

"An Interesting Planet": The Ecotheology of Marilynne
Robinson's Fiction

by

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Thesis

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*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
 And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

*And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

– Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur”

*Why do people keep asking to see
 God’s identity papers
 when the darkness opening into morning
 is more than enough?*

– Mary Oliver, from “I Wake Close to Morning”

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INTRODUCTION

Marilynne Robinson's Ecotheological Imagination

Q. Would you say that your concern for the natural world is part of the centrality of nature to your fiction?

A. Well, yes. I don't even know how to describe what I think of the natural world as being...The world expresses the ultimate—I don't know what to say, but we're undoing it.

—Marilynne Robinson, 1994 interview with Walter Schaub (249)

While in this interview, Marilynne Robinson seems to be at a loss for words to describe the natural world, she is both vocal and articulate about environmental degradation and the environmental movement. She raises alarm about the “undoing” of the natural world as a “blasphemy...of the most cosmic proportions” (Robinson, interview with Schaub 249), using language which clearly assumes that the environment is sacred. Only sacredness profaned could truly merit the term “blasphemy,” and Robinson is a writer too aware of her language and too invested in theology to toss about such a word lightly. What, then, can we do to honor the world rather than to commit such gross blasphemy? Robinson answers the question herself, asserting that “re-establishing the sense of the sacredness of what is occurring here is probably the only antidote” (251). Indeed, her four novels—*Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*—are permeated with a sense of the world's here-and-now spiritual significance and sacredness.

Despite providing this “antidote” to environmental “blasphemy,” Robinson's fiction is not widely considered environmental. In fact, her novel *Housekeeping* is given just a few lines of mention in the introduction to Lawrence Buell's seminal text, *The Environmental Imagination*.

Buell references Robinson in passing as he considers women writers and depictions of wilderness (Buell 17). What's more, Robinson herself has said she "would not write a novel about this [environmental destruction]" because "[p]eople would think [she] was making it up" due to the sheer magnitude of the crisis (250, interview with Schaub). Indeed, no major threat of ecological collapse looms over Robinson's novels. Her characters are not explicitly preoccupied with how best to protect the environment from human exploitation and destruction, and phrases like "global warming" or "climate change" never make even a single appearance. But through her novels, Robinson nonetheless builds a distinctive ecotheology which cultivates reverence, love, and care for the earth. In essence, while Robinson may struggle to articulate what the natural world is in the interview, she finds a way in her fiction to express the world's significance as Creation and to explain what it is that we are "undoing" (249). Robinson's ecotheology of the world as Creation asserts that all things in existence have been created by God, an understanding which prompts a response of love and respect towards the natural world.

This theologically-grounded engagement with the environment is not simply marginal or incidental to Robinson's novels. Rather, an understanding of Robinson's view of nature is inseparable from understanding her fiction. In fact, non-academic articles about her career actually seem to find it impossible to write about Robinson without also writing about natural landscapes, suggesting the inextricability I will demonstrate throughout this thesis. When *Gilead* was published in 2004, Meghan O'Rourke opened her *New York Times* essay on Robinson with the description of a church on "the side of a narrow, weed-lined road stretching through fields that used to be prairie." This opening line immediately evokes two central elements in Robinson's fiction: Christian theology and the natural world. As O'Rourke further discusses Robinson's career, she notes that the very prose of *Housekeeping* is "infused with the

spaciousness of big-sky land”; she also relays talking with Robinson through “a forgotten prairie graveyard” as the author offers “a summary of her aesthetic,” which focuses on that which might otherwise be overlooked and forgotten (O’Rourke). In other words, the natural environment, this prairie, becomes the space in which Robinson offers an understanding of her own career. In her fiction, too, giving attention to the natural world provides critical insights for understanding the novels.

O’Rourke’s essay, intertwined with reference to nature, is not some kind of a fluke in the coverage of Robinson’s career. In September 2020, Casey Cep’s essay on Marilynne Robinson ran in *The New Yorker* to mark the publication of Robinson’s fifth novel, *Jack*. Like O’Rourke sixteen years before her, Cep evokes the natural world in her discussion of Robinson. In fact, just as O’Rourke did, Cep even opens her essay with a description of a landscape: Robert Frost’s ninety-acre Vermont farm, with its orchard-turned-fallow-field. Just as Robinson walked in the prairie with O’Rourke, she walks through the field and Frost’s grounds with Cep. Cep even casts Robinson’s theological preoccupations and literary aspirations with references to nature. “As a Calvinist, [Robinson] has spent a lot of her life thinking about apple trees,” Cep writes in reference to the Fall. As a writer, Robinson’s choice to focus on oft-overlooked topics is, in Cep’s estimation, akin to “tending gardens that others have forsaken.” Cep ultimately concludes, “This is Robinson’s entire cosmology: the world is self-evidently miraculous, but only rarely do we pay it the attention it deserves” (Cep). With this assertion, Cep indicates that Robinson’s writing revolves around bringing attention to this marvelous world.

To pay attention, so to speak, to Robinson’s own sustained attention to the natural world in her novels is fruitful twice over. Ecotheology-attuned readings of Robinson’s fiction produce accounts of the novels’ narrative tensions and reconciliations, and they lead to the construction

of a Christian environmental framework. The environmental outlook Robinson presents is in fact inseparable from crucial lines of relationality in her fiction, including both relationships between people and the relationship between people and God. In shaping this critical ecotheology, Robinson's ecological concerns and her theological beliefs engage and inform one another. Robinson's vision produces a viable Christian framework for environmentalism in that her ecotheology shares important criteria with secular environmental arguments: the reality of ecological interconnectedness, an account of the intrinsic value of the earth, and a proposed mode of engaging with the world to care for it. However, her ecotheology is ultimately distinctive from secular environmentalism, from popular evangelical conceptions both ecological and theological, and even from Christian environmental stewardship. Developing an interconnected account of sin and salvation that integrates both heaven *and* earth, Robinson explores how human sin affects non-human Creation—but also asserts that the Christian promise of resurrection and redemption is woven into the very materiality of the earth. Marilynne Robinson's fiction ultimately asserts that we cannot have heaven without earth.

The arc of Robinson's career in fiction, from *Housekeeping* (1980) to *Lila* (2014), moves steadily towards this comprehensive environmental outlook. Here, I will first provide an abbreviated overview of how Robinson's environmental vision develops across her novels; I will then compare her framework to other environmental understandings in order to demonstrate its distinctiveness. Robinson's earliest novel, *Housekeeping* (1980), employs a series of Scriptural allusions and invokes implicit theological ideas to establish the natural world as a place and a presence imbued with incredible spiritual significance. This novel is less overtly religious than Robinson's later works in that the central characters do not reflect on their own faith or lack thereof. Nor do they ever go to church; they seem to have no real relationship to institutional

Christianity. However, a serious examination of the novel's religious influences and undercurrents is critical to understanding its conception of the natural world. This understanding of nature as spiritually significant forms the foundations of Robinson's ecotheology, which she picks up again two decades later with *Gilead*.

In the twenty intervening years, Robinson continued to voice concern for environmental degradation in her interviews and in her nonfiction, including in her 1989 book *Mother Country* and her 1998 essay entitled "Surrendering Wilderness." However, it is in *Gilead* (2004) in which Robinson solidifies the vision of spiritual significance initially established in *Housekeeping*. In her second novel, the natural world finds its spiritual footing more explicitly and firmly in Christian theology as Creation. Moreover, people, too, are created beings and are therefore part of this Creation. *Gilead* takes as fact that God made all that exists, and that God continues to attend to it with care and love. Moreover, the Fall has not transformed the created world into an abandoned wasteland devoid of divine love. Instead, Creation remains the good garden of God, evoking wonder and awe from its beholders. This idea is the cornerstone of Robinson's religious understanding of environmental valuation: nature is God's beloved Creation, always expressing divine glory and goodness, and as such, it is worthy of our own appreciation and love.

This understanding of the world as Creation, and of human creatures as God's image-bearers, also gives rise to radical ways of understanding not only the natural world but also salvation and grace. In *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014), the companion novels for *Gilead*, Robinson invokes gardening to take up questions of salvation and to demonstrate a model of appropriate environmental engagement. No one, in Robinson's conception of salvation, is excluded from its reaches, just as no one lives beyond the reaches of the garden that is Creation. Robinson's presentation of gardening in these two novels carries not only a particular salvific

vision but also gives rise to a particular outlook on caring for the environment. Gardening requires engaging in an interconnected and redemptive relationship with Creation, providing people a way to live out the *imago Dei* by modeling the work of God as gardener, seen in Genesis 2. Ultimately, gardening suggests that salvation is for all of Creation and that the natural world, too, will be redeemed and restored. Thus gardening and its implications in *Home* and *Lila* demonstrate the full depth and breadth of Robinson's ecotheology, the culmination of what began in *Housekeeping*.

Because Robinson's characters understand and experience salvation *on earth* through an understanding and experience of interconnected ecologies, her novels ground readers into the present reality, rather than seeking heavenward release. It is quite obvious that this ecotheological imagination differs sharply from the conventional perspective of salvation stressed by many American evangelicals—one that is not only individual but also earth-escapist in mindset.¹ British Anglican theologian N. T. Wright notes with dismay an “American obsession” with the Second Coming and an emphasis on the “end times” that lead to a disengagement and disregard for the environment. “If Armageddon was just around the corner,” such Christians argue, “there [is] no point worrying about trying to stop polluting the planet with acid rain and the like” (Wright 119). In the so-called rapture, those who are saved will be

¹ The label “evangelical” has been notoriously difficult to define with precision. One proposed definition from 1989 revolves around a focus on the Bible, Jesus's crucifixion, converting others, and the integration of faith into public life. The term “evangelical” actually first entered mainstream usage when Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter ran for president in 1976, but over time the word “became a catch-all term for politically conservative Christians” as groups like the Moral Majority gained influence in the 1980's (Merritt). White evangelicals have continued to largely consolidate around the Republican Party into the twenty-first century and supported Donald Trump by overwhelming majorities in recent elections (Haberman). In terms of environmentalism specifically, political conservatives—including the many white evangelicals who hold such politically conservative beliefs—have been increasingly rejecting climate change over the last few decades as the issue of climate change grows more polarized, partly due to conservative resistance to government regulation (Dietz 307). It should be noted that Marilynne Robinson does *not* identify as an evangelical. She calls herself “a mainline Protestant, a.k.a. a liberal Protestant” (*Death of Adam*, “Tyranny” 261).

“snatched up to heaven” (120). What happens to earth, then, is of little concern. Similarly, non-religious nature writer Brenda Peterson describes this challenge of discussing climate change with her staunchly conservative Southern Baptist family. In her memoir, she writes how they posit climate change as “God’s will” rather than the effect of human behaviors, if indeed it is even happening. Moreover, Peterson’s family muses that global warming might actually be part of the “End Times.” Peterson quotes one of her relatives as saying, “Revelation says the world will end in fire. I always thought that was nuclear war, but maybe it will be global warming” (217). From this particular evangelical perspective, climate change is not a problem to be solved but even a welcome herald of the coming rapture, which will lift the saved up out of earth for a perfect, eternal life in heaven.

While Robinson’s Christian faith and her environmental concerns might make her seem like a good candidate for Christian environmental stewardship, she diverges from this particular framework as well. Stewardship, the dominant position among environmentally conscious Christians, is the idea that humans, as God’s image-bearers, “have the unique powers and responsibilities that equip them for the role of management of the earth” (Wirzba, *Paradise of God* 130). However, the ecotheology Robinson articulates differs from the usual language of Christian environmental stewardship. The very language of stewardship itself indicates this difference, for the word “stewardship” still implies that nature can be considered property or resources to be managed and used by (and for) humans—responsibly, yes, but managed and used nonetheless (Frank 38). In other words, the idea of stewardship, though well-intentioned, still positions non-human Creation in a passive and inferior state relative to human beings, and it is unable to fully move away from a utilitarian view of the earth. Moreover, it carries with it “the temptation to forget the lordship of the creator” (Wirzba, *Paradise of God* 131). The idea of

stewardship can slip into the illusion of ownership, leading people to believe that they themselves are in control and are capable of mastering the environment, rather than remembering divine creation and origin of all things. Worse, stewardship may even provide excuses for the “history of exploitation” in the idea that imperfect human beings no doubt go astray at times in their stewardship (130).

However, while Robinson diverges from this traditional outlook on Christian environmentalism, she does not embrace the ideas of secular environmentalists, either. Although she obviously shares the same concerns as secular ecocritics and environmentalists, the assumptions and beliefs that undergird these desires are quite different. In fact, she views herself as being so different from environmentalists that “[t]here is no environmental group whose methods or priorities [she] consider[s] useful” (Robinson, interview with Schaub 248). Robinson affirms and values nature specifically as Creation, whereas environmentalists operating out a secular worldview do not view the world as having been created by God. Their underlying perspectives on what it means to behold nature as it truly is are clearly very different. As Creation, the earth is not only an ecological entity but also *theological* one. The very material world itself communicates key theological ideas about sin and salvation, as well as divine glory and goodness. Thus, despite the oft-cited charge that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (White 1205), and that it is a “Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (1207), Robinson draws upon her Christianity to present a decidedly theocentric vision of the world.

This perspective urges human beings to recognize the sacredness of Creation itself, and therefore to invest and engage deeply and respectfully in the environment around while recognizing our own created status. Similar to environmentalists, Robinson’s ecotheology

demonstrates and insists upon our inextricable interconnectedness with the earth—not simply in terms of ecology, but also in terms of eschatology and salvation. This interconnectedness does not, however, result in indistinguishability between humans and non-human Creation, nor does it gloss over the distinctiveness of each created thing. The theocentric nature of Robinson’s environmental framework results in a celebration of each created thing in its individuality, even as all of Creation shines with the same divine glory. As contemporary ecotheologian Norman Wirzba writes, because it is divine love which “brings creation into being...God *sees each creature and his own love at the same time*” (*Nature to Creation* 75, emphasis original)—and Robinson’s ecotheology calls for seeing as God sees.

Clearly, this insistence on theocentrism sets Robinson apart from secular environmentalists, but in further divergence from them, Robinson also embraces a form of human exceptionalism through the *imago Dei*. However, instead of licensing exploitation of the earth, the particular human status as image-bearers gives rise to the ability and responsibility to care for Creation in a reflection of God’s own care for the world. Rather than valuing Creation’s usefulness to people, though, Robinson eschews both anthropocentrism and utilitarianism by grounding the worth of created things in their relationship to their Creator. While the rejection of anthropocentrism and utilitarianism aligns Robinson with other mainstream environmentalists, the celebration of the human being as distinctive from the rest of Creation is obviously at odds with deep ecologists. Deep ecology emphasizes a kind of continuity with nature via an identification with it and an abdication of individual ego in favor of the eco-self (Diehm 4).

It would be reductive, however, to understand Robinson as writing her novels *against* environmentalists—that is, as a reproof or a correction of their methods and ideologies through an articulation of an alternative view. In a sense, Robinson’s fiction and the environmentalist

movement actually operate on entirely different tracks. Deep ecology and other frameworks of environmental thought arose in response to environmental degradation and the ever-increasing urgency of climate crisis. Environmentalism essentially began as a *reactive* movement seeking to *prevent* disaster—which, to be clear, is an ethical and moral necessity in our time. Robinson may decry environmentalists, but their efforts and their effects cannot be denied. The first Earth Day in 1970, organized to draw attention to environmental issues, successfully generated bipartisan support for legislation that resulted in the formation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and other laws to address environmental pollutants and toxins (Dietz 306). But even as the secular environmental movement seeks to rehabilitate and protect the environment, its failure to recognize and embrace the world as Creation makes it a participant in the “undoing” of the world—that is, it “undoes” the conception of what it truly is. Robinson’s ecotheology, on the other hand, does not depend on looming crisis to find meaning or power. Rather, its origins are rooted in an abiding love and loyalty for the world which precedes any fear of calamity, and it provides a reverent and affirmative account of the world instead of honing in on averting catastrophe. It is our current context of climate crisis which lends a greater sense of urgency to Robinson’s vision, but our environmental obligations and responsibilities toward Creation continuously flow forth from this particular vision of the earth, regardless of its state—whether it thrives or teeters on the brink of disaster.

Yet there are strands within American environmentalism which descend from the same Calvinist wellspring that Robinson’s ecotheology stems from. An understanding of the lingering religious impulses in environmental thinking helps contextualize not only American environmentalism itself but also Robinson’s work within the broader history of this movement.

Robert H. Nelson argues that in contemporary America, environmentalism is “the leading religious outlet” for people who want to find meaning but do not wish to participate in traditional organized religion (Nelson 250). In fact, “many Americans express affinity for nature spirituality” (Taylor qtd. in Nelson 254), and use language that Nelson characterizes as implicitly Christian—seeking, for example, “intrinsic value” in the natural world and resisting anthropocentrism (258). In that regard, contemporary environmentalists share the same environmental concerns as John Calvin, whose theology significantly shaped American Protestantism. Calvin argued for a theocentric vision of the natural world, which found an intrinsic worth because of its Creator (263). Unsurprisingly, many of America’s earliest environmental thinkers, like John Muir, came from Protestant and specifically Calvinist backgrounds (260). Moreover, Calvinist arguments for moral urgency and activism continue to be reflected in environmental activism (266), and while Lynn White, Jr. lays the blame for environmental issues on religion, he also identifies religion as the strongest answer to the current crisis (1207). Calvinist histories and legacies continue to fuel American environmentalism, though it is obvious that contemporary environmentalists depart from explicit religiosity, while Robinson’s ecotheology explicitly centers Christianity in crafting an argument for an interconnected, loving view of Creation.

An examination of how Robinson’s theology shapes and gives rise to her environmental outlook will take place across the three chapters of this thesis, following the arc of her novel-writing career and tracing the development of her ecotheology. In light of the countless Scriptural references in these works, I will use a sustained intertextual reading of Robinson’s novels with the Bible throughout these chapters. The first chapter, “Ecotheological Communion: Nature, Language, and Memory in *Housekeeping*,” examines the natural environment in

Robinson's first novel, which revolves around two sisters from a family awash in sorrow and loss. Ruth and Lucille Stone end up in the care of their transient and unconventional aunt Sylvie following their mother's much earlier suicide and their grandmother's more recent passing. Their town of Fingerbone is dominated by an untamed landscape of mountains and a great lake prone to flooding, and Sylvie's style of housekeeping allows their home to become more or less continuous with the natural world beyond its walls. For Ruth, communion provides a way to maintain relationship to those she has lost, and this communion is made possible only by a religiously inflected conception of the natural world. Robinson casts nature as the site, means, and participant in communion, establishing both human interconnectedness and difference from the environment, as well as the idea that the material world itself is imbued with spiritual significance. The natural world emerges as a revelatory presence that testifies to both human sinfulness and the holistic promise of restoration and resurrection. In this chapter, I will put *Housekeeping* in conversation with Eucharistic theology, natural theology, deep ecology, and key Scriptural texts to examine the novel's interpretation of communion and its vision of the natural world.

The second chapter, "'Wherever You Turn Your Eyes': Seeing the World as Creation in *Gilead*," identifies the explicit source of this spiritual significance through the theological idea that the natural world has been created by God. As Creation, the natural world is imbued with divine love and glory, but human sinfulness leads to a difficulty in properly seeing the world for what it is, resulting in alienation from both God and nature. *Gilead* takes the form of John Ames's long and heartfelt letter to his young son, and through it he conveys his observations, narrations of family history, and the tense relationship he has with his namesake, Jack Boughton. Reconciliation between the two men actually hinges upon a certain conception of the world as

Creation. Only when Ames fully grasps this framework and properly sees Jack as a divinely created and loved being does his attitude towards his namesake shift. In this chapter, I will draw on a variety of thinkers and sources, including Stanley Fish and John Milton, contemporary ecotheologian Norman Wirzba, and American preacher Jonathan Edwards, to probe the idea of nature as Creation and the fact of our trouble seeing it. In addition, the development of Robinson's ecotheology in *Gilead* engages with Christopher Stone's arguments about the legal standing of the environment. Robinson also continues examining interconnectedness and difference, though in more theologically explicit and robust terms: like all other things in existence, people are created beings, but they are set apart by their sinful state and in their status as the *imago Dei*.

In my third chapter, "Ecologies of Salvation: Gardening in *Home* and *Lila*," I will focus on the activity of gardening and its implications. Gardening is deeply intertwined with Robinson's communal vision of salvation, and it emerges as a model of active engagement with Creation—a model which is specific to our status as image-bearers. Jack Boughton and Lila Dahl live on the margins of society, estranged from the structures of family and faith. In *Home*, Jack's gardening illustrates his true belonging in his family and the reality that he is not beyond the reaches of salvation, despite his own fears of the contrary. *Home* also explores the limits of human agency in salvation, ultimately opting simply to rest in the complexity of salvation without seeking an easy resolution to the issue. By arriving at a kind of acceptance of this mystery, it sets the stage for *Lila*'s relatively more straightforward and explicit depiction of an inclusive, communal salvation. In *Lila*, gardening provides Lila a means of entering into relationships—which in turn integrates her into salvation. In addition to continuing to draw from Wirzba's work, I will also consider Kathryn Ludwig's analysis of gardens as liminal spaces,

along with Scriptural inclusions of gardens and theological considerations regarding whether or not non-human Creation itself must be redeemed.

Over the course of her four novels, Robinson exhibits a sustained attention towards the natural world, and she builds an ecotheology that engenders love and care for the world as Creation. While in that 1994 interview, she might have struggled to articulate the significance of the natural world, by 2014 with *Lila*'s publication, it is clear that Robinson's ecotheology has found a way to express the ineffable "ultimate" through her fiction. After an examination of Robinson's novels, the coda of this thesis will then turn to a consideration of the implications of Robinson's novelistic ecotheology for the future of environmentalism, taking into consideration current trends within the movement. In particular, I will propose that Robinson's work encourages environmentalism to consider the realm of the literary postsecular as a means of effecting transformation.

CHAPTER ONE

Ecotheological Communion: Nature, Language, and Memory in *Housekeeping*

“[Ruth]’s speaking from an old, old tradition...”

– Marilynne Robinson, 1994 interview with Walter Schaub

Confronted with an impending separation from her aunt Sylvie, Ruth Stone plunges into a crucial meditative sequence filled with Biblical allusions. This sequence marks a pivotal point in *Housekeeping*: when Ruth begins this sequence, she seems resigned, having “no curiosity about what was destined for [her] and no doubt” (287), but what follows after her musings is not acceptance but rather rebellion and an embrace of a new life. She and Sylvie burn down their house and flee Fingerbone for vagrancy on the margins, alienated from Ruth’s sister Lucille and rejecting settlement or social acceptability. Ruth’s musings during the critical sequence of allusions provide insights for living a life of estrangement and separation. Her considerations negotiate loss and memory and, perhaps most importantly, they point to a way to continue relationships despite lack of proximity or immediate presence—through communion. As she ponders the deaths of her mother and grandfather, Ruth specifically invokes the sacrament of communion, reflecting that “[t]here is remembrance, and communion” each time she takes a sip of water (291). Because her mother and her grandfather both drowned in the lake, the water reminds her of them and allows her to experience this communion with them. Riddled with loss and preoccupied with memory, *Housekeeping* is interested in the sustaining of relationships across time and space—relationships with the dead, like Ruth’s mother and grandfather, and with the estranged, as the sisters ultimately are. The novel essentially hinges on communion as the

only viable means by which Ruth is able to sustain these relationships and to retain hope for a future reunion.

In this chapter, I will argue that Ruth's vision of communion depends upon a certain conception of the environment—a religiously inflected conception that draws from Scriptural and theological precedent. Through the idea of communion, the novel asserts the inherent spiritual significance of the empirical universe and establishes interconnectedness between humans and non-human nature. In *Housekeeping*, the natural world and the idea of communion—as well as the reunion communion foreshadows and hopes for—are inextricable from one another in three ways: nature as (1) the site of communion's future fulfillment, (2) the means of taking communion in the present, and (3) a participant in the present experience of communion. In the first regard, Ruth views the natural world, specifically a garden, as the *site* where reunion will finally occur. I will show that environmental contexts hold memory and thus the possibility of the future recovery of the lost. Moreover, because of its relationship to both memory and human biology, nature also provides Ruth with the *means* to specifically experience communion with the dead in the present: water allows for “remembrance, and communion” (291). However, Robinson casts the natural world not as a passive backdrop or as simply an avenue of interaction, but rather as a *participant* in its own right. With its own language and its commemoration of loss, the natural world is an established communicative presence in *Housekeeping*. Ultimately, I will also argue that the novel gestures to a grounding of the natural world in the Word of God, thereby anticipating developments in Robinson's career.

By melding the ecological with the theological, the novel locates itself within a specifically ecotheological framework, one we can only understand if we take seriously its religious influences. Achieving a comprehensive understanding of *Housekeeping* thus

necessitates a critical examination of its Scriptural and theological subtexts. Yet since the novel's publication in 1980, few critical readings of the novel have taken seriously the relevance of religion. Scholarship has often centered on feminist readings that examine the subversion of the domestic space and the intergenerational relationships between the novel's female characters.² The novel certainly lends itself to these readings in many ways: it emphasizes a female lineage, dispatches its family patriarch swiftly, and concludes with a house burned down and two women embracing vagrancy. Critics like Joan Kirby have also integrated a feminist lens with the novel's strong sense of loss and its powerful landscape—rightly so, for the lake and the mountains are impossible to ignore. These readings clearly bring together important elements of the novel and construct useful models for understanding *Housekeeping*, but they are also limited in their neglect of the novel's religious influences. Radical as some of Ruth's claims might sound, Robinson herself asserts that Ruth is merely “speaking from an old, old tradition,” the same as “every prophet in the Bible” (interview with Schaub 243). My reading of *Housekeeping* seeks to redress critics' overlooking of religion by prioritizing the novel's integrated Biblical intertextuality as I examine the integration of memory and nature, in the process generating a new understanding of the house itself.

It is important, however, to note that *Housekeeping* is different from Robinson's later novels in its relationship to Christianity. *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila* are far more explicitly Christian, while *Housekeeping* is often more broadly spiritual than theological. Perhaps nothing serves as a better indicator of the novel's somewhat ambiguous relationship to Christianity than the relative absence of robust theological interrogation and engagement in existing *Housekeeping*

² See the following for examples of such scholarship: Joan Kirby's “Is There Life After Art? The Metaphysics of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*” (1986); Paula E. Geyh's “Burning Down the House? Domestic Space and Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*” (1993); Hannes Bergthaller's “‘Like a Ship to be Tossed’: Emersonian Environmentalism and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*” (2007)

scholarship. In fact, in a recent monograph on Marilynne Robinson, Alex Engebretson describes the novel as one that is not doctrinally specific (26) and suggests that it might venture beyond the bounds of Christian orthodoxy—even verging on Gnostic heresy in the associations it gives to nature with death and, in Engebretson’s estimation, “evil” (33). Engebretson’s interpretation is not entirely unfounded: the natural world in *Housekeeping* is certainly not all roses and rainbows, and the idea of the divine is almost absent in comparison to Robinson’s later works.

However, *Housekeeping* makes significant use of Christian ideas like the resurrection, and its various Biblical allusions ultimately suggest a very different understanding of the natural world’s role in the novel. In fact, Ruth, in observing the natural world, comes to the conclusion that the world will be made “comprehensible and whole” (136). In addition, the sacrament of communion is specifically Christian, and the religious framework and undergirding theology make possible the familial communion that collapses the obstacles of death and distance in *Housekeeping*. The treatment of communion in the novel even parallels Eucharistic theology with regard to language, remembrance, and hope in a future restoration of that which has been lost. If we are to take Ruth seriously, rather than interpret her ideas as the tragic and wishful byproducts of loss as others have done (Bergthaller 92), we must take also seriously the theological influence and literary presence of the “old, old tradition” Ruth, like Robinson herself, operates out of (Robinson, interview with Schaub 243).

Eucharistic Theology and *Housekeeping*’s Communion

Before turning to delve directly into Robinson’s novel, we begin first with the Christian sacrament of Eucharist. On the surface, Eucharist looks deceptively simple: Christians gather together to share bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus and his crucifixion. Communion in

Housekeeping also appears outwardly simple: Ruth drinks water and remembers her dead mother and grandfather. However, despite the seeming straightforwardness of these actions, neither *Housekeeping*'s communion nor the Church's practice of Eucharist is simply commemorative. Underlying the rather ordinary acts of eating and drinking in Eucharist is a chronological complexity: the sacrament pulls both the past and the future into the present moment of its enactment. Perhaps most obviously, its past dimension is a "recollection" of God's saving acts, (McGrath, *Christian Theology* 392), and "above all, the death of Jesus Christ" (394). The instruction to look back and remember is explicitly given in the New Testament, with Jesus telling his disciples, "[T]his do *in remembrance* of me" as he breaks the bread (*King James Version*, Lk. 22.19, emphasis added). Simultaneously, the Eucharist has a future dimension, serving as an "anticipation" of the glory to come at the end of all time, as depicted in the final book of the Bible, Revelation. The Second Coming, bringing with it reconciliation and resurrection, will thus fulfill the hopes of the Eucharist. This future dimension of the sacrament collides with the past in the present moment of the celebration of the Eucharist, in particular in the affirmation of faith undertaken by the sacrament's partakers (McGrath, *Christian Theology* 394).

In addition to bending time, breaking bread, and passing the cup, Christians celebrating Eucharist also draw heavily on language. In fact, the enactment of Eucharist involves a triple—perhaps *triune* is the appropriate word—layering of language, with each layer of language recalling the one beneath it. Repeated each time Christians celebrate communion, the liturgy is the topmost layer, but it draws from the written gospel accounts of the Last Supper (McGrath, *Christian Theology* 394). The gospel accounts thus form the second layer of Eucharistic language. Peeling this layer back, we discover the foundation that forms the basis of these

recorded accounts: the words that Jesus himself spoke to his disciples during that Passover meal. Moreover, even the Eucharist itself is sometimes portrayed as a kind of statement, an assertion composed of the triune layering of language as well as the material elements of bread and wine. Some translations of the Apostle Paul's writings about communion even describe the act as one of public announcement: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you *proclaim* the Lord's death until he comes" (*English Standard Version*, 1 Cor. 11.26, emphasis added). Thus the act of Eucharist becomes a proclamation, a though it were an emphatic linguistic declaration unto itself, a statement made of liturgical and scriptural statements.

In *Housekeeping*, the communion that Ruth participates in also leaps across the bounds of time to bring past and future into the present via an intertwining of memory and language. The backward-looking aspect of Ruth's communion is initially most obvious, with Ruth herself specifying the fact that "[t]here is remembrance" in her act of drinking water. She "cannot but taste a cup of water but [she] *recall[s]*" the dead and the means of their death—the lake (Robinson 290, emphasis added). Likewise, Christians who eat the bread and drink the wine recall Jesus's death from the crucifixion: broken body, spilled blood. Though memory, by nature, turns to the past, it is clear that Ruth's act of remembering occurs in the present, a chronological positioning made explicit in the use of the present tense "I recall" (290). As a result, the act of taking communion and its backward-looking effect both take place in the present moment, true to Eucharistic theology. Yet memory, inherently retrospective though it may be, paradoxically also fuels the forward-looking component of communion in *Housekeeping*. When communion causes Ruth to look back and "recall" her dead mother and grandfather (290), she cannot help but look forward as well, for "memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory." In *Housekeeping*, memory originates from the past behind us, but it paradoxically also goes

before us, providing clues of the future to come. As “prophecy,” memory points Ruth to those she will one day rejoin in the final “reconciliation and return” of the resurrection. Essentially, the memory at work in communion’s remembrance “pulls” Ruth toward the future—toward the coming reconciliation—by the force of her longing for those who are gone (288). Therefore the “yearnings of memory,” as critic George Handley puts it, “foreshadow the reunion of all things” in Robinson’s novel (Handley, “Religion, Literature, and the Environment” 79). Communion memorializes those who by their death now belong to the past, while anticipating a future reunion with them.

Both the retrospective and prophetic arms of memory emerge as inseparable from language. Thus, like the Church’s Eucharist, communion in *Housekeeping* also requires language. Ruth actually presents language as the basis of memory, asserting that what we remember of anyone is “an anecdote, a conversation at a table” (Robinson 292). Language, in Ruth’s estimation, is the central component and enabler of memory. Thus, without language, there can be no true possibility of the retrospection that takes place in communion. Nor can there be any lasting hope of the restoration of those who are lost. Our memories—the scraps of conversation and the piecemeal anecdotes we treasure—are “turned over and over again,” Ruth says, and “every word” is “written in the heart,” all “in the hope that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh” (292). Language, by facilitating memory, provides those who are gone with footholds in the hearts of the living. As a result, language keeps their memories alive, fueling a present-day experience of the future resurrection—and thereby sustaining the hope of one day actualizing the communion practiced in the here and now. Mirroring the repetition of liturgy, this repetition of words and memory in *Housekeeping*’s communion furthers its connection to Eucharistic theology. The liturgical remembrance of Christ, too, will be enacted over and over

“till he come[s]” again (*King James Version*, 1 Cor. 11.26)—till real flesh and blood fulfill memory in the Second Coming and the resurrection.

While both *Housekeeping* and Eucharistic theology hope for and anticipate an ultimate restoration, stark contrasts emerge in their specific visions. These give rise to the novel’s ecological claims, including that of human interconnectedness to the natural world. The future in traditional Eucharistic theology is oriented toward the book of Revelation and the Second Coming of Christ, but Ruth instead locates the future *back* in Genesis, envisioning “a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine.” The memory-driven future of *Housekeeping* ultimately brings us back to a reunion with the first mother—a reunion so complete that it is a bodily communion. Ruth’s vision of future “reconciliation and return” to this mother figure certainly speaks to her on-going mourning for her own mother Helen (288). Indeed, many critics have focused on such a reading of *Housekeeping*, with Joan Kirby presenting the novel as a quest for both the personal and the archetypal mother (Kirby 102). While such readings encompass the loss and longing so apparent in *Housekeeping*, they gloss over—and in fact *neglect*—something incredibly striking about Ruth’s statement: her identification of a *garden* as the site of communion’s ultimate realization, the site of the “reunion of all things” (Handley 79). Essentially, the natural context becomes the site of prophetic memory’s fulfillment. Ruth’s invocation of Eden clashes with Revelation’s emphasis on a *city* as the ultimate dwelling place of God and humankind. Revelation makes abundantly clear that New Jerusalem is a city—a built environment—through the details of its measurements, walls, and gates, as well as through reference to the precious stones and metals that form its foundations and streets (Rev. 21.12-21). By contrast, Ruth identifies our ultimate future, the site where communion will finally be fully realized, as a *natural* environment. She

envisioning a natural environment as the place where we all ultimately belong and where we will all find one another again.

Nature as the Site of Communion's Future Fulfillment

This vision, alluding to Genesis, necessarily produces certain ecological claims about the human relationship to the natural world, and it also relies on *Housekeeping*'s presentation of the natural world as the "repository of memories" (Handley 76). In Genesis, God places Adam in Eden to tend and "to keep it" (Gen. 2.15). Caring for a garden requires close engagement with nature, rather than withdrawing from the environment or passively enjoying it from a distance. Moreover, it is clear that Adam and Eve cannot view themselves as independent from nature, for they rely on Eden for food and for a home—a home that they share with all of God's other creations, plants and animals alike. And as a home to all of these different organisms, the garden is, in fact, an interconnected ecosystem. Ruth's ultimate placement of humans in such an environment thus necessitates the acknowledgement that we do not exist divorced from nature. Instead, we participate in "a broadly conceived ecological context" (Wirzba, *Paradise of God* 3). *Housekeeping* asserts that as we acknowledge this truth of interconnectedness and engage accordingly with the environment around us, we discover an "ecological reality...framed by the hope of wholeness and restitution" (Handley 81). Indeed, the natural world itself in *Housekeeping*, especially the lake, is the site of the prophetic memory which foreshadows reunion: it contains those memories. Ruth's mother and grandfather drowned in its waters, and the memory of them constantly laps against the pebbly shores of Fingerbone so that Ruth is always reminded of them, and always longs for them. In her longing, "memory pulls [her] forward" toward the eventual reunion in the first/final garden (Robinson 288).

Moreover, these waters themselves contain layers of geological memory. “At the foundation is the old lake, which is smothered and nameless and altogether black. Then there is Fingerbone,” the current lake which is known, mapped, and photographed, but there is a third lake as well, the one that “rises in the spring” when farmers plow their fields (10-11). The layers of this lake, none of them lost even if the foundation is “nameless” and unseen, reflect the way nothing and no one is lost in memory. The water rising up out of the furrows in springtime foreshadows the reversal of loss and the recovery of what seems gone. In *Housekeeping*, the very fact of memory’s existence means that all loss will be remedied, for Ruth identifies memory as prophecy, as discussed earlier. Because of nature’s role as the holding pond of the memories that will one day be fulfilled, the ecosystems we participate in foreshadow the garden that Ruth imagines—and in doing so, they bear witness to the restoration that communion anticipates.

Embracing a “radical interdependency with nature” (Handley 75), Sylvie’s unconventional housekeeping rejects an artificialized separation from the natural world—something critics have noticed time and time again. The result of this style of housekeeping is that the house itself eventually emerges as an ecosystem, a natural site where reconciliation with the lost seems possible. Ruth and Lucille, having grown up in Fingerbone with its “outsized landscape and extravagant weather,” already know all too well that four walls and a door ultimately cannot provide any assurance from the invasions of floodwater or the cold drafts of wind (Robinson 91). Even in fair summer weather, their house is subject to subtle natural incursions, for their grandmother’s old room is often “full of the smell of grass and earth and blossoms or fruit, and the sound of bees” (132). Sylvie, rather than trying to further barricade the house from nature, instead prefers it “sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude” and thus welcomes nature indoors (148). She allows piles of leaves to accumulate in corners. She throws

open doors and windows “for the sake of air,” thus opening up the house “for wasps and bats and barn swallows” (126). Soon there are “crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, [and] sparrows in the attic” (148). Each of these species seems to have found its own habitat within the wider ecosystem of the house, but Sylvie does not treat them as pests to be driven out. Nor does she question the appropriateness of their presence, even in a space like the pantry—which, with its associations with the kitchen, is especially rooted in traditional images of the domestic and the hearth. Instead, Sylvie peacefully lives alongside and with these animals as they subvert the traditional idea of a house. No longer an exclusively human and domesticated space keeping nature at bay, the house instead becomes an ecosystem in which humans and non-human animals coexist in an interconnected web.

This status as an ecosystem transforms the house into a site that contains this “hope of wholeness and restitution” (Handley 81) and which offers a promise of “the reunion of all things” as a place of intergenerational memory held in ecology (79). Ruth, indeed, reflects that “it seem[s] that something [she] had lost might be found in Sylvie’s house” (Robinson 184-185). By becoming an ecosystem rather than a tidy domestic space separate from nature, the house prefigures the garden in which communion will finally be fully realized and that which is lost will be returned. In fact, even in the novel’s present, the house is the very site where reminders of Eucharist can be found. Because of its openness to the outdoors natural world, the house begins to accumulate mysterious scraps of paper blown inside. One of them reads “*Powers Meet*” and another “*I think of you*” (125, italics original), both of which are statements reminiscent of Eucharist—Christ as the meeting of divine and human, and the sacrament as a “thinking of” Christ’s death, so to speak. Of course, the notes also serve as references to the particularities of communion in the novel: “*Powers Meet*” doubles as the intermingling of the

human and natural worlds in the space of the girls' house, and "*I think of you*" serves as a reminder of Ruth's constant mulling over her mother and her grandfather. Much later, when Ruth imagines how Lucille might react to the disappearance of her sister and aunt, she still pictures Lucille at the house, trying and failing to stave off the encroaching natural environment—and being reminded, via the house's tendency to open itself to the natural, of both Sylvie and Ruth. Lucille, Ruth muses, would sense their presence in the wind "[throwing] the side door open" and "[bringing] in the leaves," and in the "strong smell of lake water" left behind (326). It is the mingling of the natural world in the domestic space which allows the house to become a place of memory and thus a foreshadowed experience of reunion, or communion's fulfillment.

With all this in mind, it is no wonder that the last attempt to break apart their family coincides with the domestication of this natural house. With the townspeople threatening to use legal means to separate Ruth from her aunt, Sylvie begins to clean the house in earnest, thereby ruining the house's ability to ground the family in the mindset of communion. Tellingly, Sylvie's cleaning project involves putting "a bouquet of artificial flowers on the kitchen table" (281), signaling an attempt to put in place a conventional divide between the natural world outdoors and the controlled, domestic space indoors. But cleaned out, the house has been gutted and emptied of its former power; it can no longer effectively serve the purpose it once did in the remembrance of the lost and the hope for a restitution. It is no surprise then that the final act that Sylvie and Ruth undertake with regards to the house is to burn the building itself after purging it of all the detritus inside. The house can no longer serve its larger purpose to them, and to stay is only to risk their own separation from one another. If they cannot dwell in its strange, natural haven of memory anymore, the next best thing is to let it burn—to give it over completely to the natural element of fire so that in that communion with the flames, the house might "burst its

tomb, [break] up its grave” in a blazing testament to the ultimate hope of resurrection (316).

By casting nature as the site of communion’s realization, Robinson asserts a radical ecological interconnectedness between humans and nature in a manner which initially seems consistent with deep ecology. However, *Housekeeping*’s conception of communion ultimately requires the preservation of human difference and distinctiveness from the natural world, thus embracing an environmental understanding which differs from deep ecology. In a deep ecological framework, interconnectedness is most fully expressed through the adoption of the eco-self, which requires an identification with “the wider ecological world” over and against any other conception of the self (Wirzba 134). To develop an eco-self, we must surrender our own sense of ourselves as individual entities and instead “recognize that we are part of nature and that nature is part of our selves” (Diehm 4). Deep ecologists argue that doing so will allow us to pursue more meaningful environmental action, for an expanded sense of self means that nature’s interests become our own, and we thus advocate on behalf of the environment (5). In *Housekeeping*, Ruth’s nighttime experience in the woods parallels the actualization of the eco-self in significant ways, but the moment is one that verges on indistinguishability, rather than one that resembles a newfound sense of self integrated into a wider ecological context. Thus it implicitly shares in a critique that other established environmental thinkers have also pointed out regarding deep ecology—that of indistinguishability (9).

In *Housekeeping*, even the lead-up to this moment of the seeming actualization of the eco-self demonstrates the gradual collapse of any distinction between human and non-human. As Ruth and Lucille spend an afternoon in the forest, they engage first in picnic-like pastimes, including skipping stones and wading. As the hours pass, this “outing” gives way to the “rituals of predation” (Robinson 169), a phrase that melds an element of the religious—a trait associated

exclusively with human culture—and the animalistic. Because they have lost track of time and it is too dark to walk home, Ruth and Lucille decide that their only option is to stay overnight in the woods. The sisters are plunged in “absolute darkness” as they huddle in their makeshift hut (171). Ruth senses that unidentifiable “creatures” have crept down “to the water within a few feet of [the sisters],” upsetting Lucille with their failure to detect the scent of humans and keep their distance. The fact that the animals do not take particular notice of the girls’ human presence again suggests that the distinction between human and non-human has blurred. Indeed, Ruth accepts “that all our human boundaries were overrun,” and she “simply let[s] the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in [her] skull and bowels and bones” (172). This moment of coextensive-ness actualizes the eco-self: Ruth moves beyond a sense of self that is individual and separate, instead experiencing a merging with the wider natural world. The fact that Ruth perceives the same darkness both *within* herself—not just in a metaphorical sense by way of describing her mental or emotional state, but rather literally locating it within her *physical body*—and *outside* herself, in the sky, underscores the continuity between the human and the natural. Human bodies and the natural world are compositionally identical. However, the continuity of this scene results in an indistinguishability which appears to dissolve not only the body but also any sense of an individual human self.

Rather than allowing Ruth to remain in this state, Robinson instead suggests an inviolability to the human self. However powerful this moment of melding might seem, the morning comes, bringing light to dispel the “solvent” of darkness and pull Ruth out of this co-extensiveness (172). Instead of embracing deep ecology, *Housekeeping* ultimately develops an alternative account of the relationship between humans and the environment through its vision of communion. The environmental framework in *Housekeeping*, unlike that of deep ecology,

maintains interconnectedness without succumbing to indistinguishability—in fact, it requires this balance in order for communion to be successful.

However, another source of potential indistinguishability besides the eco-self still remains as a barrier to the novel's ecotheology: the biological reality of our bodies. While the eco-self is ultimately abstract and conceptual, biology is concrete, established, and impossible to ignore. Biology dictates that death breaks the human body down into organic matter, rendering it no different from the earth. This principle of mortality and "the interdependence between humanity and soil" is rooted in Genesis itself (Wirzba, *Paradise of God* 10): God warns Adam that when he dies he will "return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (3.19). Even the name *Adam* springs forth from the earth, for the word *adamah* means soil (Wirzba 29). Robinson nods to our mortality and this interdependence with the earth in the novel's opening pages, through a description of a dugout that is "no more a human stronghold than a grave" (1). Conflating this earth-sunken home with a grave suggests that in living and in dying, we are deeply embedded into the environment around us. Moreover, the Biblical principle of dust to dust seems to suggest that humans and non-human nature ultimately *are* the same—and it seems also that *dying*, perhaps, is actually the only real way to achieve a true communion. After all, death and decomposition would permit Ruth to join her mother and her grandfather, in the sense that the breakdown of her body would merge her with all other organic matter, presumably including the corpses of her deceased family members.

The biological indistinguishability with nature that would result from death appears almost convenient for establishing how the natural world fits into communion. However, *Housekeeping* eschews this relative straightforwardness. Rather than death and decomposition, the novel's communion hinges upon a drink of water—a natural element commonly associated

with life. The novel's presentation of communion goes on to spotlight the biological human body in a way that maintains both interconnectedness with the environment *and* ontological distinction from it, exposing the limits of a strictly ecological and biological perspective.

Nature as the Means of Communion: Spiritually Significant Materiality

Nature's role in *Housekeeping* as the "repository of memories" (Handley 76) allows Ruth to view it as the site of communion's future realization. However, because it houses these prophetic memories, direct interaction with the natural world, especially in the act of consumption, actually provides the means of taking communion in the present, in the way that bread and wine provide the means of taking Eucharist in commemoration of Christ's death and anticipation of his return. Ruth remarks that "[o]ne cannot cup one's hand and drink from the rim of any lake without remembering" all the people who have drowned in the Flood. The Flood has left no reservoir untouched, and so communion is universally available and even inevitable—one "cannot" help but experience it, and "any lake" will do (290). Even for Lucille, whom Ruth imagines as having left watery Fingerbone behind, communion-like remembrance is marked by a glass of water. Ruth pictures her sister in a restaurant in Boston—a safe, indoors space in a cosmopolitan city where encroachments of the natural world are kept well at bay. Yet Lucille sits with a water glass, "her thoughts thronged by our absence," indicating that she is reminded of her sister and aunt's presence despite their immediate absence (328). Tellingly, her cup "has left two-thirds of a ring on the table, and she works at completing the circle with her thumbnail" (327). The attempt to complete the circle of water is indicative of Lucille's own desire for wholeness, that is, the reunion with the lost. Although this scene does not actually feature communion itself, Lucille's desire, like the novel's communion, is mediated through water—

fitting especially since Lucille believes that her aunt and sister have drowned in the lake.

Breaking bread and passing the cup provide Christians with the flesh and blood of Christ; drinking water in *Housekeeping* provides a connection to the bodies and blood of those who have died. In fact, the waters actually “taste a bit of blood and hair” (289), underscoring the bodily nature of communion. The lingering traces of the human make it possible for water to provide communion—but they also necessitate a deeper probing into the status of the biological human body, as well as that of the empirical natural environment itself. Are these human traces metaphorical? Simply imagined? Or is there something more real, more substantial, to this human presence in nature? While *Housekeeping* clearly presents humans and nature as ecologically interconnected, the novel’s vision of communion asserts an inviolability to both that supersedes biology and prevents their merger.

To better understand how bodies and nature stand in relation to one another, we must turn again to Eucharistic theology. The relationship between the material *means* of the sacrament—that is, the bread and the wine—and the actual body and blood of Christ is both complicated and contentious, as centuries of debate demonstrate. Out of a wide range of theological positions on this topic, we will begin with two major opposites. Roughly on one end of the spectrum of Eucharistic beliefs lies Catholicism’s transubstantiation—bread turned to real body, wine turned to real blood. Regardless of the unchanging outward appearance of the bread and wine, their true inward identities are considered to have been transformed into Christ’s flesh and blood (McGrath, *Christian Theology* 397). We find on the other end of this spectrum Protestant Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, who argued that there is no “real presence” in communion: it is a memorial, and the bread and wine “must be taken metaphorically or figuratively” as reminders of the physically absent Jesus (Zwingli qtd. McGrath 401).

A figurative reading of water loosely paralleling Zwingli's argument certainly seems persuasive. At the least, it is easier and simpler to believe that Ruth's grief from losing her mother leads her to view the lake as a connection to her, rather than to entertain thoughts of a more literal—and far more unsettling—interpretation. Zwingli's position suggests that when we drink, we engage in a *memorial* of the lost; the waters in which we lost them only *metaphorically* provide any union with them or any semblance of their presence. However, the novel's emphasis on taste and smell in the experience of communion resists easy categorization into the mere figurative. The waters have the distinct "taste" of "blood and hair" (Robinson 289) as well as "a certain pungency and savor" that is "clearly human" (290). Ruth never conceals her uses of speculation, signaling them with phrases like "say that" and "imagine that"—but here, there are no such speculative signposts in her description of the human-ness in water. Rather, Ruth deploys sensory specificity with clarity and authority. If we insist upon a strictly figurative reading, we risk interpreting Ruth's experience out of a pity that borders on dismissal. *Poor Ruth, whose grief drives her to such wishful thinking.* Moreover, we lose an important aspect of the novel's argument about the material world, including human bodies, which we will turn to shortly.

First, a brief consideration of transubstantiation: does nature *become* human in *Housekeeping* as the bread and wine *become* the body and blood of Christ? The fact that the water tastes and smells so distinctly human might indeed suggest that the water has actually become transubstantiated into the human—but it is clear that the natural elements themselves are *not* transformed into body and blood in the novel. Ruth does not drink water-turned-mother or water-turned grandfather: she drinks water, but "the waters [are] full of people" (259). One has not subsumed the other; the two co-exist. The simultaneity of the natural and the human presence

in *Housekeeping*'s communion actually recalls a third view of the Eucharist: Martin Luther's consubstantiation, an argument for "the simultaneous presence of both bread and the body of Christ at one and the same time" (McGrath, *Christian Theology* 400). Consubstantiation thus provides an understanding of the Eucharist which is both literal and metaphorical, material and spiritual. In the context of *Housekeeping*, the consubstantiation of the natural and the human produces strange and unsettling implications. Although the novel affirms the reality of ecological interconnectedness with nature, human bodies in *Housekeeping* fail to break down into organic matter—even after death and the implied decay that follows. Instead, body and blood persist in and alongside earth and water. Abel's "blood cried out from the ground" after his murder (288); "blood and hair" linger in the water even after the Flood has dwindled down to mere "pools and ponds and ditches" (289). Though by all biological rights, natural forces should have erased any trace of the recognizably human, a palpable and irreducible human-ness persists.

This human irreducibility suggests an ontological difference that always distinguishes us from nature despite biological common ground and ecological interdependence, again demonstrating *Housekeeping*'s divergence from the eco-self. However, in making this claim of irreducibility, Robinson focuses on the human parts that *are* biological. They are the very parts that *should* be reducible, the very parts that make it possible to argue that humans are compositionally no different from nature. Hair is made of keratin, of protein. Blood is made of plasma, of platelets. Yet *these* linger in the water, as do an inexplicable "pungency and savor" of human-ness (290). Their apparently permanent presence suggests that biology cannot adequately capture or explain all that constitutes the human, even when it comes to the body. But it is not enough to say simply that we are more than bodies—because in fact, our *bodies* themselves are more than bodies, more than biology. In Eucharist, Christ's material and biological flesh and

blood have, in and of themselves, a spiritual dimension and a spiritual significance. In *Housekeeping*, the image of communion casts the bodies of the dead in a position analogous to the body of Christ—and thus the novel suggests that bodies are not only biological but also *spiritual* entities.

“Spiritual” is a slippery, nebulous category with an incredibly diverse range of associations, from astrology to yoga. When it comes to discussions of the human being in religion, though, the human is often divided into two parts: the visible material part of the body, and the invisible spiritual part of the soul. The former is perishable, the latter imperishable. However, *Housekeeping* confounds this dualist view by presenting the material body itself in much the same way as the immaterial soul: enduring and inviolable, resisting dissolution and disintegration into nature. Walt Whitman more explicitly and ecstatically expresses this idea, ending his poem “I Sing the Body Electric” with a resounding assertion about the sacredness and spiritual significance of the body itself. Extolling various physical aspects of the human body, Whitman cries in ecstasy, “O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul! / O I say now these are the soul!” Whitman identifies the body, the material, *as* the soul, the spiritual. While *Housekeeping* is far more subtle than Whitman, the novel’s presentation of human bodies in communion also asserts the spiritual and lasting significance of the material body, the flesh and the blood.

While water does serve as the means of communion, *Housekeeping*’s ecotheology argues that nature is no mere vessel acting in service of human body and blood. The body is not unique in having spiritual significance. Instead, the novel actually presents the whole of the natural world as being imbued with its own spiritual significance. Thus, every theological position on Eucharist ultimately falls short of Robinson’s vision, for they all hold that the bread and wine—

the means of communion—are not significant in and of themselves. Consecration in the Eucharist *renders* them significant, but they are “mere sign[s]” until then (McGrath, *Christian Theology* 397). By contrast, *Housekeeping* asserts that nature is never “merely” anything. In fact, it is spiritually significant on its own even when “unhallowed,” that is, even when not formally consecrated. Indeed, Ruth specifically notes that this communion is an “unhallowed” one (Robinson 290)—but Robinson still marks nature with spiritual significance via capacities for language and memory. By endowing nature with these same capabilities as human participant in Eucharist, *Housekeeping* portrays the natural world as not merely the *site* of communion’s fulfillment and the *means* of taking communion—but as a *participant* in its own right. The novel’s “ecological reality” is not just one merely “*framed* by...the hope of wholeness and restitution” (Handley 81, emphasis added) but also one that actually participates wholly in it through its own language and memory. As a result, taking communion in *Housekeeping* is always an ecotheological undertaking, bringing together not just the living and the dead, the past and the future, the material and the spiritual, but also the human and the natural. Communion, not deep ecology or the laws of biology, thus serves as the ultimate and all-encompassing model of the interconnected relationship between humans and the non-human environment.

Nature as Participant in Communion: Language and Memory

The idea that language marks nature as spiritually significant is not without precedent in Christian theology. Earlier Christian thinkers often viewed nature as a book that could be read, providing a kind of testament to God (McGrath, *Re-Imagining Nature* 88). In fact, medieval theologian Hugh of St. Victor argued that “this whole visible world” was “a book written by the finger of God...to show forth the wisdom of the invisible things of God” (qtd. in McGrath, *Re-*

Imagining Nature 88), and Robinson's own theological favorite, John Calvin, declared that God's glory was "engraven in large and bright characters" in nature (Calvin 219). *Housekeeping* also alludes to the interface between text and nature through the dictionary that Ruth's grandfather kept. When Ruth opens it, she finds to her surprise that "[t]his dictionary is full of pressed flowers," carefully tucked where they belong alphabetically (Robinson 188). Queen Anne's lace is at Q, pansies at P, and roses at R. The alphabetical arrangement of flowers actually casts the plants themselves as words that can be categorized—words that might, perhaps, even be read.

Indeed, *Housekeeping* presents nature as an entity with its own language. Similarly, theologians in the Renaissance era solidified a natural theology which assumed the existence of a "natural language" inherent to the natural world, a language that could speak to people about God (McGrath, *Re-Imagining Nature* 87). It is this assertion of natural language that *Housekeeping* leverages to depict the environment itself as spiritually imbued—and to solidify the specifically theological dimension of our relationship to our ecological contexts. But just as Renaissance theologians argued that the book of Scripture was necessary to properly read the book of nature (87), we must first begin with an examination of the Bible in order to better understand natural language in *Housekeeping*.

In the Bible, Psalm 19 in particular expresses wonder and awe at nature, directly asserting the existence of natural language in its praise:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
and the firmament sheweth his handywork.
Day unto day uttereth speech,
and night unto night sheweth knowledge.
There is no speech nor language,
where their voice is not heard.
Their line is gone out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world (19:1-4).

This psalm makes clear that nature has a language: the skies “declare” (19.1) and each day “utter[s] speech” in a witness to the work of God (19.2). Nature’s “words” are so universal that they are heard everywhere, “through all the earth” and even “to the end of the world” (19.4). Moreover, this natural language is intelligible to *all* people, no matter where they live or what language they themselves speak, as the psalmist asserts by proclaiming, “There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard” (19.3). However, the status of natural language is, strictly speaking, nonlinguistic. In fact, another translation of this same psalm asserts that “[t]here is no speech nor language; their voice is not heard,” implying that natural language is speechless even as it speaks (*American Standard Version*, Gen. 19.3). The poet Joseph Addison also picks up on this paradox in his celebration of natural language: the heavens have “nor real Voice nor Sound” but still undeniably “utter forth a glorious Voice”—indeed, even tell a “wondrous Tale” to “spread the Truth.”

What, then, is “the Truth” told by nature’s paradoxically nonlinguistic language in *Housekeeping*? The natural environment makes claims about sin and about eschatology, demonstrating through both of them the interconnectivity between people and the natural environment. The repeated flooding of Fingerbone serves as a reminder of the Flood in Genesis, and Ruth strengthens this association by directing alluding to the Flood throughout the novel. While the Genesis Flood underscores and repudiates human iniquity, it also serves as an assertion of ecotheological interconnectedness. God uses the Flood to bring judgment upon the terrible “wickedness of man” (*King James Version*, Gen. 6.5), but the deluge does not selectively impact humans. Instead, the torrents sweep away “man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air” (6.7). The fact that human sin so deeply affects all of non-human nature forces a recognition that we are “bound up” with nature (Latz 292). Our fate is one and the same

as that of “the whole living world” (Robinson, *Death of Adam*, “Darwinism,” 63). The prominent attention given to the flooding of Fingerbone drenches *Housekeeping* in this assertion of interconnectedness, along with the reality of present human fallen-ness. Ruth presents the Flood as God’s attempt to wipe the world clean of the generational repercussions of Abel’s murder, which continues to resonate even in Fingerbone, where the people are “very much given to murder” (265). The flooding of Fingerbone thus underscores the reality of ecotheological connection between humans and nature, through which human sin infects and affects the environment. The fact that the natural world suffers the effects of human sin renders it Christ-like; Christ, after all, is crucified as a result of human iniquity. Just as Christ’s is the body at the center of Eucharist, the natural world contains the bodies of the dead who are crucial to *Housekeeping*’s communion.

If sin affects all things, salvation, too, uplifts everything. The Apostle Paul asserts this eschatological interconnectedness between humans and nature. Not only humans but “the *whole creation* groaneth and travaileth in pain together” (Rom. 8.22, emphasis added), straining under “the bondage of corruption” produced by human sin while eagerly anticipating the resurrection to come (8.21). Humans and the entirety of the natural world look forward to the same future, but for now, both bear and bemoan the effects of sin. Robinson asserts this same eschatological interconnectedness by alluding directly to Paul’s writing, employing the word “groan” with reference to the lake. The lake in Fingerbone “*groan[s]*” under the weight of ice in winter (Robinson 92, emphasis added), and the “clashes and *groans* from the lake” continue into the night (96, emphasis added). After the lake floods the town, it “thunder[s] and *groan[s]*” (103, emphasis added). The groans might signify “giant miseries” (93), but by using the same word as Paul, Robinson turns the expression of suffering into one of anticipation as well. The world of

Housekeeping is thus “a broken world awaiting resurrection” (Stout 581), a “ruin...meant for greater things” (Robinson 243).

Resurrection is evidently writ large in natural language in *Housekeeping*, for Ruth picks up this eschatological vision of wholeness and restoration from the empirical natural world. “Ascension seem[s]...a natural law” to her when she watches “gulls fly like sparks up the face of clouds” or “gnats sail out of the grass” (137). Every small detail of the natural world is incorporated into natural language in *Housekeeping*. Nature does not waste a single utterance, no matter how seemingly trivial. In addition to natural minutiae, larger-scale natural events like the seasons also bear witness to the future resurrection. Winter giving way to spring declares to Ruth that “death is undone,” giving her hope that her own losses are not absolute (185). What Ruth picks up from nature’s nonlinguistic language shapes her own vision of the resurrection. As she reflects upon the missionary aspirations of her aunt Molly, Ruth imagines Molly casting out a great net to sweep up and restore every lost person and thing. All the people claimed by the lake over the years, including Ruth’s mother, would be caught up in the net and fished out of the waters. Just as even the minutiae of nature proves significant, the resurrection treats the minutiae of ordinary life as significant, restoring even “fallen buttons” and “misplaced spectacles.” Then “time and error and accident [would be] undone, and the world [would become] comprehensible and whole” (136). Then the communion Ruth partakes in each time she drinks water, the communion with the dead, might finally be fulfilled.

In speaking of both the human spiritual condition, which is present with us from generations past, *and* the resurrection to come in the future, nature in *Housekeeping* engages in the past-present-future dimensions of communion alongside the human participants. Memory, too, is not relegated only to humans: nature itself is capable of memory in *Housekeeping*. As

previously discussed, Ruth identifies language as the basis of memory—and she further defines memory as “the sense of loss,” alluding to the fact that we remember what is lost to the past, whether people, places, or particular moments in time (291). The natural world in *Housekeeping* has a nonlinguistic language—and it keenly feels loss. When Cain kills his brother Abel, the tragedy gives “the simple earth of the field a voice and a sorrow” (289). Nature is so impacted by this murder that a “wicked sorrow” becomes deeply embedded in it—so deeply, in fact, that God resorts to a natural disaster, a flood, to “purge” it away (289). Nature’s acute sense of loss, sustained over generations, thus demonstrates nature’s memory, and the role of the wordless but unmistakable voice in mourning underscores again the nonlinguistic language of nature.

Capable of mourning, memory, and language, the natural world is clearly far more than a vessel in the way that bread and wine are in Eucharistic theology. Spiritually significant like every other material thing, including human bodies, the whole of the natural world acts as a participant in communion. The act of engaging in this communion thus doubles as a declaration that we always participate in a wider ecological and theological realities with the rest of nature. In sin and salvation, in loss and hope, we live in ecotheological communion with the environment and look towards a future restoration. Ultimately, the novel gestures toward a rooting of this ecotheological reality and hope in the Word of God.

A Web of Word(s): Looking Toward Nature as Creation in *Gilead*

Words prove so consistently important in *Housekeeping* that by the novel’s end, Ruth has a revelation that “things were held in place, are held in place, by a web of words” (300). Ruth’s memories, built as they are by language, and the prominence of natural language in the novel certainly lend credence to the centrality of words. Moreover, a word is also at the heart of

Eucharist: the Word of God. In fact, all the other words spoken during Eucharist, the language(s) of the sacrament, are intended to invoke and evoke his presence. Ruth is correct to center her hopes of future restoration and reconciliation around language—those words “written in the heart” (292)—for it is the death and resurrection of the Word that anchors such hope in any meaningful way. Through the image of a “web of words” (300), *Housekeeping* further suggests that the words and Word of God undergird the entire world. Grounded in the Word, the natural world participates in and shares the hope of the restoration foreshadowed by communion.

Housekeeping’s high level of allusiveness suggests that the novel itself exists in and is shaped by a web of words—of different writings. Of these, the most prominent and consistent intertextual influence on the novel is clearly the Bible, and in particular the book of Genesis. And Genesis, like Ruth, declares indeed that the world is held in place by words. In fact, Genesis presents the world as having been brought into being by words—God’s words. At least eight times, the Genesis creation story draws specific attention to God’s speech through the phrase “And God said” in reference to the act of creating (Gen. 1.3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). God speaks night and day, plants and animals, all into existence. Later, the early Christians affirmed this utterance-based creation narrative, proclaiming that “through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God” (*King James Version*, Heb. 11.3). God’s words form a framework for the universe, and we are thus connected to the rest of our environmental contexts—from soil to the sun—via this divine linguistic webbing.

Echoing Genesis, the ending of *Housekeeping* draws upon “an ineffable word of truth” to mark the beginning of “a new sort of life” for Ruth (Potts 489). Ruth and Sylvie make their precarious way across the bridge in the night, and the windy darkness around them and the deep waters below them call to mind the very opening lines of Genesis: “darkness was upon the face

of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Gen. 1.2). Out of this darkness, just as God utters light into existence, Ruth’s moment of transformation—“baptism,” Matthew Potts suggests (489)—occurs when she hears “some word so true [she] did not understand it, but merely felt it pour through [her] nerves” (Robinson 322). Indeed, as with baptism, Ruth’s life is utterly changed as she whole-heartedly embraces wandering and vagrancy with Sylvie, entering into a very different relationship with the rest of society. This moment marks a collision of word, flesh (that is, “nerves”), and truth which echoes the collision of Word, flesh, and truth in the Bible: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth” (John 1.14). This verse describes the Incarnation, which Christianity presents as a pivotal moment in the history of the divine-human relationship.

This Word, the Word of God, contains all other words and the things they speak into existence. “Christ is the eternal *Logos* who holds together all the *logoi* (words)” that are instrumental to God’s creative work in Genesis (Wirzba, *Nature to Creation* 85). All things hang together in and on and through the Word of God. To paraphrase Ruth, then, all things are held in place by a web of words, which is held in place through the Word. The Gospel of John asserts this importance of the Word to the creation of all things:

In the beginning was the Word [*Logos*], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made (John 1.1-3).

In Christianity, the divine Word, the *Logos*, is the very source and means of creation, the power that flows in and through the words God speaks in Genesis. Nothing, John writes, was made without the Word. However, the Word is central not only in the moment of making. Instead, all things *continue* to be held together in *Logos*, as though it were a kind of sustaining divine spider web. The Apostle Paul emphatically underscores this idea:

For by him [Jesus, the Word of God] were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible...all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and *by him all things consist* (Col. 1:16-17, emphasis added).

All things “consist” by the Word of God; the continued existence of everything in heaven and in earth depends on the Word. Another translation specifically mirrors the same language of being held in place that Ruth employs: “in him all things *hold together*” (*English Standard Version*, 1.17, emphasis added). *Logos*, the Word of God, thus forms the wider context—the wider spiritual reality—in which we live in relationship to all the rest of the natural world.

Through the advancement of its specific vision of communion, *Housekeeping* lays out an ecotheology rooted in the Word of God. The relationship between humans and nature is interwoven into *Housekeeping*’s communion, for nature emerges as site, means, and participant in communion, capable of its own language and memory. While affirming an ecological interconnectedness between humans and the environment, Robinson presents an alternative environmental framework that implicitly critiques deep ecology and a strict biological view of both humans and nature. These views, in Robinson’s estimation, fall short of the spiritual reality of both human and natural existence. However, despite its deep immersion in Christian imagery, and despite the obvious parallels between Eucharistic theology and the novel’s portrayal of communion, *Housekeeping* is far less overtly theological than Robinson’s second novel, *Gilead*. *Housekeeping* provides a foundation about the inherent spiritual significance of the world and the ecotheological reality of our relationship to the environment. In turn, *Gilead* builds upon this groundwork and the ultimate grounding in the Word of God to develop a reverent celebration of the environment not simply as nature but specifically as Creation—and of ourselves as created beings, all bearing witness to a loving, intimately involved God.

CHAPTER TWO

“Wherever You Turn Your Eyes”: Seeing the World as Creation in *Gilead*

And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.
— *Genesis 1:31*³

Twenty-four years and several nonfiction works after *Housekeeping*, the publication of Robinson’s second novel, *Gilead*, was welcomed with much praise and enthusiasm. While the two novels are clearly quite different from one another in their characters and their overall atmospheres, Robinson’s celebrated return to fiction was not only a return to a particular mode of creative writing but also to a certain ecotheology. Robinson builds upon the vision of a spiritually significant world from *Housekeeping* by presenting nature as infused with divine love and glory. Specifically, in *Gilead*, Robinson solidifies the idea of spiritual significance into a theologically robust presentation of the world as Creation—everything in existence, including the human person, has been created by God. The fact of having been created makes all things valuable, worthy of honor and love because of their relationship to the Creator. This revelation enables the resolution of the novel’s interpersonal tensions and furthers Robinson’s ecotheological project. It is by fully embracing a creational understanding of all things that Ames is able to reconcile himself to his estranged namesake, Jack Boughton. Through the idea that the world is Creation, Robinson also proposes a specifically Christian frame for properly valuing the environment.

Like *Housekeeping*, *Gilead* is interested in the negotiation of complicated familial and intergenerational relationships. The entire novel is presented as John Ames writing a letter to his

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural citations are taken from the American Standard Version to match the version that John Ames quotes from throughout *Gilead*.

young son and, in the process, relaying stories about his own father and grandfather—as well as his troubled and tense relationship with Jack Boughton, his best friend’s wayward son. Jack is not only named after Ames but also calls him by the familial and informal term “Papa.” In contrast to the affection and closeness implied by “Papa,” Ames and Jack are estranged from one another. Ames harbors suspicions and frequently jumps to assumptions, ruminating on Jack’s troubled past. But as Ames mulls over this relationship throughout his letter to his son, he consistently expresses love and wonder at Creation while failing to truly see Jack in the same loving and wondering light. This disparity is all the starker because Ames does, in fact, know that Jack is a “creature” (92), and yet he fails to properly see Jack through the creational lens. Ames himself confesses to these visual difficulties, drawing upon the language of sight and seeing. His assumptions and constant questions about Jack’s potential “guilt and regret,” about that which might be “beyond rectification in the terms of this world,” cloud his own vision of Jack. Frustrated, Ames wishes he could just clear away all of these impediments—“[t]hen I could *see* what I’m actually dealing with,” he thinks (201, emphasis added). The resolution of the tensions between the two men come when Ames’s creational understanding finally expands to properly include Jack, enabling him to bless and honor Jack as he is. Ultimately, Ames finds himself writing about Jack’s marriage in his letter to his son because he wants to preserve and pass on a visual clarity in terms of seeing Jack: he hopes to “let [his son] *see* the beauty there is in [Jack]” (232, emphasis added).

But while seeing the world as Creation is a prerequisite to proper human relationality and reconciliation, the unfortunate reality of *Gilead* is that we struggle to see the world clearly as Creation and to honor it as such. Seeing—that is, using our eyes to perceive and process visual stimuli—seems simple enough at first, and for those without visual impairments, the act does not

even require any effort or even any thought. Ames simply tells his son, “Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration,” a statement which very directly echoes this assertion from John Calvin: “Wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of God’s glory” (qtd. in Nelson 263).

Everywhere, nature itself glimmers with divine glory, and the only thing anyone needs, Ames notes, is just “a little willingness to see” (Robinson 245). Yet *Gilead* demonstrates that truly seeing Creation—and by extension, seeing the human creature—is actually quite difficult.

By engaging with this difficulty, *Gilead* also engages with the modern environmental movement, which has also recognized our trouble seeing and valuing the world for what it is. In order to remedy this failure of truly seeing nature, contemporary secular environmentalists like Christopher Stone have proposed the granting of legal personhood and the accompanying rights to nature. Stone hopes, in effect, to force us to recognize the natural world as having importance and value as an entity on its own, separate from human use. However, *Gilead* presents secularity itself as an obstacle. Speaking instead from a theological perspective, the novel suggests through Ames that it is a creational framework rooted in faith which loosens the scales from our eyes.

While Lynn White, Jr. is highly critical of Christianity in his seminal 1967 essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” he concludes that “the remedy [to environmental issues] must also be essentially religious.” However, White’s conclusion stems from his conviction that religion, especially Christianity, has also been the cause of environmental disaster (1207).

Through *Gilead*, Robinson’s theologically-rooted presentation of the world as Creation not only challenges White’s negative assumptions about Christianity but also provides a religious “remedy” for ecological crisis in the form of specifically Christian environmentalism. White perceives in Christianity an anthropocentric view that gives humans an “effective monopoly in

spirit” (1205), reducing the natural world to a series of material facts and resources. As a result, White writes disapprovingly, “[t]he whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity” (1206).

Robinson, however, demonstrates that the sacred grove is actually essential to *Gilead*’s narrative resolution and to Christian ecotheology. In fact, Robinson is more radical than White even imagines; while he implies the veneration of certain groves set aside as sacred. Robinson’s ecotheology proclaims that *all* groves are sacred. In Robinson’s theocentric telling, a grove is by definition sacred because it is part of God’s Creation. Throughout this chapter, I will lay out an intertextual elaboration of the spiritual nature of seeing in *Gilead*, which not only requires but also produces and sustains particular divine-human-non-human relationalities. I will argue that understanding the world as having been divinely created leads both to a Christian framework for environmental value and to transformation in Ames’s approach to Jack Boughton. Seeing the world as Creation—seeing all things as created by God, and having value as such—ultimately enables Ames to see Jack as God’s Creation, worthy of honor and love because of his sacred, created status.

The Struggle to See: Legal & Theological Arguments

From the beginning of the novel, Ames views the natural world as God’s Creation, but he also acknowledges that he is still new to such a vision—and that he is ultimately limited in his perceptual abilities as a human being. Ames notes that “our human circumstance creates in us a radically limited and peculiar notion of what existence is” (143). The newness of Ames’s own visual ability despite his age and experience as a pastor, along with his remark on human limitations, are suggestive of the difficulty of true creational seeing. Ames proclaims Earth “an

interesting planet,” one that “deserves all the attention you can give it” (28), and he himself gives much attention to the world around him. His own primary mode of attention is visual. Yet even Ames, despite the loving attention he lavishes on the world, is in actuality an amazed novice when it comes to truly seeing Creation as it is meant to be seen. Moreover, this perceptive clarity has come late in life to him, as he draws nearer to its end. Elderly and experienced, Ames describes how he nonetheless feels “sometimes as if [he] were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and then has to close its eyes again.” Ames’s characterization of himself as a “child” implies both childlike wonder and an innocent ignorance, as well as a humility, about the world’s awe-inspiring mysteries. Even Robinson herself confesses that she has spent a long time trying to achieve true sight—confesses that she has spent, in fact, “[her] life watching, not to see beyond the world” but rather “merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before [her] eyes.” Such a statement underscores the fact that to see with the eyes of faith—eyes that expect the world to shine with transfiguration and glory—is not to perceive something “beyond” and faraway, but rather to see that which is immediately and materially present, that which is “plainly before [our] eyes” (*Death of Adam*, “Psalm Eight” 243). As in *Housekeeping*, a division of the world into the invisible spiritual realm and the visible material realm is a false dichotomy. Instead, the very things which are “plainly” present are in fact the mysterious things of God. To see “merely” is to see nature as it is, as Creation—and yet to do so is so difficult that it appears to take a lifetime of practice and patience.

Ames and Robinson are not alone in calling attention to our difficulty with (and need for) clear visual perception of the natural world. A particular strain of the environmental movement—the rights-for-nature movement—repeatedly employs the language of looking in order to diagnose our failure to adequately care and campaign for the environment. The

suggested remedy for this problem is not in a new conception of our own expanded *selfhood*, as deep ecology argues, but rather in the granting of legal *personhood* to the natural world itself. Christopher Stone, providing an argument for legally endowing natural phenomena with such personhood and its accompanying rights, repeatedly returns to the verb *to see* in his discussion of the roots of our environmental failure. (Emphasis has been added to the verb and all its variations in all following quotations from Stone.) According to Stone, “it is hard to *see* [the environment] and value it for itself until we can bring ourselves to give it ‘rights.’” In fact, until nature has rights, “we cannot *see* it as anything but a *thing* for the use of ‘us’—those who are holding rights at the time.” We wear utilitarian and anthropocentric blinders, appreciating the environment not for itself but for its use to us, and the law as it currently stands provides no way of forcing us out of such a utilitarian mindset. Stone’s solution to this problem is that we must be *made* to see through legal changes awarding nature with personhood and the resulting rights. Laws must override our resistance and open our eyes to the intrinsic value of the natural world so that we break out of our human-centered perspective.

To further support his argument and to demonstrate the necessity of providing nature with legal personhood and rights, Stone points to the historical legal inequities that deprived certain marginalized groups, such as women and people of color, of the rights granted to white men. Again, Stone employs the language of looking to describe these laws and the injustices they perpetuated. A Wisconsin court that struck down a woman’s bid to practice law did so because it failed “to *see* women as they are (and might be),” because it could only “*see*...the popular ‘idealized’ version” of a woman: feminine, domestic, and decidedly not working as a lawyer (3). In addition, “the law once *looked* upon ‘man’s’ relationship to African Blacks” as one of conquest, mastery, and usage—a statement which also implies that Black people were not

viewed as men, that is, as humans. Such is the unequal way the common law continues “*regard[ing]*” rivers, lakes, trees, and other “natural objects” (7). Stone thus argues that just as the status of people before the law affects the way we see them, so too does the status of nature before the law affect how we see it. Stone is certainly not alone in his opinion; while he initially advanced his argument in 1972, more recently—in fact, in 2020—a *Slate* article also expressed approval of the rights-for-nature movement, suggesting that “personhood subverts this notion of ownership and confers its bearers certain inalienable rights” (Smith). Again, the assumption is that legal changes would prompt changes in our attitude toward and treatment of the natural world, moving us away from paradigms of ownership and property.

Gilead does not tackle the question of rights-for-nature head-on, but it becomes clear that the novel espouses a very different perspective on the issue of seeing and valuing nature for itself. In *Gilead*, the answer to valuing nature lies not in changing nature’s legal status but in having our own eyes opened to the reality of the world. Robinson’s framework for the proper valuation and appreciation of the environment is rooted in the Judeo-Christian idea of the world as God’s sacred Creation. In fact, the novel suggests that to truly see nature, to see it for what it is, is to see it as Creation. *Gilead* demonstrates that this mode of seeing and valuing the world frees us from anthropocentric utilitarianism and instead gives us theocentric admiration, respect, and love for everything around us.

Moreover, on an interpersonal level, this clarity of creational vision is also central to honoring people as they are: created by God and sacred as such. In *Gilead*, the failure to love and honor others is also essentially a failure of sight—and this failure persists despite legal attempts at correction. This troublesome failure to truly see others is evident through Jack and Ames’s relationship, which is the central narrative in the novel. Although Jack and Ames have equal

standing before the law as white men, Ames grapples with regarding Jack with affection and respect as his true theological and moral equal, as another image of God. Ames, too, uses the language of looking as he confesses his trouble seeing Jack: he finds it difficult “to *see* good faith in John Ames Boughton” (Robinson 154, emphasis added), and he broods over how Jack “doesn’t have the *look* of a man who has made good use of himself, if [Ames] is any judge” (160, emphasis added). The irony of Ames’s statement is that he is *not*, in fact, a good judge of Jack’s character based on what he perceives. In the background of the conflict and the resolution between Jack and Ames is another issue of human relationality left unsolved by legal changes: racism. *Gilead* presents Iowa as legally progressive and yet, in practice, the state cannot—or does not—make good on its legal promises of equality. The town of Gilead, in particular, fails to live up to its promises and its own early hopes of being a place where both Black and white citizens can live in peace. Despite the law, and despite good intentions, the town has no Black members, and while there are Black characters, like Della and her family, none of them are actually visible within the book’s pages. They are mentioned but remain unseen. In rendering them invisible and marginal, the novel literalizes their second-class status in white-dominated America, including in well-intentioned Gilead, and underscores the basis of the problem as a failure to truly see another human being.

Given these issues, *Gilead* suggests that no legal change could possibly produce a radical shift in vision. The novel depicts the primary root—and remedy—of our deficient seeing as being spiritual in nature. Christianity, too, as a whole asserts unequivocally that law alone is inadequate in truly working transformative change in people because of the persistent problem of sin—an issue of spiritual health, not legal inadequacy. The Apostle Paul writes that though the law may be “holy, and righteous, and good” (Rom. 7.12), human sinfulness is more than capable

of “working death to [us] through that which is good”—the law itself (7.13). No matter how holy, righteous, or just it might be in its instructions and commandments, “what the law could not do” was offer salvation, which instead came through God “sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh” (8.3). From a perspective on environmental action, then, *Gilead* suggests that national laws could only ever go so far in transforming attitudes and granting proper perception, for perceptual difficulties are rooted in deep-seated spiritual corruption, not simply in the legal status of natural phenomena. This same spiritual corruption, by impeding the development of a clear creational sight, impedes the ability to see and relate to other people as God’s sacred Creation.

Such an assertion about the centrality of our spiritual state to the state of our sight might initially seem too stark, and perhaps even extreme, compared to the way Ames points to insufficient bravery as the source of our trouble. All we need is “a little willingness to see” the world around us, Ames muses, but “who could have the courage to see it?” (Robinson 245). What does courage have to do with sin or salvation or sight? The answer becomes clearer upon consideration of the presentation of Old Testament visions, in which prophets confronted with such visions find that their courage fails them. They initially respond to visions with terror—a terror produced from their sudden awareness of their sinfulness in comparison to the sheer holiness of God. A vision of God prompts the prophet Isaiah to cry out in awe and fear, “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of hosts.” The vision he sees makes him acutely aware that he is sinful and “unclean” in comparison to the holiness of God, and he seems to quail, to become utterly “undone” (6.5). Bible stories like this present God’s glory and holiness as being more than a mortal can bear, and *Gilead* suggests that we, too, fear “that there

is more beauty than our eyes can bear” in the world around us (Robinson 246). But it is also the argument of Christian theology that we are so steeped in sin in our postlapsarian universe that we struggle not only to *handle* this beauty but also to simply *see* Creation to begin with.

Here, Stanley Fish’s arguments about John Milton’s seventeenth-century epic *Paradise Lost* provide insights that illuminate the idea of sight in *Gilead*. Fish posits that the “true horror of the Fall” is in “the loss of that happy state in which man’s faculties worked in perfect harmony” (38-39). In Eden, our abilities were perfectly intact and perfectly capable, including our ability to see things as they truly are. However, as a result of the Fall, our “perceptual equipment, physical and moral”—including both our ability to see *and* our ability to understand and judge what we see—have become impaired (103). Original sin “places a permanent screen...between the mind and the full and clear comprehension of what is” (126), and indeed the Apostle Paul writes that “now we see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinth. 13.12). The cost of falling in Eden includes the loss of an accurate vision of the world itself. But what would an accurate vision of the world actually look like? What does it mean to see with clear eyes unclouded by original sin?

To see in such a way would be to share God’s sight, the epitome of clear vision. What God sees is the “very essence of things” (Wilkins qtd. in Fish 64)—and this “essence,” Fish argues, always remains utterly “incorruptible” (Fish 154). What comes from a good and incorruptible God remains good and incorruptible; an accurate vision of the world would perceive this intrinsic goodness. This is not, of course, to diminish “the true gravity of sin,” which Ames is certainly mindful of (Robinson 190). *Gilead* is clear that sin is powerful force, and in this novel as in *Housekeeping*, human sin taints the natural environment just as much as it stains the human soul. Drawing upon language that clearly echoes the Flood-based imagery in

Housekeeping, Ames observes that human “guilt can burst through the smallest breach and cover the landscape, and abide in it in pools and danknesses, just as native as water” (82). Creation seems utterly soaked and steeped in iniquity—but while guilt may *appear* “as native as water,” the novel makes it clear that sin and its effects are, in actuality, far from native (82). Rather, they are alien marks smudging what was created perfectly, whether human or natural—and so then “why should the Lord bother much over these smirches that are no part of His Creation?” (190). Ames conjectures that in God’s eyes, sin, no matter how serious, does not and cannot define what God has made. While the Fall may have left behind a “spot” of corruption on all things, they remain good at their core, as a good God’s creation (Fish 154). However, because our fallen nature renders us unable to see into the incorruptible heart of things, we also fail to see this inherent and essential goodness in all things (312). The “covetous eye,” for example, fails to see and appreciate a jewel as it is, as a precious gem of beauty, and instead twists it into what it is not and never was—“an object of temptation,” something to scheme about and perhaps even steal or kill for (136). Squinting through the fun house mirrors of sin, we see a distorted version of God’s reality.

In *Gilead*, seeing as God sees is also crucial to properly recognizing and honoring a fellow human as a sacred, created being deeply loved by God. “[T]o love the *being* of someone” is to be “godlike,” and Lila loves her son “as God does, to the marrow of [his] bones,” a phrase which underscores the depth and utter completeness of a parent’s love (Robinson 136, emphasis original). To truly love someone in this way is in fact to “see her as God sees her” (Robinson 139), a statement which suggests that for God, to see someone is to love them. If loving is seeing, then the unseen presence of the novel’s Black characters discussed earlier further underscores the failures of the town’s abolitionist dreams, the tragic gap between the

expectations and the reality. Moreover, Ames's failure to truly love Jack, an issue which he revisits again and again, reinforces the idea that he fails to see Jack for who he is. While the novel does not resolve the problem of persisting racism, *Gilead* does provide a resolution between Jack and Ames as Ames learns to see his namesake with a creational worldview—that is, as God sees him, as a beloved creation.

Regaining Sight: The Courage to See

But how can we begin to truly see again? Critic Laura Tanner argues that Ames demonstrates heightened sensory perception and attention throughout *Gilead* because of an acute “awareness of his impending death” (Tanner 235). There is certainly truth to this assessment, given that Ames does especially express his love and attachment to this world when he considers his ever-approaching departure from it. His knowledge of his inevitable leave-taking leads him to reflect on what he knows lies on the other side of the grave—but as Ames admits that “this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us” in heaven, he is reminded of the “human beauty” of this life, concluding that this earthly life “is only lovelier for that” (Robinson 57). It is obvious that Ames's sense of his mortality does heighten his awareness of and appreciation for the world around him, but the anticipation of death is by no means the only source of a sharpened vision. In fact, in *Gilead*, the knowledge of mortality is far from the most important and most effective corrective to our weakened and impaired eyes. Instead, Ames gives the credit to the “prevenient courage that allows us to be brave—that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands” (246). And from whom does such prevenient courage come from? Like grace, the source of this courage is divine. Ames himself compares this prevenient, sight-enabling courage to the prevenient grace which God

provides. However, it is not that such prevenient courage changes the world before us, but rather that it works to open up our *own* sensory capabilities to God's reality. Ames refers to "*our* eyes" and "*our* hands" (emphasis added), underscoring the involvement of our own ordinary, bodily senses in perceiving and responding to Creation.

Divine help to achieve clarity of sight is certainly not a novel idea, though. Michael J. McClymond argues that for American theologian and preacher Jonathan Edwards, true sight—the "fulfillment" of the "ordinary sense experience" of seeing—also hinged upon divine assistance (McClymond 214). Edwards wrote that the guidance of the "Spirit of God activates and quickens the natural human faculties" (Edwards qtd. in McClymond 215) so that we can see at last the true, inherent "excellency" and "divine glory...in the sun, and moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature" (315). Divine power and intervention serve not to *transform* reality but rather to reveal it *as it is* to our ordinary senses (Fish 312), those natural human faculties Edwards wrote of—or, in the words of John Ames, our eyes and our hands. Ames, like his fellow Congregationalist Edwards, points to God as the source of right seeing and true perception of the world while celebrating our existing sensory capabilities.

Courage, however, is an interesting virtue to pair with sight, for seeing seems almost passive, whereas courage conventionally involves action. One need not perform heroic feats to see and to admire the dawn or the moon, and yet Ames argues that we need bravery in order to do so. *Gilead* thus prompts a reconsideration of what might constitute courage. Here, we turn once more to Stanley Fish's arguments regarding *Paradise Lost*. Fish suggests that true heroism, at heart, is the decision to maintain loyalty to the reality of "God as the central fact of the universe" in all circumstances (Fish 183). In other words, heroism is fidelity to God. Heroism is

faith. Moreover, the Bible itself also links courage with faith, as in the Old Testament book of Joshua. After Moses's death, God commands Joshua to cross the Jordan with the Israelites into the promised land of Canaan at last, instructing him to be brave multiple times in the opening of the book. "Have not I commanded thee?" God asks Joshua. "Be strong and of good courage; be not affrighted, neither be thou dismayed, for Jehovah the God is with thee whithersoever thou goes." The construction of this verse—in particular the "for" which signals a causal relation—makes it clear that the promise of "Jehovah the God" to accompany Joshua everywhere is cited as the very reason why he should "be not affrighted" or "dismayed" (1.9). His courage is to be an outpouring from his faith in God's constant presence with him.

Returning with these insights to *Gilead*, then, we find that the novel roots "the courage to see" the world—to see it truly and clearly, that is—in faith in God (Robinson 245). It is faith which allows Ames to speculate about the existence of divinely provided prevenient courage in the first place, and it is faith which gives him an understanding that the world around him is not simply nature but Creation—as something sacred and worthy of love because it comes from a divine, loving Creator. A theocentric understanding of nature as Creation is key to recognizing its sacredness in *Gilead*, for only when we see the world as Creation will we "see the world with the love by which God sees and sustains the world" (Wirzba, *Nature to Creation* 4)—and only then, as Ames's own emotional journey with regards to Jack demonstrates, are we able to see others with the same love that God sees them.

The World as Creation

In *Gilead*, while a particular relationality with God—one of faith—is clearly a necessity to see all things in existence as God's Creation, the resulting creational understanding itself

actually better reveals the relational work and attentive nature of the divine. The paradox of the creational vision is that to see Creation, we must see God, but to see God, we must see Creation. As the Apostle Paul writes of Creation, “the things that are made” do indeed provide Ames with a glimpse of God (Rom. 1.20). However, the world is not merely a passive canvas upon which God reveals himself but instead is itself “relational and communicative” (Wriglesworth 94), born of “the Creator’s generous address” and bearing witness to God (106). The similarities with *Housekeeping* are immediately obvious, given Robinson’s treatment of natural language in her first novel. In *Gilead*, Creation specifically witnesses to God’s affirming love for the world and his continued involvement in it; Creation is both “brought into being and renewed” continuously by God (Wriglesworth 94). Creation’s very existence, then, is a testament to God’s caring and continuous relationship with the world, and its communication of this divine truth to human beings draws it into relationality not only with God but also with people. Creation actually mediates the human-divine relationship in *Gilead*: humans experience and glimpse God on earth by observing and participating in the world.

Ames, indeed, perceives and appreciates on-going divine attention in Creation. Robinson makes apparent the continuous nature of divine involvement by alluding to the Genesis creation story in her descriptions of nature in the novel’s narrative present. As Ames watches “the dawn come and the light flood over the land,” he feels “the word ‘good’ so profoundly affirmed in [his] soul” (246). Both the dawn—a beginning—and this affirmation of the world’s goodness reflect Genesis 1, in which God creates all things and affirms, over and over again, that Creation is good. Genesis 1 is not, however, just the story of cosmic origins but rather begins God’s own on-going involvement with the world. At another dawn, Ames expresses this faith in God’s sustained presence and care for Creation. Though it may seem like a new day, Ames notes that

instead “it has all been one day, that first day” of Creation. “Light is constant,” and though we may not know it “we just turn over in it. So every day is in fact the selfsame evening and morning” (210). In viewing each day as the very first day of Creation, Ames not only directs our attention to the world’s created nature but also suggests that its creation is still on-going. Just as on the first day, God is still directing and attending to Creation, affirming its goodness. As a result, “the experience of the goodness of creation”—the awe Ames feels for the dawn and the prairie—is in fact also the experience of “God’s continuous activity” (Latz 286). Because of this idea of continuous divine engagement, Robinson’s portrayal of nature as Creation doubles as a presentation of a Creator God who is attentive and involved with the world, not a distant “Watchmaker” deity who sets things into motion and steps back to let them run their course (*Death of Adam*, “Darwinism” 37).

Because of God’s sustained engagement with Creation, it follows that all things, as facts of their created existence, exist in constant and direct relationality with the divine. In fact, *Gilead*’s creational framework conceptualizes all things as being *first and foremost* in relationship with God, embracing a theocentric perspective rather than an anthropocentric one. *Gilead* shares Jonathan Edwards’s belief that Creation “does not exist solely to satisfy the will, pleasure, or self-defined happiness of human beings” but rather for the glory of God (Gatta 65); Ames himself makes the theocentric declaration that “the world exists for God’s enjoyment.” Ames further elaborates this enjoyment by comparing it to how a parent “enjoy[s] the *being* of a child” (Robinson 124-125, emphasis original). This analogy and the evocation of enjoyment paints a picture of God appreciating and loving the world for what it is, simply for the fact of its existence, the way a parent appreciates and loves a child—simply for being. “Your existence is a delight to us,” Ames tells his son (136). The novel presents Creation’s most salient relationship

as its relationship to its Creator and its very existence as a delight—a source of enjoyment—to God. In fact, contemporary ecotheologian Norman Wirzba argues that God rests on the seventh day specifically in order to make the space and time to “delight” in Creation (*Nature to Creation*, 75). To see Creation as God sees it, then, is to delight in its existence and to be led back to the primacy of God.

In *Gilead*, this relationship between God and Creation produces three major interconnected impacts for the relationship between human beings and non-human Creation as demonstrated by the way Ames relates to the world. The creational understanding of the world which sees as God sees (1) leads to a theocentric and decidedly non-utilitarian relationship between humans and non-human Creation; (2) replaces utilitarianism with a loving attentiveness toward Creation which moves Ames to respond to its sacredness; and (3) through this attentiveness and response leads Ames to a fuller understanding of human beings as a part of Creation. This third part of the creational framework in turn produces interpersonal relationships of a particular nature which are central to the intergenerational conflicts and reconciliations narrated through the novel.

First: *Gilead*'s centering of Creation's value and worth on the sheer fact of its created existence moves beyond anthropocentrism and undermines a utilitarian mindset by separating its value from its usefulness to humans—in other words, by divorcing its worth from its function. This idea bears similarity to Bill Brown's “thing theory,” in which Brown suggests that we only “begin to confront the thingness of objects” when they are separated from their usefulness and their functions, such as when they break (Brown 4). However, in *Gilead*, unlike in Brown's thing theory, no dysfunction or breakdown is necessary to prompt the honoring of a created thing as and for itself, rather than for its uses. Moreover, although both Robinson and Brown consider a

thing's separation from use, Robinson focuses on its inseparable connection to its divine maker—a theocentric vision of Creation. De-contextualizing created things from their utilitarian value to humans, Robinson re-contextualizes them, properly, in terms of their relationship with God.

This theocentric and anti-utilitarian mindset toward Creation is most obvious when Ames reflects on water. Contemplating water's role in blessing and appreciating it for its *being*, Ames is ultimately led back to God the Creator. Ames watches a young couple laughing and running through “a storm of luminous water” pouring down from the tree branches after the rain (Robinson 27). The scene is so beautiful that he finds it “easy to believe...that water was made primarily for blessing and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash” (28). The second of these purposes is both obviously useful and necessary. Yet these uses of water, despite our obvious dependence on them, are not the main point. Instead, the primary purpose of water, Ames says, is for blessing. Though this statement does suggest that there is indeed a *use* to water in blessing, the act of conferring a blessing has no actual utilitarian value. It does nothing to ease our lives, or to quench our thirst, or to grow our crops. In fact, it “doesn't enhance sacredness,” even—it simply “acknowledges it.” However, Ames muses that “there is a power in that” which leads him to recognize and honor the inherent sacredness of another created thing (23). Water thus helps lead Ames *beyond* himself, allowing him to recognize the sacredness of other things. However, Ames also argues that simply to see water at all is to behold something sacred, for water “has a significance in itself” even before it is put to any use, whether that be the washing of clothes or the blessing of babies. This sacred significance is theocentric in nature. Ames quotes Feuerbach describing water as “the purest, clearest of liquids” and therefore as a reflection of “the spotless nature of the Divine Spirit” (23). Water not only points back to its

Creator but also reveals something of the divine nature. *Gilead* suggests when Ames uses water for its true purpose—blessing—he acknowledges the Creator who has endowed the world with sacredness, demonstrating again that “ultimate end of all works of Creation,” as Edwards believed, is divine glory (Gatta 64).

This environmental framework rooted in the idea of Creation engenders an anti-utilitarian outlook not only of the environment but also of manmade structures and technologies such that they, too, point back to God. Ames consistently contextualizes everything built by humans as existing within a created order, as with his description of honeysuckle growing “on every fence post and porch railing in [C]reation” (51). People live not in neighborhoods or in towns or in a specific country, but rather in Creation at large. Moreover, watching his son playing outside in the sprinkler spray, Ames describes the machine as “a magnificent invention because it exposes raindrops to sunshine.” Conventionally speaking, the primary purpose of a sprinkler is to facilitate the process of watering a lawn—but for Ames, the sprinkler is praiseworthy not because of its utility but rather for how it draws our attention to “a thing so miraculous as water” (63). Unlike most naturally occurring storms, which roll gray clouds over the sun, the sprinkler can produce water in the presence of direct sunlight, creating an “iridescent little downpour” that reminds Ames of baptism and resurrection. Thus the sprinkler is valuable not because it makes our lives easier—not because it serves *us*—but rather because it acts in the service of God’s Creation, calling well-deserved attention to its holy beauty. The theocentric nature of creational seeing draws everything in existence back to God and values it in relation to the divine.

Because his creational vision orients him toward the theocentric significance and worth of all things, even the most minute details become worthy of deep and reverent attention to Ames. Since God affirms the goodness of each created thing and cares for each creation, all

things without exception are sacred and significant. The value of each and every thing appears heightened—or rather, it is revealed. The clarity of creational sight allows Ames to see and respond appropriately to the true, divinely-endowed worth in each thing. Everything ordinary is in fact extraordinary simply because it exists as part of God’s Creation and reveals divine glory. Even mundane afternoon light is so incredible to Ames that he believes “no one could begin to do justice to [it]” (*Gilead* 51). Indeed, Robinson writes elsewhere that, according to John Calvin, when even a tiny “seed falls into the ground it is cherished there” (*Death of Adam*, “Psalm Eight” 234). The word “cherished” implies not merely attention but also deep affection and love. To see the world as Creation is to have a transformed outlook that notices and respects every little thing—a transformed relationship to the minute and mundane details of the (extra)ordinary world.

This reverent relationship to Creation moves Ames to respond to the sacredness of the world around him not only by praising it in writing but by actually extending a sacrament to it. This response in turn produces a deeper awareness of sacredness not only of the other but also of one’s own self as a created being. As children, Ames and his playmates decide to baptize some “dusty little barn cats” because they “thought the world of those cats” (*Gilead* 22). The children’s awareness of the inexpressible worth of the cats, half-tame vermin hunters though they may be, demonstrates the creational view which holds all Creation as sacred, and it inspires them to respond through baptism. This sacrament “doesn’t enhance sacredness” but instead specially “acknowledges” the cats’ inherent sacredness as created beings (23). Moreover, blessing the cats with the sacrament provides Ames with a special awareness of sacredness: he has the sensation of truly feeling the cat’s “mysterious life,” as well as an understanding of “[his] own mysterious life” (23). The sacredness of Creation inspires a response which only enhances the experience of

sacredness in a kind of positive feedback loop; it draws Ames ever closer into this theocentric Creation by inspiring him to interact with it in blessing it—and by increasing his awareness of his own created nature. Both he and the cats share a “mysterious life” which witnesses to the sacredness of their created being; both are part of God’s Creation.

The baptism of the cats is a particularly interesting point in the broader environmental context of this chapter because of the similarity it seems to bear with an element of the rights-for-nature movement. In one regard, the fact that extending baptism to cats produces a revelation of the animals’ sacredness initially appears to offer supporting evidence for Stone’s arguments. Because baptism is reserved for human beings, baptizing the cats seems tantamount to bestowing a kind of theological personhood upon them, much as Christopher Stone advocates for the granting of legal personhood to what he dubs “natural objects” (Stone 7)—and it elicits a strong response in Ames about the cats’ inherent worth, much as Stone argues legal changes would affect our attitude towards nature’s value. However, to conflate the baptism of cats with an argument for the *personhood* of cats is ultimately an unfounded interpretation. To do so would actually be to lose a certain uniqueness about cats in favor of regarding them, somehow, as people. Providing personhood, theological or legal, to a cat would detract from its true created nature, its cat-ness.⁴ While rights-for-nature would ostensibly decenter humans by broadening legal personhood to include non-human species, such a move capitulates, in a sense, to anthropocentrism by assigning higher value to (legal) persons and creating more of them. Rather than challenging humans to love and value non-human species as they are, the rights-for-nature movement argues that we must learn to see them for what they are *not*: persons.

⁴ The term “cat-ness” owes its origins to ecological farmer Joel Salatin’s term “pigness” in his book *The Marvelous Pigness of Pigs: Respecting and Caring for All God’s Creation* (2017).

However, unlike this ideological demand of rights-for-nature arguments, *Gilead* does not diminish the distinctiveness of each created being by painting them all with the broad brush strokes of an indistinguishable sacredness. In fact, responding to a created thing's sacredness makes Ames *more* aware of the particularities of its sacred existence. When baptizing the cats, Ames experiences "[t]he sensation of really knowing a creature" (23), suggesting that baptizing a cat provides an intimate understanding of its mysterious, sacred, and particular being. This intimate knowledge preserves and honors the specific "cat-hood," so to speak, of the cats, while heightening Ames's awareness of its theocentric significance. Thus the creational vision of the world and the response it evokes perceive both "the diverse forms of [C]reation *and* the [divine] love that holds and sustains them in their being" (Wirzba, *Nature to Creation* 75, emphasis original).

This recognition of the particularities of each created existence and the divine love which creates and sanctifies them in turn necessitates an understanding of the human creature as part of Creation while remaining distinctive—the third of the results produced by creational seeing. Just as Ames views the prairie and the dawn as revelations of God's loving attention to the world, so too does he view his own body, thereby emphasizing its created nature and the way it serves as a testament to the divine. Ames sees "all the defects and injuries" of his aged body as markers of "long life faithfully preserved in him" and as his own physical "tendencies honored" by God (115). The fact that the finger he broke while playing baseball as a young man is now "crookeder than ever" is a sign of "an intimate attention" from God (115). Ames also underscores God's continuous and renewing involvement with Creation through his own body. His very heart, failing though it is, bears witness to this fact. Ames considers each beat of his heart to be a sign of his on-going "Preservation," which in itself is not just "a Creation" but also "a continued

Creation, and a Creation every moment,” as Ames quotes George Herbert saying (111). No matter how decrepit or diseased, no matter how weak or weary, the human body takes its place in God’s beloved Creation, physically manifesting God’s sustained, unwavering love and attention.

The fact that a human being is also part of Creation is made evident in Ames’s appreciative awareness of human affinity with the natural world. The same “shimmer on a child’s hair” and “on a child’s skin” are likewise present “in the dew” and “in the petals of flowers” (52). This interplay suggests that human beings are interconnected with Creation, embedded in it—an ecotheological statement which resonates with ecological realities. In fact, there is no part of us which is exempt from the common miracle of created existence; rather, “[w]e participate in being without remainder. No breath, no thought, no wart or whisker, is not as sunk in Being as it could be” (178). Even the use of the word “whisker” here highlights our interconnectedness with the rest of Creation, for the word contains a reference to men’s facial hair as well as to the whiskers of other animals, like mice.

This immersive, complete participation in this shared Being with all the rest of the created universe is so extensive that it collapses space and confounds scale: celestial bodies and earth-bound humans can equally illuminate one another. On one hand, Ames describes the moon as a “metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within the great general light of existence” (119). On the other hand, it is as he “listen[s] to baseball that it occur[s] to [him] how the moon actually moves, in a spiral” (45). The moon sheds light on the human soul, and the human game of baseball sheds light on the moon. The deep immersion of the human creature in the rest of Creation enables a kind of communicative interplay between the universe and ourselves that helps us better understand both ourselves and the world.

In elaborating this human affinity and interplay with the rest of Creation, Robinson makes a key point which is crucial to the reconciliation between Ames and Jack. The relationality between people and non-human Creation suggests that a proper understanding of the human creature is impossible to separate from an understanding of Creation at large, and thereby impossible to separate from the Creator. As a result of this intertwined relationality, interpersonal human relationships must be approached through a creational framework that takes into full account the fact of another person's sacred, created existence as revelatory Creation. To truly see another person is to see God's sacred and beloved Creation. The reconciliation and resolution of *Gilead's* interpersonal and intergenerational dramas hinge upon the successful adoption of this creational understanding to straighten out sight made crooked by the condition of sin.

Seeing the Human Creature

As with the cats have their own particular sacredness, there is also a sacredness particular to the human creature which sets it apart from all other things in Creation. Given the novel's emphasis on proper seeing, it is hardly a surprise that it this human sacredness is something which must be *seen*. It is when Ames has "seen" (and "held," calling back to mind his emphasis on our eyes and our hands) a child, a fellow human creature, that he senses that "there is nothing more astonishing than a human face." He posits that this "has something to do with incarnation," referring to the Christian doctrine that a divine God became human, taking on mortal flesh and a mortal life, as Jesus Christ. Ames's use of the vague and non-specific word "something" in his attempted explanation of the human's "singularity" suggests that the exact theological nature of human exceptionalism is, ironically, beyond human linguistic expression—perhaps even beyond full human comprehension (66). However, something about this exceptionalism evidently

manifests itself in the realm of vision. The creational understanding of the world asserts that all things have a theocentric significance in and of themselves, and the human creature in particular bears the uniquely bestowed image of God. Though not necessarily an indication that the physical human form literally resembles the form that God takes, if any, the use of the word “image” is striking because it is visually grounded. *Image* must be seen.

In her nonfiction, Robinson herself associates a proper appreciation of the human with “our aesthetic pleasure in the human presence as a thing *to be looked at* and contemplated” (*Death of Adam*, “Introduction” 27, emphasis added). Visual art, the artistic presentation of the human form, is a sign of such aesthetic pleasure, she argues, describing the way people once “painted human figures on their jars, carved them into their city gates” (26). Again, *image* is central, and by virtue of what it is, it demands to be seen. In the past, images of humans “decorated lamp stands and soup tureens and the spines of books,” and human figures were considered—rightly, Robinson asserts—“things pleasing in themselves” (27). The visual veneration of the human form thus serves as an acknowledgment and an honoring of “the sacredness of the human self,” which Robinson defines as seeing “ourselves as images of God” (“Radiant Astonishment” 8). The *imago Dei* is part of the fact of human created existence. To see the human as a created being is in fact to see it as having been created in the image of God, and “reverence is owed to human beings simply as such” (*Death of Adam*, “Darwinism 62). The creational view of all things seeks to see as God sees and to love as God loves, and to turn this creational lens upon the human creature is to understand that people are worthy of honor and love simply “because God their Father loves them” (*Gilead* 189).

To bear the image of God also comes with its own particular ability, one grounded in the visual as well. The language of Genesis returns repeatedly to the verb “to see,” drawing on the

language of looking. Who is the subject who does this seeing? The answer is God, the Creator himself. “God saw” recurs five times in the first chapter of Genesis (1.4, 12, 18, 21, and 31). God sees his Creation, and he sees that it is good. Moreover, one of God’s first utterances to human beings, his image-bearers, is “Behold” (1.29)—a command to look, to see, to engage in the visual. Notably, God does not provide any such instruction to his other creations; his command to them is simply that they *be*. To bear the image of God is to be given the unique gift and the command, even, to see—to see what God sees, and to see *as* God sees: “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (1.31). In Robinson’s understanding of the world, human beings can and must look upon all Creation and see, as Ames indicates in *Gilead*, that it is very good. As the image of God, people are set apart from all other created things with this ability to see God’s glory and love manifest in everything that exists. Nowhere is there any indication that a tree or a bird or a lake, glorious Creation as each is, is capable of such seeing.

However, the fact that such seeing does not come easily to people in a postlapsarian universe suggests that there is a human exceptionalism which is negative in nature. Human beings among all God’s Creation are exceptionally alienated from their Creator. While non-human Creation consistently proclaims the glory and love of God in every aspect of its very existence, people struggle with the task of merely seeing the world for what it really is. Moreover, it seems that in a post-Fall world, human creatures alone among Creation are in *need* of such sight. The plains ask no proof of God, yet people constantly require it—evidence of a less-than-favorable spiritual state, if Christ’s assessment is to be believed: “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign” (Matt. 16.4). (Perhaps it is not nature which needs personhood but rather people who must aspire to be more like non-human Creation.) While all Creation acts as signs for divine love and presence, our need to render the world around us as

evidence to remedy our alienation unfortunately runs the risk of reducing Creation into a series of clues and losing sight of the intrinsic sacredness of its existence.

This alienation from God and this alienation from Creation, evidenced by the struggle to see it, intersect and interact with one another—and also ultimately produce the ways people alienate one another. The dark side of human exceptionalism means that “the inaccessibility of Paradise,” as Stanley Fish writes, “is more a question of psychology than geography” (103). The paradox in *Gilead* is that this fallen world is both Paradise lost and Paradise unseen. The novel acknowledges that its setting is a post-Fall world, where guilt seems “as native as water” (Robinson 82), but still casts this fallen reality as a kind of Eden. Every morning, Ames feels like “Adam waking up in Eden” (66), and as he watches the sun rise, he quotes from Ezekiel 18.13 to further underscore the Edenic nature of life even now: “Thou wast in Eden, the garden of God” (210). Though Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, it seems that we are still in the good garden of God—if only we would see clearly. Our alienation, our exile, is something we ourselves create.

The exclusionary implications stemming from our failure to see are far-reaching and interpersonal. In *Gilead*, we are also responsible for our alienation from one another. Though we live together in this Eden of a world, our failures of sight produce exclusionary attitudes that turn our fellow human beings, fellow creatures made in the image of God, into exiles and outcasts. This problem of seeing and the resulting exclusion is central to the novel’s conflicts, embodied especially in the character of Jack, who is viewed as a troublemaker and a disgrace to his pious, respectable family. He ultimately leaves the town of Gilead, abandoning hope that it is a place that would accept and embrace his interracial marriage and biracial child. The novel illustrates how we so frequently fail not only to see Creation but also to see our fellow human beings with

clarity, to honor one another's "mortal and immortal being," without regard for "all the tedious particulars" of our doings and mistakes (197). Even Ames, awed by the natural world as he is, still struggles to see Jack clearly as one of God's creations and to love him as such.

The theocentric nature of creational vision means that, as discussed earlier, seeing and revering each created thing ultimately leads Ames back to God. The sign that he fails to see Jack with this same creational perspective is that Ames's ruminations about Jack lead him not to God but farther inward to his own self: his own concerns, insecurities, and qualms. Even when Jack is an infant, Ames fails to see Jack's sacred nature as a human creature, bearing the image of God, because he is "so distracted [by] his own miserable thoughts" (189). As he christens the infant Jack, Ames is aware of "how coldly" he is behaving towards the baby and "how far [his] thoughts were from blessing him" (188). Later, when the adult Jack returns to Gilead, Ames is frequently concerned about how Jack views him and what Jack intends toward him. Ames is on edge because he views Jack as a potential threat towards him and towards his family, rather than being brought beyond his worries to a greater recognition of Jack's God-given sacredness. *Gilead* presents creational seeing as the solution to this suspicious, exclusionary attitude towards others because it sees people as God sees them—as beloved creatures. As a result, the creational worldview when applied to interpersonal dramas and conflicts is far more generous and forgiving because it values people for "the exquisite primary fact of existence," just as God does (190). "Existence is the essential thing and the holy thing" for God, and so "whatever reality [transgressions] have is trivial and conditional" in the face of the miracle of created existence (189). To achieve reconciliation with his namesake, Ames must turn this kind of clear-eyed, Creation-focused vision upon Jack to see him in his created sacredness as a human being.

Ames does, eventually, learn to see Jack with a theocentric creational perspective towards the end of the novel. The experience paves the way for a full reconciliation in which he blesses Jack not in the distant and cold manner at Jack's christening but with an attitude of honest honoring of Jack's sacredness. Soon after Ames reflects upon existence as essential and holy and upon God's view of Creation as beloved and valued simply because of existence, he finds himself confronted with the holiness of Jack's own created existence, flowing forth from the divine Creator. Tellingly, Ames and Jack are both outside, on Ames's porch, when this vision of clarity takes place, and the outdoors setting conspicuously places them in God's Creation. Moreover, this vision actually unfolds in the gathering dark of evening, superseding the strictly ocular. By producing a miraculous kind of seeing in darkness, this experience underscores the centrality of the divine element in true sight. And just as Biblical visions inspire fear and trembling, Ames experiences "a sort of lovely fear" like the "fear of angels" as he sees Jack in his full God-given humanity at last, as an "eternal soul" full of "mysteries," not simply as a troublemaker or a dangerous misfit (197). He sees Jack's created existence and its intrinsic holiness—and by the novel's end, he is finally able to bless Jack as a "beloved son and brother and husband and father" (241). This moment of blessing occurs outdoors as well, again conspicuously placing both men in the natural world of Creation. These familial roles are, moreover, an accurate detailing of Jack's position relative to the other Boughtons as well as his own wife and child, indicating that Ames sees and honors Jack not only as a fellow human creature, endowed with sacredness and dignity, but specifically as *Jack* himself. In addition, because these familial roles also mirror Ames's own, Ames's choice to call Jack by these roles not only legitimizes and acknowledges who Jack is—and hopes to be—but also identifies Ames *with* Jack in an overt declaration of equality and empathy. This identification with Jack echoes

Ames's recognition of his "mysterious life" and that of the kittens he baptizes as a boy (23), indicating that Ames is acknowledging and responding to this mysterious sacredness of Jack's created existence and, simultaneously, his own. The resolution of the conflict between Jack and Ames hinges upon Ames's ability to see Jack with the theocentric creational vision that recognizes and responds to the sacredness of each thing in existence.

Environment and *Imago Dei*: Looking towards *Home* and *Lila*

Building upon the groundwork in *Housekeeping* for a spiritually significant world, Robinson demonstrates the difficulty, power, and necessity of seeing the world as Creation through the central narrative conflict in *Gilead*, the tension and reconciliation between Ames and Jack. In addition, from an environmental perspective, this framework of looking at the world also models a clear alternative way to articulate the value and worth of the environment in relation to the divine. The natural world exists not for human beings but for the glory of God so that the very existence of Creation is theocentric, not anthropocentric. Yet this creational view of the world also clearly models a certain vision of the human creature which has its own specific environmental implications. Truly seeing the particular sacredness of the human being, the *imago Dei* in each person, necessitates not only a responsibility to honor other people but also a particular human responsibility to the natural environment. The image of God in humans, Norman Wirzba argues, does not mean humans as "*other than* creation"—that is, does not invalidate our created status—but provides us with "a unique role to play *within* creation" (*Paradise of God* 127, emphasis original).

Robinson's ecotheology asks us to accept and even to embrace this form of human exceptionalism as part of the creational framework which sees and values each created being for

what it is. To abandon this account of human particularity would be to reject the nature of the human creature—a principle which articulates *Housekeeping*'s presentation of the dangers of deep ecology in specifically theological terms. However, the idea of human exceptionalism is often yoked to the much-criticized “dominion mandate” of Genesis 1. God commands his human creations to “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Gen. 1.28). This so-called dominion mandate has been frequently criticized by scholars like Lynn White, Jr. as the source of an anthropocentric worldview that licensed and justified “indifferent” human exploitation of the environment—that privileged humans over any other natural phenomena (White 1205). In a sense, the rights-for-nature movement represents one response to this perceived issue, combating the privileging of people by giving personhood to nature in a form of what might be considered legal reparations.

For White, the roots of this improper privileging of humans over non-human nature lie in the realm of the spiritual. He casts Christianity as a religion which denies the idea of sacredness to anything which is not a human being and thereby practically invites people to mine the world without concern for its well-being. Clearly, the Christian ecotheology Robinson crafts through *Gilead* shows that nothing could be further from the truth: it is the inherent sacredness of the created world which prompts a praxis of love as the proper response. For Robinson, this foundational idea leads to an understanding of the dominion mandate not in terms of control or usage but rather in terms of care. Accordingly, she expresses frustration with the way the dominion mandate has been poorly interpreted. In an essay from *The Death of Adam*, Robinson takes note of environmental criticisms, citing the way atheist philosopher Daniel Dennett “scolds Judeo-Christianity” for the dominion mandate “as if it licensed depredation”—but she dismisses Dennett’s argument as baseless, witheringly commenting, “Notions of this kind go unchallenged

now because the Bible is so little known.” She deigns, however, to respond to the accusation of senseless depredation. Robinson points out the fact that only until after the Flood, “people are told, as if for the first time, that they may eat the flesh of animals” which she argues suggests that “the Edenic regime was meant to be rather mild” (*Death of Adam*, “Darwinism” 69). The word “regime” is perhaps anathema to those who imagine it to condone and even invite human oppression of other species, but Genesis itself suggests that human beings are charged in their unique role with *caring*—not exploiting—the rest of Creation. God places Adam in Eden “to dress it,” which carries with it a solicitousness for beauty and appearance, and “to keep it” (Gen. 2.15), which is sometimes translated as an injunction to “take care of it” (*New International Version*, Gen. 2.15). To use a phrase with visual resonances, it seems we have been instructed to look after the world.

The fact that both secular environmentalists and the highly religious Robinson are concerned with the proper care of the environment should not be understood as a minimizing of differences between the two. While secular environmental movements have formed in reaction to escalating environmental concerns, Robinson’s ecotheological imagination is, practically speaking, more preemptive and proactive. For Robinson, the idea of the world as Creation is not a theory developed in response to environmental issues but a fact of existence, holding true regardless of the condition of the earth. This ecotheology suggests that honor, love, and care for Creation would be no less serious or no less prioritized should the earth be perfectly paradisiacal. Indeed, all of Ames’s praise and awe at Creation, his anti-utilitarianism and his theocentric perspective, occur in the absence of imminent environmental disaster. The ecotheological imagination flourishes meaningfully not against catastrophe but through and towards love for Creation and its Creator. However, because the earth *is* pockmarked with destruction,

Robinson's ecotheology takes on new urgency. In the words of British theologian N. T. Wright, if the entire world is "God's holy land, we must not rest as long as that land is spoiled and defaced" (266).

But what does it mean to look after the world, though? We must track the development of Robinson's ecotheology into *Home* and *Lila* in order to answer this question. In *Gilead*, Robinson's developing ecotheology builds a vision of how we ought to look *at* the world, to see it as sacred Creation and to honor it as such. Unlike secular environmentalists who have noticed the same problem of proper sight, *Gilead* points to a more foundational and transformational remedy than legal changes: we must achieve a corrected vision of the world that the fact of its created existence as the good garden of God. The conception of nature-as-Creation sets the stage for the next step in Robinson's ecotheology, which spotlights literal gardens and two gardeners, Jack Boughton and Lila Dahl, in narratives of estrangement and belonging. In *Home* and in *Lila*, gardens elucidate certain complexities of salvation and cultivate an environmental mindset which allows us to embrace and exercise the *imago Dei* to look after Creation.

CHAPTER THREE

Ecologies of Salvation: Gardening in *Home* and *Lila*

And Jehovah God planted a garden eastward, in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed...And Jehovah God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

– *Genesis 2:8, 15*⁵

Towards the end of *Gilead*, Ames remarks that when Jack talks to Lila, he “sound[s] like someone speaking with a friend. And so [does] she” (201). Jack and Lila come from starkly different backgrounds—he a respectable pastor’s son and she a wandering itinerant of unknown parentage—but the two of them share certain experiences that draw them together, particularly the experiences of estrangement and life on the margins of society and sociality. Moreover, both Lila and Jack move towards or demonstrate relationality by engaging with gardens, providing the foundations for the novel’s ultimate vision of redeemed people and redeemed environments. Given the characters’ shared conditions of alienation and their shared role as gardeners, it is little wonder that the *Home* and *Lila* resonate strongly with one another in producing Robinson’s vision of a communal and inclusive salvation. Both novels follow the arcs of Jack and Lila’s relationships to family (or familial figures) and to faith, as well as to gardens, in ways that shift their statuses toward belonging rather than exclusion. Because these two outcasts are unsure of their status not only in the present world but also in the realm of the eternal, both novels are preoccupied with salvation of varying scales and forms: salvation which is more immediate, like

⁵ As in the previous chapter, the American Standard Version (ASV) is used throughout this chapter to reflect the Bible that Lila uses.

deliverance from rejection and estrangement: salvation which is eternally oriented, like the salvation of the soul; and literal earthly salvation—the salvation of all Creation. By redefining and expanding the scope of salvation, *Home* and *Lila* challenge conventional ideas of salvation held by certain strands of conservative Christianity. Robinson's presentation of salvation, which relies on relationality and embraces inclusivity, provides an implicit critique against the idea of an individualistic salvation which has as its goal an escape from earth to heaven. Moreover, from a specifically environmental perspective, the garden-mediated vision of salvation also proposes a theologically-motivated mode of relating to the earth in a restorative, rather than destructive, manner.

It is important to note, however, that *Lila* does not merely repeat *Home*. In some respects, the two novels actually end very differently: Jack ultimately leaves Gilead without much hope that he might be among the elect, whereas Lila finds herself at home with Ames and feeling more assured about not only her own salvation but that of non-Christians like Doll. The salvific revelation about Jack in *Home* is more for the reader, preparing us for *Lila*, in which Robinson more fully elaborates her idea of salvation. While Jack himself feels uncertainty about the state of his soul, Robinson signals to the reader that he is in no way beyond the reach of salvation—far from it, in fact. *Home* also handles thorny theological questions related to salvation, specifically the tension between free will and predestination, and in doing so clears the way for *Lila* to present a more straight-forward articulation of Robinson's inclusive, communal salvation. Thus possibility in *Home* concretizes in *Lila* to a more confident assertion. The role of gardening in relation to salvation also becomes more active and visible from *Home* to *Lila*. In *Home*, gardening signals Jack's already existent belonging in his family and thus the real possibility of

his salvation, whereas in *Lila*, gardening actually facilitates Lila's entry into community and thus into salvation.

The actual space of the garden has both theological and ecological significance, which unsurprisingly become intertwined for Robinson. Ecologically speaking, gardens evoke the reality of interconnectedness and interdependence; as such, they are "the world in miniature" (Wirzba, *Paradise of God* 113). Engaging in gardens thus models a way to engage with the environment more broadly. Theologically speaking, the gardens in *Home* and in *Lila* are, in effect, Creation in miniature. They give direct expression to the following principle from *Gilead*: all Creation is the garden of God, and because all people live within Creation, within this garden, no one is beyond the reach of divine love. Gardens are thus revelatory of the inclusive nature of salvation. In *Home* and in *Lila*, Robinson pointedly returns the characters who are considered outcasts and outsiders to literal garden sites in order to demonstrate the fact of their inclusion over and against the appearance of their exclusion. Gardens thus signal to Robinson's readers that Jack and Lila are within the salvific realm, not impossibly beyond it. Moreover, their gardening literally works upon the material of the garden, like its soil and plants, and reclaims these spaces from disarray, demonstrating the intertwining of the ecological and the theological. This transformative work upon the garden itself—and thus the garden that Creation is—suggests that Creation is to be part of salvation. Robinson's all-encompassing, interconnected salvation gestures to the ultimate redemption of all of Creation.

In this manner, *Home* and *Lila* represent the fruition of the salvific vision anticipated by Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*. The resurrection net that Ruth imagines indiscriminately sweeps up every lost person and thing together, including even misplaced glasses and stray buttons, in the hope of an all-encompassing restoration. In this chapter I will argue that, via

engagement with gardens and Biblical intertextuality, Robinson challenges both an exclusive conception of human salvation and an exclusively human vision that discounts the relevance of salvation to earthly Creation. I will also argue that Robinson suggests that the gardening mindset is an appropriate mode and model for the cultivation of the appropriate relationships to the environment and to the divine.

Revelatory Creation: Gardens, Salvation, and Scripture

Both novels recall and re-establish *Gilead*'s assertion about the revelatory nature of Creation, thereby setting the stage to specifically present gardens as being appropriately suited to serve a revelatory role about salvation. In *Home*, Jack considers how Christians believe "that the splendor of creation and of the human creature testify to a gracious intention lying behind it all, that they manifest divine mercy and love" (Robinson 104). This idea echoes the notion of natural language first raised in Robinson's first novel, which is explicitly picked up again in *Lila* when Ames quotes Psalm 19—the very psalm previously discussed in relation to *Housekeeping*. The edifying, revelatory interface between language and Creation is most literalized in *Lila* through Lila's attempts to read the Bible she steals from Ames's church. Lila's entryway into Christianity makes use of the idea of the two books, the theological position that there is both a book of nature and a book of Scripture. For Lila, the interaction between what she reads in the Bible and what she has witnessed in nature renders both Scripture and her life more legible and comprehensible. Her knowledge of "prairie fire[s] in a drought year" make Ezekiel 1:4, with its portrayal of "a stormy wind" and a "great cloud, with a fire infolding itself" less strange and foreign (*Lila* 68). Moreover, another passage from Ezekiel 1 describing how "the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lighting" reminds her "of the wildness of things":

Lila is all too aware that “[e]xistence can be fierce” and “[a] storm can blow up out of a quiet day, wind that takes your life out of your hands” (106). What Lila knows from living life in the open and what she reads in the Bible come together to help her grasp ideas from Scripture and truths about the nature of existence itself. Both books—Creation and Scripture—are crucial for Lila’s fledgling spiritual formation and understanding.

Lila also finds that, sometimes, Scripture is realized in Creation. Something in the text is made real in the natural world, attesting to its truth. “It could be that the wildest, strangest things in the Bible were the places where it touched earth,” she muses, citing Doane’s story of the unbelievable sight of a cyclone drawing up a river into itself so that it crosses to the other bank over dry ground. Lila views this instance as the Bible “touch[ing] earth” not simply because it seems broadly miraculous in nature but because it actually literalizes a specific aspect of a Bible story, that of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. The waters of the Red Sea part, and the Israelites cross to the other side over dry land as the cyclone does (Exod. 14). The cyclone and its Biblical predecessor demonstrate how, in Lila’s experience, Creation is uniquely capable of testifying to the truth of what is written in the Bible. Interestingly, however, when these seeming impossibilities from the Bible are made real in Creation, their miraculous nature is not diminished. Lila does not explain away or rationalize Scriptural events based on her understanding that what the text describes can, in fact, occur naturally. Instead, these events are proven to be “the wildest” and “the strangest”—they become all the more incredible for the fact of their existence, evoking wonder and awe in Lila by the fact of their reality.

What is particularly interesting about the story of the cyclone is that it actually alludes to specific instances and symbols of salvation. The parting of the Red Sea saves the escaping Israelites from their Egyptian pursuers, who are seeking to re-capture and re-enslave them. The

deliverance from Egypt is referenced multiple times throughout Jewish texts and serves to reinforce the idea of God's saving and redemptive power. Take, for example, Psalm 106, which emphasizes how God saved the Israelites at the Red Sea. The emphasis on salvation is even more apparent in the repetition of the verb "to save." The psalmist proclaims that God "saved them" and "redeemed them from the hand of the enemy" (106.10) when he "rebuked the Red Sea" so that "it was dried up" (106.9). The cyclone that Doane saw serves as a Biblical allusion to this major salvific event for Israel, and its description as being "just as white as a cloud, white as snow" only further reinforces its association with salvation (*Lila* 226). Again in Exodus, God leads the Israelites "by day in a pillar of clouds, to lead them the way" as they escape from Egypt. In essence, God provides immediate salvation from oppression and enslavement (13.21). Furthermore, the phrase "white as snow" signifies salvation from sin—an eternal salvation which affects the status of the soul—at several points throughout the Bible. In one instance, the prophet Isaiah draws on this imagery to describe how "though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be white as snow" through God's forgiveness (Is. 1.18). Thus the cyclone literalizes the Red Sea narrative and Biblical metaphors of various kinds of salvation—salvation not only from sin but also from certain conditions of life, like bondage, enslavement, and generations of exile in Egypt. Creation makes salvation visible and known; even the imagery of being "white as snow" draws upon the created natural world to explain what it might mean to be redeemed and saved.

To rephrase what Lila learns from written word and created world, it seems that the places where the Bible touches earth, where the divine and the miraculous most obviously intersect and interact with Creation, are particularly revelatory of salvation. Robinson reveals her inclusive and generous vision of salvation by attending to literal gardens throughout her two novels, thus following in the footsteps of Scriptural tradition. In the Bible as in *Home* and in *Lila*,

garden spaces emerge as sites where the meetings of heaven and earth, so to speak, are made most conspicuous. All Creation is the garden of God, and literal gardens, as Creation in miniature, provide spaces to spotlight God's attention to the world. Indeed, the first place in Scripture where God "touches earth," both figuratively and literally, occurs in a garden—Eden. Genesis 2 describes how God "plant[s] a garden" in Eden (2.8) and places humans there to care for it and to maintain it (2.15). The use of the verb "plant" suggests that God does not merely create from afar but—literally—gets in the weeds as a gardener. Rather than presenting God as aloof and distant, Genesis 2 introduces us to "God with knees and hands in the dirt, breathing into soil the breath of life" (Wirzba, *Nature to Creation* 1-2), the divine "Gardener who loves soil and delights in fertility" (2). God as a gardener is thus deeply involved in Creation, nurturing and tending to all that is.

Given God's care for the garden of Creation, it seems hardly surprising that God includes Creation by way of gardens throughout the drama of salvation. In fact, Isaiah invokes the image of the garden to indicate the salvation and redemption of Israel: God "hath made [Zion's] wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of Jehovah" (51.3). Moreover, the Bible invokes gardens at three crucial points in the narrative of salvation: the Fall, the crucifixion of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ. The Fall takes place in the Garden of Eden, and thus a garden becomes the site where sin enters the world and cripples humankind. God's answer to this condition of destructive sinfulness comes in the form of Jesus Christ, the Son of God sent from heaven to earth. Prior to his crucifixion, Jesus prays in another garden, Gethsemane. His actual death and resurrection—the key salvific events in Christianity—also occur in garden contexts, again highlighting heaven "touching" earth to bring about salvation: "Now in the place where [Jesus] was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new tomb wherein was never man

yet laid” (John 19.41). The garden setting of Jesus’s tomb is in fact so conspicuous that Mary Magdalene mistakes the risen Christ for the gardener (20.15). The garden contexts of Jesus’s death and resurrection are appropriate not just in creating a kind of narrative arc from original sin to ultimate salvation, but also because in gardens, decay and detritus turn to new life—a kind of resurrection both literalized and naturalized.

Like the Bible, *Home* and *Lila* center the dramas of salvation for its characters in literal gardens. By evoking Scriptural gardens, these gardens clue readers in to the fact that a broader salvific context is at play, and characters’ association with gardens indicates their potential inclusion in the realm of salvation. In *Home*, Robinson draws an explicit connection between gardens and salvation by referencing two hymns, “I Come to the Garden Alone” and “There’s a Garden Where Jesus Is Waiting,” which Jack plays when the Ames family is visiting for dinner. Both of these hymns present the garden as the place where people directly encounter God and receive solace and grace, unsurprising given the Scriptural precedent of representing gardens as spaces of divine involvement suggestive of salvation. The garden where Jesus is waiting is “wondrously fair” and glowing with “the light of His presence”; this description suggests the divine presence completely suffuses the garden as sunlight might. In addition, the refrain of “I Come to the Garden Alone” describes how God “walks with me, and He talks with me,” highlighting a sense of intimate relationality with God. This verse also echoes Genesis 3, in which God walks in the Garden of Eden in search of Adam and Eve after they have fallen into sin by eating the forbidden fruit (3.8). However, while God’s walk in Genesis ends with the exposure of Adam and Eve’s sin and their expulsion from the garden, the garden walk in the hymn is one of salvation and the restoration of the relationship between the human and the divine. God “tells me I am His own” and “the joy we share” while walking together is immense.

The fact that the atheist Jack plays such hymns might initially seem ironic—or perhaps even confirmative of a predestined inability to believe, despite knowing the core tenets of Christianity and having a familiarity with its Scriptures. However, in the broader salvific context of both *Home*, Jack’s playing of these garden-related hymns suggests instead that the ultimate redemption of Jack’s soul—or indeed, that of anyone outside of Christianity—is far from an impossibility.

Building on this sense of possibility, *Lila* more explicitly rejects the idea of exclusivity. Kathryn Ludwig’s reading of *Lila* argues that gardens represent liminal spaces that undermine exclusive visions of salvation. Ludwig characterizes gardens as straddling both the public and the private: they may belong to the gardener, but they are exposed to the outside world and can be viewed and, in some cases, even *accessed* by a passer-by. Ludwig suggests that the recurring liminal garden space throughout the novel destabilizes and overturns rigid understandings of binaries, including the split between “saved” and “unsaved”—the included and the excluded, or, in more specifically Calvinist terminology, the elect and the non-elect (Ludwig 5). Lila’s affinity for the liminal space of the garden, combined with her own uncertainties about Christianity, is representative of this hopeful possibility and inclusive openness towards those who might, at first glance, appear to be outside of the faith (7).

Revelatory Gardening in *Home*

In *Home*, Jack, unlike itinerant Lila, already has known and established familial relationships—siblings and a father who worry about him and seek to protect him. All the same, Jack feels “so estranged” from his family that he even feels like an uncomfortable visitor in his own home (Robinson 69). He confides this feeling to his sister Glory, telling her, “When I was a

kid I used to wish I lived here. I used to wish I could just walk in the door like the rest of you did” (276). Jack does not feel that their home is his home, signaling his sense that he is not truly part of the Boughton family. Indeed, he distinguishes himself by misbehavior throughout his childhood; he is “so conspicuously not good” that his well-behaved siblings strive to be all the better to compensate for his mischief (6). Jack stands out from the pious and respectable Boughton family as the “black sheep, the ne’er-do-well”—not to mention the only atheist (69). He is thus not only an outsider to his own family but also to the faith they have all devoted themselves too. While they have all grown up attending church and were baptized as infants, Jack notes that he is actually someone “[does] not enjoy the honor of membership in that body” (225). Worse, Jack knows “the great truths” of Christianity but does so “without feeling the truth of them” (104), even though he “wish[es] to God [he] were religious” (266). Thus while Lila is more worried that salvation would separate her from Doll, Jack worries that he himself is categorically unable to believe. His seeming inability to believe, combined with the Calvinist doctrine of predestination he has grown up hearing in his staunchly Presbyterian home, haunts Jack with the suggestion that he has always been consigned to perdition.

However, in *Home*, Jack’s gardening serves a revelatory purpose: it suggests that he does, in fact, belong in his family, despite his feelings to the contrary, and that his soul is perhaps safer than it seems to him. Jack’s gardening restores him to the family he has long felt estranged from by re-placing him in the very landscape of his childhood and signaling his appropriateness, his belonging, in this context. This belonging, in turn, illustrates the fact of Jack’s inextricable interconnectedness to his family and their love—the very relationality which emerges as crucial to his salvation. While Jack himself never reaches a state of confidence and ease about the state

of his own soul in *Home*, Robinson suggests to the reader that Jack is very much in salvation's reach—that in fact, no one is excluded from the possibility of salvation.

Jack's shifting spatial relationship to the garden at the Boughton home reveals first his hesitant sense of being an outsider and then the fact that he does, indeed, belong there. When Jack first returns home, he stands "at the edge of the garden" and suggests that perhaps Glory "could put [him] to work out here." His physical positioning at the Boughton garden's edge indicates his status as someone who doesn't quite belong but wishes to—someone on the outside, hoping to enter, but hesitant and cautious about seeking entry. When Jack does enter the garden to begin working there, his familiarity with the place—and thus the fact of his belonging there despite a sense of estrangement—becomes quickly evident. As Jack begins to garden, Glory starts to tell him where the iris beds once were only to be met with a response that indicates his knowledge of the place: "I know. I used to live here" (59). This response establishes the fact of Jack's presence in the past, despite how frequently he drifted away and how long he has been gone. As Glory watches her brother breaking the soil with a spade, she realizes that he "knew how things were done" even though it "had somehow never seemed to her that the place had his attention" (61). Though he has always seemed so distant and far from the Boughton circle, Jack's gardening efforts demonstrate his true attentiveness for his family and remind Glory that he does, indeed, belong among them. Indeed, the way he tends "with particular care" to the garden's bounty indicates his own emotional attachment to the Boughton landscape of his childhood and adolescence, and Glory also notes that her brother seems "comforted" by the results of his gardening (151). Robinson underscores Jack's belonging in the Boughton family by placing him in the garden so that he literally stands among "the dusty lilacs of their childhood" (193). Jack's gardening restores him to this shared landscape, to the "terrain of their childhood" that he has

long felt excluded and estranged from (8). Despite his sense of being the odd one out, in actuality he very much belongs among the Boughtons.

The establishment of Jack's familial belonging bears implications for his belonging in the body of Christ. Anticipating *Lila*, *Home* gives voice to an inclusive and communal vision of eternal salvation based on interconnected relationships of love. Just as gardening itself requires interconnectedness with the earth, salvation, too, is an interconnected reality in both these novels. Glory ultimately feels hopeful about Jack's salvation "[b]ecause perdition for him would be perdition for every one of us" (316). Her assessment demonstrates that Jack's belonging among the Boughtons and his belonging in the body of Christ are inextricably intertwined. It is because Jack is part of their family, because they could not bear to lose him to perdition, that Glory believes God will have compassion upon them. Their interconnected familial network has the potential to fold Jack into grace alongside them. Clearly, Robinson's depiction of salvation has a greater communal, interconnected drive rather than an individualistic focus, and in fact, it is a more capacious and generous vision than what even Jack himself imagines.

Moreover, the simple fact of Jack's placement in the garden context underscores the idea that despite being outside the traditional bounds of Christianity, he is not beyond the reach of salvation. Because the garden is the Biblical setting for key events in the drama of salvation, Robinson's establishment of the outsiders and outcasts in spaces associated with salvation suggests that salvation is inclusive rather than exclusive. In addition, Robinson further dispels the notion that Jack is beyond the salvific grace and love of God by actually casting him as a kind of Christ figure. Glory draws directly from Isaiah 53:3, a prophetic text considered in Christianity to allude to Jesus, to describe Jack as "[a] man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,

and as one from whom men hide their face” (318). Surely salvation is not absolutely out of question for a man whose life carries such clear echoes of Christ’s.

In addition, Jack’s consistent engagement with gardening demonstrates that he, too, bears the image of God despite the fact that neither of them feel particularly close to God. According to ecotheologian Norman Wirzba, to garden is actually to reflect the work of the first gardener, God himself. Genesis presents people as the images of God, and the doctrine of the *imago Dei* results in a particular and unique “vocation” for human beings. Because humans reflect the gardener God who fashioned us in his image, the “care of the earth,” initiated by God’s own care for his Creation, “defines the human vocation.” By engaging in this vocation of caretaking, we participate in and continue “God’s own life-giving creativity” (*Paradise of God* 21). Whatever his doubts, Jack (and Lila, as we will see in Robinson’s next book), as a gardener, is able to fully participate in this sacred work begun by God. Jack’s gardening thus demonstrates that he is far from being excluded from the life and power of the divine, further illustrating that he is *not* shut out from the possibility of salvation—indeed, suggesting that he might well be within the grace of God. The universality of the human vocation in fact indicates that *all* people are welcome—and able—to participate in God’s work in the universal garden of Creation.

Despite this openness, however, Robinson does not resolve a key theological tension that preoccupies Jack—the balance between divinely ordained predestination and human free will when it comes to salvation. Robinson raises this thorny theological issue in *Home* directly through Jack’s questions. Does predestination mean that salvation is merely “the accident of birth”? Are “some people intentionally and irretrievably consigned to perdition” (Robinson, 219)? Moreover, “are there people who are simply born evil, live evil lives, and then go to hell” (225)? Jack’s questions and the ensuing argument unfold on the front porch of the Boughton

house, a few steps from the garden that Jack has been tending to. The argument's setting—near but not *in* the garden—is fitting given that it revolves around the possibility of intentional exclusion from salvation. During the discussion, the two experienced pastors, John Ames and Robert Boughton, point to grace and divine mystery but are unable to provide satisfactory answers for Jack. On the other hand, Lila Ames, the other outsider-turned-gardener, ends the discussion with an assertion that seems to favor something akin to free will: “A person can change. Everything can change” (227). Tellingly, Lila phrases her declaration in the active construction, not the passive—“[a] person can change,” *not* “a person can *be changed*”—and thereby suggests that people are able to take some form of meaningful action themselves. However, it is unclear whether Lila intends her statement to apply to the realm of eternal salvation, and if so, how much of salvation hinges upon one's own free choice.

Just as his gardening indicates to the reader that Jack's salvation is certainly not out of question, it is also gardening which—without resolving this tension—nonetheless provides a productive understanding of the limitations of human agency and suggests an embrace of the mysterious nature of salvation. Gardening highlights both human agency and its limitations, for while we might plant gardens, many environmental factors lie beyond our control, and we must be attentive to what the garden itself needs. Gardening requires sustained attention and an openness to listen and properly respond to the earth's needs, not simply to our own desires and wants. Thus gardens require us to recognize and respect our own limitations. While gardens planted and maintained by human beings “retain a signature of the human agency to which they owe their existence” (Harrison 7), gardeners cannot “simply impose [their] desires on the earth” (115). In fact, such a domineering attitude can only fail, because no matter the human efforts, gardens always remain “plunged into time and uncertainty, openly contending with the vagaries

of soil, weather, and elements” (39). It is impossible for humans to perfectly manipulate seasons and weather patterns. As a result, in order to cultivate any semblance of success, the gardener must “adopt nature and its creative processes” as a “tutor,” observing and learning from the environmental context—and giving careful consideration to the garden’s needs, not just his or her own wants (Wirzba, *Paradise of God* 115). Gardening thus recognizes and requires the tension that exists between a gardener’s agency and the limitations of that agency.

But as Jack demonstrates, the ecological realities of human limitation in gardening clearly do not preclude people from active participation in the work of the divine as images of God. Gardening thereby demonstrates that people are not merely passive, static beings who can only be acted upon by God, but rather that people are able to actively take part in the work God began as the first gardener. In fact, the Apostle Paul asserts that “we are God's fellow-workers” (1 Corinth. 3.9). Paul’s statement casts humans in a position of acting with and alongside God, not simply being the object of divine action or agency. Yet even human gardening is an *imitation* of God’s own gardening in Genesis 2. While imitation is, indeed, a conscious action, we must also acknowledge that it is still the shadow of an original action. What power it has may be traced back to the power of the original. Moreover, the work of gardening does not, in and of itself, actually provide the ultimate salvation of our souls. Nowhere does Robinson give any indication that it is weeding and coaxing irises to bloom which will save Jack’s soul, or Lila’s. Gardening might facilitate relationality, as with Lila, or demonstrate it despite feelings to the contrary, as with Jack, and thereby position people for salvation, but the act of gardening does not itself produce eternal salvation. Indeed, “by grace have ye been saved through faith...not of works” (Eph. 2.8-9). Yet through Jack’s gardening, Robinson indicates that he is not beyond salvation, despite his atheistic views.

There is a clear tension here between our inability to save ourselves and our ability to participate in the sacred work of gardening. However, Robinson's remarks on this topic suggest that it is this very unresolved tension which is itself spiritually productive, inculcating in us a sense of the mysterious nature of salvation and divine power. The literal work of gardening—that is, tending to the earth and growing plants—requires an understanding of the constant tension between human agency and its limitations. Respecting and embracing—not somehow *resolving*—that tension yields literal fruit: the garden flourishes. Similarly, in a specifically theological sense, Robinson uses gardens to illuminate the productive mystery of salvation. The tension itself is not intended to be resolved; rather, Robinson argues that we cannot and should not seek to resolve it because the mechanics of salvation are beyond human comprehension.

When asked about predestination in an interview, Robinson replies, “I feel that there has to be something we don't understand about being, time, causality, something that would allow us a richer sense of alternatives than is offered by free will and predestination, both of which are very problematic notions from a theological point of view” (Robinson, “Further Thoughts” 489). As discussed earlier, Ludwig describes the liminality of gardens as effectively dismantling the binary between the saved and the unsaved. It seems that gardens also lead us to recognize that the idea of an absolute binary between human agency and divine sovereignty is a distracting one, if not an altogether false one. In that sense, gardening actually leaves us freer, no longer burdened by having to make false choices between two seemingly divergent worldviews. Robinson suggests that in the garden, we can find salvation from the tyranny of theological dichotomies. As we attend to the mystery inherent in salvation, we are better able to grasp the complexity of God's ability to work in ways beyond our human comprehension—and we are thereby brought closer to the divine.

Managing this theological thorn *Home* prunes away difficulties and questions to provide *Lila* a clearer path. Indeed, gardening and salvation have a more concrete relationship in *Lila* than in *Home*: we have moved past signaling and possibility and into greater assurance and activeness. For Lila, gardening provides experiences of immediate salvation—that is, relief from loneliness or unhappiness—and positions her for eternal salvation by facilitating the development of her relationships.

Gardening Towards Community and Salvation in *Lila*

Lila Dahl is attracted to Christianity to a degree, accepting some of its ideas, but soon becomes ambivalent and uneasy. Lila likes the idea of salvation and the promise of the resurrection because she believes it will allow her to be reunited with her beloved Doll in the future. However, Lila becomes alarmed when she realizes that not everyone might be saved and that some people have never even heard of Christianity. She worries “that Doll was not...among the elect” since “she did not believe and was not baptized” (*Lila* 97). The idea of Doll’s exclusion from heaven and the resurrection strikes Lila as unjust and heartbreaking because “the heathens” are, in her experience, “just as good as anybody” and “sure don’t deserve no hellfire” (225). Lila finds it terrible that there is the possibility “that souls could be lost forever because of things they did not know, or understand, or believe,” and in particular the thought that her own baptism might separate her forever from the unbaptized and unsaved Doll. No, Lila decides: “If Doll was going to be lost forever, Lila wanted to be right there with her” (21). In an attempt to prevent the pain and sorrows of an eternal separation from Doll, Lila even tries to wash off her own baptism. However, the novel ultimately makes the case for an inclusive view of salvation through Ames, who tells Lila that because “the Lord is more gracious than any of us can begin to

imagine...Doll and a whole lot of people are safe, and warm, and very happy” (142). Ames believes that their lack of faith, or lack of knowledge about Christianity, will not consign them to eternal perdition.

Despite her own ambivalent attitude towards Christianity, Lila comes to accept this inclusive view of salvation by the novel’s end. Moreover, she understands it to be made possible by relationality, especially by social and familial relationships of love here on earth. She realizes because “[t]he Reverend couldn’t bear to be without her” (260) his love and concern for her might “bring her along into that next life” regardless of her own beliefs or actions (261). Lila considers the fact that there are always “people somebody couldn’t bear to be without” (258), and she concludes that those people, whether they are baptized or not, would be brought into eternity by those relationships. Salvation in the singular sense would be incomplete if it meant an eternity of grief and longing, and so it must therefore be communal and interconnected rather than individual. It might be, she thinks, that “any scoundrel could be pulled into heaven just to make his mother happy” (259), or that even “just by worrying about it, Boughton would sweep up China into an eternity that would surprise him out of all his wondering” (258)—an eternity with “more of every kind of room in it than this world did” (260). This spacious and inclusive view of salvation grounded in the communal, rather than in the individual, comforts Lila and allows her to believe that she will see Doll again: Doll has been important to her, and she could not bear to be without them in eternity. Lila’s own salvation, too, is made possible by relationality—in particular, her relationship to Ames. She would have been one of “the people no one would miss...if she had not wandered into Gilead” and married him, joining a family and becoming someone whose “lack” and “loss” would be unbearable in eternity (258). Because Lila

establishes herself in Gilead and in Ames's life via gardens, her gardening facilitates her ultimate eternal salvation by integrating her into a web of relationships.

A scene of gardening early in the novel foreshadows the relationship-building role that gardens ultimately play in Lila's settled life. Lila remembers "kneeling side by side" with Doll to work in the garden shortly after Doll whisks her away from a terrible home situation (10). In this case, their co-gardening signals their budding closeness, which contrasts with the severe neglect Lila previously experienced. Gardening with Doll thus makes evident Lila's salvation from her former life and the genesis of a new one. In fact, the new beginning is made more conspicuous and significant because Lila receives her very name there in the garden, shedding the nameless anonymity of "the child" for "Lila." The bestowing of a name echoes the bestowing of new names in the Bible, which occurs at highly significant moments in a given person's life. Abram becomes Abraham after God makes a covenant with him (Gen. 17.5). Similarly, Jacob is renamed Israel when he wrestles an angel and receives a blessing (Gen. 32.28). Lila's naming in the garden serves as a major marker of her deliverance from her old life. The garden is the site of her rebirth into a relational life with Doll, echoing the Scriptural precedent of the garden as the site of Christ's resurrection.

Again as an adult, it is through gardening that Lila finds salvation from the exhaustions of a life so harsh and difficult that Lila thinks "[p]eople living the way she was could go crazy" (*Lila* 27). Gardening provides emotional relief and purpose for Lila when she first arrives in Gilead. Working in the soil is something she enjoys; "[s]he loved the smell of dirt, and the feel of it" (16). When she steps into a Gilead garden to work, she notes that "[j]ust brushing by the tomato plants, getting that musk on them, made her clothes seem clean" (221). *Clean*. The word is especially noteworthy in the context of salvation, for the Bible frequently uses the metaphor of

cleanliness to signal redemption from sin. The fact that plants in the garden provide Lila an experience of being cleansed provides a particular point of comparison to the psalmist's declaration to God, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean" (Psalm 51.7). Lila's sense of being cleansed by the garden is suggestive of her feeling of deliverance from the humiliations and the weariness of her past. Furthermore, this sense of cleanness in the garden, as a Biblical allusion to salvation, foreshadows the eternal salvation which gardening facilitates for Lila in helping her forge relationships.

Gardening helps Lila enter Ames's life and develop a fledgling relationship with him, eventually leading to their marriage. As a result, gardening provides Lila with an immediate salvation from a life in which loneliness gnaws at her constantly. Moreover, by facilitating her relationship to Ames, gardening facilitates her eternal salvation. Lila decides to work in Ames's overgrown garden after she notices it is "running to weeds" (33). She tidies the garden, stepping into Ames's space and his life to do so, and eventually decides to make "a little garden in a corner...just for herself" (16). In effect, she stakes out a scrap of land for herself. While this move might appear exclusionist and even isolationist in a sense, it asserts a kind of rightful belonging in the space and serves as a gateway into a more communal existence with Ames in his home and his town. Indeed, Lila's miniature corner garden in Ames's yard leads, unsurprisingly, to additional run-ins and conversations with Ames, as when she comes to harvest a few of her stringy beans and stays to speak with him because of the rain. After Lila marries Ames and more or less establishes herself in Gilead, she "[makes] the garden much bigger," and the division between her personal garden patch and the wider garden at the Ames house evaporates (16). The garden's development thus parallels Lila's level of comfort in Gilead and illustrates her tentative putting down of roots, no matter how shallow. In this case, Lila's

gardening not only facilitates but also represents her movement towards community and into the communal salvation Robinson envisions.

Gardening also allows Lila to claim family roots in a way, providing her with a kind of ancestry by marriage. Her act of gardening thus saves her from the anonymity and abandonment which characterize her biological origins and parentage. Moreover, it integrates Lila more closely into Ames's own family and his life: she tends to the cemetery where his first wife and child, as well as his siblings, are buried. When Lila goes to the graveyard, she notes that the place is a rather unkempt. She takes it upon herself to "scrape the moss off the headstone and put the ivy there," to "cut back the yew shrubs" for sunlight and to "make the roses bloom" (33). When Ames notices the roses over Louisa's grave, Lila explains her attention and her actions with a simple phrase: "No folks of my own." Her statement suggests that she now claims Ames's "folks" in the absence of her own (225). By the time the events in *Home* occur, Lila is significantly more settled in life in Gilead and in her marriage, a fact reflected by the growth and expansion of the graveyard garden. "Snowdrops, crocuses, jonquils...late tulips...[and] creeping phlox" now flourish in the cemetery (100), and Glory takes these flowers to signify the "love of the lives, past and present, into which [Lila] had chosen to adopt herself, as if finally at home." The garden, which Lila "care[s] for so lovingly," thus demonstrates her choice to join the Ames family, connecting her not only to Louisa and Angeline/Rebecca Ames but also to John Ames's siblings (101). The graveyard garden underscores the webs of relationality Lila now experiences, in contrast to her earlier drifting, unhappy loneliness. Lila's gardening allows her to develop and strengthen the social and familial connections which are so crucial in drawing her into eternal salvation.

Salvation for All Creation: Ecologies of Salvation

The fact that Jack and Lila both engage in gardening demonstrates that, despite the unanswered question about the limitations of human agency in salvation, they are able to participate in the broader salvific works of God: restoration, resurrection, and redemption. Their participation not only rejects, again, the notion that they might be beyond salvation's reach, but also makes it clear that *human* salvation is not the only salvific project at stake. In *Home* and in *Lila*, gardening has the power to redeem non-human Creation itself. The advancement of this idea forces us to confront the theological question of whether Creation itself even *needs* salvation or redemption. In Christianity, people, not nature, have sinned, and so nature itself is not—and cannot be—sinful. As previously discussed in relation to *Gilead*, Creation clearly shines with God's goodness and glory even after the Fall. It is clear, then, that if "redemption" refers to "the expiation for guilt, then nature does not need redemption," for it bears no guilt (Wirzba, *Paradise of God* 19), but we might alternatively understand "redemption" as being "rescued from harm" or having a life's value "rescued and restored." A more scientifically familiar term for one potential type of redemption with regards to nature, Rolston suggests, might be "regeneration" (Rolston 211). Indeed, Robinson presents the dilapidated Boughton yard, as well as Ames's weedy garden, as being in deep need of a regenerative touch.

Robinson's treatment of regeneration focuses on the narrower scope of these disorderly, overgrown gardens, but this idea pushes us to a broader ecotheological consideration of the wider natural world. Nature's need for regeneration stems from the biological reality that the natural world is not one in which survival is always guaranteed. In fact, there is the constant threat of "relapse into chaos" and "the downhill tug of entropy" which renders "regeneration from life to life" absolutely crucial for the survival of each species and, ultimately, an ecosystem.

With such a definition of redemption, it becomes apparent that “life must be perpetually redeemed in the midst of its perishing” (Rolston 212)—and is, indeed, “ever redeemed” from death and failure as life does persist and continues to flourish (218). From an understanding of nature consistent with the theocentric vision of the world in Robinson’s fiction, God can be seen in biology as “the suffering and resurrection power that redeems life out of chaos” (219). Resurrection is writ large in *Creation*, just as Ruth observes in *Housekeeping*—but such struggle and successful redemption in the realms of biology and ecology can, obviously, occur with or without the human presence. However, “sin produces suffering at new levels” for *Creation* as for other human beings (224), as evidenced by the destructive wars, boundless consumption, and reckless pollution that deeply harm the environment and human life both (225). “Cursed is the ground for thy sake,” indeed (Gen. 3.17). The idea that human sin can affect the rest of the natural world is present in both *Housekeeping* and in *Gilead*, in the former via the flooding which echoes the Flood and in the latter by the similarly watery idea that “guilt can burst through the smallest breach and cover the landscape” (Robinson, *Gilead* 82). Nature thus needs redemption “more urgently today than ever before” from the sinful human behaviors that abuse the earth and led to devastating environmental degradation (Rolston 226)—it must be “rescued and restored” (211).

Home and *Lila* are not novels depicting destructive environmental exploitation, but the books nonetheless depict gardening as having the power to redeem environmental contexts. This redemption, most obvious in the transformation of the Boughton garden in *Home*, occurs on smaller scales and in seemingly very ordinary ways which belie their cosmic significance—but is “the everyday” and “the commonplace” which Robinson deems as being “most available to being thought of as sacred” (Robinson, “Radiant Astonishment” 29). This elevation of the

ordinary is reminiscent of the environmental slogan “think globally, act locally” which encourages people to take action within local communities for the health and future of the whole planet. In the context of Robinson’s novels, this idea implies that gardening has significance beyond one’s own yard, both ecologically and theologically. It anticipates the redemption of all Creation as envisioned by Revelation, and, as Wirzba argues, it also helps to repair the human relationship to Creation.

Jack, certainly, participates in restoration, rescue, and resurrection as it relates to Creation. The effect of this participation is two-fold. First, it again indicates Jack’s inclusion rather than exclusion from the realm of the divine and the sacred. Second, it serves as a reminder that salvation encompasses all Creation and orients us toward the holistic vision of resurrection in Revelation. In *Home*, Glory watches her brother “wrestling weeds out of the ground for all the world as if something depended on it” (Robinson 91). But this is not the question of “as if”; something significant *does* very much depend upon Jack’s work. His gardening has the power to heal and restore the Boughton garden. At the start of *Home*, “the gardens and the shrubbery” in the Boughton yard have become “disheveled,” the porch overtaken by “an immense bramble of trumpet vines.” Only “[a] few” of their mother’s irises just barely “managed to bloom,” suggesting an uphill battle to flower in this overgrown, unkempt garden. The effect of all this dishevelment, this disarray, is that the Boughton house, once “stanch and upright,” now seems “abandoned” and “heartbroken” instead (4). The Boughton garden, and by extension the Boughton home itself, is in need of being redeemed, renewed and reclaimed from this disorder and dilapidation.

It is Jack who “*rescue[s]* the bleeding-heart bushes from a tangle of weeds,” an act which not only draws on the very language used to describe redemption, but also indicates the

reclaiming of order and beauty from the disarray and chaos of this “tangle” (150, emphasis added). Glory furthermore views Jack’s “helpfulness” in the garden and the house as “restoration”—the “iris garden reclaimed, the Adirondack chairs repaired, the treads replaced on the back porch steps.” While Jack performs no miracles of literal resurrection, the rescue and restoration he works in the garden has a resurrection-like effect. His efforts create the feeling of “having the family come to life again” (300), the bygone past brought back into the present in an echo of *Housekeeping*’s repeated returns to remembrance and memory. Similarly, in *Lila*, Lila also works a kind of minor resurrection as she plants a garden in the graveyard, bringing forth new life in a place reserved for the dead. Moreover, Lila envisions the flowering graveyard itself becoming the site of Louisa and Angeline/Rebecca Ames’s resurrection, much as a garden was the site of Jesus’s own resurrection. Lila imagines that Louisa and her daughter will rise “right through the roses” that now grow all over their graves (*Lila* 251).

The resurrection effects of Jack and Lila’s gardening imaginatively restore people to the environments they have rescued and redeemed, bringing back the Boughton family as well as Louisa and Angeline/Rebecca—and for Jack, in particular, his efforts in a sense restore him back into his family’s fold and to the shared landscape he has felt such alienation from. The restoration of people to restored environmental contexts in Robinson’s novels reflects Revelation’s depiction of the resurrected life. Revelation 21 proclaims and celebrates “a new heaven and a new earth” (21.1)—a renewal of Creation, not the abandonment of the material earth for a disembodied heavenly life. Moreover, although Revelation 21 goes into significant detail about the built environment of “the holy city, new Jerusalem” (21.3), this divinely restored world is harmoniously and seamlessly integrated with the natural environment as well. This cohesive unity is evident in the way “a river of the water of life” flows “in the midst of the

street.” In addition, along the river grows “the tree of life” whose leaves are “for the healing of the nations” (22.1-2). The presence of this tree clearly hearkens back to the Garden of Eden, but while Eden was the site of sin, the new heaven and the new earth are the site of the fruition of salvation—the resurrection. “Cursed be the ground for thy sake” (Gen. 3.17) becomes the promise that “[n]o longer will there be anything accursed” (Rev. 22.3), neatly demonstrating the contrasts from the beginning and the end of the Bible’s narrative arc. In addition, the detail about the healing powers of the tree leaves further underscores the salvific nature of this newly reconstituted world and serves as another recognition of the interconnected realities of humans and the environment. It turns out that human healing cannot be separated or isolated from the natural world, from God’s Creation—hardly surprising when we consider the fact of our own createdness emphasized in *Gilead*.

In depicting this new heaven and new earth, Revelation presents a vision of restored and redeemed ecologies as the context for life as restored and redeemed people—the same vision Robinson presents. Salvation and resurrection are not set apart specifically for human beings. Rather, salvation is for *all* of Creation. Robinson’s most radical ecotheological claim is that we cannot have heaven without earth, that “God’s redemptive purposes are worked out in [Creation] rather than apart from it” (Wirzba, *Paradise of God* 19). As such, Robinson’s novels challenge popular conceptions of salvation that imagine “ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven” (Wright 19), leaving earth far behind. Such a perspective on heaven and on salvation as an escape from the earth makes it possible for people to face environmental issues with indifference. If “the present world is doomed to destruction” anyway (12), and if salvation whisks believers away to heaven, then “there [is] no point worry about trying to stop polluting the planet with acid rain and the like” (119). Such beliefs are clearly antithetical to

environmentalism, but the ecotheological implications of Robinsons' garden-rooted salvation insist that we cannot treat the present earth as something which will simply pass away—as an entity wholly irrelevant to eternal salvation. The redemption of the Boughton garden in *Home* and that of the graveyard in *Lila* instead lead to a theologically-grounded framework for environmental action that advocates for a gardening mindset towards Creation. If *Gilead* illustrates God's continuing involvement and care for Creation, the prominence of gardening in *Home* and *Lila* suggest that divine involvement with Creation continues into the realm of the eternal, prompting us to respond appropriately out of this theological framework.

Salvation involves not an escape from the material world but a radical renewal of all Creation—and a renewal of our relationship to it. Clearly, Revelation demonstrates a world in which humans neither exploit nor neglect the earth but instead live in harmonious relationship with it. But if Creation at large is to experience any kind of redemption and regeneration at all in the *present* (pre-resurrection) era, the human relationship with the environment must itself be redeemed from its own destructive and fallen bent. The “human cultures” and attitudes that permit and engender environmental degradation must be redeemed and transformed to affirm and care for sacred Creation, rather than to exploit it (Rolston 227). It is the human vocation of gardening which provides positive, nurturing ways of engaging and interacting with the environment around us—ways which allow us, as the images of God, to reflect the divine attitude and actions towards Creation. Moreover, by gardening “we learn to care for the garden which the [C]reation itself is” (Wirzba, *Paradise of God* 117). Wirzba argues that we find our place in the ecological interconnectedness and interdependence of gardens, and we learn “that our presence need not be destructive” (117). The harmony learned in gardening not only

provides a model of engaging with the environment at large but also foreshadows life in the redeemed, resurrected world as envisioned in Revelation.

Robinson, too, though more subtly, presents the transformation of Jack's relationship to his particular environment in *Home*, though not in an atmosphere of drastic and dire climate circumstances. Jack's care for the garden not only redeems it from disarray but also redeems *him* to the landscape he has long felt estranged from; his relationship to it is transformed by gardening. Gardening remedies the sense of estrangement by putting Jack into immediate interaction with the place he feels alienated from and entangles him into interconnectedness with it instead. Such interconnectedness is not only familial and emotional but also distinctly ecological and creational. Contemporary ecotheologian Norman Wirzba argues that gardens teach us about our own interconnectedness to Creation by drawing us into "the whole wild world of microorganisms, pests and predators, pollinators, weather cycles, and their evolutionary histories." The result of these ecological entanglements is that gardening grounds human experience "in the realities of soil, water and light" (Wirzba, *Paradise of God* 113). In addition, the work of gardening requires significant physical and bodily labor, reminding us again that we are also created beings connected to the world around us and to God the Creator (118). The interconnected reality of gardening anticipates and reflects the ultimately interconnected nature of salvation—not just in terms of interconnected human relationships but in terms of the interconnectedness of the entirety of Creation. Salvation is not—cannot, even—be isolated *for* the human creature, *from* the rest of Creation.

In *Home*, Glory's reflections on church embody this idea, for she describes church—which, arguably, helps its congregation seek "the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 3.2)—as a place opened to the created world. Worship is intertwined with an admiration and appreciation for

Creation. For Glory, “church was an airy white room with tall windows looking out on God’s good world, with God’s good sunlight pouring in through windows and falling across the pulpit” (Robinson, *Home* 50). These windows literally open the church up to the created world beyond its walls, allowing people within to look beyond and permitting the outdoors entry inside. The repetition of the word “good” in reference to the world and to the sunlight alludes to Genesis 1, in which God declares Creation to be good. The allusion highlights the God-given worth of so-called earthly material matter. Moreover, Christ’s resurrection in a garden setting, with a physical body, suggests that the resurrection is *not* intended to be an escape from this present material world. Indeed, poet and agrarian environmental activist Wendell Berry even defines the “ancient faith” as the knowledge that “what we need is here” (“The Wild Geese”). Gardens and their role in the salvation story ground salvation itself in materiality and in Creation, communicating implicitly what Robinson makes explicit in a previous interview—that there is “a sense of the sacredness of what is occurring here” (Robinson, interview with Schaub 251).

Redeeming Environmentalism: Towards a Postsecular Environmentalism

Robinson draws on gardening in *Home* and in *Lila* to illuminate the interconnected, communal vision of salvation which is key to remedying the conditions of estrangement and alienation that Jack and Lila experience—*Home* indicating the possibility of Jack’s salvation through his gardening, *Lila* charting Lila’s garden-mediated relationships into communal salvation. The entanglements of salvation with gardening go deeper than simply human salvation. *Home* and *Lila* feature the redemption and restoration of natural environments via gardening, thereby indicating the inclusion of all Creation in salvation as Revelation does. This all-encompassing nature of salvation leads to the suggestion that a gardening mindset is

appropriate to care for Creation and to embrace the human vocation implied by the *imago Dei*. In this way, the ecotheology Robinson develops challenges popular conceptions of salvation and constructs a specifically Christian framework for environmental action.

While through her novels Robinson essentially debunks the accusations from Lynn White, Jr. about Christianity's intrinsically negative view of the environment, her consistent ecotheological attention to the earth suggests an agreement with White's ultimate conclusion—that the solution to the environmental crisis must be religious in nature (1207). As such, the ecotheological orientations toward Robinson's fiction not only produce ways of reading the novels but also gesture towards the realm of the postsecular as a viable form of future environmental discourse. In the coda, we will turn to an examination of the relationship between Robinson's novels and postsecular environmentalism.

CODA

Towards a Postsecular Literary Future for Environmentalism

“Lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins occur, or not even—I’m more radical than that.”

– Marilynne Robinson on nature, 1994 interview with
Walter Schaub (249)

Across Robinson’s career, she has produced two major works of nonfiction which focus specifically on environmental issues: her 1989 book *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* (1989) and her 1998 essay “Surrendering Wilderness.” In the first, she condemns and critiques the practice of the British government of dumping nuclear waste into the sea; in the second, she asserts the need to give up the idea that there is such a thing as untouched wilderness—an idea which naively implies that there *is* a limit to the repercussions of human environmental destruction. Despite her obvious environmental concerns, Robinson’s arguments have not endeared her to mainstream contemporary environmentalists—quite the contrary, in fact. Britain’s Greenpeace sued Robinson for libel because of her critique of the organization’s inefficacy, and the book actually remains banned there (O’Rourke). Robinson, for her part, clearly does not have one iota of fondness for groups like Greenpeace. Her blistering assessment of environmental organizations is that they “have systematically, whether they intended it or not, effectively mischanneled public attention and public resources” (Robinson, interview with Schaub 248). From her perspective, they are worse than useless. They are directly contributing to the grave problem she sees, the “unknitting” of “the whole system” (249).

Robinson is obviously forthcoming about her environmental concerns in this interview, and in others—saying elsewhere, once again, that she is “profoundly critical of the environmental movement” (Robinson, “Radiant Astonishment” 2), and even calling *Mother Country* her “most important book” (Cep). Moreover, she herself claims that her conception of the environment is more “radical” than poet Gerard Manley Hopkins’s (Robinson, interview with Schaub 249). While her nonfiction and her occasional interview remarks may not provide a clear glimpse of this radical vision, Robinson’s novels do. Throughout her fiction, Robinson, like Hopkins, presents the world as being suffused with “the grandeur of God” (Hopkins). But Robinson’s outlook on the natural world is in fact more comprehensive than Hopkins’s, and thus more radical in that sense. While Hopkins and Robinson both praise the world and God’s involvement in it, it is Robinson who asserts a high degree of interconnectedness and argues that the human relationship to the earth at present is ultimately inseparable from the eternal future of all Creation, human and otherwise.

Across her novels, Robinson cultivates and advances an ecotheology which is not simply incidental but is in fact *essential* to understanding the relationships—between people, and between people and God—upon which her novels hinge. In *Housekeeping*, the spiritual significance of the natural world allows for the communion that grants Ruth connection to her dead mother and grandfather and fuels her hope for a future reunion. *Gilead*, in turn, develops the idea of spiritual significance into that of Creation, and this creational framework makes possible the reconciliation between Ames and Jack. *Home* and *Lila* focus specifically on gardens and the question of salvation for the novels’ outcasts: gardening in *Lila* facilitates the development of the social relationships that enfold her into salvation, while gardening in *Home* demonstrates Jack’s socially embedded existence and the potential for his salvation, despite the

fact that he feels neither of those assurances. These two novels re-orient the idea of salvation to encompass the nature as well and suggest gardening as a human model of engagement with the rest of the world.

I have argued that Robinson's ecotheology engages with and critiques various movements within environmentalism, especially deep ecology and rights-for-nature activism. Through her fiction, Robinson proposes an alternative environmental framework that encompasses the concerns of secular environmentalists while simultaneously suggesting certain limitations to their conceptual models. But I would also argue—and am arguing now—that her novels also anticipate and contribute to a particular turn in the modern environmental discourse: the development of an emerging postsecular environmental ethics. Specifically, Robinson's novels propose not simply the postsecular but specifically the *literary* postsecular as one viable and powerful way to provide a holistic articulation of the world.

Robinson may consider *Mother Country* her most important book, but in truth, it is her novels which have most popularly—and most successfully—expressed “the ultimate” about the world (Robinson, interview with Schaub 249). Robinson's novels have enjoyed a far wider and more diverse readership than *Mother Country*, thereby reaching many more people than that singular work of nonfiction. Moreover, even without invoking the specter of climate catastrophe, Robinson's novels cultivate an all-encompassing ecotheological imagination infused with a kind of religious wonder that is often lacking from the language of reportage and political argumentation. The literary form thus provides the space to express the theological nature of “the ultimate” more fully and more freely. Indeed, Robinson's remarks in her interviews and her nonfiction on the environment have all fallen short of encompassing the true depth and breadth of the ecotheology she develops in her fiction. Instead, it is the literary which is most conducive

to the expression of the sacred, for “saying what people can’t say for themselves” (Robinson, interview with Schaub 237)—that “ultimate” which eludes even Robinson in the interview but unfolds with clarity across her novels (249).

The environmental movement has also begun to remark upon the power and potential of religion, and some scholars and activists have actually begun to advocate for the postsecular as a way forward in environmentalism. Twenty-two years after Robinson published *Housekeeping*, with its insistence upon a natural world infused and abuzz with spiritual significance, and two years before the publication of *Gilead*, with its celebration of the world as Creation, scholar Sarah McFarland Taylor highlighted the rise of “green sisters,” Roman Catholic nuns who advocate for environmental protection. Her 2002 article notes that these green sisters “reinhabit” the land—choosing to become rooted in a place to repair and rehabilitate it (“Reinhabiting Religion” 230)—and to “reinhabit” religious tradition—actively engaging and leaning into their religion to address ecological concerns (231). They represent a shift towards the “greening” of religion—the “integration of religion, ecological consciousness, and green culture” (237). By 2016, two years after *Lila* and its intertwining of salvation, relationality, and ecology was published, George Handley argued that “a dismissal or willed ignorance of the continued relevance of religion and religious discourse to the quest of establishing an environmental ethos would be an utterly fatal mistake to make in the age of climate change.” Calling on ecocritics to acknowledge the powerful influences of religion and religious texts, he argued that ecocritics “need to get religion”—that is, to understand it and to rethink assumptions about secularity in the context of environmental discourse. Handley cites Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’* as a text which “urges consideration of the postsecularity of the environmental humanities” and invites us to think cosmologically about the environment and our role in the Anthropocene (“*Laudato Si’*”).

Similarly, in another 2016 publication, *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh concludes that *Laudato Si'* is, in fact, a more effective text than the Paris Climate Agreement. Ghosh prefers the pope's encyclical because of its openness and clarity, as well as for its crucial acknowledgements "of how profoundly humanity has lost its way and of the limits that circumscribe human agency." By contrast, Ghosh argues, the Agreement is regrettably opaque and stilted. Moreover, it concludes with "an expression of faith in the sovereignty of Man and his ability to shape the future" by proposing a deadline of sorts by which countries will achieve their goals (Ghosh 158). This illusion of self-sufficiency is, in fact, part of Robinson's own charge against contemporary environmental movements; she finds that they go unquestioned and uncritiqued as "good-guy, lone-ranger" types. While powerful and visible, secular movements alone are not enough in Ghosh's estimation of the urgency of climate change. Instead, he writes that "religious worldviews" are uniquely equipped to mobilize people in great numbers because they "transcend nation-states, and they all acknowledge intergenerational, long-term responsibilities; they do not partake of economist ways of thinking" (160). More than logistical advantages, though, Ghosh finds that religion brings us to "an acceptance of limits and limitations" and of a recognition of the sacred (161). Moreover, to add to the growing incorporation of religion into environmental discourse, by 2019 Taylor was writing of how popular non-religious media and culture was using idea of environmental virtue—which she terms with the religious language of "ecopiety"—to signal that which was eco-friendly and therefore ethically upright (*Ecopiety* 2).

Taylor, Handley, and Ghosh all suggest that the one way forward for environmentalism lies in moving into the realm of the postsecular. Among these three thinkers, Ghosh also asserts that *literary* engagement with environmental concerns is paramount. He writes that culture,

including the arts and humanities, shapes attitudes towards the environment in ways that permit the perpetuation of destructive practices. As a result, Ghosh proclaims that “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (9). Ghosh’s remarks suggest that in engaging its readers through narrative and description, literature can bring about shifts in imagination that can help shape better environmental attitudes and spur more effective environmental action without falling into the dry, stilted language of a document like the Paris Agreement. By tapping into the imagination, literature is able to evoke a stronger response than reportage or formulated polemic by activating emotion and attachment to the environment, not instilling a straightforward—and misguided—confidence in human mission and ability.

Interestingly, however, Ghosh does not explicitly bridge the gap between his arguments for the imagination and his arguments for the religious. It is Robinson, instead, who comprehensively and creatively practices what these thinkers preach, orienting readers toward an ecotheological imagination. Robinson’s fiction intertwines the two key factors Ghosh identifies—the religious acceptance of God and thus the acceptance of human limitations, as well as the literary exercise in environmentally-aware imagination. Her overt theological engagements demonstrate the positive possibilities of deferential religious considerations of the natural world. In addition, her rooting in Protestant theology serves as a reminder that the origins of American environmentalism are actually in the culture and theology of American Calvinism, although contemporary discourse and secular language does not make this legacy immediately obvious. Robinson weaves these theological influences into her fiction as she offers readers her characters’ lived experiences of a deferential relationship to the natural world and to the divine. The aesthetic disposition of her novels, so often characterized by awed attention, encourages us to view the world around us in the same manner.

Environmentalism may have moved far from its religious inception, but Robinson's novels, in conjunction with recent recognitions of the potential of the postsecular, suggest that it is crucial that environmentalism recall its roots, especially in a literary form. The very existence of Robinson's fiction argues for common ground between faith and the environment, between art and science, and implies that such common grounds are fertile soil rife with postsecular possibility and planetary hope. Suffused with the influence of thinkers like Calvin and Edwards, and through sustained intertextuality with the Bible, Robinson cultivates an ecotheology which asks us to love and honor a sacred Creation—and in that love and honor to draw nearer not merely to earth but to one another and to the divine.

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