

# Marilynne Robinson and theology

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Konferenser 105

KUNGL. VITTERHETS HISTORIE OCH  
ANTIKNITETS AKADEMIEN

*Marilynne Robinson and theology*. Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien (KVHAA). *Konferenser* 105. Stockholm 2021. 219 pp.

#### ABSTRACT

The American author Marilynne Robinson is, in her five novels as much as in her half a dozen collection of essays, not only an accomplished novelist but also a theologian. With a rare depth, she energetically treats central theological, ethical, and philosophical questions, in sharp and challenging essays and in aesthetically advanced and kaleidoscopic novels. The essays in the present volume study, from various perspectives, the intersection between theology and the entire corpus (except for the most recent novel published in 2020) of Robinson's writings. The first section, "On Theology", analyzes her theology from the more general perspectives of poetics, science, and history, whereas the second, "On the Novels", collects contributions that have one of Robinson's three novels *Gilead*, *Home*, or *Lila* as their particular focus. Common to all these essays is the attempt to understand why and how Robinson is one of our age's most celebrated authors on home and homelessness, and on faith, grace and hope in the midst of despair.

#### KEYWORDS

Marilynne Robinson, theology, theopoetics, history, Calvinism, faith, homelessness

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ISBN 978-91-88763-25-9

ISSN 0348-1433

Publisher: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien  
(KVHAA, The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities)  
Box 5622, SE-114 86 Stockholm, Sweden  
[www.vitterhetsakademien.se](http://www.vitterhetsakademien.se)

Distribution: eddy.se ab, Box 1310, SE-621 24 Visby, Sweden  
<http://vitterhetsakad.bokorder.se>

Cover image: Charles Melville Dewey, *The Harvest Moon*, Smithsonian  
American Art Museum

Graphic design: Bitte Granlund/Happy Book

Printed in Sweden by DanagårdLiTHO, Ödeshög, 2021



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# The children are always lost: Marilynne Robinson and the poetics of theology

## THE EXPERIMENT

Almost a decade ago I was fortunate enough to take part in a unique experiment. Marilynne Robinson, whose work as a writer, cultural critic, and Christian thinker was already widely celebrated, agreed to spend nearly a month with a small group of theologians. The intention was to help us become better writers. In the long liminal years between *Housekeeping*<sup>1</sup> and *Gilead*<sup>2</sup> her vocation had been to inspire and teach creative writing. The challenge was to see whether the skills and insights that she had carefully nurtured in others could be fostered in us. Her commitment to this project was very deep for two reasons. First, she loved theology – intensely. Second, she was deeply concerned that this holy enterprise was not flourishing. As she stated “With all respect for theologians and scholars of the modern period, my brothers and sisters in Christ [...] the vision of Christ, of Jesus of Nazareth, they have retrieved out of the tempests and the droughts of their period is gravely impoverished”.<sup>3</sup>

We met in Princeton. We sat around a huge polished wood table each morning until lunchtime. We listened to her. We presented our own work and we struggled together with its form and content. It was an intimate privilege to be in such prolonged proximity to Robinson and witness her thinking aloud on many issues. There were many deep and insightful moments. However, there was also an uneasy sense that the challenges and concerns we identified in our theological work did not quite correspond to her own. We were approaching theology instrumentally – seeking to engage tradition for ecclesial or emancipatory ends. Robinson had a rather different approach. “You must

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson 1981 (UK edition).

<sup>2</sup> Robinson 2005a (UK edition).

<sup>3</sup> Robinson 2016, 189.

return to doctrine”, she said. “It is beautiful. You must write it beautifully”. We heard but we did not understand what she meant and our conversations returned again and again to the unresolved question, “What *is* this theological-writing-thing we are supposed to be doing?” In this chapter I return again to this challenge – but this time attempting to comprehend it from the perspective of my teacher. I am asking “What form does theology take for Robinson?” And, more particularly, “How does her literary writing offer a means to understand her theological vision?”

### SPIRITUAL GIFTS

As I begin to approach this topic I note a self-evident fact I believe is important in coming to an understanding of her theological vision. Robinson is a popular writer. I mark it because it is so very unusual for a profoundly religious author to have such widespread appeal. We live in an age of culture wars in which aesthetic tastes are frequently elided with fiduciary frameworks and mobilized antagonistically against those whose belief systems differ from our own. Furthermore, her writing addresses mid-century domestic piety and dwells on themes that could appear parochially Presbyterian or period-bound. And yet somehow Robinson manages to speak to her many believing and unbelieving readers in a manner that provokes emotional response and intellectual respect from both camps. So, for example, fellow novelist Neel Mukherjee celebrates *Gilead* as a book of, “spiritual intensity [...] You might not share its faith, but it is difficult not to be awed, moved, and ultimately humbled by the spiritual effulgence that lights up the novel from within.”<sup>4</sup> From a theological perspective Rowan Williams similarly testifies to the breadth of her appeal: “She has brilliantly voiced a story [...] – unmistakably a Christian story, but [...] [its] moral acuity and insistence on what it means to allow the voiceless to speak give it a [...] weight well beyond any confessional limits.”<sup>5</sup>

There are, no doubt, many reasons for Robinson’s ability to reach such a wide audience. I will note two that I consider particularly important. The first is that Robinson is, in every respect, a serious writer who offers serious gifts to her readers. Significantly these gifts appear to coincide with their own sense of loss or lack.

Cultural critics, particularly those from the United States, are thankful for the way she offers back to them the heterogeneous spiritual, poetic, and political traditions that form the heritage of this country. So Professor of the Practice of Literary Criticism, James Wood, states that “*Gilead* is a beautiful book, demanding, grave and lucid

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4 Mukherjee in Spinks 2017, 147.

5 Williams 2014.

[...] suffused with a Protestant bareness [...] [and] the American religious spirit that produced those bareback religious writers, Emerson, Thoreau and Melville”.<sup>6</sup> This is a heritage, he implies, that is particularly to be prized in our own intellectually darkened times. Professor of American Literature Sarah Churchwell ventures that Robinson’s theological commitments may not *actually* be incompatible with the pragmatism and scepticism that characterize American radical thought. The works embody a yearning for right relations amongst people and deep, integral connections with the wild forces of the natural world. This being the case, “the Gilead novels can be read as an act of national and cultural recovery, resurrecting powerful ghosts to remind America of a forgotten moral lineage”.<sup>7</sup>

Christian commentators approaching Robinson’s work also celebrate its restorative power. She gracefully bestows on them the sense that it is defensible (ethically, intellectually, and aesthetically) to be a person of faith. Many religious reviewers go on to note her stories have biblical references, theological themes, and present believing characters as if they might have some wisdom to contribute to the world rather than being the dangerous dupes of reactionary forces. Some delight to have Barth and Calvin as vital presences in the texts; as a central character in the *Gilead* trilogy, Lila, remarks to her clergy husband Ames, the way you talk about Calvin, “I had no idea he was dead”.<sup>8</sup> Others claim to identify the literary expression of a panoramic redemptive vision which provides an arc of meaning transporting us from exile to home again echoing the meta-narrative of Christian doctrine. Fewer note the troubling and challenging theological questions that Robinson’s novels articulate with audacious, imaginative power – *but some do*.<sup>9</sup> All are united in the experience of exalting in being able to breathe fresh air. In the space of the *Gilead* texts theological issues are not closeted away in shaded and stuffy places but brought into conversation with themes that normal people care about: big political themes like racism and poverty as well as the exquisite pain of familial and domestic relations.

So part of Robinson’s appeal is as a serious writer able to restore to secular and religious readers alike a sense of heritage, values, and intellectual worth in a period when all of these appear under threat. Or, to put this another way, she appeals firstly through the power of nostalgia – often treated as a negative word but I do not use it in a negative sense. In a perceptive article on Robinson, Sinead McDermott<sup>10</sup> argues that her

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6 Wood 2004.

7 Churchwell 2014.

8 Robinson 2014, 131. After this article was written a fourth novel in the Gilead series, *Jack*, was published in 2020.

9 Potts 2017.

10 McDermott 2004.

writing is structured around a reflective nostalgia which – although it looks back and mourns what appears to be lost (or occluded) in contemporary experience – does so as a means of enabling restorative imagination and mobilizing yearning for transformation. However, I do not believe that Robinson's theological contribution can be understood simply as nostalgic, even in-a-good-sense. Nor does nostalgia alone sufficiently explain Robinson's wide appeal. Her writing also seems to construct a spiritual space for her readers; a space in which they are able to be differently attentive to the sacred resonances of the world – and to wonder at them. And so I turn to a second reason I believe her writing is so widely attractive. That is her poetics; the issue of creative form in her writing. As I seek to explore her theological perspective further Robinson's poetics will form the main focus of this chapter.

### POETIC PROBES

In a number of interviews and essays Robinson has described how she began to construct her first novel, *Housekeeping*. During her doctoral studies she had immersed herself in the work of great 19th-century American writers such as Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman. Most particularly she had become absorbed in the work of the transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau – all good, serious authors who themselves transgress borders between the sacred and the secular. One thing that struck her particularly during these studies was the way in which these authors used strong metaphors not as literary adornments but as epistemological probes. She writes that they enabled her to understand that metaphor might be seen “as a highly legitimate strategy for real epistemological questions to be dealt with in fiction and poetry [...] that reality must somehow be describable as linked through analogue”. Furthermore, “the discovery of anything that seems communicative, that satisfies the mind, that is emblematic or that answers to the mind [...] [represents] an opening”.<sup>11</sup>

Robinson here is clearly not employing metaphor in a limited, technical sense. Rather she is adopting a distinctly Emersonian way of proceeding in writing. Emerson called on his contemporaries to abandon rotten, decadent, literary rhetoric and “fasten words again to visible things”.<sup>12</sup> This is because he considered that it was through a deep and rapt engagement with the world around us, the natural world in particular, that humanity achieves self-understanding and learns of God. For Emerson there are no natural elements, no tides and motions, that are not in analogous relations with

11 Robinson in Chodat 2017, 350.

12 Bergthaller 2007, 82–83.



spiritual realities. So the world is animate with symbols and attention to this fact not only enables us to address real epistemological questions – it even opens up for us the possibility of participation in the life of the divine.

To give an example. An important metaphor for Emerson (and also for Robinson) is water. Attention to the fluid movement of water is attentiveness to a marvellous divine motion not only in nature but in the minds and souls of people. As Nina Baym writes for Emerson, “The continual replacement of water in bodies through circulation suggests the continual refreshing influx of spirit from the source, as well as the perpetual motion of embodied spirit towards the source”.<sup>13</sup> And so, Emerson states, “The waters of the great deep have ingress and egress to the soul”.<sup>14</sup> What is being presented here is a profound vision of the interpenetration of matter and spirit, and Emerson’s analogical writing method forges links between them in order to present the world as a totality – unified and animated by the divine spirit. This interpenetration, to quote Baym further, “turns the whole world into miracle”.<sup>15</sup> Robinson was deeply inspired by this approach. She began to note and write down things she thought of as metaphors, and discovered that they appeared to cohere together, bind together as atoms do to create compound forms – and it was out of this process of analogical thinking and deep connective symbolization that her fiction emerged – from what she describes as the “deep integral use of metaphor”.<sup>16</sup>

Writing that contains dominant metaphors repeated, revisited, and realized in many forms generates that lucid, reflective, and “spiritual” quality that many of Robinson’s readers cherish. Of course if you work in this way economy is called for. You should not proliferate images to excess but rather forge a limited symbolic repertoire from which to constantly and creatively improvise. As other commentators have noted there are in Robinson’s work a number of major tropes – and these are consistent throughout her oeuvre. Amongst these would be, just to take some key examples: the town of Gilead itself; transient people like Sylvie, Ruthie, Jack, Lila; water – a major metaphor; and, I would add, not only prodigal sons but many, many lost children. Children who are rejected and abandoned. Children who are wounded, missing, or dead.

So, the second major factor in Robinson’s appeal as I understand it is the multi-layered poetic construction of a symbolic world full of deepening analogies which the reader sometimes notices but often simply absorbs and experiences as satisfying. And crucially they are satisfying in a spiritual sense. As Hungerford has it, Robinson’s po-

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<sup>13</sup> Baym 1966, 236.

<sup>14</sup> Emerson 1984 [1841], 426.

<sup>15</sup> Baym 1966, 236.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson in Owens 2007.

etic strategy is “to knit up a broken world through simile and analogy,”<sup>17</sup> making each local landscape, each common or domestic encounter a re-engagement with a cosmic mystery. But a deepening sense of wonder in the everyday commerce of life, however lyrically achieved, might soon appear contrived, overly pious, and become alienating to the contemporary reader. By and large we are not 19th-century transcendentalists seeking the forms of harmony Emerson reaches towards. Our sensibilities react against moral and aesthetic closure. It is thus important that Robinson’s readers are not only offered a warming sense of spiritual uplift but also touch the ragged edges of tragedy through her writing. The sense of wonder she communicates is counterbalanced by the depths of sorrow, pity, and pathos she evokes. And again I believe her poetics offers the key to understanding how this is achieved.

#### SYMBOLS THAT SPEAK BUT DO NOT SAY

To go back again to the major tropes and devices I previously listed: all of them are profoundly unstable, ambivalent; capable of signifying differently. Gilead is a place of balm and kindness. But it has sunk to the very depths of hell in its racism. Or again, to be a transient is to wander in the cold and darkness, unhomed and always on the outside of brightly lit domestic life. But to be a transient is to move freely in the wilderness where the spirit also dwells. As Emerson states in his essay on Swedenborg, “The Eden of God is bare and grand [...] we pity those who can forego the magnificence of nature for candle light and cards”.<sup>18</sup>

As stated, water plays a major symbolic role in Robinson’s works. It is the dominant metaphor in *Housekeeping*, which is set in the town of Fingerbone established beside a deep lake. The water can show a calm countenance “permeated by sunlight [...] green life and innumerable fish”.<sup>19</sup> But below the warm shallows lie the deeps; lightless and airless. “Sometimes in the spring this old lake will return. One will open a cellar door to waddling boots floating tallowy soles up and planks and buckets bumping at the threshold [...] The earth will brim, the soil will become mud and then silty water, and the grass will stand in chill water to its tips.”<sup>20</sup> Here we have water symbolizing primeval power that cannot be prevented from welling up and flooding human dwellings. People drown in this water and are lost. Biblical images of creation, chaos, and flood are transported into Robinson’s text and mingle here

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17 Hungerford 2010, 120.

18 Emerson 1987 [1850], 72.

19 Robinson 1981, 9.

20 Robinson 1981, 5.

with literary images from Melville's *Moby-Dick*<sup>21</sup> and Kate Chopin's *Awakening*.<sup>22</sup>

In the novel *Gilead* water takes on a kinder aspect. The lyrical fluidity of Emerson and Thoreau meets with biblical images of overflowing cups, wells and springs flowing out of barren rock, the waters of life run freely – renewing and refreshing. The work is resplendent with spring showers, children making rainbows, streams and bathing, fertile waters that bless lovers, and the advent of Lila out of the rain – redeeming love and life for Ames. However, it must be stressed that water in both novels can, and does, turn and become its opposite – it is never straightforwardly one thing or another. In Robinson's fourth novel *Lila* the symbol is profoundly ambivalent throughout. So Lila poised between Gilead and the wild is baptized and then seeks water to cleanse herself of this baptism. A "baptism" of ice-water provokes a gasp and cry from her child after its perilous birth. However, baptism itself stands as much for fearful, legalistic, ludicrous approaches to faith as it does for renewal and rebirth. Feeling confined by Gilead and longing for wildness and wandering again, Lila imagines herself as wading out into an icy flood that freezes but also cleanses to the very bone.

#### PARENTS AND PRODIGALS

I have argued that Robinson's poetics, employing "the deep integral use of metaphor", mobilizes a restricted range of key symbols that give resonance and coherence to her writing. These metaphors carry biblical and literary allusions and affects into her texts in explicit and intuited ways. The books are resonant and echoing. I have also argued that her key symbols are made to signify variously. She is no poststructuralist but difference and deferral are words that could be used here; each symbol carries its own "other" into the text, destabilizing assumed meanings. This results, as Potts states, in poetic work does not depend "upon the fixed correspondence between signs and their referents – upon stable definitions – but upon the freedom of signs to signify in novel and creative ways, to look for and create new meanings".<sup>23</sup> The metaphors are animate and they are in motion. To explore this matter further I now turn to the images of lost children in Robinson's writing. I believe the power of metaphor to act as epistemological probe emerges with particular force in relation to this constantly recurring symbol.

For Robinson the child/parent relation within the Christian tradition is not only significant, it is the "major metaphor for the situation of a human being in the world

21 Melville 2004 [1851].

22 Robinson wrote an introduction to the reissued version of this classic work of feminist fiction. See Robinson 1988.

23 Potts 2017, 490.

relative to God”.<sup>24</sup> This being the case clearly there is great literary and theological resonance to be gained from the deployment of images that evoke this relation. As Wood argues, Robinson mobilizes in her fiction many of the major biblical stories of fathers and sons – and particularly the narrative of the prodigal son, “most loved because most errant”.<sup>25</sup> However, whilst these intertextual references are certainly present and active they do not function in the manner that might be anticipated or, indeed, in the way we assume they will when we first encounter them. So in the Gilead trilogy we meet the two engaging, ageing clerics, Ames and Boughton, whose piety, intellectual integrity, ability to quote scripture and poetry as well as their deep care for each other dispose us to trust and respect them. Because they *speak of God* and we assume they *speak for God* and in wrestling with the return of the wanderer Jack we expect them to behave eventually as forgiving and welcoming fathers to this lost child. We want this to be the story of the prodigal son that comforts and restores us. Some Christian commentators, for example Alison Jack,<sup>26</sup> do read it in this way. For her the novel *Gilead* functions as a supplement and complement to “Both the parable and the narrative of salvation [which] rely on the movement from the heights to the depths, from home to the far country and back again”.<sup>27</sup>

Ames is particularly attractive to readers because of his whimsical but earthy mysticism and his Emersonian capacity to see wonder in the everyday. Todd Shy states he is that rare literary character who exhibits “simple, complete piety”.<sup>28</sup> However, although his presence is luminous and subtly compelling, Robinson gradually leads us to perceive another side to Ames’ character. She reveals his willed ignorance concerning the racism of his community (particularly in regard to the burning of the black church), his narrow mindedness, woolly-mindedness, and the bitterness he harbours towards Jack his godson and namesake. Ames’ friend Boughton is less sympathetic from the outset but we still *want* to believe his professions of love for Jack his son and his lost illegitimate granddaughter. We strive to understand and excuse his failures in forgiveness and his legalistic concerns for who might, or might not be, be included in the family of God.

Robinson is less charitable in her judgement of these men. For her Jack represents the challenging advent of grace/judgement in Gilead and in portraying him thus she spectacularly turns the tables on her readers and confounds our expectations. As Rebecca Painter writes when Ames “realizes and acknowledges that the man he has al-

24 Robinson 2005b.

25 Wood 2008.

26 Jack 2018.

27 Jack 2018, 112.

28 Shy 2007, 251.

ways perceived as the bane of his best friend's and his own existence, is actually a loving husband and father and a good man, [this] is the miraculous high point of Robinson's novel".<sup>29</sup> Jack, the son whom Robinson loves, is portrayed as having overcome the parochial curse of Gilead. Although living a wilderness existence that is by no means innocent or entirely virtuous, he is deeply loving towards his black partner Della and their child; toward his father and his sister and even towards the home where he is not, and never has been, at home. He wants to return to Gilead with his family (Iowa is one of the few places in the US in the 1950s where miscegenation laws do not apply) but as all three novels make clear neither Ames or Boughton have the capacity to envisage that such a return might be possible. Marking his narrative as truly tragic, Jack is never able to disclose the truth of his goodness to his father who continues to believe him lost and wasted. So Robinson states:

I have changed the terms of the parable [...] In the biblical story the prodigal has squandered money and consorted with prostitutes, and he is brought home by sheer destitution [...] The prodigal [...] leave[s] his old life behind him. Jack brings his to Gilead – in the form of loss and loneliness and also hope, and a painful and precious secret [...] His father cannot absolve him of the pain and difficulty of his life, and Jack does not expect him to. He comes home seeking help in restoring a good life he had made, which has been destroyed by the pressures of law and social custom. I suppose people take the issue [in the novel] to be forgiveness because they think about Jack's youth rather than about his present situation. But really he is bringing judgment home with him, and he finds himself continually having to forgive his father and to love him graciously [...] despite all.<sup>30</sup>

There are many clues to the grace which is also judgement Jack brings with him to Gilead in the trilogy of novels. Some are subtle. So at the close of *Gilead* when a chastened Ames says "I'll pray, and then I'll sleep,"<sup>31</sup> we might read this as an ordinary statement from a pious old man who has had a tiring day. Or alternatively we might interpret it as an elegiac reference to his long years of prayer and his forthcoming sleep in death. But these words, chosen by a writer who is also a Shakespearian scholar, are a direct quote from *King Lear*. They are spoken at a dramatic turning point in the play when Lear realizes how at fault he has been in neglecting the plight of the unhoused ones like poor Tom; the destitute of his kingdom. "Oh," Lear realizes, "I have ta'en / Too little care of this!"<sup>32</sup> So Ames, we who cannot help love him are glad to discover, is not beyond achieving at last an understanding of his own culpability. Some of Robinson's markers of judgement are not as subtle as this. "Jesus Christ",

29 Painter 2011, 229.

30 Painter 2009, 487.

31 Robinson 2005a.

32 See William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 3 Scene 4, lines 27–33.

Jack exclaims in *Home*, voicing outrage and passionate protest at television footage of police brutally turning dogs and water cannon against black protestors. That kind of language “has never been acceptable in this house”,<sup>33</sup> says his father in a deeply ironic judgement on his own inability to name Christ in relation to issues of unjust human suffering – although he evokes his name piously in almost every other circumstance.

To remain with the much-debated prodigal son theme a little longer, what is particularly revealing about the relation between Jack and his two fathers is that he asks them theological questions. He has read theology. He understands in broad terms the teachings of Calvin, the thinking of Barth, and he has been trying and failing to find theological answers to his own questions about the tragic alienation that has marked his life. However, the two old men who delight in nothing more than discussing the subtle intricacies of doctrine between themselves on the porch in long summer evenings cannot make any meaningful replies to his questions on matters of faith. They consider them irreverent traps – they cannot turn their precious doctrines into words of life. The holy formulas they exchange incessantly to each other don’t make any sense when they are voiced to Jack. It is only his sister Glory, herself an outsider, and Lila, a fellow wanderer and transient now married to Ames, who can speak real words of love, forgiveness, and hope to him. Glory tells Jack that she certainly can forgive him past wrongs (so why not God, why not his father?) and Lila tells him things can change, really change, “Everything can change”.<sup>34</sup>

### MOTHERS OF THE LOST

The overwhelming weight of critical attention to the symbol of the lost child in Robinson is devoted to the father/son relation and the question of forgiveness. However, as I seek to approach Robinson’s theology through her poetics I find that the motif of the lost child is opened out in far-reaching and differently challenging ways by attending to Robinson’s female characters. Through these women Robinson imports a whole other set of biblical images into her fictional texts. We now recall the ancient biblical narratives of barren women who long for children: Sarah, Rebecca, Hannah, Elizabeth. We hear frightening echoes of children as “sacrifices” in a masculine divine economy and remember the knife held to Isaac’s throat, the annihilation of the children of Job, the massacre of the innocents, and Rachel weeping for her children because they are not. However, alongside these dark images there are annunciations, visitations, restorations; dead children are brought back to life<sup>35</sup> and weeping

33 Robinson 2008, 97.

34 Robinson 2005a, 174.

35 Recalling the raising of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:21–43, Matthew 9:18–26, Luke 8:40–56).

mothers reunited with their offspring – as in this poetic passage from *Housekeeping*: “Lott’s wife was salt and barren, because she was full of loss and mourning and looked back. But here rare flowers would gleam in her hair [...] and there would be children all around her, to love and marvel at her for her beauty”.<sup>36</sup> In fact there is such an abundance and richness in the feminine symbolics of the lost child in Robinson’s work that, within the limits of this chapter, I will focus principally upon the character of Lila particularly as presented in the fourth Gilead novel.<sup>37</sup> However, I will refer to other characters and other novels in order to show how certain metaphors and symbols are enduring, and indeed gather in momentum, as they are developed throughout Robinson’s oeuvre.

The novel *Lila* opens with the narrative of a little girl who has been locked out at night, for many nights; a story that is beyond painful to read.

The child was just there on the stoop in the dark, hugging herself against the cold. All cried out and nearly sleeping. She couldn’t holler anymore and they didn’t hear her anyway, or they might and that would make things worse [...] There was a moon staring straight at her, and there were sounds in the woods.<sup>38</sup>

Starved, sick, and scratched by the cats who lived under the stoop, Lila is almost dead and is certainly then, and possibly forever, lost to the safe domestic world of warm light and candles. So, Lila is a later type of Ruthie from Robinson’s first novel *Housekeeping* who is painfully exiled from her familial and communal roots, from home and hearth. Like Ruthie, Lila is pictured as an outcast victim and *also* as someone who gains wisdom from her exile and who finds, in Emersonian terms, the dangerous outdoor life to be one of intense sensory perception, fundamental passions, and piercing vision – there are keys to understanding existence that can only be found here.

Like Jack, Lila brings her knowledge as a form of grace to Gilead. She uneasily (and we must never forget temporarily) finds love and rest beside Ames and becomes the mother of his beloved son. However, she never ceases to be the voice of the lost child challenging his customary norms and theological understanding. Her challenge is sometimes practical. She brings lost children to memory: quite literally by clearing and marking the grave of Ames’ first baby who died shortly after birth. She also tends the neglected grave of Jack’s illegitimate daughter. In a parable within a parable Lila

<sup>36</sup> Robinson 1981, 153.

<sup>37</sup> This means leaving out, for example, the important theme of Glory’s relations with Jack’s living and dead children in *Home*. It also entails limiting discussion of the huge significance of this theme in Robinson’s first novel *Housekeeping*.

<sup>38</sup> Robinson 2014, 3.

also meets a lost child, a true prodigal son in desperate need and running from the law. She gives him money, food, and clothing. When the clerics Boughton and Ames meet the same boy their fear and judgement scare him away.

But Lila's challenge is not only practical. In some of the most important passages of the book Lila discovers stories of lost children in the Bible and begins to challenge Ames about their plight. She is particularly fascinated by the passages in which Job's children are killed by an act of God, swept away by a wind that breaks down the walls of their dwelling.<sup>39</sup> She also ponders deeply upon verses in Ezekiel about a baby cast out at birth:

And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water [...] None eye pitied thee [...] to have compassion upon thee; but thou wast cast out in the open field [...] in the day that thou wast born. And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto [...] "Live"; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, "Live".<sup>40</sup>

Lila questions Ames insistently about this text.

There's a baby cast out in a field, just thrown away, and it is God who picks her up. But why would God let somebody throw her out like that in the first place?<sup>41</sup>

But if God really has all that power why does He let children get treated so bad? Because they are sometimes. That's true.<sup>42</sup>

Does he [Calvin] say anything about why a child would be treated so bad in the first place?<sup>43</sup>

When Ames inadequately answers that Calvin "says basically that people have to suffer to really recognize grace when it comes",<sup>44</sup> this is not accepted: "A baby like that one in the Bible, just born, it wouldn't feel what it was to have somebody take it up. Or it wouldn't remember well enough to know the difference. So there wouldn't be no point in the suffering".<sup>45</sup> While Ames theologizes further about the meaning of the passage in relation to covenant and idolatry she sticks to her guns. "A child is just a child. It can't help what happens or doesn't happen to it."<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, she remem-

39 Job 1:19.

40 Ezekiel 16:4–6.

41 Robinson 2014, 129.

42 Robinson 2014, 129.

43 Robinson 2014, 131.

44 Robinson 2014, 131.

45 Robinson 2014, 131.

46 Robinson 2014, 135.



bers, it was not a pious believer who bent down to rescue the child she was, unwashed, rank, and unloved, but another transient and homeless person.

So Lila speaks the theological challenge of the lost child to Ames in direct and forthright ways. And she also bears to him a child who cannot be sheltered and made safe. This is an undernoted theme in the trilogy and one which I shall return to later. I will state at this point not only is the birth perilous but we are casually informed in all three Gilead novels that Ames cannot provide any security for the son of his late years. The prodigal cleric has already squandered his substance on expensive theological books from far countries and has nothing at all for his widow and son to inherit when he dies. Gilead, we already know, is definitely not to be trusted as a place of refuge for the widow, orphan, or stranger. Lila contemplating her child's uncertain future remembers how they placed the near-lifeless newborn in her arms: "That orphan he was first he always would be, no matter how they loved him. He'd be no child of hers otherwise".<sup>47</sup>

#### GRIEF AND GRACE

In the above passage we see Lila is not only herself a lost child; as the carer for and advocate of lost children she also becomes in some sense their mother. It is important to note here that while the theme of lost children is always for Robinson an issue of justice and of care, always, it is never only that. This is an analogical symbol that speaks a spiritual reality. So there are many passages in the book *before* Lila gives birth, when she mourns for children who are unborn, not present, lost in a different sense. A pivotal passage in the novel is her car drive at night across states to Gilead. Lila and the woman who offers her a lift both share intimate secrets of denied motherhood. They speak the unnamed grief of this loss that is not a loss. This scene evokes many similar ones in *Housekeeping* in which the theme of needing to mother and yet being unable to mother lost children is elaborated upon in more detail again and again. This is a typical passage:

[Grandma once] told us, she dreamed that she had seen a baby fall from an airplane and had tried to catch it in her apron, and once she had tried to fish a baby out of a well with a tea strainer. Her mother she told us, knew a woman who, when she looked out of her window at night, often saw the ghosts of children crying by the road. These children, who were sky black and stark naked and who danced with the cold and wiped their tears with the back of their hands and the heels of their hands furious with hunger, consumed much of the woman's substance and most of her thoughts [...] Sometimes it seemed to me my grandmother saw our black souls dancing in the moonless cold and offered us deep-dish apple pie as a gesture of well-meaning and despair.<sup>48</sup>

47 Robinson 2014, 255.

48 Robinson 1981, 25–26.

This evocative scene precedes Ruthie's visionary experience of herself searching for dead children. This point marks her own acceptance that she will live safe and sheltered. It marks her entry into wilderness life:

Children had been sleeping in this fallen house. Soon I would uncover the rain-stiffened hems of their nightshirts, and their small, bone feet, the toes all fallen like petals. Perhaps it was already too late to help. They had lain under the snow for far too many winters. [...] [but there were no children trapped in the ruin]. They were light and spare and thoroughly used to the cold and it was almost a joke to them to be cast into the woods, even if their eyes were gone and their feet were broken.<sup>49</sup>

This vision is epiphanic, theological for Ruthie. It gives her a new credo. A statement of faith with which the book concludes; *all the lost children though they appear unable to walk are travelling home*.

The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to be an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return. So [...] – there will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine.<sup>50</sup>

Robinson was a much older, and decidedly more Calvinist author, when she penned *Lila* than when she wrote *Housekeeping* – but the later novel makes the very same concluding point. Lila has her own epiphany and it is very similar indeed to Ruthie's. Waiting in the church for Ames to join her after the baptism of their son, she reflects on Boughton's comic insistence that the little baby, his godson, must be baptized as soon as possible to ensure its home in the community of faith and place in heaven. Lila thinks that heaven can't be conceived of in this closed and barred way. Heaven must be ludicrously open because of the love we bear for each other and the longing that this love creates which itself redeems the desolation of all loss. In Lila's visionary imagining every prodigal that ever lived had better be pulled into heaven because otherwise their mother would mourn them; indeed the whole of China might well be swept up into eternity simply because Boughton was rather troubled on its behalf. And what about the other lost children? "If any scoundrel could be pulled into heaven to make his mother happy, it couldn't be fair to punish scoundrels who happened to be orphans, or whose mother didn't even like them",<sup>51</sup> she reasons. As she remembers the many transient people she has met on the road she dares to believe that each and every one of them will astonished to find themselves

49 Robinson 1981, 158–159.

50 Robinson 1981, 192.

51 Robinson 2014, 259.

touched by grace and brought home. Grace; “There was no end to it. Thank God, as the old men would say”.<sup>52</sup>

In this lyrical and mystical ending to the novel Lila reflects upon an intuition of grace she has received that Ames cannot yet grasp: “Someday she would tell him what she knew”<sup>53</sup> are the final lines. However, hers is not the knowledge of someone who is settled now, brought back inside and made safe at home. Someday very soon, and taking her son with her, Lila knows that she will set out again on the road again. The boy would realize he had no place in Gilead and she would say “It don’t matter, We’ll just wander for a while. We’ll be nowhere and it will be alright. I have friends there.”<sup>54</sup> At this point we should remember that this young son is the one addressed throughout the first novel as well as at the end of this one. He functions, in a sense, as the reader also; the one to whom the messages of these texts are being addressed. We are on the road too, we are outcast in wild places. This is Lila’s/Robinson’s testimony to us:

All the tangles and knots of bitterness and desperation had to be pitied. No better grace had to fall on them [...] That is how it is. Lila had borne a child into a world where a wind could rise that would take him from her arms as if there were no strength in them at all. Pity us yes, but we are brave she thought, and wild, more life in us that we can bear, the fire unfolding itself in us.<sup>55</sup>

#### GRACE AND GLORY

The challenge I set myself in this chapter was to interrogate Robinson’s poetics in order now to ask “What form does theology take for Robinson?” And, more particularly, “How does her literary work offer a means to approach her theological vision?” I argued that she has created a coherent analogical poetics, that initially drew upon Emerson but now draws much more upon her own aesthetic interpretation of God’s glory manifest in the world employing the insights of Calvin. Integral metaphors recur throughout her work linking the material world and human relations to spiritual truths. What is particularly interesting about the symbols she employs and the manner in which she employs them is that their meanings are mobilized in ways that are challenging and confounding. As Robinson stated in an interview in 2005, “both poetry and theology push conventional definitions and explore perceptions that might be ignored or passed off as conventional, but when they are pressed yield much larger

52 Robinson 2014, 260.

53 Robinson 2014, 261.

54 Lila imagines him looking at the graves of his father and his first family and realizing that there was no space left for them to rest there. Robinson 2014, 251.

55 Robinson 2014, 260.

meanings, seem to be part of a much larger system of reality”.<sup>56</sup> Her poetics appears conventional and is often read as such – but it is not. It yields much larger meanings.

Further, I have argued, the symbol of the lost child is particularly important for Robinson in theological terms. It is the dominant trope for exploring relations between the divine and the human, it awakens a concern for social justice and compassion – but more than this. Particularly in the feminine register she employs through the characters of Ruthie, Glory, and Lila, it institutes an alternative divine economy in which absence and loss are met by grace. Actually more than this. The absence and loss in themselves appear to be somehow the vehicles of grace.

Latterly in her essays Robinson has begun to quote from a favourite medieval dream poem titled ‘Pearl’. It narrates the story of a man whose beloved daughter died in childhood. He encounters her again in visions of a beautiful young woman dwelling serenely in a paradise he cannot yet enter. It contains the lines “My soul by grace of God has fared, venturing where marvels be.” In the wilds and wastes of grief a glory is revealed. These lines sum up Robinson’s mature faith and theological understanding. If she has a favourite word it would be grace. A favourite understanding of that would be the unprecedented work of God that restores *in beauty* (it is fundamentally an aesthetic act) that which has been lost. So she writes:

[‘Pearl’] speaks beautifully and tellingly of such loss, acknowledging a depth of grief that is, finally, embraced in the consolations of a cosmic order that is as tender and profound as such sorrows would require. We might call this wish fulfilment, the projection of human hopes on an empty heaven. Or we might call it a vision of Being that is large and rich enough to accommodate the experience of human love and grief. The beauty we see in this world is a sign and portent of an ultimate beauty, and we are rightly enthralled by it.<sup>57</sup>

This is a wild and brave vision. Matthew Potts<sup>58</sup> is one of the few critics who have come near to approaching it in their work on Robinson. He compares Robinson’s poetics to the understanding of sacrament in the work of Rowan Williams. For Williams material signs and sacraments do not so much locate and then communicate the presence of God in the world but alert us to a continuing, “alienation, estrangement and renunciation in the crucified Christ”.<sup>59</sup> Sacraments are the signs through which we recall this kenotic “deferral, estrangement, forsakenness, and absence”.<sup>60</sup> “Posses-

<sup>56</sup> Robinson 2005b.

<sup>57</sup> Robinson 2018, Kindle location 1586–1592.

<sup>58</sup> Potts 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Potts 2017, 492.

<sup>60</sup> Potts 2017, 492.

sion and presence would overwhelm or obscure it", writes Potts.<sup>61</sup> But loss, deferral, and estrangement can open it like a wound. Longing and love go together. And this is why Williams insists that sacraments must speak a loss. You might also think of doctrine in this way perhaps? That it does not articulate some propositional truth but opens a wound, marks a loss? This approach to doctrine attracts me and alerts me to new creative potential. Why did I not grasp this when we met in Princeton? There is a reason I think.

As I have stated Robinson's work nurtures deep nostalgia. So when she writes and speaks phrases that irritate me such as "I would like to see a revival of real no non-sense scholarship and the emergence of rigorous theologies",<sup>62</sup> or when she berates the churches for an "uncoerced abandonment" of their former riches of theology and tradition,<sup>63</sup> I tend to rebel against a lurking magisterial conservatism I think I identify here. I have no idea at all how to go back to the kind of propositional doctrinal theology she *appears* to be advocating. But maybe I should listen and read more subtly. Alongside this nostalgia lies a radical vision, one that is linked to the integral poetics I have explored here.

Robinson's nostalgia is for theology that she feels reaches the grandeur expressed by her great heroes Calvin, Bonhoeffer, and Barth. Of Calvin and Bonhoeffer she makes the same observation that they do not innovate theologically but the express doctrine "beautifully [...] with a kind of visionary orthodoxy".<sup>64</sup> She goes on to state in relation to Bonhoeffer that great theology does not define its creedal terms which are the symbolic inheritance of the community. It accepts them as given but instead "reveals what they contain". As such doctrine functions like "a kind of giant and intricate poetry",<sup>65</sup> I would go further than this and argue that she is treating doctrine in a similar way as she treats the symbols she employs in her writing. Vitally able to move between material and spiritual worlds, they are charged and meaningful, fluid and animate; able to contain a world of meaning without fixing meaning and capable of communicating alterity as well as establishing presence. I am not wishing to oversimplify here. I am positing that there is an affinity – not a direct correspondence but certainly an analogy – between the way her poetics operates in fiction and the way doctrine functions for her within theology.

This insight goes some way to explaining the fact that Robinson, neither in her books nor in her essays, gives systematic accounts of what the doctrines she so deeply

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61 Potts 2017, 493.

62 Painter 2009, 492.

63 Robinson 2016, 100.

64 Robinson 2007, 115. I don't agree with this judgement of their work.

65 Robinson 2007, 117.

treasures actually mean. Nor, except in the very broadest of brushstrokes, does she apply them to concrete situations. In a sense she writes in or through doctrine, not about it. “You have to forgive me [...] I could probably not say more than that life is a very deep mystery and that finally the grace of God is all that can resolve it. And the grace of God is also a very deep mystery”, says Ames to Lila.<sup>66</sup> Says Robinson to us. Furthermore, right alongside her nostalgic elegies on theology’s decline she appears to offer an altogether different account of lively theological work taking place all around her; in her own imaginative creation and the work of others. It is about wonder and beauty she affirms; string theory and social justice. It is where “inquiry, imagination and ethics collide”.<sup>67</sup> It even happens in church through liturgy, sacrament, and sermon. The sermon she best remembers is the one which as a small child drew her attention to mystery<sup>68</sup> by pointing out that there were different accounts of the resurrection and that these resisted compilation into one account and expressed various forms of the longing, *let it be as if*, which is the heart of poetic representation. So she muses “what can these strange stories mean [...] After so much time [...] the mystery is only compounded.” “I study theology”, she says, “as I would watch a solar eclipse in shadow”.<sup>69</sup>

These apparently contrasting approaches to theology are I believe not in contradiction although they may embody paradox. A way of proceeding with which Christians appear quite comfortable argues Robinson. The children are safe at home in bed; the children are always lost. The theologian works beside the fire in candlelight. The theologian’s hands are numb and they watch from outside in the darkness. You might think that you want the assurance of faith but maybe what you are seeking is the wild journey along dark and narrow pathways. Robinson puts it this way: there is a synthesis that is unique to theology, an acknowledgment that, in sacred matters, in this theatre of God’s glory ... love means awe, and awe means love.<sup>70</sup> So the wild calls and as Lila ponders in her heart:

Fear and comfort could be the same thing. It was strange, when she thought of it. The wind always somewhere, trifling with the leaves, troubling the firelight. And that smell of damp earth and bruised grass, a lonely, yearning sort of smell that meant, Why don’t you come back, you will come back, you know you will.<sup>71</sup>

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66 Robinson 2014, 31.

67 Robinson 2005b.

68 Robinson 2007, 233.

69 Robinson 2007, 230.

70 Robinson 2018, Kindle location 572–580.

71 Robinson 2014, 240.

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