“Our Experience is Fragmentary”: Partial Redemption in Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead Tetralogy

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Marilynne Robinson burst onto the literary scene in 1980 with her debut novel *Housekeeping*, a gorgeous and cerebral tale of loss, memory, and reunion set in a small Idaho town. Though *Housekeeping* was widely praised and selected as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, it would take twenty-four years for Robinson to publish her next novel, *Gilead*. *Gilead* (2004) was followed by three other books featuring the same characters and setting: *Home* (2008), *Lila* (2014) and *Jack* (2020). Together, the four books tell the story of the Ames and Boughton clans, both of whose aging patriarchs have spent their entire lives in the town of Gilead, Iowa.

Although the characters and thematic throughlines vary across the four books, each novel takes an interest in the reality of division and considers ways of negotiating and healing that division. Whether the divisions are theological, familial, socioeconomic, or racial, their presence haunts the text and the question of their resolution always hovers near the surface. In this vein, the literary critic James Wood has noted that in Robinson’s fiction, it is always an open question as to whether “the shape of the healing can possibly fit the size of the wound.” Other scholars have also recognized the role of rupture in Robinson’s fiction. 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 mankind. Michael Vander Weele also deals with the role of difference in Robinson’s fiction, though unlike Ploeg, he focuses on the differences that exist between people rather than the one between God and humankind. Weele’s argument is that Robinson depicts authentic human interaction as something that is decidedly difficult but, once achieved, also extremely rewarding. Finally, Rowan Williams, like Ploeg and Weele, attends to the negotiation of difference, arguing that the alienation Jack Boughton experiences relative to other characters is so pronounced that Robinson figures it as the gap that arises between native and non-native speakers of a language. To summarize, Ploeg, Vander Weele, and Williams notice the borders and boundaries that separate characters from God and from one another. Additionally, each reads Robinson as recognizing those markers of separation while at the same working to undercut them.

Although these three scholars have analyzed the role of difference in individual books in the Gilead tetralogy, no one has weighed in on the centrality of that theme to the series as a whole. By attending to the ways in which each of the four novels engages with this theme, the uniqueness of Robinson’s theological vision comes into greater clarity. While multiple forms of division are present in each of the four novels, this study will limit its analysis to a different dominant division in each one. In *Gilead*, the division of interest is theological, primarily the one that exists between Reverend Ames and Jack Boughton. In *Home*, the division is familial, in particular the relationship that Jack has with his sister Glory. In *Lila*, the division is a socioeconomic one between Lila and Reverend Ames. Finally, in *Jack* the division of interest is the racial one between Jack and Della. Taken together, these considerations of difference across the four books demonstrate that Robinson populates her novels with chasms that her characters bridge, but only partially. This coexistence of reconciliation and continued alienation allows Robinson to articulate a vision of Christian community where the knottiness of human affairs is acknowledged, but God’s capacity to smooth out those knots—to create coherence out of disorder—is never foreclosed. The fictional world of Gilead is one where friends and siblings care for but still speak past one another, a place where feelings of belonging and safety are substantive, yet somehow still tenuous. In short, the community of
Marilynne Robinson’s imagination is convinced of the possibility—but not yet transformed by the reality—of total reconciliation.

One religious division that arises early in *Gilead* is between Christianity and atheism, depicted in John and his parents’ relationship with their son and his brother Edward. Even before he arrives at the subject of Edward’s loss of faith, Ames’s descriptions of his brother focus on the ways in which the brothers are different. He mentions that there is a difference of ten years between them, which meant that they hardly interacted as children. Additionally, he notes that Edward knew the three Ames children who died of diphtheria before he was born, which constitutes “another great difference” (24). Finally, we learn that Edward left for college when John was a mere six years old and was away completing first his collegiate, then graduate education for close to twelve years (25). When Edward does finally return, it doesn’t take him long to announce himself as an atheist and thereby offend both of his parents. And yet, there are clear indications that John doesn’t respond to his brother’s atheism in the same way as his parents. When Edward refuses to bless the food because he can no longer “do that in good conscience,” his father loses his temper and leaves the kitchen table and his mother weeps silently. John, however, simply keeps eating (26). Ames also quotes with approval from Ludwig Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*, the very book that Edward gives him to “shock [him] out of [his] uncritical piety” (24). The suggestion of John Ames’s generous approach to his brother Edward is that although he views atheism as an incorrect assumption—“That is [Feuerbach’s] one error, and it is significant”—he does not view it as a threat (24). Instead, in drawing on Feuerbach to explain baptism and calling Edward “a good man,” Ames effectively lowers the stakes of the disagreement between Christianity and atheism and gestures towards a state of affairs where that one difference is real, but not radioactively divisive.

If the differences between John and Edward are slight and easily overcome, the differences between John and Jack Boughton, the disgraced son of his lifelong friend Robert, are steeper and far more difficult to resolve. From the moment Jack arrives in Gilead, there is an obvious tension between him and Reverend Ames, the man for whom he was named. Jack’s sister Glory stops by to let the Reverend know that Jack is home, and Ames writes that “I am grateful for the warning. I will use the time to prepare myself” (86–87). Later, when Jack himself pays a visit, Ames’s discomfort is apparent, and he writes that the day “was a fine one, until I found myself being hoisted
to my feet by that Jack Boughton” (93). There are a few reasons for Ames’s conspicuous distrust of Jack, though the contrast between his interactions with Jack and with everyone else are sufficiently striking to indicate that his reaction is intended to be exaggerated. That is, though it is true that Reverend Ames resents Jack for callously turning his back on something that the Reverend spent most of his life pining after, those motivations are unable to entirely explain the enormity of Ames’s grudge.¹

For instance, when they first meet, Jack tells Ames that he looks “wonderful,” and the Reverend’s embittered response is that “after so many years, the first words out of his mouth would have to be prevarication” (92). Even if Jack was being slightly ironic, it is a gentle irony that hardly constitutes a willful or harmful evading of the truth, which is what Ames perceives it to be. Ames also notes with coldness that Jack is endowed with preacherly mannerisms that he in no way earned, and, somewhat mystifyingly, says that seeing Robert and Jack Boughton together “has been one of the great irritations of my life” (120). Where the religious differences discussed previously were essentially immaterial, the disagreement between Jack Boughton and John Ames—which Ames posits is at least partially religious in labeling Jack a “heathen”—runs deep (120). The upshot is that Robinson cannot be criticized for downplaying the differences between people, an argument that might hold water if the minor disagreements were the only ones that she depicted. Instead, she structures the story around a major and apparently intractable disagreement, a decision that makes the themes of redemption and reunion far more resonant than they would be otherwise. Thus, to the extent that there is a vision of Christian universalism running through Gilead and its companion novels, it is, to borrow the language of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a costly universalism, a universalism that mends brokenness instead of pretending that very little was shattered to begin with (Bonhoeffer 45).

The differences between John Ames and Jack Boughton are at least partially theological. In a conversation on the subject of predestination that reappears in Home, Jack gives voice to a question that is at the heart of his dispute with Reverend Ames, asking, “are there people who are simply born evil, live evil lives, and then go to hell?” (151). The person Jack has in mind is

¹ As a teenager, Jack Boughton impregnated his girlfriend and then abandoned her, whereas Reverend Ames’s first wife Louisa and his daughter Angeline died during childbirth.
himself, and he is trying to make sense of his knack for wrongdoing and his innate sense of alienation. In his reflections, Reverend Ames echoes Jack’s self-conception as someone who might be constitutionally incapable of behaving in righteous ways, writing that “that boy was always alone, always grinning, always intent on some piece of devilment” (181). That Jack’s behavior is a theological issue is rendered even more apparent by Ames’s clarification that “he was always a mystery, and that’s why I worry about him, and that’s why I know I can’t judge him as I might another man” (184). Along with all of the particular reasons for Ames’s distrust of Jack, then, comes a more general frustration at his inability to make religious sense of Jack’s behavior. Jack’s tendency towards theft, lying and malice are problems in themselves, but the larger issue for Ames is the lack of any sort of causal explanation. In sum, the religious division that exists between John Ames and Jack Boughton is rooted in the fact that, as Jack puts it, they do not share a “common language” and thus continually fail to truly connect with one another.

Given that the rift between Jack Boughton and John Ames is primarily theological, it is fitting that their reconciliation be theological in nature as well. As Jack is making his way to the bus that will take him away from Gilead for the final time, Reverend Ames stops him and gives him his copy of The Essence of Christianity, the same book that Edward gave to him upon returning from Germany as a genteel atheist (239). Whereas Edward had given him the book in order to shock him out of his uncomplicated Christianity, John Ames now regifts the book as a gesture of inclusion rather than division. In John Ames, Edward’s attempt to trigger a recognition of the incompatibility of atheism and Christianity becomes an effort to convince Jack that he has a place in a community in which he has always felt alien. After giving Jack the book, Reverend Ames makes two more theological clarifications in order to show Jack that he is less of an outsider than he believes. First, he says that a person can be classified as a believer, even if they’re unable to assent to certain doctrines. Second, he informs Jack that the Greek word for saved “can also mean healed, restored, that sort of thing,” thereby suggesting that if they only dig a little deeper, he and Jack will find that they do indeed share a common language (239). John Ames’s final act of reconciliation is blessing Jack at the bus stop, an event that is so significant that Ames says

2 This is a response to Jack’s earlier admission that “the last form of religious conviction” of which he was capable was his adolescent assumption that “the Lord was someone who lived in the attic and paid for the groceries” (Robinson, 169).
that he would “have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment” (242).

Although the exchange between John Ames and Jack Boughton is significant and meaningful, it is not a cure-all. Jack leaves with a blessing, but he still leaves. Furthermore, he leaves at a time when his father’s death seems imminent, so his grace-filled exit is complicated by yet another shirking of a filial duty. Additionally, his exit is triggered by a realization that Gilead is still too prejudiced to make room for his wife and mixed-race child, a realization that stems in part from Reverend Ames’s failure to grasp that the fire at the town’s African American church might have been an act of arson (171). The upshot is that though *Gilead* depicts the healing of the rift between the two John Ames, that one instance of healing sits alongside a whole host of unaddressed injuries. Thus, the forces of restoration and reconciliation in the novel coexist with rather than triumph over those of division and misunderstanding, a dynamic which gestures towards Robinson’s desire to paint a picture of a world whose problems will not be resolved simply.

*Home*, the second book in the tetralogy, takes place at the same time as *Gilead* and is likewise interested in the ways in which humans are both driven apart and brought together. Unlike the novel that preceded it, however, *Home* is primarily focused on Jack Boughton’s relationship with his family rather than his relationship with John Ames. It tells the story of Jack’s return from the perspective of Glory, his youngest sister, who is serving as her father’s caretaker and is there to welcome Jack when he comes into town. Surprisingly little happens in the novel, and what does happen is frequently recounted in *Gilead* as well. As a result, certain events already described by John Ames acquire greater depth when they are renarrated by Jack, Glory, or Robert Boughton. For instance, in *Gilead*, Reverend Ames senses that his sermon on Abraham and Hagar has been received as a personal attack by Jack, but it is only in *Home* that the reader sees the blow that that sermon was to both Jack and his father. In short, *Home* echoes the themes and storylines of *Gilead*, but does so by way of centering characters who were of secondary importance in the prior novel.

Jack’s alienation from his family is a topic that crops up with no small degree of frequency in *Home*, making it the central rift of the book. Early on, the narrator notes that his siblings were so aware of his otherness that they were extra good just to offset his delinquency, to “compensate for Jack, who was so conspicuously not good as to cast a shadow over their household”
Although his difference is figured in moral terms here, elsewhere it is described in non-normative terms. That is, the problem is not Jack’s evil-doing, but rather the fact that he exhibits “a wry distance” and feels that others are “native to their life” in a way that he can never achieve (249). John Ames strikes a similar chord in Gilead, when he writes that “If I had to choose one word to describe him as he is now, it might be ‘lonely,’ though ‘weary’ and ‘angry’ certainly come to mind also” (Gilead 184). Thus, what we have is a person who, even at home among those who love him, feels very much like an outsider. For Jack, alienation is less a consequence of a particular triggering event than it is an unacquired approach to life, a status that he feels he was born with and is hard-pressed to shake.

When Jack returns home to determine whether Gilead would be a suitable place to live with his wife and raise his mixed-race child, his childhood home is populated by two people, his father and his sister. As the novel progresses, his relationship with the former refuses to move beyond the mutual incomprehension that has plagued their relationship from the beginning, but his relationship with the latter is more hopeful and would seem to contain the possibility of growth and renewal. That is, to the extent that, like Gilead, Home is a story of partial redemption, the partiality component is reflected in his relationship with his father, and the redemption component is reflected in his relationship with Glory.

Although Robert Boughton is hopeful that Jack’s return represents a new beginning, it soon becomes clear that their former patterns of communication are difficult to shake. As Rowan Williams puts it, “Jack and his father clearly love each other, yet are trapped in a painful inarticulacy toward each other” (9). One example of this is that when Jack carries his father from his chair to his bed, which Glory approvingly describes as “a demonstration of your fabled charm,” Robert Boughton receives it as a gesture of disrespect (Home 75). What might have otherwise been a stirring scene of filial regard—the son finally carrying the father who had figuratively carried him his entire life—is instead perceived by the elder Boughton as a commentary on his failing health. He tells Jack that “you just picked me up and carried me . . . I’m not the father you remember, I know that,” causing a surprised and saddened Jack to leave the kitchen table and take a smoke break in the garden (74–75). The barrier between Jack and his father only becomes more pronounced as the story proceeds, with their inability to speak the same language reaching its climax in their final goodbye. Jack tells his father that “I have to go now. I
wanted to say goodbye,” and Robert Boughton responds by refusing to take his outstretched hand, turning away and muttering “Tired of it!” (317). Lest the reader miss the finality of this farewell, Robinson follows it up with an allusion to Isaiah 53, with Jack as the one “from whom men hide their face.” (Robinson 318; Isaiah 53:3). With that reference, the Prodigal Son narrative is supplanted by that of the Suffering Servant, and the possibility of belonging is replaced with notions of grief and exclusion. Again, although *Home* does offer a degree of hope and healing, those things are not to be found in Jack’s relationship with his old and unyielding father.

Instead, the site of redemption in *Home* is the ever-evolving relationship between Jack and Glory, a relationship that begins in resentment, but ultimately moves beyond old grievances to clear-eyed compassion. Salley Vickers gets it just right when she says that “it is the delicate growth of tentative trust between the two siblings which forms the skein of redeeming promise in this otherwise acutely painful narrative of human misunderstanding.” When Jack first returns home, Glory is frustrated by the fact that her father’s attention immediately turns from his loyal caretaker to his problem child, frustration that is compounded by years of living as the youngest daughter in a family where the needs of the sons are privileged over those of the daughters. Sexism aside, Glory’s resentment is also that of the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, who wonders why their steadfastness receives no recompense while their sibling’s repentance merits a feast. Thus, Glory thinks that Jack “ought to have been beautiful, and he was not,” and wonders what “right he had to take over the house this way” (42, 67). Later, though, these negative feelings mature into care and understanding, as when Glory defends Jack against their father’s criticism: “But Jack is here now. His life has been hard. It’s been sad. And he’s home now. He’s come home” (295). Whereas previously Glory’s behavior was that of the insulted older brother, she now adopts the role of the Prodigal Son’s father, clarifying for her father that the only thing that really matters at this point is that “this thy [son] was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:32). Another indication of the improved relationship between Jack and Glory is that Glory has become attuned to Jack’s positive traits, the traits that were long hidden by his adolescent delinquency and loneliness: “These last few days his gentleness had been especially striking to her, and why should it be . . . She would tell the others in case they had forgotten, so that they would all hope someday to know him as well as she did” (310–311). In imagining
herself acting as Jack’s advocate with the rest of the family, Glory reveals that she is aware of Jack’s imminent departure but, unlike her father, will not hold that against him. She will hold him in sacred memory until that moment, sometime in the future, when his son will visit Gilead and Glory will receive him graciously, just as she received his father (324–325).

Just like *Gilead*, *Home* is a story of reconciliation and a drama of redemption, but in much the same way as its sister novel, it is also a story of loose ends and imperfect reunions. Just as in *Gilead*, Jack leaves, and his departure leaves a hole in the family. Furthermore, even though Glory seems happy to keep house in Gilead while her brother returns to the outside world, it is not clear that that agreement is entirely satisfactory. Why does Jack get to leave while Glory has to stay? The book ends with an affirmation of the fact that “the Lord is wonderful,” but the proximate cause for that statement is the imagined homecoming of Jack’s son, Robert, which makes Glory’s happiness contingent on her continued devotion to her brother (325). In one reading, this is a moving act of sisterly kindness, but in another, it just looks like Glory once again inhabiting the role of understudy in the story of her own life. Literary scholar Jennifer Holberg acknowledges the second possibility, but argues that ultimately, Robinson would have us see Glory as “the real presence of God to her family” (293). Regardless of the interpretation one chooses, the restoration on offer is powerful but not all-encompassing.

In keeping with the two books that preceded it, Marilynne Robinson’s 2014 novel *Lila* concerns itself with loss, separation, and reunion, with socioeconomic divisions figuring particularly prominently. *Lila* tells the story of John Ames’s wife, Lila, beginning with her abduction as an infant, passing through her life as an itinerant and then concluding with the birth of her and Reverend Ames’s son, Robbie. The relationship that develops between Lila and John Ames is of particular interest. The socioeconomic realities of their respective upbringings and their life experiences could not be more different. Ames has spent his entire life in the middle-class community of Gilead, Iowa, whereas Lila was born in squalor, abducted into nomadism, and has spent most of her life at the margins of human society. At one point, Lila notes

3 In an essay published a few years before the inauguration of the Gilead series, Robinson wrote that familial reunions are “human” and “beautiful” even if they “yield no dulling of pain, no patching of injuries.” This would seem to suggest that even though the reconciliation in Home is only partially realized, it nevertheless deserves that label.
that “town people thought they were better,” which functions nicely as a summation of the chasm that exists between her and Reverend Ames (Lila 47). As the other two novels would condition us to expect, this chasm is bridged over the course of the novel, but only to a certain extent.

Represented by John and Lila, respectively, the cleavages between the haves and have-nots run all through Lila. Lila’s poverty is evident from the outset of the novel, when, as a child, she is given “a couple of dresses out of flour sacks with holes cut in them for her head and arms” (7). As an adult, the stigma of poverty remains, reflected in Lila’s thought that “this is the very worst part of being broke. Everybody can see how broke you are” (40). Relatedly, Lila alludes to her poverty in acknowledging that some people might assume that she married John Ames “just because [he has] a good house and winter’s coming” (85). Lila’s poverty sits in contrast with John Ames’s material comfort. Although he isn’t wealthy, his housing is guaranteed by his congregation and he has a standing in the community that keeps him from feeling out of place in the way that Lila does. Lila notes that “he was an old preacher and she was a field hand,” speaking both to the apparent incongruence of their partnership as well as to their respective statuses in Gilead (19). They both have a perceived place in the community, but his is as a village elder whereas hers is as a faceless and peripheral functionary. Importantly, and this comes up again and again in Lila, the division in question is not merely an economic one, but rather a socio-economic one. That is, Robinson is interested not merely in what might be termed wealth inequality, but also in the ways in which that disparity shows up in social relations—in the novel, to be poor is to be poor and powerless.

In addition to emphasizing the distance between Reverend Ames’s world and the one that Lila has grown up in, Lila also speaks to the ways in which that distance is lessened by the theological bent that the two share. For instance, both Lila and John Ames are deeply interested in water and are attuned to its religious meanings.4 As a child, Lila enjoys bathing in rivers because of the “good sting of cold in the water sliding over her skin” (37). Then, as an adult, she attempts to literally undo her baptism by bathing in the river (21–22). Similarly, Reverend Ames speaks often of the symbolism

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4 In their shared attraction to water, Ames and Lila reflect the values of their creator, Robinson, who uses her fiction to argue that water “is itself a divine presence, a form of immanence that creates and sustains life, and sometimes destroys it, and remains mysterious no matter how familiar it might seem to us” (O’Connell).
of baptism, and in *Gilead* writes that “water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash” (28). Another theological point of contact between the two characters is that Lila seems to have an experiential understanding of the concepts that Reverend Ames has devoted his ministerial career to considering. In a letter to Lila, Reverend Ames reveals that the experiences of the former have influenced his own religious inquiries, writing that “my faith tells me that God shared poverty, suffering, and death with human beings, which can only mean that such things are full of dignity and meaning” (77). Presumably, John Ames is brought to reflect upon poverty, suffering, and death because Lila’s intimate familiarity with those realities has forced her to reckon with them herself. To summarize, one of the ways in which Robinson allows John Ames and Lila to transcend the socioeconomic barrier between them is by endowing each with a tendency to ask big, existential questions that find their answers in the language and practice of religion.

Although John Ames and Lila forge an authentic and lasting connection as husband and wife, the specters of flight and alienation are never completely banished. On multiple occasions, Lila goes on long walks that Reverend Ames fears are dress rehearsals for a definitive departure, and at one point Lila confesses that “I’m in a strange house with a man who can’t even figure out how to talk with me” (94). Furthermore, the birth of Robbie is followed immediately by speculations of the Reverend’s death in the not-too-distant future (“One day she and the child would watch them lower John Ames into his grave”), speculations which are in turn followed by thoughts of departure on Lila’s end. Just as Doll did with her when she was a young child, Lila might take her son, leave Gilead and “just wander a while” (251). It may be the case that with no husband to hold her back, the siren calls toward movement and placelessness might prove irresistible and “she might just set the child on her hip and walk out into it” (256). Admittedly, the novel doesn’t require that we see this flight in tragic terms, but at the very least, the whisper of a return to vagrancy complicates the themes of homecoming and rootedness. Finally, the loneliness that plagues both John Ames and his wife is never completely neutralized, a state of affairs that echoes a line from Robinson’s first novel, *Housekeeping*, when a character remarks that “love was half a longing of a kind that possession did nothing to mitigate” (*Housekeeping* 12). Marriage is a response to their shared loneliness and sorrow, but it is not a solution. Like the two novels that preceded it, *Lila* imagines a ministry of healing and
reconciliation without presuming to propose a solution to all the forms of brokenness that show up within its pages.

*Jack*, the most recent addition to the Gilead series, returns to a character whose troubles are central to both *Gilead* and *Home*. Of all her characters, Robinson centers no one’s brokenness, alienation, or grief to the extent that she centers Jack’s. The bulk of the narrative in *Jack* takes place some time before the events of *Gilead* and *Home*, and largely concerns itself with Jack’s relationship with Della Miles, meaning that the primary division in the novel is racial. As Jordan Kisner notes, Jack is, from the outside looking in, “intensely thoughtful, a voracious reader, gentle in his manner [and] oddly bewitching,” but “within, he’s steeped in recursive, debilitating self-loathing, which he dulls by getting drunk, though he knows it’s no salve.” This alone is enough to prevent him from connecting with Della, a respectable and churchgoing schoolteacher who isn’t known to frequent drunks, but “that she is a black woman further places a barrier between them, since even if Jack were to exchange the beer bottle for an ordered and virtuous life, racist laws would forbid the marriage.” The division that requires healing, then, is at once psychological and racial, as Jack must be convinced that he can be with Della without doing her great harm, and both Della and Jack must navigate the illicit nature of their relationship.

One thing that stands in the way of Jack and Della committing to a relationship is his conviction that he can do her no good. In a conversation in a St. Louis graveyard that comprises the first eighty-or-so pages of the book, Della attempts to convince Jack that his sense of alienation, his inexplicable strangeness, is perhaps not as singular as he assumes. Jack tells her that he “can’t quite persuade [himself] that [he’s] like most people,” to which Della responds by saying that “most people feel a difference between their real lives and the lives they have in the world” (73). What Della is suggesting is that though Jack’s sense of estrangement is legitimate, he sometimes overemphasizes that aspect of his character in order to ensure that he is sealed off from the rest of humanity. “That’s how you defend yourself,” she tells him, “that’s how you keep yourself at a distance” (74). Della is able to trenchantly diagnose Jack’s condition because she too feels “uneasy and ill-adjusted,” in much the same way that Glory is able to understand him because she too feels broken and misunderstood (Kisner). And it is this understanding, this capacity to look at “absolute Jack” and call him beautiful, that allows her to state, with equal parts eloquence and finality, that “once in a lifetime, maybe,
you look at a stranger and you see a soul, a glorious presence out of place in the world. And if you love God, every choice is made for you. There is no turning away” (208). In Jack, then, the psychological rift between Jack and Della is healed by the latter, who bridges the gap by asserting that it is not as yawning as Jack thinks.5

Although Della and Jack successfully overcome the more substantive issues that might keep them from being together, the racial politics are less easily resolved. Their relationship is illegal in St. Louis, and Della’s family is opposed to her seeing Jack. As Paul Gleason notes, it is striking that the opposition to a mixed-race relationship comes not from Jack’s white family but rather from Della’s Black one. For example, Della’s father tells Jack that he is an advocate of “the practice of separatism” and that “[he] can never be welcome here” (306–307). This familial opposition is paired with the institutional racism that threatens their relationship from the other side, symbolized by the “Eminent Domain [that] will make rubble of the house [Della] lives in, rubble of her church” (271). If they want to stay together, Jack and Della are fated to rootlessness. St. Louis won’t accept them, Della’s Memphis refuses to host Jack and, as is revealed in Gilead and Home, the Gilead of Jack’s childhood won’t suffice either. As a result, they are doomed to spells of cohabitation followed by makeshift accommodations when their secret gets out: “So over all these years we have been back and forth, with her going to Memphis when things were too difficult, for the boy’s sake” (Gilead 228). Jack ends on a relatively upbeat note—“They were together, after their fashion, and the world was all before them, such as it was”—but the fact that Della has been disowned and that previous books in the series speak to the near impossibility of their living together peaceably makes the long-term status of their relationship ambiguous (309). Jack’s alienation has found solace in Della, but Home and Gilead reveal that the specter of otherness hasn’t been banished for good. And Della has stuck with her life partner in spite of the strictures of the day, but she finds that it is not easy to carve out a space for oneself in a country that, to quote James Baldwin, “spells out

5 In undertaking the work of resolving contraries, Della is following in the footsteps of Jack’s father, Robert Boughton, who uses his sermons to “nullify primary distinctions.” Just as Boughton builds towards the assertion that all distinctions are “secondary to a more absolute intention,” Della persuades Jack that the inevitability of their love (“there is no turning away”) is the “absolute intention” which trumps any and all of the differences that would keep them apart.
with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you are a worthless human being” (7). Just as in Gilead, Home, and Lila, then, the divisions in Jack are negotiated and sutured together, but only imperfectly so.

This analysis of two competing themes in Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead tetralogy—division and reunion—is revealing. On the one hand, the four books speak to Robinson’s conviction that, as she first put it in Housekeeping, “everything must finally be made comprehensible,” because “what are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?” (92). In keeping with this notion, a series of relationships that criss-cross the four novels are knit together and made comprehensible, among them the relationship between Jack and John Ames, Jack and Glory, John Ames and Lila, and Jack and Della. John blesses Jack, Glory prepares to receive Jack’s son, Lila remains loyal to John, and Jack and Della commit to an interracial partnership that makes life difficult for both of them, with each one of these instances representing the bridging of some sort of divide, the movement across some sort of border. Whether the barrier is theological, familial, socioeconomic, or racial, time and time again the books offer a way out and a path forward. On the other hand, the books also speak persuasively to another one of Robinson’s favorite themes, namely the idea that our loneliness is inescapable, which is to say the business of reconciliation will always remain unfinished because at his or her core, every human being is a fundamentally unknowable entity. John Ames is speaking for his creator when, in Gilead, he avers that “in every important way we are such secrets from each other,” and that though “we take fortuitous resemblances among us to be actual likeness . . . all that really just allows us to coexist with the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us” (197). Robinson has said as much in her interviews, noting that although “there is a tendency to think of loneliness as a symptom, a sign that life has gone wrong . . . I sometimes think it is the one great prerequisite for depth, and for truthfulness” (Painter 492). Applied to the world of Robinson’s novels, this perspective suggests that the incorrigible lonesomeness that attends some characters—John Ames listening to the radio in the dark or Glory tending a home that her family has deserted—need not always have a negative valence.

There are surely a whole host of explanations for the coexistence of the apparently contradictory strands of dissolution and restoration, but one is that it allows Robinson to make an argument about the type of redemption offered by the God to which she is faithful. This God, as the Reverend tells
Lila over breakfast, is one who has structured existence such that “we have no way to reconcile its elements, because they are what we are given out of no necessity at all except God’s grace in sustaining us as creatures” (Lila 223). Thus, Robinson juxtaposes healing and injury, communion and loneliness, and homecoming and flight precisely because the God of the novels is one whose grace and goodness transcend logic and operate outside of human conceptions of proportion. For Robinson, the scope of God’s regard is so capacious and the reach of his care so absolute that all contraries will be proven and all irregularities smoothed; the threads of suffering that persist in a set of books oriented towards redemption serve to emphasize that conception of the divine.
Works Cited


