egalitarian relationship between Sylvie and nature in a crystallized form occurs when Ruth, talking about how Sylvie keeps house, notices the leaves and scraps of paper gathering in the corners and speculates as to why they are not being cleared out: "Perhaps Sylvie when she swept took special care not to molest them. Perhaps she sensed a Delphic niceness in the scattering of these leaves and paper, here and not elsewhere, thus and not otherwise" (*Housekeeping* 85).

Sylvie's guiding, but non-interfering attitude is also visible throughout their time on the secluded valley, for after they disembark the boat, she leaves Ruth alone for quite some time. Martha Ravits reads in this a coming-of-age ritual prevalent in American fiction: Ruth is left to "come to terms with her loneliness and thereby achieve the influx of will that brings self-reliance," she argues and adds: "The wilderness setting recapitulates the seclusion in nature long associated with similar male rituals in American fiction" (Ravits 654).

Ruth's changing perception in the boat, where she is for the first time able to entertain the possibility of reunification with an entity and all it stands for, is carried over to the time she spends alone on this stretch of wilderness. "To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow (...) So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again," she thinks to herself looking at the frost-covered land and reimagining it as a "Carthage sown with salt" (*Housekeeping* 152-153). The toppled snow-woman she once built with Lucille also makes an appearance on this vista in

her mind's eye, only this time surrounded by children, where "she would be more than mother to them, she so calm, so still, and they such wild and orphan things" (153). The salt-covered ground can miraculously blossom with flowers, and the snow-woman does not disintegrate, because Ruth's imagination is undergoing a transformation that can sustain the external world without, in Galehouse's words, "keep[ing] the past so much at bay that memory and understanding are inhibited or allow[ing] it so much sway that it threatens to overwhelm the present" (Galehouse 135).

On their way back to Fingerbone, on the boat, Ruth has a vision of her rebirth. This rebirth is, in its specific phrasing and imagery, an obvious parallel to, and reversal of her night in the woods, that dark night of her soul:

Say that the water and I bore the rowboat down to the bottom, and I, miraculously, monstrously, drank water into all my pores until the last black cranny of my brain was a trickle, a spillet. And given that it is in the nature of water to fill and to force to repletion and bursting, my skull would bulge preposterously and my back would hunch against the sky and my vastness would press my cheek hard and immovably against my knee. Then, presumably, would come parturition in some form, though my first birth had hardly deserved that name (*Housekeeping* 162)

The central image in this imagined rebirth is the penetrative quality of the water, and when Ruth imagines it as reaching into even the "last black cranny of [her] brain," she is *again* echoing her night in the woods where she let "the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in [her] skull and bowels and bones" (116). Like her way to the valley, but this time more explicitly, darkness is completely purged by water. There is an interim period between Sylvie and Ruth's returning home from this journey and their night of burning the house and crossing the bridge during which they attempt to put the townsfolk worried about Sylvie's caregiving abilities to ease by "acting normal" (193). They both know this is in vain, however. For the first true crossing over the lake is already undertaken, and Ruth's

transformation already in place; of the last crossing, Ruth remarks that it was the one that changed her “finally” (215).

At the end of the narrative, Ruth and Sylvie emerge as transients or drifters who, having crossed the bridge, never settle down again – “once you have set your foot in that path it is hard to imagine another one,” says Ruth of her new state of being (213). Yet there is no mournful tone to accompany the apparent displacement that would, by conventional standards, be something to mourn. In his conclusion to *Walden*, Thoreau says: “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away” (Thoreau 356). So is the case for Ruth and Sylvie who may be exiles from conventional society, but not from their private universe, so to say: coming from the family of a man who dreamt endlessly of far away places, and a woman who always kept her distance from the townsfolk, their new state can be read as an embracing of their own drumbeat more than anything. This is also attested by Galehouse who says that the final pages of *Housekeeping* “[reinforce] the notion that individuals are bound to the land on which they are raised and to the people who bear and raise them. The ultimate irony of the novel is that, for Sylvie and Ruth, drifting does not mean excommunication from their ancestors or personal histories. In fact, the opposite is true” (Galehouse 134). Burning down the house is not a destructive act which leaves them without shelter, because the house has never been a shelter for them in the traditional sense: “[I]et them come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart. It was no shelter now, it only kept me here alone.” Her plea is answered when she is unhoused not of her flesh, but of that other house (*Housekeeping* 159). With the walls of that structure which offers no shelter but only separation down, she is reunited with her family, on her own terms:

I cannot taste a cup of water but I recall that the eye of the lake is my grandfather's, and that the lake's heavy, blind, encumbering waters composed and weighed her garments and stopped her breath and stopped her sight. There is remembrance, and communion, altogether human and unhallowed. For families will not be broken. Curse and expel them, send their children wandering, drown them in floods and fires, and old women will make songs out of all these sorrows and sit in the porches and sing them on mild evenings. (194)

Ruth's last vision is that of Lucille, sitting by herself in a restaurant in Boston, and Ruth imagines that "[h]er water glass has left two-thirds of a ring on the table, and she works at completing the circle with her thumbnail" (218).). It is a valid observation, but while her focus is on the brokenness of the circle, in the narrative itself Ruth's inner gaze is fixed on the image of Lucille, who is attempting to complete the circle herself. This last image is a final instance of Robinson's appropriation of Emerson's circles: Ruth and Lucille's paths are not the same anymore, but they are not so divergent either, after all; like concentric circles, they never cross each other nor stray too far. And in a similar way, it encapsulates her appropriation of Emerson's conception of tradition versus individuality. The two concepts, in her reformulation, emerge as complementary rather than dichotomic entities: the affirmation of one is enabled through the presence of the other.

Galehouse draws attention to the fact that it is through becoming drifters that Sylvie and Ruth are reunified with their ancestors and personal histories (134). The novel, circling around the question of "whom to follow," or rather, the adequate way of answering this question, eventually settles neither on Emersonian self-determinism nor predetermination, but rather on Robinson's vision of both as mutually inclusive conditions. Ruth's personal quest for her personal and familial history is thus at an end when she arrives at the knowledge of this necessary coexistence -- with Sylvie's aid.

CHAPTER III:

GILEAD AND THE ACT OF FINDING WHAT WILL SUFFICE

“I believe in a brightness
miraculously increased
to shine on all things”
Anna Kamienska, “The Other World”

Marilynne Robinson’s second novel, *Gilead*, is epistolary in form: it is a book-length letter from a father to his son, written during the course of his terminal illness to be read long after his death, when the boy is “old enough”. John Ames’s ostensible reason for penning such a letter is that he will not be there for his son as he grows up; so the letter is a way for him to connect to a projection of his son in the future, bypassing his own absence (*Gilead* 3). The idea of writing as a way to establish a connection between individuals, therefore, is at the core of this narrative. And lest the significance of it go unnoticed, it is repeated very early on: Ames talks of a letter written to him by his father, which he chose to burn (6). As with *Housekeeping*, *Gilead* too is, essentially and ultimately, a narrative exploring the ways that individuals are, try to be or fail to be part of a tradition. The image of that one letter passed from father to son, be it read or discarded, is as summary as the waters of Lake Fingerbone is in *Housekeeping*. The oscillation between being an individual, an entity whole in itself and being part of something much bigger than that, voluntarily or otherwise, is the momentum of both narratives.

At a first glance *Gilead* may appear to be crucially different from *Housekeeping* in the story it sets out to tell: in the simplest opposition, it is the final farewell of an old man to the world he loved so much as opposed to one young girl’s discovery of the world which terrifies her. However, Ruth and Ames have much in common in the way they think and perceive the world. Most importantly, they share

that Emersonian view of the world in which “Nature” is not the signified but the signifier; a worldview which prompts them to presuppose that everything they see is imbued with a deeper meaning waiting to be figured out by them. “There is a lot under the surface of life, everybody knows that,” opines Ames, echoing Ruth’s fascination with the unrevealing surface of Lake Fingerbone (6). And throughout the narrative, there is an accumulation of sensory details from everyday life, transformed from the mundane into something else by the way Ames perceives them: “You two were too intent on the cat to see the celestial consequences of your earthly endeavors,” he writes to his son on one occasion, as he remembers watching him and his mother play with the cat (9). Such moments are collected by him, much like the sermons he wrote and preached for forty-odd years, now sitting in boxes in the attic.

The other major thread that connects the two novels is their preoccupation with the concept of family, which is also, as previously argued, the manner in which Robinson fictionalizes the American Romantics’ hotly debated issues of tradition and influence. Apart from the fact that the novel, as mentioned above, is in the form of a letter from Ames to his son, fathers and sons figure largely in its narrative as well. The relationships between Ames and his father, his brother and his grandfather are recounted and pondered retrospectively at great length. At the same time Reverend Boughton and his troublesome, troubled son Jack, who are among the principal characters of *Home*, give Ames occasion in the present day to further consider the complicated nature of the relationships between father and son. There is something to be said about the contrasts as well as the similarities between *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, and the first would undoubtedly be *Gilead*’s heavily male cast of characters as opposed to *Housekeeping*’s female one. Although *Housekeeping* is not seen or analyzed as an essentially feminist text in this study, this inverted difference between

the two novels potentially opens up an avenue for observing the different effects of gender on the handling of what is posited as the common essence of both works, their Emersonian worldview.

John Ames, the protagonist and narrator of *Gilead*, is defined as a person first and foremost in terms of his vocation. Like Emerson, he is from a family of clergymen: “My mother’s father was a preacher, and my father’s father was, and his father before him, and before that, nobody knows, but I wouldn’t hesitate to guess. That life was second nature to them, just as it is to me,” he remembers (6). Their shared vocation, however, hasn’t brought them together: among the first things he has to say about his father, Ames notes the mutual disappointment they caused in each other, father and son (6). “A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension,” he writes to his own son, his writing an attempt to dispel this possibility of incomprehension from their relationship, as he bares his innermost thoughts and feelings (6).

Even though—or perhaps because—his death is imminent, Ames is able to feel delight in the beauty of things big and small, and also to extrapolate further meanings from them, such as the instance where he witnesses his wife and son playing with the cat. This urge to simultaneously observe beauty where another eye might pass over it and read meaning into it punctuates his meditations throughout the narrative. It has been picked up by critics on more than one occasion, as one commentator notes how Ames’s way of seeing the world provides “a vehicle to an experience of the divine in the immediate and the immanent: an experience that stops short of knowing through reason and is content with simply living the experience of the miraculous in the everyday” (Leise 349). Another critic posits a direct connection

between Ames's impending death and his perception, claiming that the novel's "cultural force stems not only from its lyrical rendering of quotidian experience but from its powerful unveiling of how dying shapes the sensory and psychological dynamics of human perception" (Tanner 228). Although opinions vary on the origin and nature of it, the consensus appears to be that there is indeed something noteworthy about Ames's perception of the world.

"The world [...] exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty," Emerson says in *Nature*, and it holds true for Ames as well (Emerson 8). Yet this pursuit of beauty is not defined as a merely aesthetic and self-absorbed end in itself by Emerson, nor practiced as such by Ames. For Emerson, the observation and understanding of beauty is akin to the contemplation of divinity, and in a Keatsian turn of phrase, he claims that "[t]ruth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same All" (14). Throughout his essays, Emerson consistently employs images of light and water to illustrate that quality of beauty that makes people also think of its deeper or divine meanings, and the same way of thinking about or reading light and water is also present in Ames.

Early on in the novel Ames reminisces about the time when as a boy of twelve, he went to find his itinerant grandfather's grave with his father, undertaking a perilous journey (Gilead 10-13). When they ultimately find the grave, Ames's father sets out to clean it and then starts to pray, and during his father's prayers Ames notices a strange phenomenon:

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. (14)

A significant, revelatory meaning is not explicitly assigned by Ames to this phenomenon, not then and not when he is remembering it. Yet this balancing act between the sun and the moon, and the way it appears to materialize and solidify the rays of light, transforms the bleak landscape for both father and son, making the father say, “I would never have thought this place could be beautiful” (15). Yet beautiful it is in that moment, although not of a very specific nature. This falls into the category of beauty defined by Emerson as needing the “presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element as essential to its perfection”; the human element of an itinerant preacher’s death and grave juxtaposed by that natural phenomenon transforms it into a metaphor.

This memory of childhood is repeated somewhat as Ames is writing his narrative: “The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of the morning. Light within light,” he notes (119). On the one hand, the particular beauty of the scene seems to be borne out of a correspondence between two distinct elements. Just as what made that moment in his childhood so memorable for Ames is not just the sun or the moon, but the fact of them appearing together and shining over his grandfather’s grave, what appears as wonderful to him in this instance is not just the moon, but its coexistence with the evening light. On the other hand, there is not one single predetermined meaning for this metaphor according to Ames, and at this point he thinks of Emerson, as noted previously in the Introduction chapter: “It seems like a metaphor for something. So much does. Ralph Waldo Emerson is excellent on this point” (119). For Ames, this metaphor could stand for a number of things and he counts off a list of possible correspondences – but the important thing is not determining what it stands for as much as the fact of it standing for something.

How, then, to approach this approach; how to understand it? There is something Emersonian about it, doubtless – Ames does not think of him in vain when he crafts his metaphor. Emerson, for whom “[n]ature is the vehicle of thought,” claims that “[p]articlar natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. Nature is the symbol of the spirit. Words are signs of natural facts. The use of natural history is to give us aid in supernatural history” (Emerson 14). Emerson is not a particularist in his semiotics: he does not look at this tree and that rock and finally secure a teleological meaning. Rather than prying a meaning out of them, he reiterates an open-ended presupposition, that they mean simply something.

Ames is first and foremost a Christian minister, Emersonian or not: so how to reconcile his agreement with Emerson on points of interpretation, given Emerson’s deistic semiotics? This brings us back to the point made earlier in the Introduction, that Emerson, among other Transcendentalists, borrowed heavily from Christian theology in devising his own philosophy even as he revolted against it. Central to his worldview, so central that it is easy to perhaps overlook it, is the belief that there is a process of signification by which things mean other things, that meaning is inherent in this world. For him life is not “a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”. This founding fact is not something that can be put to test or be objectively proven: it has to be taken for granted, it has to be believed in if the rest of Emerson’s worldview is to make sense. In this respect it is similar to Thomas Aquinas’s belief on the nature of revelations: in *Summa Theologica* he argues that even though certain aspects of God are deducible through human reason, the revelation of God in Jesus is the essential and ultimate “proof” to his existence, which cannot be known except by taking it on faith.

This partly answers the question of reconciliation, but there is more to it: Emerson's worldview is ultimately optimistic, without being naive or reductive: "All loss, all pain, is particular; the universe to the heart remains unhurt," ("Spiritual Laws," Emerson 191). There is a place for evil and corruption in it; but they are explained in terms of people having gone astray, rather than in terms of the original sin or some such corresponding essential defect (having gone astray, in Emerson's terms, more or less corresponds to the severing of the links between man and nature). It veers towards the benevolent, redemptive interpretation. Thinking back to Ruth, *Housekeeping's* protagonist may provide a helpful contrast to drive this point home. Ruth is a thwarted Emersonian for much of the book, by which is meant that although she shares his belief in the world yielding meaning, the meaning yielded by the world is for her disconcerting to say the least: she talks of "the dread which inheres in things," not soothing, not reassuring, but dreadful is the signification for her (*Housekeeping* 83). "Nature always wears the colors of the spirit," would be Emerson's counter to such a pessimistic reading, "wear" being the operative word (Emerson 7). It implies that although nature appears to reflect the feelings of the individual person, in essence it is something beyond that. And in extracting that essence via a process of interpretation, a decision is ultimately made. In *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Augustine talks of such an interpretive decision with regards to Biblical interpretation, in the context of reading the lives of ancient saints: "Everything ... that is there narrated we are to take not only in its historical and literal, but also in its figurative and prophetic sense, and to interpret as bearing ultimately upon the end of love towards God or our neighbor, or both," (Augustine 57). This persuasion to see things a certain way --a leap of faith, so to speak-- is also present in Emerson's philosophy. He *chooses* to interpret in the particular way he does, even if his

exuberant and self-assured prose may, at times, cover the fact of a decision being made and present his interpretation as a given. This is the other part that reconciles Ames with Emerson: they both subscribe to worldviews which are, although not identical, very similar in how their primary mode of meaning-making is predetermined.

Considering the immemorial light of Ames' imagination in the context of this process of meaning-making, then, we note that he appears to have devoted a lot of time to observing it. On yet another day he writes, "I was struck by the way the light felt that afternoon. I have paid a good deal of attention to light, but no one could begin to do it justice," (*Gilead* 51). Reluctant as he is to ascribe just one meaning to its particular occurrences, light nonetheless seems to be a way in general for Ames to think about existence, if not stand for it. He particularly dwells on the perceived weight and solidity of it: "There was the feeling of a weight of light... It was the kind of light that rests on your shoulders the way a cat lies on your lap. So familiar" (51). He is almost insistent on this point – light is, after all, not matter the way a cat or a lap is, in fact it is not matter at all, yet it makes its presence known all the same. Ames talks of light much as Emerson describes the soul. "[T]he soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs, is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hand and feet; is not a faculty, but a light," Emerson says in *The Over-Soul* (Emerson 263). The soul, according to Emerson, makes its presence felt in certain moments, moments "which constrain us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences" (261). Similarly, Ames's writing and contemplation often fasten on the fabric of that moment itself, as it were, and its real meaning is revealed to him. The light functions for him the way Emerson describes the operation of the Over-soul: it is at the same

time less material than everything else, but more substantial than them all; it is not a thing in itself, but things and people are not much without it either. It is the “light [that] shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all” (263). It is more than a soul separate and unique to each individual— it is the Over-soul, connecting them all together in its unity. And so is light, in a manner of speaking. From a scientific point of view life on earth would not have been possible, neither in its creation nor in its sustenance without the light of the sun; and from a theological viewpoint, creation begins when God says “Let there be light”. In all these aspects light is a very fitting vessel for the contemplation of existence, a fact that Ames agrees with as much as Emerson does.

Another source of both delight and contemplation for Ames is water. He often thinks of water in conjunction with baptism, as when he recalls the time he baptized a litter of cats as a child in the waters of a river nearby (*Gilead* 22). Looking back at that event years later, he is struck by the possibility of what he and his siblings might have done to those cats “from a cosmic viewpoint” more than anything (23). For him the symbolic meaning of baptism is the acknowledgement of sacredness, the sacredness of life that everyone partakes in (23). The flowing waters unite that which is separate; it is not a coincidence that Emerson employs imagery of water as well as light in describing the unity of the over-soul: “Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence,” he says. Water, like light, welcomes people into the unity of existence – and the river is an apt imagery in this case, flowing, connecting one to the other. One might consider this image of the flowing river alongside the still waters of Lake Fingerbone in *Housekeeping* to better understand the implications.

At this point one may wonder if Ames's propensity to read the miraculous into the seemingly mundane is a result of his lifelong ministry as well as his personality insofar as the two can be thought of in separate terms. Is this way of thinking nurtured and ingrained in him through both his own practice and through what he inherited from generations of the same practice in his family? On the night of their having witnessed the alignment of the rising moon and the setting sun over his grandfather's grave, as they are making their way back home, Ames's father makes his opinion known to him, the real meaning of which will be understood by Ames much later:

[M]y 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 the 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 emanated out of his parched repose. Later I realized my father would have meant that the sun and the 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 (*Gilead* 48)

From this passage it is easy to concur that Ames and his father do not see eye to eye on matters of interpretation. Ames's father is in constant denial of the existence of the miraculous in everyday life, and it appears that Grandfather Ames is largely responsible for this (All three men are named John Ames, somewhat inconveniently). He is portrayed as an Old Testament Biblical figure in Ames's remembrance of him. In a photo he is a "wild-haired, one-eyed, scrawny old fellow with a crooked beard, like a paintbrush left to dry with lacquer in it, staring down the camera as if it had accused him of something terrible very suddenly, and he is still thinking how to reply and keeping the question at bay with the sheer ferocity of that stare" (81). He is an abolitionist who has fought in the Civil War and lost an eye; he routinely gives away his (and his family's) personal belongings right up to the shirt on his back to those in need of them; and he eventually leaves the town of Gilead for Kansas where he

wanders as an itinerant preacher until his death, partly because his own congregation has been taken over by the other churches (9, 31-33). What would have been admirable qualities in a prophet do not necessarily make a good father, however. Ames's father appears to resent his own father inwardly for his negligence where his family is concerned: in his early twenties, he is left to fend for his younger siblings and his sick mother, as his father does not take a particular interest in the affliction of his wife when so many of his congregation need his help (89). Another point of contention between the two men is the militant Christianity of Grandfather Ames. Ames recalls that he "preached his people into the war, saying while there was slavery there was no peace, but only a war of the armed and the powerful against the captive and the defenseless. He would say, Peace will come only when that war ends, so the God of peace calls upon us to end it. He said all that with that gun in his belt" (101). Whereas Ames's father sees his own father as waging war for war's sake, and in one final instance, a heated exchange takes place between the two men when they finally air their differences:

[My father] said, "Well, Reverend, I know you placed great hope in that war. My hopes are in peace, and I am not disappointed. Because peace is its own reward. Peace is its own justification."

My grandfather said: "And that's just what kills my heart, Reverend. That the Lord never came to you. That the seraphim never touched a coal to your lips –"

My father stood up from his chair. He said, "I remember when you walked to the pulpit in that shot-up, bloody shirt with that pistol in your belt. And I had a thought as powerful and clear as any revelation. And it was, This has nothing to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing. And I was, and I am, as certain of that as anyone could ever be of any so-called vision. I defer to no one in this. Not to you, not to Paul the Apostle, not to John the Divine, Reverend."

My grandfather said, "So-called vision. The Lord, standing there beside me, had one hundred times the reality for me that you have standing here now!"

After a minute my father said, "No one would doubt that, Reverend." (84-85)

The deep disappointment these two men feel in each other is palpable in this dialogue. And in line with Robinson's fictionalization of the nineteenth-century American Transcendentalist divergence from the Unitarian forefathers, their

disappointment can be read as a confrontation of the ideals between Edwardsean First Great Awakening evangelical Christianity and the less fervent approach of the Unitarian Church. This is not because either men belong to these movement or denominations –they are themselves Congregationalists, but because they provide a shorthand for understanding the crux of the difference between these men’s opinions on the subject.

Not a long time after their last discussion takes place, the old man leaves Gilead for good and they do not see each other ever again. Yet there is something very familiar about this relationship even as it is being revealed piece by piece: in its dynamic if not its particulars, it is the same one that existed between Ames and his father. Very early in the narrative, Ames says that “Something [about my father] made him disappointing from time to time,” and adds: “I know for a fact that I disappointed him” (7). What accounts for this incessant conflict between father and son? Although he addresses the existence of a dispute between him and his father early in his narrative, Ames does not hold forth about its particulars until very well into it. Then he lets it be known: Ames’s elder brother Edward became an atheist as a university student, and over time his way of thinking came to influence their father a great deal, although exactly how much Ames is not forthcoming (177). One time, long after his departure from Gilead, Ames’s father says to him, “I have become aware that we here lived within the limits of notions that were very old and even very local. I want you to understand that you do not have to be loyal to them” (235). Ames resents his father for this, for being perceived as provincial and holding onto a mode of life and belief long past its expiry date, as no doubt his father must have resented his own father in turn for being perceived as lacking in proper faith. The mutual

disappointment between father and son paves the way for a way of life that is reactionary.

That there will be disagreement between father and son is almost an unspoken premise of the narrative. In dissecting this web of problematic relationships, it is instrumental to remember the dynamics of influence as it was understood by the American Transcendentalists, and see this dynamics as the context in which we may understand this web. Insofar as Ames's grandfather and father are concerned, it is obvious that these men experience the same religion in very different ways. William James talks of the "ordinary religious believer" on the one hand, a person whose religion "has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit," and those "individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit but as an acute fever" on the other (11). Regarding the second he says that these are the people who have had "the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct" (11). It is not hard to deduce from this categorization which group Grandfather Ames would fall into, he is the seer of visions, after all. Another thing to note about James's categorization is its evocation of Emerson's distinction between an almost mythic past and the dim present that is only an echo of that past, which he delineates at the beginning of "Nature". Again, Grandfather Ames belongs securely in James' first category, at least from Ames's point of view. The pertinent question to ask here would be, who are those "foregoing generations" that Emerson talks of? Would it be the ancient Greeks or Romans, is it the Pilgrim Fathers, or is it some other group? He is very unspecific on this point – he *appears* to be referencing the past without actually referencing anything in particular.

“Emerson liked to think of himself with no past at his back,” Harold Bloom writes of him and adds: “All the cultural past was actually at the erudite sage’s back but he denied that history existed. There was only biography” (*Anatomy* 204). The past he posits is no past for him at all but a construction of it – and why would that be? In Bloom’s sprawling theory of influence, there are very few writers who prove to be exceptions to his idea that poets create through a struggle with their predecessors, in their acts of misreading those “old masters”. He names Goethe and Emerson as the exceptions to his rule – these men, he argues, never felt the anxiety that other writers did of being influenced by their predecessors, or by anything, really (*Anxiety* 53). Yet regarding Emerson one cannot help but ask: why did he feel the need to deny its existence if he never felt burdened by history? Bloom is not wholly accurate in absolving Emerson from the effect of all that came before him – Emerson has his moments where he thinks within the context of history, such as when he identifies Transcendentalism as “Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists” (*Emerson* 87). Yet Bloom is not completely in the wrong either, for Emerson’s dehistoricizing tendency is still at work, even when he is seemingly attempting to do the opposite. Claiming that mankind has “ever” been in two opposing camps about a particular issue is an effective way of uprooting the matter from its immediate context and historicity, lending it an air of myth.

Of the few exceptions to this tendency in Emerson, “The Lord’s Supper” is a case in point. Originally a sermon that Emerson preached as a pastor before his resignation, it elaborates on his disagreement with the Unitarian Church in terms of doctrine; and it has ample references to both Biblical and church history (107). Emerson’s purpose in the deployment of such historical examples is to refute the

stance of the Unitarian Church and justify his own – extreme conditions call for extreme measures, after all, and he broke away from the church not long after (105). In other words, he is so direct in this case because the immediacy of the situation necessitates it. Elsewhere his oblique approach shines a revolutionary light on the revisionary. It certainly is a way of dealing with a history, with a tradition whose bearing is at times too much to negotiate with because it is too close to home. This is the dynamics of the relationship between Grandfather Ames and his son laid bare, and in turn, between Ames and his father: the obliging sons feeling misunderstood and misjudged by their fathers. Disagreement is coated in evasion and denial of itself until the inevitable moment of confrontation. The closest Grandfather Ames and his son come to such a confrontation is recounted above, after which he leaves Gilead; and it is replicated somewhat in a drawn-out manner between Ames and his father. Ames's father too leaves Gilead for his own vision of a better understanding of life (*Gilead* 235). It must have been felt like parental abandonment, even worse, repudiation to both men.

Parental abandonment is a recurring thought in Ames's meditations, even though on a conscious level he often thinks of it in terms of his advanced age, imminent death and young son. Central to his musings on the subject is the Biblical figures of Hagar and Ishmael, on whom he composes a sermon (128). The most important convention of a sermon is formulated as "the idea that it is an act of mediation, between the present moment and eternity" by Kimnasch et al. (xii). It is not difficult to envision that such an act of mediation can, in effect, relieve the present of its own implications, sublimating them into an everlasting pattern. While it is grossly reductive to claim that this is all a sermon ever does, or even to say that it is the main objective of a sermon, it would be equally omissive to not consider this

particular function of such a form. Preaching about Hagar, Ishmael and Abraham, Ames can simultaneously ponder on his paternal and filial relationships without the risk of being overwhelmed by their immediacy. It is a manner of distancing the personal, the individual as much as contextualizing it within a theological framework; as such, it bears close resemblance to Emerson's paradoxical method of (de)historicizing by way of mythologizing. So Ames preaches about Hagar, Abraham's servant and their child Ishmael, and about how Abraham banishes them to the wilderness (128). He is ostensibly thinking about his own son, and about how, by dying, he "must give his child up to the wilderness and trust to the providence of God" (128). It is true on one level that he *is* thinking of his son, but there is a broader context to his contemplation where his own father and grandfather are also implicitly considered, in the grand scheme of how such things go. Ames goes on describing his sermon: "I noted that Abraham himself had been sent into the wilderness, told to leave his father's house also, that this was the narrative of all generations, and that it is only by the grace of God that we are made instruments of His providence and participants in a fatherhood that is always ultimately His" (129). It is important to notice how the stress falls on Abraham in his role as a father *and* son, so the listeners (or readers) anticipate it being the "narrative of generations" before that phrase is uttered. This is presumably the closest that Ames comes to justifying or rationalizing what happened between him, his father and his grandfather; that is, if rationalizing can be said to coexist with such a religious context. Nevertheless, the most comprehensive explanation that can be gleaned from this piece of Biblical exegesis is that such things do happen, and it is God's will that they do. As to the origin of this pattern, or to its cause, no questions are raised by the narrative; there is no anticipation that such questions will be answered, and consequently, the answers –if

there are any—are shrouded in mystery. A critic considers this elusive, unnameable cause in terms of sorrow:

In Robinson's fictional universe, sorrow's source often goes unexplored. We never know why Ruth and Lucille's mother kills herself. Jack cannot explain his childhood mischief or his more serious adult misdeeds. Ames's wife Lila decides never to speak about her difficult past. The eldest Ames simply smolders himself into a husk. The narration of all three novels speculates on these figures and their sorrows. Robinson's project insists on the undeniable omnipresence of human suffering, loneliness, and grief. We will not understand it, nor do we know how to address it. (Gonzalez 377-8)

Yet try to address it Ames must, even if it proves to be a futile attempt. To this list of relationships he is trying to decipher, the one between himself and his godson Jack Boughton should be added. Jack is the son of Ames's best friend Reverend Boughton, and he makes his rightful appearance as a protagonist in *Home*, the novel to follow and complement *Gilead*. That being the case, the two novels inhabit the same narrative time and space, so Jack is also present in Ames's narrative. In *Home*, this provides Robinson with the opportunity to revisit scenes from *Gilead*, only this time from Jack's point of view, so the meaning carried by them is transformed. Ames's sermon on Hagar and Ishmael is one such event that is covered by both novels, and the different light in which it is respectively depicted in them is a glimpse into the nature of incomprehension that exists between fathers and sons that is assumed by Ames early in his narrative (7). As discussed above, Ames chiefly has his own son and, after a fashion, his father and grandfather in mind when preparing his sermon. Yet for Jack, who comes to church that day—an aberrance in itself—to listen to Ames's sermon, the words are directed at himself. On returning home from church he informs his sister that:

[t]he text was Hagar and Ishmael, the application was the disgraceful abandonment of children by their fathers. And the illustration was my humble self, sitting there beside his son with the eyes of Gilead upon me. I think I was aghast. His intention, no doubt. To appall me, that is, to turn me white, as I am sure he did. (*Home* 206)

The full extent and nature of the incomprehension between Ames and Jack can only be appreciated by placing *Gilead* and *Home* side by side, as in the above instance. Jack takes the sermon's message personally because of a child he fathered out of wedlock as a teenager, a child who died in her infancy. This is not Ames's intention – at least not at first, for he claims that he “did not expect [Jack] to be at that service. Furthermore, there are plenty of people whose behavior toward their children falls far short of what it should be” (*Gilead* 131). Yet as he continues, a petulant undertone creeps into his voice: “[E]ven though I will concede that my extemporaneous remarks might have been influenced by his sitting there with that look on his face, right beside my wife and child, still it was considerable egotism on his part to take my words as directed to him only” (131). Reverend Ames is not as gracious towards his godson as he can be, it seems. But why might that be?

At one point in the novel, as an answer to his son's exacting questions about the particulars of God's grace and forgiveness, Reverend Boughton says that “[t]o conclude is not in the nature of the enterprise” (152). The same would also apply the question posited above – there is no way to know exactly why Ames is so discomfited by Jack's presence in Gilead; his arrival halfway through the narrative marks the beginning of unsettled, nagging thoughts in Ames's letter, revolving around him. A remembrance of Jack's miscreant childhood and irresponsible teenage years might contribute towards it, and one critic observes that

[w]e know it rankles Ames when Jack refers to the old minister's seven-year-old son as “little brother,” placing ironic claim upon his own status as son. It also troubles Ames when Jack talks, perhaps too easily, with Ames' young wife, who almost could be a grown-up version of the young hillbilly girl [that Jack got pregnant as a teenager] with her uncultured background and lack of social compunction. (Weele 224)

None of these offenses –or perceived offenses, one might say—can add up to the feelings that Jack evokes in Ames. Ames himself is aware of the disproportionate

animosity he feels towards his godson, and it does not sit easy with him. He remembers Jack's baptism, performed by himself, and the cold shock he felt when it was sprung on him that the child was going to be named after himself -- "my heart froze in me and I thought, this is *not* my child -- which I truly had never thought of any child before," he reminisces (*Gilead* 188). This is curious in itself -- that a man of God should harbor such strongly negative feelings towards a person for no justifiable reason; and for his best friend's son, his own godson, no less. But if Ames dislikes Jack onwards from a point in time when he has no meaningful reason to do so, Reverend Boughton's unwavering love for his son is just as inexplicable. Jack is not his only son, neither is he the most loving, or most personable, or worthy of any positive adjective from a parent's point of view -- he has been nothing but a source of pain and shame for his family all his life, and the distinct sense they all have of him is that he is a stranger to them. Yet Jack is Reverend Boughton's most loved son, his favorite. What is being demonstrated by this portrayal of Jack, simultaneously loved and unloved for no particular reason?

Towards the end of the book, Jack leaves Gilead again, despite knowing that his father is in his deathbed, and that he won't see him again. Ames says, "It was truly a dreadful thing he was doing, leaving his father to die without him. It was the kind of thing only his father would forgive him for" (278). James Wood reads this, quite astutely, as referring not only to Reverend Boughton and notes "the link between the terrestrial relationship and the religious one" (n.pag). Indeed, the idea of God as father is ever present in some form in all of Ames's reflections on fathers and sons; made explicit at times, such as his in sermon on Hagar and Ishmael, or in another instance when he recalls a quote from Augustine: "[he] says the Lord loves all of us as an only child, and that has to be true. He will wipe the tears from all

faces” (223). And if that is the case, that is, if the religious relationship can shed some light on the mysteries of the terrestrial one, then the concept of grace would go some way towards explaining the inexplicableness of love (or the lack of it) between fathers and sons. In Ames’s (and also the Boughtons’s) Protestant faith with its Calvinistic strain, salvation is earned through faith and grace alone, not through good works. And since grace is not something that can be earned in this interpretation, but something that God bestows upon those he chooses, individual believers have no final say on whether they are saved or not. This predetermination is random – from an earthly point of view, at least—and from birth onwards. As such, it really echoes the relationship between Jack and Ames, and Jack and his father.

However, the randomness and inscrutableness of it all is not the final note that the narrative sounds. Critics have often noted the revisionist tendency in Marilynne Robinson’s reading of Calvinism, with one drawing attention to how it “tends to be far more hopeful about grace, agency, and the beauties of the natural world than traditional interpretations allow” (Steiner ii). How is this attitude translated into *Gilead*’s narrative, and its resolution of this point? For one thing, it is important to note that Ames is not content with simply letting his feelings about Jack be as they are. He wrestles with the problem, as he sees it, for a good deal of the narrative until coming to a solution that is satisfactory to him both emotionally and doctrinally. His solution is nothing less than existence itself: he reasons that since God loves everyone merely because they exist, overlooking any flaw and shortcoming they might have, there is no reason he himself shouldn’t: “Existence is the essential thing and the holy thing,” he writes (189). From the viewpoint of a traditional interpretation this may be problematic, because the unconditional love that Ames’s (and Robinson’s) reading yields is at odds with Calvinistic doctrine,

especially that of unconditional election as discussed above. Ames repeats this same thought elsewhere, though, and interestingly enough, he does so by drawing on a quote from Calvin himself:

Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense. ... I do like Calvin's image, though, because it suggests how God might actually enjoy us. It would be a way into understanding essential things, since presumably the world exists in God's enjoyment, not in a simple sense, of course, but as you enjoy the being of a child even when he is in every way a thorn in your heart. "He has a way of his own," Boughton used to say when that son of his was up to something. And he meant it as a praise, he really did. (125)

It is possible, then, to read Calvin against himself, or against a version of himself perceived by the traditional interpretations – but then, who is to decide which reading is superior to the other? This is the ultimate way in which Ames is an Emersonian: he does not base his argument on tradition, or rather, tradition as it is understood by the majority. He does not defer to dominant modes of thought and interpretation and nor does he walk away from his belief and faith on account of them. Even as he is writing this "endless" letter to his son in his old age, he is revising and reinventing his thoughts and beliefs regarding existence, which is to say regarding everything. Therefore even if his own quiet manner of talking and writing does not quite resemble the declamatory style that the grandfather of Transcendentalism is famous for, Ames nonetheless makes up for the similarity in the substance and mode of his thought.

CHAPTER IV:

UNHOUSING THE FLESH IN *HOME*

“One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.
He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”
Elizabeth Bishop, “At the Fishhouses”

Home is a book of subtle tensions underlying seemingly serene surfaces and as such, echoes thematically, and even metaphysically, the rest of Robinson's novels. The critic A. O. Scott condenses this aspect of her writing thus in his review of the book for *The New York Times*: "it is a characteristic of Robinson's prose to proceed with self-evident clarity and simplicity while seeming at the same time pregnant with troubling implications" (Scott). At the crux of the events of the book, if one is to assign a relative center to this complex narrative, is the hesitantly late-blooming relationship between siblings Jack and Glory, children to the Reverend Boughton, set in their childhood home in the Iowa town of Gilead. Glory comes "home to stay," as her father cheerfully declares much to Glory's despair, to look after the aged man, a state of affairs which she nonetheless accepts with as much grace as she can muster. Her elder brother Jack's homecoming, on the other hand, is wrought with difficulties from beginning to end, yet it is this one the Reverend seems to be anticipating more than any other return, be it Glory's, or her other siblings'. Jack's rocky path back home and back to his father is the source of the better part of the tensions, apparent dilemmas and paradoxes in the text. By the end of the narrative it is left rather ambiguous if his journey is truly at an end. It is, however, a journey undertaken; and as such bears affinities to the transformative quest in American literature that Robinson discusses with relation to *Housekeeping*. However, just as in

Housekeeping, there is also the element of the devotional text in *Gilead* whereby certain Biblical narratives are subsumed and appropriated by the novel. In order to appreciate the complementary way these two modes of narrative work together in establishing the “unreasoned crisis of his soul,” to borrow the words of Wilfred Owen, Jack’s childhood is a good place to start (Owen 75).

Jack Boughton is the black sheep of Presbyterian minister Robert Boughton's large brood of four boys and four girls. From his childhood onwards he is the stray one in a family of otherwise well-behaved and proper children: truancy, petty theft and a silent recalcitrance towards his father are the ascending vices of his childhood and early youth which reach their nadir in his impregnating a neighbor's daughter out of wedlock (*Home* 6, 16). These behaviors are presented as the manifestations of a deep-reaching, all-consuming turmoil within him that is rather difficult to pinpoint and label exactly. In fact, the main concern of the narrative appears to be, at times, circling around this "condition" and trying to decipher the paradox that Jack is.

Aging patriarchs and their sons occur repeatedly in the Bible, but it is the Parable of the Prodigal Son which resonates most particularly with Jack's story as at least three of the book's critics, James Wood, A.O. Scott and Ron Charles have drawn attention to in their reviews. M. H. Abrams in his *Natural Supernaturalism* describes this parable as follows:

[A]n apt, detailed, and impressive figure for life as a circular rather than a linear journey [...] the Prodigal Son, who collected his inheritance and 'took his journey into a far country and there wasted his substance with riotous living'; then, remorseful, made his way back to his homeland and the house of his father, who joyously received him, clothed him, in the best robe, a ring, and shoes, and ordered the fatted calf that they might 'eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' (Abrams 165)

How much the novel runs along these narrative lines and at which junction(s) it departs from it, and how, and why, are all questions to be addressed, but as to the

more basic question of why such a device is employed and how it works, Robinson's general outlook on the function of religion –or one of its functions, at least-- may apply: "Religion is a framing mechanism," she says in a *Paris Review* interview, "It is a language of orientation that presents itself as a series of questions. It talks about the arc of life and the quality of experience in ways that I've found fruitful to think about" (Fay). This answer, and its particular phrasing with the stress on asking questions and finding a path, apply not only to understanding the place of importance the parable holds with regards to the novel, but also to Jack. Orientation as a continuous process does not forgo the possibility of deviation, in fact it would be a superfluous concept without it, and perhaps Robert Boughton's holding his prodigal son above all the others is an intuitive perception of this quaintness. Robinson's view of religion as a framing mechanism is thus also reminiscent of how his sermons enable Ames to consider the personal in terms of the impersonal, or the immediate in terms of the immanent in *Gilead*.

Jack's homecoming occupies the better part of the novel – its prospect, its imminence, its actuality and the always-near possibility of his going away once he is there, and finally, his departure. But it is Glory's return to her childhood home that opens the narrative: "Home to stay, Glory! Yes!' her father said, and her heart sank" (*Home* 3). It is a less than enthusiastic homecoming for her despite all the trouble she leaves behind – a relationship that did not turn into the marriage she wished it to, and a teaching post that fell through. "Weary or bitter or bewildered as we may be, God is faithful. He lets us wander so we will know what it means to come home," she echoes the thoughts of her father at another time, but this does not give her peace either (102). For her problem is, although decidedly less pronounced than his, of the same nature with Jack: uncertainty about what home is, or should be. She says so

much to herself when she thinks, “What does it mean to come home?” (102). The home, the “real” home, as she calls it, that she has dreamed for herself is “a home very different from this good and blessed and fustian and oppressive tabernacle of Boughton probity and kind intent” (102). And each word in her description of the house fits –or rather, is also intended for—her father the Reverend; it is almost what “pious” Glory who in her childhood “confused, in fact fused, the words ‘secret’ and ‘sacred’” can never bring herself to acknowledge openly (15). On the matter of her discontent, although it is never quite manifest as Jack’s is --not to the outer world, not to her-- it is there even after her attempts at backtracking and covering: “Did she choose to be here, in that house, in Gilead? No, she certainly did not. Her father needed looking after, like every other human being on earth. What an embarrassment that was, being somewhere because there was nowhere else for you to be. All those years of work and nothing to show for it. But you make the best of things. People respect that” (37). The house’s presence is on some level interchangeable with its patriarch, that level being the minds of the children, much like the house that Ruth’s grandfather built in *Housekeeping*.

Why such an association presents itself as a problem substantial enough to be the narrative drive of books and the path-breaking force of certain sons, is a question of influence. For Robert Boughton is not a villain, not the antagonist, nor even a less-cherished character in Robinson’s approach to the cast of the book. He is in such a position to his children simply because he is their father, and also because he is a man of God and thus doubly a figure of authority. Fatherly influence, be it real or figurative, and authority are of central concern to the American Romantics and the verdict is generally the same. It is summed up thus by Emerson in his address, “The American Scholar”: “Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the

good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil” (81). In “The Over-Soul,” he is portentously descriptive as to what happens when this is not the case: “[He who would know what the great God speaketh] must greatly listen to himself, withdrawing himself from all the accents of other men’s devotion. Even their prayers are hurtful to him, until he have made his own. [...] The faith that stands on authority is not faith. The reliance on authority measures the decline of religion, the withdrawal of the soul” (Emerson 276-277). The son of a Unitarian minister and himself an ex-Unitarian minister, the dissatisfaction Emerson felt with the institution of the Unitarian Church was no doubt colored with this perception of legacy and influence.

At one point in *Gilead*, Reverend Boughton says that religion is “human behavior,” and that it is something quite different from God’s grace (220). Emerson’s objection is directed at human behavior as well and not to the concept of the divine itself. The same also holds true for Jack: nowhere in the novel does he deny the existence of God or a divine presence. He is not irreligious, for instance, when he asks Glory to “save his soul” (104). Even Ames is willing to admit this fact, as when he defends Jack against his father by saying “He doesn’t exactly reject [the Scripture], Robert. He’s clearly given it a good deal of thought” (225). As to how Glory should go about saving his soul, Jack informs her:

I’m willing to confess to a certain spiritual hunger. I think that’s usually the first step. [...] Then I think it is usual to ponder great truths. That has been my experience. [Such as] the fatherhood of God, for one. The idea being that the splendor of creation and of the human creature testify to a gracious intention lying behind it all, that they manifest divine mercy and love. Which sustains the world in general and is present in the experience of, you know, people who are saved. Or will be. [...] It’s possible to know the great truths without feeling the truth of them. That’s where the problem lies. In my case. (104)

It is curious that in thinking of an example to the “great truths,” the first one to come to his mind is the fatherhood of God, and the concept of grace. For grace is the

foundation stone of his father's belief as well, never absent from his meditations. "He loved to reflect on the fact that grace was never singular in its effects, as now, when he could please his son by forgiving his friend," it is observed of Reverend Boughton in one instance (215). It must certainly be baffling, an insurmountable problem for Jack that grace, which somehow ties the world together in a coherent unity, is not something that can be worked at like being religious but solely dependent on God's giving. The problem, as he feels it, is that he has not been the recipient of this particular blessing, and as such, he cannot feel the truth of great truths. "Can the Scotsman change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good that are accustomed to evil": Jack often quotes directly and impeccably from the Bible, displaying enough command of the subject matter to provide his own twist on the one hand, and establishing his own hopelessness where his essential condition is concerned on the other (278). Spiritual exile has been his lot from childhood onwards, it seems. "I've thought about this place so many times," he says of their home, "When I was a kid I used to wish I lived here. I used to wish I could just walk in the door like the rest of you did and, you know, sit down at the table and do my homework or something" (276). He is as ill-at-ease in his body as he is in this house. "Like a ghost," is one of Glory's first impressions of him when he comes back, one disconnected to a corporeal form (31). In his inverse opinion of himself, he is "[n]othing, with a body, [creating] a kind of displacement around [himself] as [he passes] through the world" (Home 288). What they tacitly seem to be agreeing upon is that a unity has been severed, or has not really been there in the first place. And no one knows, not Jack nor his father, why he is different in this aspect from his seven siblings – ironically (for the Reverend at least), the only explanation can be that grace has not been extended to Jack. "I suspect Scottishness is another name for

predestination,” Jack observes when talking to Glory and his intuition is correct insofar as the changeability of both concepts are possible.

Presbyterianism, the denomination of the Reverend and his family has its roots in Calvinism and while some tenets and their applications may differ, predestination and grace are the two concepts that remain the same in both branches. That is to say, God predetermines whether someone is going to be eternally damned or saved; and grace is unearned, undeserved favor brought upon the chosen. As Jack makes it clear to Glory, God’s grace is the foremost thought in his head when he considers his soul, and in light of his difficulties coming to terms with his father and his father’s faith, it is entirely consistent that this might very well be the reason he has such difficulties: he is, quite literally, damned if he does believe and damned if he does not. When his father says to him that “[n]obody deserves anything, good or bad. It’s all grace. If you accepted that, you might be able to relax a little,” his answer is clearly in this direction: “Somehow I have never felt that grace was intended for me,” he tells his father, much to the old man’s frustration (271). Yet Glory also looks at him and thinks of “[t]hat strange and particular grace a man’s body seems never to forget,” and in another instance, that “there was a kind of grace to anything Jack did with his whole attention, or when he could forget irony for a while” (92, 146). To whom the correct intuition belongs is not made clear: what is clear is the inescapability of his situation to Jack. One reviewer of the book is quite astute in observing the omission in sight committed not only by Reverend Boughton but also by Ames when they take Jack’s question regarding predestination to be provocation rather than his immediate, very personal concern (219-220).

Nothing in the novel rules out the possibility that Jack might exist outside the grace of God, and that this spiritual condition, as much as any psychological disposition, might explain his loneliness and estrangement in the bosom of such a warm and

blessed family. The apparent failure of two learned and serious ministers to hear the plain, earnest intent of Jack's question is painful in itself. (Scott)

Scott correctly notes how the Reverend's inability to comprehend his son's dilemma, a dilemma enabled by the religion he has passed down to him, further entraps Jack in his hopeless situation. In "Spiritual Laws" Emerson similarly discusses how faith and legacy are sometimes likely to interact:

Our young people are diseased with the theological problems of original sin, origin of evil, predestination and the like. These never presented a practical difficulty to any man –never darkened across any man's road who did not go out of his way to seek them. These are the soul's mumps and measles and whooping-coughs, and those who have not caught them cannot describe their health or prescribe the cure (Emerson 191).

The way "theological problems" or religious thoughts of this vein are associated with the likes of a virus or a germ, that is, something contagious or transmittable at any rate, is resonant of the trope of the "sins of the father." Incidentally, in the first chapter of *Walden*, "Economy", Thoreau paraphrases the Bible to a similar end when he says "the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (13). Thoreau is talking about the state of home-owning in Concord and says "It is true, the encumbrances sometimes outweigh the value of the farm, so that the farm itself becomes one great encumbrance, and still a man is found to inherit it" (13).

Even the physical abode of the parent becomes a burden to the child, as it is not only for Jack but also for Glory. Emerson, however, supposes that these existential problems only manifest themselves to those who go out of their way to find them.

What, then, is to be made of the case of the Presbyterian minister's son? Granted, both the Reverend and his late wife are presented in a mild way where their faith's application to daily life is concerned. They had

[...] put aside their innocence on practical grounds, not in the belief that it had been discredited, but because they accepted the terms of life in this world as a treaty to be preferred to conflict, though by no means ideal in itself. Experience had taught them

that truth had sharp edges and hard corners, and could be seriously at odds with kindness. (*Home* 17)

The tone of this passage is also very similar to Glory's passive-aggressive moments of thought, where she finds a way to backtrack and cover her occasionally rebellious thoughts with commonplaces such as "you make the best of things". Their religion is a pact made unwillingly and out of necessity, and at the core of it, the certainty of eternal damnation or eternal beatitude remains intact – or so it would appear to Jack. How his and his siblings' religion is irrevocably tied up to their father is recounted in this passage by Glory:

When the others were at home for the holidays, they would sit around the table in the dining room and one of them would read aloud from the Psalms or the Gospels. Like most of their obligations and many of their pleasures, this was, whatever else, a performance meant to please their father, to assure him that they loved the old life, that they had received all the good he had intended for them. To please him was so potent a motive that it displaced motives of [Glory's] own, which no doubt would have included piety. (101)

Although Jack is not Glory, and to please his father might not have been so potent a motive for him, this sense of obligation is what he is subject to as a child at any rate. And also as an adult coming back home, gospel according to his father is again what is doled out to him. In one poignant passage where Reverend Boughton is musing on what brings people to God as much as what has brought his son to him, he says:

[W]hen I think what it is that brings us to our Father, it might be grief or sickness – trouble of some sort. Weariness. And then there we are, and it's a good thing at such times to know we have a Father, whose joy it is to welcome us home. It really is. Still, humanly speaking, there is that trouble, that sorrow, and a Father has to be aware of it. He can't help it. So there is a sadness even in great blessing, which can be a hard thing to understand. (41)

Reverend Boughton is at the same time extremely prescient about the nature of his son's visit and yet also in the dark about its immediate motive; the contents of his meditation do not seem to extend to this "motive" in his own mind. For he is constantly haunted by the ghost of Jack's dead daughter, condemning himself that he

did not do right by the child, that he has not even baptized her and despite Glory's protests that Presbyterianism does not really require baptism for a child's soul to be saved, his pain is not abated (152). And he attributes much of Jack's despair to circumstances surrounding this event – that the child died, and without the Reverend's blessing and baptism too; whereas Jack says to his sister when they are alone, "If I were an honest man I'd have told him I have never given a single thought to –any of that" (153). What the Reverend does not know is that Jack is married to a black woman, Della, and that they have a son together.

This is a more immediate and pressing concern in his mind than the long-dead daughter. Jack is in Gilead to see if it is a place where he can raise a mixed-race family, which, in the summer of 1956, it has long ceased to be. This fact in itself is a strong statement about what Gilead is, as opposed to what it was before, as one critic summarizes the changes the town underwent, for the large part expounding upon Ames's narrative from *Gilead*:

Gilead is a town that over two generations has lost its formal and its final cause, its essence and its guiding goal. Gilead was founded by a westward migration of the Protestant Reformation, by settlers who were determined to serve God by abolishing slavery. The town served as a staging post for emigration into Kansas as well as for raids upon Kansas slaveholders so that Kansas, which was then just a territory, should enter the union as a free state. It was also an important station on the Underground Railroad, a network of safe houses and white abolitionist conductors who would help runaway slaves escape to freedom. [...] It is not simply that people do not remember past heroes; they have lost a sense of the meaning of Gilead. (Lear 37)

As Ames writes to his son in *Gilead*, such is the establishing principle of the town, and it leaves little in the way of doubt about the settlers' original outlook where equality and slavery are concerned. In the year 1956 the revolutionary fervor seems to have died down in Gilead even as the Civil Rights Movement is picking up momentum countrywide, with the *Brown v. Board of Education* case ruling school segregation illegal and Rosa Parks having initiated the Montgomery Bus Boycott

against segregation and discrimination in public buses. Both events take place prior to *Home*'s events even though they are not mentioned in the text. At the very same time, not even a disinterested, distanced investment in Gilead's principles of yore is visible in Reverend Boughton. His conservatism and old-fashionedness in general is touched upon occasionally with remarks such as "The girls in this family got named for theological abstractions and the boys got named for human beings," by Glory, but an all-around attitude of conserving the values of old would have also prompted him to stand up for what the town once stood for (82). He has several arguments with Jack on the issue, if the subdued and misdirecting points he raises can be seen as constituting an argument – the first is just after they have bought a new TV, and are watching the news together:

[Jack] was standing in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips. On the screen white police with riot sticks were pushing and dragging black demonstrators. There were dogs.

His father said, "There's no reason to let that sort of trouble upset you. In six months nobody will remember one thing about it."

Jack said, "Some people will probably remember it."

[...] The old man said, "I do believe it is necessary to enforce the law. The Apostle Paul says we should do everything 'decently and in order. You can't have people running around the streets like that. [...] Young people want the world to change and old people want it to stay the same. And who is to judge between thee and me? We just have to forgive each other.'" After a moment he said, "But I hope we don't have to argue. I don't like the shouting and I don't like the swearing." (97-98)

Here a clergyman urges someone to ignore the pain of others on the grounds that it has no bearing on that person's situation, and that it will be soon forgotten anyway.

The situational irony is particularly acute due to the fact that Reverend Boughton is in the dark about Jack's secret family. The conversation, monopolized by the

Reverend, quickly dissolves into a series of platitudes and it is very much

personalized: from the race riots to the fact that the Reverend does not like arguing, it is a relatively short step.

One other instance of disagreement between father and son takes place before the TV as well – again, Jack is watching the news, is troubled by the events in the South, and just then the Reverend chimes in with his opinion: “I have nothing against the colored people. I do think they’re going to need to improve themselves, though, if they want to be accepted. I believe that is the only solution” (155). To which Jack replies that he is “a little unimproved” himself – and deflecting this point, the Reverend goes on to say that the black people are “creating problems and obstacles for themselves with all this – commotion. There’s no reason for all this trouble. They bring it on themselves” (156). It really is a monument to a father’s love –or willingness to ignore—that he does not realize what he is saying for the black people could be applied, by the same token, to Jack himself (as, for instance, it is by Ames, throughout *Gilead*) and indeed this seems to be the interpretation that is running through Jack’s mind. It is not entirely possible to extrapolate wholly from what Reverend Boughton makes known about his stance on racial equality to claim that it is affected by elements of his faith in a certain way, but there are instances where he seems to be echoing bits and pieces from an ongoing argument in his mind, especially with regards to predestination. In his insistence that protests do not change anything, and that black people should “improve” themselves (a rather vague concept when applied in such a context) rather than taking action, he seems to be talking about unconditional election and limited atonement as much as he is projecting an old man’s resistance to change. In other words, it is already determined by God who is saved and who is not, and since there is no certain way of making sure which group one belongs in, one should do his or her best to be in God’s grace. But do such ways of thinking apply to groups of people and social movements, and the repercussions of those movements as they do to individuals? This is another thing

that Jack attempts to bring into light, and in order to engage his father –and also Ames—in the subject, he brings up an article from an old magazine, titled “God and the American People,” urging both of them to read it and discuss among themselves (214). The following lengthy discussion may be regarded as the unconventional climax of a narrative so heavily dependent on its characters and less so on any particular action they undertake. This is, in a manner of speaking, the standoff that Jack has been wishing for the entire time, between his father’s faith and principles, and their application to the real world, people and situations.

The connection between the Reverend’s reaction to the Civil Rights Movement and his faith has been, up to this point, only insinuated and attempted to be brought to the surface with indirect questions by Jack, who, in the company of Ames, at least makes a direct approach. Speaking of the article’s writer, he says, “He said the seriousness of American Christianity was called into question by our treatment of the Negro. It seems to me that there is something to be said for that idea” (217). Reverend Boughton’s instinct is, true to the patterns of discussions past, to deflect instantly. Instead of taking on the statement, he says to Ames, “Jack’s been looking at television” (217). But the intermediary presence of Ames is what seems to have changed the balances in this instance, and what makes it different from the previous father-son discussions. Ames initially agrees with his namesake, saving the conversation from a premature ending and thus enabling Jack to voice for the first time in his father’s presence the gist of his problem: “I know the text. It’s the application that confuses me a little,” he says of the Bible (218). Following this, he makes the dreaded connection between race and predestination, and addresses direct questions to his father and Ames:

Ames said to his wife, “We were just talking about the fact that the way people understand their religion is an accident of birth, generally speaking. Where they were born.”

Jack said, “Or what color they were born. I mean, that is a subject of the article. Indirectly. It seems to me. [...] Reverend Ames, I’d like to know your views on the doctrine of predestination. I mean, you mentioned the accident of birth. [...] Do you think some people are intentionally and irretrievably consigned to perdition?” [...] “I tell [people] there are certain attributes our faith assigns to God – omniscience, omnipotence, justice and grace. We human beings have such a slight acquaintance with power and knowledge, so little conception of justice, and so slight a capacity for grace, that the workings of these great attributes together is a mystery we cannot hope to penetrate.” (219-220)

Despite Ames’s relative willingness to engage in the discussion, the answer he offers is not very radically different from what Reverend Boughton would have said. That is, it is not as hard-cut and definitive as Jack wishes it to be; if anything seems to expose the disparity between the respective faiths of Reverend Boughton and Ames, it is the importance that they place on the concept of grace. Glory notices this as she thinks of “her father asserting the perfect sufficiency of grace with something like ferocity, while Ames maintained, with a mildness that his friend found irksome, that the gravity of sin could not be gainsaid” (221). Is this difference merely the result of Reverend Boughton’s Presbyterian doctrines against his friend’s Congregationalism or has Jack affected his father’s religion as the Reverend irrevocably affected his son’s? Does his wish for his son’s soul to be saved color his faith? Jack hits this exact spot when he says “[T]hat visiting of the sins, it seems to describe something. It works the other way, too. The sins of the son are visited on the fathers” (225). This discussion between the three men epitomizes, in a way, how their religion is tied up to their familial bonds – what is being discussed on the surface is the story of David and Batsheba, or Ezekiel’s verses, or what Moses has said, but what everybody is thinking about is something else. Ames has his dead daughter in mind, Reverend Boughton both his son and his dead granddaughter, and Jack is thinking about both his father and his son (222-224). Their argument is at a deadlock with

Jack wanting his father to say once and for all that yes, predestination exists and therefore it is entirely possible Jack is one of the damned, his father staunchly refusing to think so but at the same time unable to prove otherwise—that Jack is not damned—and Ames refusing to refuse that Jack might not have been elected by God. And it is not something that they are going to resolve ever, either: as Ames says, “I’m not going to make nonsense of a mystery, just because that’s what people always do when they try to talk about it. Always. And then they think the mystery in itself is nonsense. Conversation of this kind is a good deal worse than useless” (226).

Predestination, by its very definition of being a mystery, it is not resolvable. Ames condemns “conversation of this kind” because, as he says, it is worse than useless; what he means is that it is probably also harmful or sinful. It would seem, however, that this sense of “useless conversation” extends, both for Ames and the Reverend, further than “mystery topics”. The general unwillingness of both men to be drawn into discussions by Jack has been attested by various examples, and also that their instinct is to either deflect or generalize. This is to some extent a reduction of Ames and Reverend Boughton’s strategies, but in essence both are, in their more elaborate forms, characteristics of sermons or tendencies of preachers. And the workings of a sermon, as we discussed previously, can be decidedly different from that of a direct discussion or a conversation. Tiffany Wayne quotes Emerson from “Circles” where he says that in conversation, “we move outward, onward, beyond the thoughts of successive speakers, and are ultimately left with the splendor of silence” (qtd in Wayne 49). She further paraphrases him:

Conversation itself is a “system of concentric circles,” in which we are introduced to the ideas of others for the purpose of establishing and evolving our own ideas about the topics. Through conversation one learns about the world, about others, and therefore about oneself, as one is always free to take what they want from the interaction. (49)

The heated exchanges between the three men are conversation and certainly enable them to “establish their ideas,” but the exchanges do little to help those ideas evolve. The closure comes not from them, but from Ames’s wife Lila, who “could never really be drawn into these conversations, though Ames tried include her” (219). “What about being saved?” she asks them, “If you can’t change, there don’t seem much point in it” (226). And as she is leaving, her parting words to Jack are, “A person can change. Everything can change” (227). Lila’s input is valuable, especially considering the stress placed upon the fact of her normally not appearing to be interested in such discussions (or discussions of any kind). When she finally is, and makes such a contribution, what she says has an “out of the mouth of babes” force to it, precisely because she is neither well-informed in doctrine or as seemingly interested in it as these men are. And when Jack says, “very gently,” thus non-sarcastically “Why, thank you, Mrs. Ames. That’s all I wanted to know,” he appears to genuinely consider this true (227).

So is this the moment of Jack’s big leap of faith, one where he discards the old faith and moves on to a new one? That is hardly the case, and neither are there any moments in the novel where Jack crosses such a threshold. To posit him against the Presbyterianism of his father and thus equate him with a Transcendentalist rejection of an inherited religious tradition would be a simplification. For nowhere in the text does he reject the tenets of the old faith such as predestination or grace and go on to replace them with their Transcendental alternatives, such as free will of the individual or self-knowledge for the sake of individual growth. All the same, if his questions seem to be pointing anywhere, they seem to be in the direction that Transcendentalism headed towards when it became a separate entity from Unitarianism rather than endeavoring to realign and reintegrate itself with it. Jack’s

relationship with his father and his religion reflects the Transcendentalist movement as a whole, as it grew out of Unitarianism, which in turn once grew out of Puritanism, as a historical event as much as it parallels any individual Transcendentalist narrative. Unitarianism is defined as differentiating itself from the Puritanism of the early settlers by its “[questioning] Calvinistic beliefs in predestination and original sin, ideas dependent upon a belief in humanity’s innately depraved nature and the subsequent inability to do anything about it other than hope for God’s grace” (Wayne 295). And Transcendentalism, as it grew out of Unitarianism, initially formed not as an outright rejection but a “logical extension”: “Unitarian intellectuals coined terms like *self-culture* and *active mind* in their quest for the perfection of individual character as humankind’s spiritual destiny,” Wayne recounts (295). Such vocabulary is closer to that of Transcendentalism than it is to the Puritanical, and for some the ultimate break from Unitarianism never completely happened as they found a way to subsume Transcendentalist ideas under their Unitarian faith. Frederic Henry and Theodore Parker are two examples of this phenomenon (295). In other cases, such as Emerson’s, the break happened because the individuals’ beliefs out-radicalized their formerly antinomian faiths. Unitarianism, once borne out against Puritanism, could not incorporate Emerson’s urging that “Unitarian ministers [should] ignore tradition and even the scriptures and [that they should] be a ‘divine man’, believing only in themselves” (qtd in Wayne 296).

The parallel between Jack’s growing out of (or having grown out of, depending on the immediacy one attributes to his questions) his father’s faith and Transcendentalism growing out of Unitarianism is justifiable on several points. One is the literal meaning of the phrase “growing out” of something, as in not being able

to be accommodated by it anymore. The immediacy of one's experiences shaping his or her faith in a necessarily different manner than those of their forebears did for them is another meaning. Jack's personal experience is tied up with the issue of race and equality in the United States, as he is married to a black woman, and therefore it is never possible for him to accept the vague generalizations on the subject offered by his father, who has no such experience. He tries to make this angle visible to his father by bringing up the example of Emmett Till, who, in his words, "[W]as a kid. He was fourteen. Somebody said he whistled at a white woman. [...] There was no trial. He was murdered. He was a child, and they murdered him" (*Home* 156). In this instance, it would be unfair to say that it is the Reverend who personalizes the question at hand, for it is obvious that Jack has his own son in his mind and when his father tells him that "parents have a responsibility. [...] They bring children into a dangerous world, and they should do what they have to do to keep them safe," to which Jack replies, "But they can't always – they might really want to. It's very hard. It's complicated—" (156). Reverend Boughton correctly identifies this as Jack's feeling of guilt and worry regarding his offspring; he is in the wrong about the specific child it pertains to. Jack's faith is as colored by his love for his son as his father's is for his love for Jack – both men ruminate on being in God's grace with their sons in mind. In this context, their faith can be considered as an answer to, or an engagement with an ongoing dialogue with their personal experiences. But then, Jack has always been the way he is, we are continually reminded, even before he had a son. So there is an inch, even if it is just that and not much more, that is not explainable by a clear-cut parallel of father-son relationships to interfaith relations, just as the ultimate mysteries of predestination and grace are not explainable by human resources, something Ames notes when he claims that because people cannot

answer certain questions, they think the questions themselves are invalid or absurd (226).

In *Gilead*, the opposite ways in which Ames and his father interpret the metaphor of the sun and the moon come to stand as a metaphor in itself: in a manner, this metaphor also stands for their inability to see eye to eye. In *Home* too the failure of father and son to establish a mutually meaningful connection is conveyed through a similar structure: in a poignant passage, Jack carries his father who has fallen asleep in the kitchen back to his bed. In the morning Reverend Boughton, in his oblique manner of stating all things regarding Jack, asks: "I have something on my mind. 'Last night I saw the new moon with the old moon in his arm.' What is that? I've been trying to think" (74). Correctly identified by Glory as belonging to the Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens, these lines appear to embody the old man's feelings regarding his relationship with his son; furthermore, not unlike his friend Ames, Reverend Boughton considers himself in the role of both father and son in these moments of introspection. Thinking of his grandmother, he quotes *King Lear*: "We that are young will never see so much nor live so long" (74). The crux of the passage, that image of the "the new moon with the old moon in his arms" is reminiscent of Ames' sun and the moon together in the sky, and not only because of the similarly mirroring, balancing effect it produces. In both instances, there is an understanding in both Reverend Boughton and Ames' father that something that doesn't occur under normal circumstances is occurring, and whereas Ames' father's reaction is indifference, Reverend Boughton is evidently sad about this fact. He is sad that Jack and himself will never develop a meaningful relationship, and that the odds of them being together, even physically, is as low as the old moon and the new moon

appearing together in the night sky at the same time. Despite his belief in God's grace and providence, and his unwavering love for his son, he despairs.

The ambiguous ending of the novel propels the reader to question if the two men are eventually reconciled; and if they are, how. Judging by the surface events of the novel, it would be difficult to say that they are: Jack leaves his father's home and Gilead again eventually, leaving his father on his deathbed even as his other siblings are coming back to their father. He also leaves Glory behind, who is there when Jack's wife Della and their son Robert come looking for Jack. In this respect, Jack is nowhere near being reconciled to his father by the end of the narrative, no more than he was at its beginning. Yet there is a shift in the tone by the end which was not present at its beginning: a hesitant and vague mood of optimism settles on the character who is the novel's point of consciousness, Glory. Therefore it's important to follow the thread and find out what would account for such a change in the mood where the events, for the most part, don't.

Robinson's view of religion as a framing device would go some way towards explaining this apparent discordance. In *Gilead*, Ames comes upon the resolution of his woes not through any change in outward events—he does not suddenly come to agree with his father, Jack does not change—, but rather through a shift in his mental outlook. He decides to accept the principle of love for existence's sake, which is his chosen definition for the concept of grace. He secures a resolution via his theological outlook, and the same process is also evident in *Home*. Glory secures a resolution by means of a deferred projection: after Della and Robert pay a visit to Gilead, cut short because they are anxious of the town's latent racism, Glory imagines that Robert will come back one day when he is grown up.

Glory envisions this return as a homecoming foretold, “[a]s if all that saving and keeping their father [the Reverend] had done was providence indeed, and new love would transform all the old love and make its relics wonderful” (323). The reconciliation that would not happen for Jack and the Reverend will be fulfilled by this son in their absence, and this belief of hers is enabled for Glory through her faith in providence. As such, Glory’s –and the novel’s—way of dealing with the past turns out to be in a curiously Emersonian vein: the legacy of the past can only be faced through a distance in time, real or projected, if it is to be faced at all. At the same time, it is through a conversation, an ongoing dialogue that it will be addressed: Glory imagines that when he comes back, Robert will talk to her at least “for a little while” (324). Emerson’s vision of both heritage and dialogue as a set of concentric circles thus presents itself again at the resolution of another Robinson novel: in *Housekeeping*, Ruth is able to consider the possibility of reunification with her grandfather by means of this image of a circle, which would enable her to both follow and not follow him. In *Gilead* it is imagined not by the child but by the elder person, yet the projection is the same: the “problem” as it is will be resolved by both moving away from it yet not moving away from it. It will be resolved not by the Reverend or Jack but by their offspring who in the consideration of the circle is also a continuation of them: Robert will do it for them. Thus Emerson’s paradoxical vision ultimately resolves what the “exhausted means of secular meaning” will not answer (Wood).

CHAPTER V:

CONCLUSION

“O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?”
W.B. Yeats, “Among School Children”

Marilynne Robinson is not a prolific writer of fiction. Between the publication of her first novel *Housekeeping* in 1980 and her second, *Gilead* in 2004, there is a span of 24 years. Yet between both novels and also *Home*, there is an unifying thread that renders the issue null in terms of years: it appears that no matter how much time passed between their composition, all novels are founded on very similar concerns. It is relatively easy to claim this in the case of *Gilead* and *Home* where the time, place and even the characters are mutual. Yet the argument also extends to Robinson’s debut novel *Housekeeping* which is, for the large part, devoid of clergymen’s families and questions of grace and damnation. It is true that *Housekeeping* is not as overtly engaged with points of Christian doctrine and theology as the two other novels are, but it is also true that notwithstanding this fact, all of their core concerns have the same origin.

In the interview in which she claims that “religion is a framing mechanism,” Robinson also holds that “[i]t is a language of orientation that presents itself as a series of questions. It talks about the arc of life and the quality of experience in ways that I’ve found fruitful to think about” (Fay). Approaching the seeming disparity between *Housekeeping* and Robinson’s later novels from this point of view is helpful in reconciling the difference. Religion, as Robinson posits, is not employed as an end in itself but rather as a kind of discourse which enables certain questions to be asked. These are questions of influence and tradition for Robinson: her novels are, as this

study argues, a fictionalization of the concerns of the American Transcendentalists regarding issues of influence and tradition. It is necessary, then, to establish once again the nature of the connection between these Transcendentalists and their doctrinally Christian predecessors.

The complicated relationship between the American Transcendentalists, here embodied mainly by Emerson, and their Christian inheritance has been one of the driving questions, and the conclusion is that Transcendentalism is not as free from the influence of its predecessors as Emerson routinely presents it to be. His dehistoricizing tendency is noted by Perry Miller in his classic text “From Jonathan Edwards to Emerson” with the caveat that Emerson is at the same time, paradoxically, aware on another level of consciousness of the context he is choosing to ignore. Miller asks:

Could it be that while his reason was dreaming among the Upanishads, and his imagination reveling with Swedenborg, his understanding perceived that on the plain of material causation the Transcendentalism of New England had some connection with the New England experience, and that his fancy, which remained at home with the customary and with history, guided his choice of words?” (594-95)

Miller is drawing attention to the fact that Emerson, while presenting Transcendentalism as the timeless thought of the ages, a thought which made “Stoic philosophers” in “Roman times” and produced “Catos and Brutuses” in “despotic times,” also talks of the Puritans and Quakers it created in “prelatical times” and especially of the Transcendentalists it has made in “Unitarian and commercial times” (qtd in Miller 593). His contention is that, as quoted above, even in his most dehistoricizing and conflating moods, Emerson is at the same time aware of the particularity of his own experience as exemplified by his eventual drift into the “Unitarian and commercial times.” Yet these rare instances of particularity in Emerson are never isolated from his sweeping verdicts on all of history and mankind.

It is indeed a paradoxical manner of simultaneously acknowledging and not acknowledging one's own context.

This, however, is not Miller's ultimate insight regarding Emerson, that his way of acknowledging his inheritance is paradoxical and problematic. For Miller, the crux of the issue is that Emerson's inheritance is dual in itself: it is not one single version of Christianity handed down to him by the previous generation. He says that this dual heritage is simultaneously

the heritage of the troubled spirit and the heritage of worldly caution and social conservatism. It gave with one hand what it took away with the other: it taught men that God is present to their intuitions and in the beauty and terror of nature, but it disciplined them into subjecting their intuitions to the wisdom of society and their impressions of nature to the standards of decorum. (600)

Miller thus locates in the mainstream Christianity of nineteenth-century New England both a fervent strain emphasizing the pantheistic, unifying aspect and a "moderate" strain bent on institutionalizing the tenets of Puritanism with a view to regulate society. Even putting aside Emerson's selective approach towards his inheritance for a moment, then, it is also possible to account for his idiosyncrasies by the token of this duality: he is responding to both, not just one. This conjecture of a dual heritage furthermore informs the argument regarding the fictionalization by Robinson of American Transcendentalists' issues of tradition and influence. For it appears that it is not a unified tradition that they are reacting to, or engaging in a dialogue.

This idea of the dual heritage enables us to better reconcile *Housekeeping* with *Gilead* and *Home* in terms of thematical unity: following Miller's logic, they are responding to different parts of this heritage. *Housekeeping* is more a response to the "pantheistic" and "mystical" Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards as it is defined by Miller; or rather, it is a fictionalization of Emerson's negotiation with that particular

heritage. Whereas *Home* and *Gilead* can better be understood as accounts of Emerson's response to the institutionalized, regulating Unitarianism of "commercial times". This is especially observable in the case of *Home*, where Reverend Boughton stands for a kind of complacent social conservatism that attempts to borrow the dignity of the past without adhering to its principles.

How, then, is this difference represented in the novels? Although in all three novels the negotiation is ultimately between two generations, in *Housekeeping* there is no direct confrontation as such. From a narrative standpoint, this is because the "previous generation" of *Housekeeping* is dead and absent. There is no immediate figure to be reactionary against, and in the lack of such a figure's immediate presence, the negotiation takes place between Ruth and the projection of the said figure onto everything she sees around her – nature, or the world. In other words, it is sublimated into the principles of nature in her perception. By contrast in *Home*, the previous generation for Jack is alive and present in the person of Reverend Boughton; and in *Gilead*, even though Ames's father and grandfather are not alive at the moment of narration they are very much present in Ames's memories.

Miller's differentiation between Emerson's inheritances further provides an answer to the question of why Emerson's negotiation with the Edwardsean portion of his inheritance is fictionalized in the simultaneously conflated and diffused manner of *Housekeeping* when his confrontation of Unitarianism can be traced in the more accessible dynamics of the father-son conflict present in both *Gilead* and *Home*. This is because, as Miller argues throughout the second half of his essay, Emerson himself is in direct contact with Unitarianism, through the cultural atmosphere of which the ideas of Edwards are relayed to him. "[I]t is true ... that the experience of any generation is inevitably a warped lens through which to view the thought and the

actions of any previous generation,” Robinson says in her essay “Who Was Oberlin?,” and her conjecture holds true in its application to Emerson’s mediated relationship with Edwards (*When* 172). Puritanism nevertheless ultimately bound Edwards’ heritage, despite Miller’s projection onto it of a transcendental and mystical bent, a doctrinal encumbrance whose significance seems to have lessened for Emerson as it was filtered to him through the lens of Unitarianism. It is similar to how in *Home* Grandfather Ames appears as the undiluted essence of revolutionary fervor to Ames, who is reacting to the complacent and conformist Christianity of his own father as he perceives it.

Moreover, the image of the “warped lens” that Robinson employs to illustrate the nature of the intergenerational relationships is complementary to M.H. Abrams’ theory of a selective heritage. Where Abrams focuses on the process itself as a means of choosing some pieces and leaving some others, Robinson also stresses the psychological aspect inherent in it: it is not a wholly voluntary act on the inheritor’s part that decides what gets taken and what is ignored, she suggests. Her proposition is rather an organic, mutually inclusive and dialogical understanding of inheritance as a conversation; one that transforms all parties involved— not only the addresser but also the addressee. Her three novels, accordingly, are the realization of this proposition. In each and every one of them, this particular understanding of inheritance is fictionalized, and such a fictionalization is powered by what Bakhtin calls the dialogic capability of the novel form. It is this capability that makes it possible for all the interwoven strands to be captured in their various interactions and transformations without conflating them to the linear progression of an equation.

The circular motion of Emerson’s mind and vision is thus ultimately preserved by Robinson in her inquiry into it, for her fiction is also perfectly described

by Emerson as partaking in the circle thus: “The man finishes his story,—how good! how final! how it puts a new face on all things! He fills the sky. Lo, on the other side rises also a man and draws a circle around the circle we had just pronounced the outline of the sphere. Then already is our first speaker not man, but only a first speaker.” (“Circles,” Emerson 128).

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