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Honors Thesis

LEAVING TOWN: LOSS AND RESTORATION IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S
HOUSEKEEPING AND GILEAD

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ABSTRACT

LEAVING TOWN: LOSS AND RESTORATION IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S
HOUSEKEEPING AND *GILEAD*

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American Studies & French Studies

Bachelor of Arts

The concepts of restoration and reconciliation are central to Marilynne Robinson's first two novels, *Housekeeping* (1980) and *Gilead* (2004). *Housekeeping* structures itself around the narrator Ruth Stone's thirst for familial wholeness, and *Gilead* tracks the aging Congregationalist minister John Ames's growing realization that there are rifts in both his town and his personal life that demand healing. The books are also united in their ambivalence towards the possibility of achieving total wholeness, as in each novel the movement towards restoration is undercut in important ways. However, the books ultimately diverge in the scope of the restitution that they allow. Whereas *Housekeeping* emphatically refuses to countenance the fulfillment of Ruth's craving for the return of her many scattered family members, *Gilead* culminates in a moment of forgiveness and ends on a note of quiet hope. This difference, far from being insignificant, is reflective of a larger transition in Robinson's work as a novelist from a precocious verbal aesthete to a politically conscious public intellectual.

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We could recount the history of literature as the history of the representation of forgiveness.

- Olivier Abel

I. Introduction

Marilynne Robinson's first two novels *Housekeeping* (1980) and *Gilead* (2004) have a curious and complicated relationship. Both books feature memorable first-person narrators, striking theological exploration, and a rigorous attention to setting, but diverge in a series of important respects. *Housekeeping* is narrated by a girl, takes place in Idaho, and is wild and ethereal in its theology. *Gilead*, by contrast, is narrated by an aging Congregationalist minister, takes place in Iowa, and is recognizably Calvinist. The differences are sufficiently pronounced for one reviewer to allege that *Gilead*, published nearly two and a half decades after *Housekeeping*, is "all but unrecognizable as the work of the same author" (Deresiewicz). In a 2018 interview with Robinson, James Wood struck a similar note, commenting that "if we could say of the Gilead trilogy¹ that it's more obviously located in a set of recognizable Christian traditions, what's very striking about *Housekeeping* is this floodlike paganism that seems to be about to inundate everything" ("The Writer and the Critic"). It is perhaps for this reason that scholars only rarely study the books as a pair; their apparent dissimilarities would seem to preclude such an approach. My study is designed to draw attention to a similarity many scholars overlook when considering Robinson's corpus: the degree to which both *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* engage the theologically inflected themes of reconciliation and restoration. When the two novels are read side by side, it becomes clear that *Housekeeping* engages the

¹ With the publication of *Jack* in 2020, the trilogy is now a tetralogy.

concept of restoration more explicitly than *Gilead*, in part because the need for healing—a key component of restoration—in *Gilead* is less immediately apparent. The novels intersect in offering only incomplete versions of the required healing, but even as both acknowledge the limits of restorative forces in a world marked by division and death, *Gilead*, through its directly articulated acts of interpersonal reconciliation, more fully realizes the restorative vision that *Housekeeping* so memorably describes.

The thematic heart of *Housekeeping* is an extended metaphor—inspired by a dusty brochure and capped by the book’s narrator, thirteen-year-old Ruth Stone—that comes to fruition in twinned laws of ascension and completion (90–92).² Using her absent aunt’s missionary work in China as a point of departure, Ruth concludes that due to these laws, “some general rescue . . . would be inevitable,” and that fragments would be knit up, families would be healed and the whole world would be rendered comprehensible (92). Ruth’s anticipation of ultimate wholeness permits her to come to terms with the deaths and departures with which she is far too familiar: *Housekeeping* opens with an account of the derailment that took the life of Ruth’s grandfather, and from there tells the story of Ruth’s adolescence in Fingerbone, where, following her mother’s suicide, she is raised first by her grandmother, who dies, then her great-aunts, who leave, and finally by her late mother’s sister, Sylvie. The book ends with yet another departure, when Ruth and Sylvie flee Fingerbone and all its inhabitants, including Ruth’s sister, Lucille.

² In his memoir *Home Waters*, the environmental humanities scholar George Handley associates Ruth’s “law of completion” with the desire to “go back to that moment of impact when spirit first moved upon the face of the waters” (Handley 115). Although it is true that Ruth interprets the movements of the natural world as prophecies of a culminating restoration, it is less clear that she understands that restoration as a return to a primal wholeness or “moment of impact.” Rather, that restoration would represent a reversal of Ruth’s origins, the mirror opposite of her family’s broken and scattered past.

The recovery of lost relationships is likewise central to *Gilead*, in which the narrator, Reverend John Ames III, composes a sort of fragmentary memoir for his young son. Though initially the novel appears to be a traditional, biographical accounting, its epistolary structure reveals both deep generational rifts in the Ames family and the narrator's unrelenting anxiety regarding his own fraught relationship with his namesake: his best friend's not-yet-prodigious son, Jack Boughton. In contrast to *Housekeeping*, which ends only with the desire for reconciliation, *Gilead* concludes with a formal act of reconciliation as Reverend Ames takes Jack's head in his hand and blesses him—a moment so rich and holy Ames proclaims it made “seminary and ordination and all the years intervening” worth it (*Gilead* 242).

One reason for the discrepancy in how each novel engages these shared themes of reconciliation and restoration is that Robinson seems to be more concerned with the aesthetic effect of *Housekeeping* than she is with its political meanings. Her goal is to construct an alternative reality out of language rather than to offer straightforward commentary on the social context of the novel. *Gilead*, on the other hand, is part and parcel of Robinson's attempt to revise public notions about religion's role in society, so it is not surprising that the book ends in a moment of hopeful reconciliation. These distinct ways of reckoning with estrangement are tied to the arc of Robinson's intellectual development—an arc she has elsewhere described as “the unsettling emergence of lady novelist as petroleuse” (*Mother Country* 32).

II. Literature Review

In *Housekeeping*, restoration is operative primarily as Ruth's conceptual response to the literal loss of her family members; restoration is a response to death. Her grandfather

dies in a train accident, her mother commits suicide, her grandmother dies of old age, and Ruth's reaction is to imaginatively anticipate their return, an anticipation that finds reinforcement in the natural world. Speaking of her childhood, Robinson has described herself as "nothing other than a latter-day pagan whose intuitions were not altogether at odds with, as it happened, Presbyterianism, and so were simply polished to that shape" (*The Death of Adam* 229). Similarly, Ruth is a child of the forest and the lake—and not of the pew—whose intuitions just happen to coincide with claims made by certain religions. Given that the themes of recovery and reconstitution play such an important role within the novel, it is not surprising that multiple scholars have sought to make sense of them. Amy Hungerford suggests that "reconciliation is the project of *Housekeeping*," and that "the narrative is designed to knit up a broken world into a whole" (Engebretson 26). Beyond being a resonant concept for the narrator, then, the dream of familial and ontological wholeness is one that shapes the book itself; Ruth's sensitivity to the signs of ultimate ascension both determines what she notices and structures the story she tells. Martha Ravits similarly contends that *Housekeeping* is built around a desire for wholeness, but she largely restricts her analysis to Ruth's hunger for her missing mother. Still, Ravits' conclusion is like Hungerford's in that she sees Ruth as a "visionary whose unassuaged longing causes her to imagine possibilities of restoration" (651). Anthony Domestico agrees with both Hungerford and Ravits that Ruth and *Housekeeping* pursue wholeness obsessively, but he also makes a claim about the veridicality of the visions generated by that pursuit. Those visions, Domestico writes, "are intimations of eternity, hinting at the divine perspective and the existence of a realm in which past, present, and future are simultaneously present" (104). For Domestico, what he terms Ruth's

“visionary imagination” is more than the ingenious reaction of a traumatized mind—it is also the manifestation of Ruth’s actual hope that she will one day recover her deceased loved ones.

Although Domestico may be correct that Ruth takes her frequent reveries of postmortal restitution at face value, it could also be the case that she understands them as aesthetic tableaux whose truth-value is beside the point. At the book’s close, Ruth offers the following admission: “I have never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming. I know my life would be much different if I could ever say, This I have learned from my senses, while that I have merely imagined” (216). On the one hand, this suggests that at least some of the resurrections scattered throughout the narrative might be “merely imagined” rather than sincerely believed. On the other, Ruth’s admission can be read as instructing us to not make distinctions between thinking and dreaming, or between imagination and truth. On that reading, it might not really matter to Ruth whether she will eventually recover her family members, as anticipating that recovery in the present offers her solace either way.

The concept of restoration is also present in *Gilead*, but unlike in *Housekeeping*, characters in *Gilead* tend to be separated more by disagreement than by death. Thus, restoration takes the form of reconciliation rather than an imagined resurrection. Multiple scholars have recognized the centrality of this theme to *Gilead* and to the series it inaugurated. For instance, Andrew Ploeg argues that in *Gilead*, Robinson uses language as something that simultaneously acknowledges and reaches beyond the yawning ontological divide between God

and humankind. Michael Vander Weele also addresses the role of estrangement in Robinson's fiction, though unlike Ploeg, he focuses on the differences that exist between people rather than the one between humans and God. Vander Weele argues that Robinson depicts authentic human interaction as something that is decidedly difficult but, once achieved, also extremely rewarding. Rowan Williams likewise attends to the negotiation of interpersonal difference, arguing that the alienation Jack Boughton experiences relative to other characters is so pronounced that Robinson figures it as the gap between native and non-native speakers of a language. Williams further suggests that in *Gilead* and *Home* (which narrates the same events as *Gilead* but from the perspective of Jack Boughton's sister, Glory) this tension is addressed via the unabashed recognition of the slippage inherent to all forms of communication; the key to solving to problem is to trust that "all truthful speech and action is activated by what is and always remains unsaid, the hinterlands of God's unimaginable judgment" (17). In other words, the proper response to difference is submission to the fact that that difference can only be effectively addressed by the mystery of divine grace.

When their two versions of restoration (*Housekeeping*: restoration as a response to death, *Gilead*: restoration as a response to profound interpersonal differences) are put in conversation, it becomes clear that *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* are posing the same question: How might we repair human relationships that have been severed in some apparently definitive way? Robinson suggests private reflection as one answer. In *Housekeeping*, the work of repair takes place in Ruth's mind, as when, suspended in darkness in a canoe on Lake Fingerbone,

Ruth exchanges Sylvie's presence for that of her mother: "And if she were Helen in my sight, how could she not be Helen in fact?" (167). Time and time again, Ruth sets the world right by crafting alternative realities inside her own head. *Gilead* is similarly interested in the internal wrestling of its chief character, John Ames, but the partial solution it offers to the riddle of estrangement also includes a public face. Indeed, Robinson depicts Ames as someone who has perhaps spent too much time inside his own head, someone for whom redemption lies in fully embodying the things he professes to believe. In admitting to his son that "if [Jack Boughton] harmed you in the slightest way, I'm afraid theology would fail me," Ames gestures towards this disconnect (190). To achieve true reconciliation, he must move from the plane of intellect to that of action—a theory of forgiveness, he discovers, is sometimes insufficient to the task of forgiving. Thus, the process of reconciliation in *Housekeeping* always functions at a certain level of abstraction, whereas in *Gilead*, Reverend Ames only succeeds in repairing his relationship with Jack Ames through interpersonal interaction.

III. The Necessity of Restoration

Ruth's situation in *Housekeeping* clearly demonstrates a need for repair, whereas *Gilead* is more guarded about its narrator's brokenness. On several occasions, Ruth, whose early life has been marked by a series of losses, finds solace in imagining the eventual undoing of those absences. For example, Ruth and her sister Lucille are excited to see their aunt, Sylvie, replace their great-aunts as their caretaker because Sylvie "would be [their] mother's age, and might amaze [them] with her resemblance to [their] mother" (41). Ruth and Lucille eagerly

anticipate Sylvie's arrival because it constitutes a "substantial restitution" for what they had lost when their mother drove her car into Lake Fingerbone (42). Similarly, later in the narrative when Ruth has grown attached to Sylvie and spends a day with her on the far side of Lake Fingerbone, she tells the reader that "though we dream and hardly know it, longing, like an angel, fosters us, smooths our hair, and brings us wild strawberries" (153). With that phrase, Ruth manages to speak both generally and specifically about restoration. In a general sense, human longing foreshadows the very healing that it craves. Tailored to Ruth's case, the act of longing calls forth her grandma, Sylvia Foster ("fosters us"); her aunt Sylvie ("smooths our hair"), who has previously exhibited a preference for certain words because of their "tendency to smooth, to soften"; and her mother ("and brings us wild strawberries"), who ate wild strawberries just before she and her car "sailed off the edge of the cliff" (99, 23). The subtle references to three of Ruth's family members, only one of whom is still alive, help clarify just who it is that she longs for. Yet another invocation of restoration comes near the book's close, during Ruth's internal monologue on biblical history, wherein she alights upon Jesus of Nazareth, saying of him that "while He was on earth He mended families" (194). Anthony Domestico observes that many of the more arresting passages in *Housekeeping*, those moments when Ruth uses the imperative mood to command the reader to imagine certain things, "deal with compensation, with the desire for and belief in final recovery and fulfilment" (103). Restoration, then, is clearly a central focus of *Housekeeping*. Further, it is the private labors of imagination, desire, and memory that form the basis of this restoration, rather than

public action. It is perhaps not too reductive to say that in *Housekeeping*, restoration remains more conceptual than concrete.

Rupture and its repair are also central to *Gilead*, but those concerns are not foregrounded in the narrative as they are in *Housekeeping*. Although *Gilead* is not as explicit in its inquiry into restoration as the novel that preceded it, there is nevertheless much that needs to be rectified. For instance, Ames's father has profound disagreements with his own father, and then a generation later, has profound disagreements with his two sons. As a young man, he takes issue with what he sees as his father's valorization of violence, telling him, "I know you placed great hope in that war," but "my hopes are in peace" (84). As a father, he fights with Ames's older brother, Edward, whose German education has left him an atheist, and much later in life, having come around to Edward's perspective, he upsets John Ames when he tells him that he ought to abandon his faith (26, 177–178). Additionally, the book is clearly interested in how 1950s-era Gilead has betrayed its abolitionist heritage, a heritage personified in Ames's grandfather, who rode with John Brown in Bleeding Kansas and whose embrace of righteous violence so offended his son. This betrayal, Susan Petit argues, manifests itself as a refusal to remember: "despite Gilead's isolation in rural western Iowa, the town reflects American history and attitudes, including a desire to forget or rewrite disturbing events in the past" (119). As a prominent member of the Gilead community, Ames manifests this tendency towards historical whitewashing. It is evident, for instance, in his easy dismissal of Jack Boughton's inquiries into the fire that damaged the African-American church in town.

Jack's wife, Della, is Black—so he has an obvious stake in the question. But at that point in the novel Ames knows nothing of Della, so Jack brings up the subject obliquely, commenting that he was “interested to learn that there was a colored regiment” in Iowa during the Civil War (171). From there, the conversation shifts to the presence of African Americans in Gilead, and then to the tragic fact that the town's Black church burned down some years earlier. At every turn Ames is oblivious to the thrust of Jack's inquiries. He says that the Black families left, neglecting to mention that it was likely the fire that pushed them out. And when he does acknowledge the fire, he insists that it took place “*many years ago,*” and that, regardless, “it was only a small fire” (171, emphasis added). Earlier in the book, Ames makes a similar comment about the size of the fire, noting that “it wasn't a big fire—someone heaped brush against the back wall and put a match to it, and someone else saw the smoke and put the flames out with a shovel” (36). In addition to its obvious insensitivity, Ames's fixation on the smallness of the fire is particularly troubling given the reverence with which he discusses another church fire in town. As a child, John Ames had watched his father and other members of the community clean up the debris of a Baptist church that had been burned to the ground by a lightning strike. He is profoundly marked by the experience, freights it with symbolic significance, and tells his son that “I mention it again because it seems so much of my life was comprehended in that moment” (96). Ames hardly remembers the burning of the African-American church and is convinced of its marginality, but he has no difficulty expanding a similar event into a life-defining experience. By way of this contrast, the book

suggests that Ames's moral imagination does not extend beyond racial boundaries.

It is deftly done, but Robinson clearly pinpoints Ames's racism—his unwillingness to countenance the possibility that Gilead had persecuted its Black population. In addition to the John Ames who is attuned to the presence of God, then, there is also the John Ames who will not see and will not hear. As Matthew Ichihashi Potts has written, Ames's blindness constitutes a “profound moral failure, a failure that—as Ames will realize by novel's end—undergirds his whole life and ministry in ways he can neither undo nor escape, however thoughtful and endearing he has been” (82). Even if Potts is a bit heavy-handed in suggesting that Ames's *entire* life and ministry is undergirded by “profound moral failure,” the point is an important one to the extent that it pushes back against facile readings of the book. As Lee Spinks points out, the spiritual maturity of Robinson's writing is so striking that in many early reviews of *Gilead*, the book's quiet spiritual authority was framed as its primary contribution. For example, in his review in *The Times*, Neel Mukherjee raved that *Gilead* is “a book of such meditative calm, such spiritual intensity that it seems miraculous that [Robinson's] silence was only for twenty three years; such measure of wisdom is the fruit of a lifetime.” Although Mukherjee identified an element of the text that was certainly present and perhaps even predominant, his and others' admiration for Ames's humble pastoral sagacity sometimes causes them to miss Robinson's attempts to complicate his astounding goodness. Spinks suggests that “what is too often missed [by these sorts of reviews] is . . . a significant failure of ethical

imagination linked in turn to an unresolved historical question of justice and responsibility” (146). Just like Fingerbone, the town of Gilead is riven by divisions that call for healing and restoration. *Gilead*’s veneer of domestic tranquility might obscure the necessity of restoration, but that does not mean that such a need does not exist.

IV. Incomplete Restoration

Of course, this need is everywhere evident in the pages of *Housekeeping*. It is perhaps surprising, then, that the obvious lack of wholeness in *Housekeeping* is not matched by a compensatory dose of reconciliation. Although *Housekeeping* makes the recovery, imagined or otherwise, of Ruth’s family one of its central tasks, that restoration is not realized within the pages of the text. By the time the book concludes, Lucille and Ruth are estranged from one another, and the only figure with whom Ruth has a relationship is her incorrigibly itinerant aunt, Sylvie. Families, Ruth informs us, “will not be broken,” but Ruth’s biological family is scattered and unmended from the book’s opening page, and departure and familial estrangement remain central to its conclusion (194). One of the first things Ruth tells readers is that she “grew up with [her] younger sister, Lucille, under the care of [her] 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” (3, emphasis added). She opens, that is, with a catalog of her losses—and the catalog is incomplete, as it does not even include the death of her grandfather or mother. Similarly, the book ends with a record of all who are not present in an imagined scene in which Lucille sits alone at a restaurant table, awaiting a friend.

Helen Stone, Ruth and Lucille's mother, "is not there" (218). Sylvia and Edmund Foster, Ruth and Lucille's maternal grandparents, are not there, and Edmund "does not examine the menu with studious interest" (218). Most absolutely, Ruth and Sylvie are not there in Boston, and "however Lucille may look, she will never find [them] there, or any trace or sign" (218-219).

Ruth cannot literally resurrect her deceased family members, so the persistence of loss is to be expected in that sense. Yet what is striking about the book's final passage is that even Ruth's imagination has failed her. As Lee Clark Mitchell puts it, "it is as if Ruth's envisioned efforts have fallen short . . . leaving her and us with a sense of ambivalence" (143). She has merely asked us to "imagine Lucille in Boston," but even in that strictly conjectural space she cannot patch together a full family portrait (218). Restoration remains unrealized in *Housekeeping* not only in the sense that death remains unvanquished, but also because Ruth parts ways with her sister and then fails to effect any sort of interpersonal reconciliation. One might suppose that Ruth's "visionary imagination" would require certain things of her, one of them being to stop the familial fracturing that so affected her, but that is not how the book plays out. Instead, Ruth imitates the transience that her family members have modeled for her. Just as her grandfather fled west, her aunt Molly disappeared to China and her mother sank herself in the cavernous depths of Lake Fingerbone, Ruth refuses to remain in place. An alternative reading would be to see Ruth's relationship with Sylvie as a replacement of her relationship with Lucille, which would mean that Ruth was acting in accordance with her restorative impulses in fleeing

Fingerbone. Elizabeth Meese argues as much, positing that far from being an act of familial unmaking, Ruth and Sylvie's departure is in fact the exact opposite, namely a "gesture to the permanence of family relationships" (64). The problem with this reading is that the book ends with a clear articulation of the distance between Lucille and Ruth. In other words, *Housekeeping* is far more interested in the impermanence of that relationship than it is in the redemptive bond between aunt and niece. Ruth and Sylvie's hegira is not a gesture to permanence, but rather a moment of rupture, clear and simple. In *Housekeeping*, then, the inertia of recovery is present as an idea throughout, but, like the thawing road upon which Ruth and Lucille walk to school, it is a "delicate infrastructure" that remains firm only "until the decay of winter [becomes] general" (93). Though not necessarily a false promise, it remains unrealized even at the book's final page.

Similarly, *Gilead* does not entirely realize the restoration of which it stands in need. The abolitionist grandfather flees to Kansas and dies before his son can reach him. Ames's father reconciles with his atheist son, Edward, but his adoption of disbelief drives a wedge between him and the son who still believes. John Ames does come to understand his complicity in his town's racism, and he admits to his own son that "this town might as well be standing on the absolute floor of hell for all the truth there is in it, and the fault is mine as much as anyone's," but the historical amnesia of which he has been guilty plagues his fellow townspeople too (233). Jack Boughton returns to Gilead to determine if it would be a safe place to settle down with his Black wife and his mixed-race son, and he finds that it is not. He "invests hope in [the] sad old place" but is forced to

“relinquish” it (242). John Ames overcomes jealousy and anger to recover a relationship with his namesake, but the scope of that restoration is limited because, as Jan Frans Dijkhuizen notes in *A Literary History of Reconciliation*, this interpersonal restoration does not spill over into political change, does not prompt a town wide reckoning with the historical and ongoing mistreatment of African Americans. Instead, readers are left with “a politically quietist form of Christianity that has become unmoored from a progressive, religiously inspired radicalism” (Dijkhuizen 181). John Ames’s moral and political awakening *might* portend Gilead’s imminent return to its progressive roots, but the book hardly makes that shift seem inevitable. Furthermore, Jack leaves in his wake a dying father and irritated family members, one of whom bitterly calls his departure his “masterpiece” (*Gilead* 240). Not only is he unable to find a place for his wife and child, but that failure has the added implication of driving him away from the rest of his family—the losses compound. In both *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, then, restoration is, at the very best, an incomplete project.

V. Partial Repair in *Gilead*

Though both books conclude with a departure that serves to emphasize the apparent defeat of restoration, that defeat is more qualified in *Gilead* than it is in *Housekeeping*. In *Gilead*, the farewell scene is explicitly flagged by the book as a moment of restoration, as Reverend Ames clarifies for his namesake, John Ames Boughton, that the Greek word for saved “can also mean healed, restored, that sort of thing” (239). That clarification is in turn followed by a blessing that John Ames finds so meaningful as to render worthwhile the entirety of his ministry

(242). He is now free to burn his old sermons because he has realized that the millions of words he wrote have been transcended by the act of grace in which he participated (245). Gilead is not ready to receive Jack and that is deplorable and tragic, but the narrative ends not with grief but with muted hope. Alluding to Gilead's betrayal of its former social progressivism, John Ames wonders whether all he has to bequeath his son are "the ruins of old courage and the lore of old gallantry and hope," but this is immediately followed by his affirmation that "it is all an ember now, and the good Lord will surely someday breathe it into flame again" (246). Gilead is no longer the "shining star of radicalism," but as Ames sees it, a new generation might be able to return it to its former glory. Hope is deferred in *Gilead*, but hope deferred is not hope extinguished. On the contrary, Reverend Ames tells us, "hope deferred is still hope" (247).

VI. Unmitigated Brokenness in *Housekeeping*

In contrast, the final pages of *Housekeeping* do little to complicate the picture of brokenness that has hitherto held sway in the book. Though the hope of ultimate reunions looms large throughout the book and serves as a counterpoint to the alienation that Ruth experiences, that hope is extinguished by the book's final page. Ruth longs for Lucille, strains to see her as the train rushes through Fingerbone, and vows to eventually "go into Fingerbone and make inquiries" about her whereabouts, but readers know that she never will (*Housekeeping* 216-217). Her apparent determination to reunite with Lucille must be read against her admission that although she has passed through Fingerbone "again and again," she has never disembarked (217). The book would have readers conclude that in

crossing the bridge and disappearing into oblivion, Ruth has undertaken a journey from which there is no turning back. Her descriptions of her escape are too harrowing—"The terrors of the crossing were considerable"—for readers to countenance a return (215). "Sylvie and I are not travelers," Ruth informs us, and just as they talk of going to San Francisco but never do, so too will Ruth ever fail to follow through on her intention to return to Fingerbone and recover her sister (216). *Housekeeping* offers readers disarray while playing with the possibility of restoration, but it finishes by making that possibility little more than a distant dream. There is nothing like the delayed hope that John Ames articulates as he closes his epistle, only a final, haunting image of a woman waiting, watching, and hoping for a gathering that is not to be.

VII. Subordination of Plot & Politics in *Housekeeping*

What should readers make of this divergence? Why, if Robinson is content to wax eloquent on restoration in *Housekeeping* without bringing it to be, does she insist on its realization in *Gilead*? One reason might be found in Robinson's relationship to language in each book. In *Housekeeping*, the enormous potential of language is of primary importance; at times, it seems that the book is as much about metaphor and cadence as it is about Ruth, Fingerbone, or the events that make up the novel. As Thomas Schaub puts it, "[*Housekeeping*] is primarily a work of style" (308). Likewise, Anatole Broyard wrote in the *New York Times* that "you can feel in the book . . . a delighted surprise at the unexpected capacities of language." Moreover, the book's origin story also attests to the primacy of language. In an interview with *Paris Review*, Robinson explained that while an

undergraduate in college, she “became interested in the way that American writers used metaphoric language, starting with Emerson.” While in her doctoral program, she “began writing these metaphors down,” and upon completing her dissertation, found that these collected metaphors “cohered in a way that I hadn’t expected” (Fay). The effect of such an approach, in some instances, is the subordination of the plot point to the machinery of the metaphor.

Take, for example, Ruth’s description of the train crash that takes her grandfather to an early, watery grave. In much the same way that Cormac McCarthy baptizes the violence of *Blood Meridian* in the aesthetic virtuosity of his archaic idiom, Robinson has Ruth use a metaphor that partially obscures the gravity of the event under consideration: “then the rest of the train slid after it into the water like a weasel sliding off a rock” (6). The reader is struck more by the aptness of the metaphor than the loss that it encodes. As Jessi Jezewska Stevens aptly puts it, the “opening chapter describes a mass drowning as no more upsetting than an exploratory dive.” Ruth describes her mother’s suicide with similar equanimity. Although not antiseptic, Ruth’s narration of her mother’s final moments emphasizes the peculiarity of the scene more than anything else. The sorrow is present, but the sentence wears it lightly: “When they got the Ford back to the road she thanked them, gave them her purse, rolled down the rear windows, started the car, turned the wheel as far to the right as it would go, and roared swerving and sliding across the meadow until she sailed off the edge of the cliff” (23). The metaphor is not as explicit here as in the description of the train crash, but the turning of the wheel and the sailing off the cliff subtly evoke a ship setting

off to sea. It is the snapshots of a slick animal sliding seamlessly into water and a ship preparing to embark, rather than a sense for the tragedy of the train crash or the suicide, that remain with the reader.

In addition to subordinating plot, *Housekeeping* subordinates political expectations. More succinctly, *Housekeeping* chooses to be more about language than politics. Indeed, as Jeffrey Gonzalez writes, “*Housekeeping* seems intended to frustrate our attempts to convert its pages into some political or even ethical end” (375). This too might help to explain why the book does not end as straightforwardly as *Gilead*. In an essay for the *New York Times* written five years after the publication of *Housekeeping*, Robinson stated unambiguously that she was unwilling to write political fiction: “Much justice awaits doing in this world, but I can no more repeat political formulas in the hope of securing any good effect than I could perform a rain dance in the hope of ending a drought” (“Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy”).³ In refusing to write political fiction, Robinson meant that she refused to craft stories that closely adhered to a particular ideology, to a strict and uncompromising perspective on the causes of and solutions for the human predicament. For example, she refused to produce work to support the contention that “social class is the central reality of human life” (“Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy”). In refusing to make Ruth and Sylvie’s marginality the determinative feature of their existence, and in choosing to aestheticize rather than take pity on

³ Elsewhere in the essay, Robinson writes explicitly of the connection between her distinctive prose and the apolitical aims of her fiction. She eschewed the language of the everyday—“the language of contemporary experience”—because she found that many words carried their contexts and meanings with them to such an extent that she could not do anything new with them. Likewise, she refuses to write political fiction because doing so would require her to abide by “elaborate conventions” that would lessen the singularity and punch of her books. In both arenas, language and politics, Robinson wanted to move away from a situation in which meaning and message were predetermined.

their transience, *Housekeeping* steers clear of the political as Robinson defines it. There are certainly elements of social critique in *Housekeeping*, and Robinson herself described it as “my feminist work” in a letter to her agent, but it is not a prescriptive work (“letter to Ellen Levine”). It presents readers with a portrait of American girlhood that is as moving as it is devastating, but it does not suggest, for example, that Ruth’s existence would be less precarious if she lived in a society where the state intervened more aggressively on behalf of its vulnerable children.

Similarly, by refusing to offer a definitive solution to the dilemmas of fracture and dissolution, *Housekeeping* allows the artistic force of the narrative to take precedence over any political messaging. If Ruth had acquired some sort of familial wholeness by the end of the novel, then, as Martha Ravits points out, the book might be read as confirming “feminist theories that women find fulfillment in relationship and community as opposed to autonomy” (665). The book, that is, could be justifiably read as endorsing the sorts of reductive theories that Robinson so adamantly eschews. At the very least, a too-tidy ending would render “Robinson’s paean to the journey as road to self-discovery” less “provisional” and “paradoxical,” which would in turn dilute its literary sophistication (Mitchell 123). Alternatively, if Ruth and Sylvie’s journey beyond the confines of society had led them to a psychological space where they were no longer in need of companionship and could forget Lucille and Fingerbone entirely, the book could justifiably be read as a valorization of the individual over and against the homogenizing hegemony of civilized society. But the book is not that, either,

because Ruth cannot stop thinking of Lucille even though she feels that a reunion is impossible.

Instead, the book is simultaneously a celebration of individuality and a testament to the benefits of relationality. In its first-person narration and celebration of human subjectivity, it is a hymn, in the tradition of Emerson, Melville, and Whitman, to the individual. Ruth's utterly distinctive voice, for example, is incontrovertible evidence of Amy Hungerford's assertion that in Robinson's fiction, "ordinary people have rich and complicated interior lives, [and] they embody a silent discourse of thought that, if we knew its voice, would astonish us" (114). But at the same time, the book takes as one of its central concerns the dependence of the personal upon the familial. Ruth is wholly herself, yet she expends much of her energy lamenting the loss of her family members. Individuality, imagination, and memory have their consolations, but in the calculus of the novel, those affordances can never fully compensate for the relationships that Ruth lacks. Ruth tries to convince herself that this is the case, that her mother has acquired a sanctity and seriousness in recollection that she would not have had she remained alive. She proposes that if her mother had "gone all the way to the edge of the lake . . . and had come back again," then she "would have remained untransfigured" (198). But the argument that Ruth tries to make, that through the mechanism of memory individuals can independently satisfy their craving for connection, soon shatters. Helen Stone left, and in her leaving she "broke the family and the sorrow was released and we saw its wings and saw it fly a thousand ways into the hills" (198).

Ruth can imagine her deceased mother and, in her absence, can turn her into something she was not in real life, but Ruth's mind does not have the capacity to transmute grief into satisfaction. Consciousness, cognition, and individual will are powerful forces, but *Housekeeping* frames them as necessary but insufficient to the task of self-actualization—they can never fully compensate for a lack of relationality. However, the message that membership in a community is the only permanent solution to Ruth's woes is obscured and undermined by the way the book ends. Ruth craves her family, but since that craving is never fulfilled, readers cannot be sure that familial restoration would solve her problem. Thomas Foster argues that by having Lucille stay and Ruth go, "the narrative asks the reader to . . . undertake the political act of either endorsing or rejecting Ruth and Sylvie's rebellion" (85–86). Although Foster is correct that Ruth and Lucille represent two distinct modes of being in the world, the narrative does not in fact require us to choose between the two. Indeed, the ambiguous ending, in which the notion of total self-sufficiency is problematized without mutual interdependence being conclusively confirmed, accomplishes the apolitical aims that Robinson articulates in "Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy." It replaces the simplicity of ideology with the uncategorizable richness of human experience.

VIII. *Gilead* as Sociopolitical Project

In contrast to *Housekeeping*, *Gilead* is clearly linked to a particular sociopolitical project, one that requires the religious figure at the center of the story to be someone worth emulating. Although Robinson did not publish another novel in the twenty-four years that elapsed between the publication of

Housekeeping (1980) and *Gilead* (2004), those years witnessed a marked transformation in her thought. In 1989, she published *Mother Country*, a nonfiction account of environmental negligence at a nuclear waste processing facility in England. This, Robinson says, was a pivotal moment in her intellectual career, as it was “largely as a consequence of writing *Mother Country* that [she] began what amounted to an effort to re-educate [herself]” (Fay). That is, she read the writings of major figures in Western thought—Calvin, Darwin, and Neitzche, among others—to gain a first-hand understanding of their arguments.

The fruit of her self-described reeducation is her 1998 essay collection, *The Death of Adam*, which argues that contemporary society tends to misunderstand the past and ought to return to the primary sources for a more accurate account of history. More specifically, this collection is an attempt to rehabilitate the reputation of John Calvin and the religious tradition that grew out of his teachings. In “McGuffey and the Abolitionists,” Robinson argues that Puritan New Englanders, Calvin’s religious descendants, migrated to the Midwest and brought with them progressive causes such as abolitionism, universal suffrage, and universal compulsory education. And in “Puritans and Prigs,” Robinson states her thesis at the outset: “Puritanism was a highly elaborated moral, religious, intellectual, and political tradition which had its origins in the writing and social experimentation of John Calvin and those he influenced. While it flourished on this continent . . . it established universities and cultural institutions and an enlightened political order” (150). We have misremembered our past, Robinson argues, and one result of that misreading is that instead of

associating Puritanism with moral, intellectual, and political innovation, we instead shudder at their severity, their sexism, and their mortification of the flesh.

This is relevant to *Gilead* because Reverend Ames, as a Congregationalist minister, is implicated in the religious tradition that Robinson feels has been so unfairly maligned. In creating a minister whose grandfather was an abolitionist from New England, Robinson attempts to rewrite the history of Calvin's influence in America in much the same way she did in *The Death of Adam*. This is why restoration had to be at least partially realized by the end of *Gilead*. If John Ames had not come to terms with Jack, and if Gilead's moral bankruptcy had been the closing impression, the conventional understanding of religion as a corrosive force in American life might have remained unaltered. If John Ames had finally revealed himself as a hypocritical man of the cloth, then the book would not have fit within Robinson's "campaign of revisionism" (*The Death of Adam 2*). But the book does not paint John Ames in such a light. Instead, the portrait that is rendered is that of a flawed yet deeply good Congregationalist minister, someone who is proud of his heritage but also able to recognize where he and his country have fallen short. *Gilead* gives readers a religious figure who aspires to be a "repairer of the breach" and a "restorer of paths to dwell in," and in so doing furthers Marilynne Robinson's efforts to make readers rethink the role that religion has played and might continue to play in American history (Isaiah 58:12).

IV. Conclusion

In her first two novels, Marilynne Robinson wrestles with the specter of an injured and incomplete existence. Her characters swim within sets of experiences

that refuse to coalesce in the ways they anticipate and crave. Hauntingly, Ruth tells us that when her grandmother “had been married a little while, she concluded that love was half a longing of a kind that possession did nothing to mitigate” (*Housekeeping* 12). Similarly, early in *Gilead*, John Ames describes his long years as a widower with understated pathos: “We have no home in this world, I used to say, and then I’d walk back up the road to this old place and make myself a pot of coffee and a fried-egg sandwich and listen to the radio . . . in the dark as often as not” (4).

However, even as the two books revolve around analogous dilemmas of alienation, the meaning of incompleteness is distinct in each narrative. *Gilead* supports Jan Frans Dijkhuizen’s contention that in literature, “small-scale reconciliation can . . . serve as a metonymy for reconciliation in a broader, politico-historical sense” (3). That is, John Ames contains within himself the histories of his father and his grandfather, and those three histories speak in turn to national themes of justice, mercy, reconciliation and forgetting. When he reconciles with Jack, then, he is at the same time symbolizing a far more capacious and “politico-historical” reconciliation. *Housekeeping*, on the other hand, seems decidedly less interested in functioning as a political parable. There is, finally, no reconciliation and thus there is no larger politico-historical message. In *Gilead*, un-wholeness is historically conditioned and contingent. In *Housekeeping*, un-wholeness is both existential and inescapable.

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