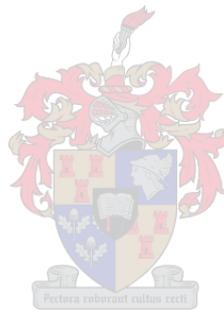


# **Redeeming Loneliness: Paul Ricoeur's Strangeness and Recognition in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, *Home* and *Lila***

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## Abstract:

In a dissertation which aims to bring together the work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, and American novelist and academic Marilynne Robinson, this study addresses themes of loneliness and its redemption in the seminal works *Oneself as Another* and *The Course of Recognition* by Paul Ricoeur, and Marilynne Robinson's novels *Gilead*, *Home* and *Lila*. In Robinson's novels, loneliness is the posture of abject estrangement and the crisis of identity. This capacity to be strange in oneself echoes the strangeness of Ricoeur's *idem* (sameness) and *ipse* (selfhood) identities, which deny the self any absolute knowledge of either itself or of the other-than-self. Both the self's attestation of self-identity and interpretations of another's self-narrative reveal the inevitable gap of understanding between them. Robinson demonstrates how the ostensible identity in family, or marriage, or the foundation of 'home' and body have the potential to deny both selfhood to the individual and, by extension, the potential to relate meaningfully with an other-than-self.

However, be it via narrative or in seeking beyond itself, the self is enabled to identify and distinguish others – a paradox where its strangeness is the fellow feeling which makes them similar and recognisable to each other. Robinson suggests that this recognition, requires the practices of Biblical neighbourliness and grace, in order to restore and redeem the self from the poles of separation. The undeservedness of this neighbourly grace invokes superabundant giving, which is seen in Robinson's novels in the practices of naming (christening) and blessing.

In this dissertation, I intend both to address the dearth in academic material which addresses these subjects, and moreover, to explore the strangeness of Ricoeur's theory of self which finds practical, narrative anchorage in the loneliness of Robinson's characters. Furthermore, I shall establish the redemption of the estranged selves by means of Ricoeur's theory of recognition and by examining how Robinson's novels propose this recognition in the practices of the Neighbour and superabundant giving.

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## Introduction

Acclaimed American academic, Marilynne Robinson, debuted as a novelist in 1980 with her first work of fiction, *Housekeeping*, and since then has produced only three more novels, *Gilead* (2005), *Home* (2009) and *Lila* (2014), although she has authored a number of essays, non-fiction works and Terry Lectures. In her novels, Robinson demonstrates what has elsewhere been dubbed a “theology of loneliness” (Greaves, “The Gorgeous Loneliness of Marilynne Robinson”), and it is a loneliness which is portrayed as the default mode of human existence. As Robinson has said in an interview with Wyatt Mason for *The New York Times Magazine*, “[Loneliness is] not a problem. It’s a condition. It’s a passion of a kind” (“The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson”). Similarly, *Gilead*’s central character, Reverend Ames, says in the opening paragraphs of *Gilead*, “There’s a lot under the surface of life, everyone knows that. A lot of malice and dread and guilt, and so much loneliness, where you wouldn’t really expect to find it either” (7).

This dissertation aims to bring together various discourses and ideas concerning the self and strangeness, as well as its correlative isolation. It discusses loneliness’s crisis of self-identity and Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy of the self in a critical analysis which will be built on a close reading of the primary texts, namely Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* trilogy, (*Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*). Paradoxically then, when the concept of strangeness and isolation is made recognisable to *all* human subjects – this brokenness is what makes it humanly and comprehensively accessible, and inclusive. Recognition, the act of identifying and distinguishing, acts both within and against loneliness, and so becomes a redemptive act in Robinson’s novels. Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy, particularly as voiced in his works *Oneself as Another* and *The Course of Recognition*, acknowledges both the strangeness of the self and the necessity of redemptive recognition, validation in neighbourliness and in superabundant giving. These texts will serve as the theoretical departure point in my study. Explored and analysed in full, they will lay the groundwork for a critical discussion of the themes of strangeness, and recognition found in Robinson’s narratives.

In an unusual relationship with each other, the three *Gilead* novels, although each anchored in the same fictional town in Iowa, and concentrating on the same families, conduct themselves as if they were each stand-alone titles. This is due largely to their differing narrative structures and styles

and varying timelines, even though they deal with the same characters. The first, *Gilead*, published in 2005, is written as a series of letters, a collection of musings, by the first-person narrator Reverend John Ames. Approaching the end of his life, he is attempting to communicate a lifetime of amassed wisdom to his very young son. The writing of these letters coincides with a time of great personal strife for Ames when Jack, the prodigal son of his good friend and fellow pastor, Reverend Robert Boughton, returns to the town of Gilead. Unusually for a trilogy, the plot of the second book, *Home*, runs concurrently to the events described in *Gilead*, focusing once again on Jack's return – but told this time from within the Boughton family, and narrated from the outside (the third-person focalised narrative of Boughton's estranged daughter Glory, who has herself only recently returned home). By contrast, surprising again, the third book in Robinson's trilogy, *Lila*, serves as a prequel to both earlier novels, presenting the character of Ames' young wife via a third-person stream-of-consciousness narrative, and describing her wanderings up until her marriage to Ames and the birth of their son – that is, before the letters of *Gilead* were written.

In these texts, Robinson investigates, narrates and describes the loneliness of characters who find themselves strange and estranged. Even within loving families, and in marriage, her characters are isolated from each other. Lila, the dear wife of Jack in *Gilead* regresses in the third novel to become the lost, wandering soul of her former life – a drifter, destitute and desperately lonely. Jack, despite the repeated attempts at reconciliation by a loving family, finds it impossible to become part of it. And Ames, the adoring husband and father, in anticipating his imminent death, is preparing for the final estrangement from those he holds dear. Estrangement appears as the connecting theme of all of them, and is manifested as loneliness. Even the town of Gilead embodies some notion of strangeness: the complexity of the idea of being 'at home' or 'going home', as the title of the second novel suggests, is contrasted with being 'without home'. Already in this peculiar independent/dependent structuring of Robinson's novels, one notices a thematic motif of strangeness which undergirds her trilogy and which serves to introduce the inspiration for this project. It is this concern with humanity, with the none-excluded brokenness which lies beneath it, which chiefly interests me. This is what first attracted me, and what continues to captivate me: Robinson's ability to make widespread human experience *intimate*.

Raised in Iowa like her characters, Robinson has become well acquainted with the sort of solitude and strangeness she describes in her own fiction. She majored in American literature, and notes to Sarah Fay in her interview, "The Art of Fiction", for *The Paris Review*, that now divorced with two grown sons, she "leads a relatively solitary life", lecturing at the Iowa Writers' workshop

and giving the occasional sermon in her church (“The Art of Fiction”). Yet she views her solitary habits as “a lovely thing” (“The Art of Fiction”), and something of a predisposition in her family. In her interview with Wyatt Mason, she characterises the feeling of strangeness in this way:

I have always been [...] in the habit of feeling quite a stark difference between myself and the world I navigated. Which was any world I navigated. And then, at a certain point, I found that that was a) very formative and b) probably an error, although it was that discomfort that made me feel like writing, the feeling of difference. (“The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson”)

It would seem that this exact hermit-like sentiment is what pushed her to reach out through the medium of the written word. Her writing is the product of her own conviction of estrangement. The inspiration of solitude, which she clearly craves, while not particularly burdensome to her, still needs the “stimulus” and the variation of her teaching career as well (Fay, “The Art of Fiction”). Robinson bluntly describes her upbringing in a “family [that] was pious and Presbyterian mainly because [her] father was pious and Presbyterian” (“The Art of Fiction”), although Robinson states elsewhere that until her college years, her religious upbringing was “random and approximate” (“The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson”). Evidently, even her faith was estranging to her because it was communal and not personal until much later. Yet now Fay reports that Robinson is well-versed and passionate on the subjects of “public policy as well as philosophical and theological scholarship” (“The Art of Fiction”). Robinson notes to Fay, that “[t]he ancients are right: the dear old human experience is a singular, difficult, shadowed, brilliant experience that does not resolve into being comfortable in the world” (“The Art of Fiction”). In Robinson’s life, neither relationships, nor faith, nor career have completely addressed the inherent lonesomeness which indwells her.

This mystery of comprehensive isolation, therefore, especially when coupled with inescapably Christian content, is something which I found fascinating in Robinson’s books. In contemporary fiction, religion is often portrayed as a dated hierarchical order, or a system which deals too gingerly with the physical world, placing emphasis instead only on the spiritual. Todd Shy, in his review “Religion and Marilynne Robinson”, declares that Robinson “manages to have her cake and eat it too” (251) because she somehow succeeds in harmonising genuinely saintly characters with unapologetic religious doctrine. She takes the ordinary struggles and hardship of daily life within a religious context as an absolute baseline. She says in an interview with Sarah Fay:

Religion is a framing mechanism. It is a language of orientation which presents itself as a series of questions. It talks about the arc of life and the quality of experience in ways that I've found fruitful to think about. Religion has been profoundly effective in enlarging human imagination and expression. It's only very recently that you couldn't see how the high arts are intimately connected to religion. ("The Art of Fiction")

With nuanced narratives and a cast of very ordinary, striving, and fallible beings, Robinson's work outlines divine theology from the worm's eye view of humanity, disparaging neither. What makes her philosophy so compelling is the very humanness from which it is addressed, and with which it is primarily concerned. It is by virtue of this loneliness that the mysteries of Robinson's theology are made accessible. It describes a loneliness which does not deny the pain of a strange and isolating human existence, even despite its Christian world-view, and furthermore still strives for redemptive hope, the enlarging of the human imagination and expression.

This then is where Robinson's reliance on the theological musings of Reformer John Calvin become pertinent to the argument. Fay reports that

Robinson is a Christian whose faith is not easily reduced to generalities. Calvin's thought has had a strong influence on her, and she depicts him in her essays as a misunderstood humanist, likening his 'secularizing tendencies' to the 'celebrations of the human one finds in Emerson and Whitman'. ("The Art of Fiction")

For Robinson, the appeal of Calvinistic thought is his humanist persuasion even in his theology, and his high esteem for the human capacity for great and beautiful thought. She declares that she "was, and continue[s] to be, struck by the power of the metaphysics and visionary quality of his [Calvin's] theology... [H]e's terrifically admiring of what the human mind does" (Mason, "The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson). Calvin demonstrated a similar faith in the potential of the human being to attain great heights of understanding. In his lifetime he was a great advocate for the common person, believing that the mysteries of God could be accessible even to the poorly educated layman. This valuing of the human being meant that Calvin did not shy away from complex and visionary theology in his writings, nor from the conclusions the human mind was capable of reaching.

This controversial estimation, however, does not equate to an evaluation of man as a full, perfect and complete being. In Calvin's theology, the right view of humankind, and therefore the right view of God, required the humbling of a person's estimation of his or her own worth in comparison with that of God. He puts it like this in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: "there is no danger that a person will lower himself too much, provided he understands that he must recover

in God what he lacks in himself” (25). In fact, he goes on to say that for a person to “ascribe to himself a single bit of good more than is proper” will result in nothing more than “vain confidence” (65). While Calvin explores the incompleteness of a person’s selfhood, its gaps and insufficiencies in theological terms, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur ventures the same argument from a philosophical perspective. In his seminal work *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur teases out the identification and definition of a person in terms of the question “who am I?”, and he discovers that even a creedal attestation of one’s selfhood is nevertheless both “a credence without any guarantee, but also a trust greater than any suspicion” (23). For Ricoeur, the self is inextricably enmeshed with what is *other*, and for Calvin, the self cannot exist as absolutely as a God who is absolute. There is a similarity of thought patterns between the Calvinistic and Ricoeurian self in that neither ‘self’ can be described as absolute, or as having absolute knowledge of itself.

As indicated in the introduction to his book *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur was himself a Protestant Christian and consequently understood his philosophy to be bracketed by a sound theological framework of God. Ricoeur biographer, Charles Reagan, in his book *Paul Ricoeur: His Life and Work*, reports that “The Ricoeurs were very devout Protestants, and Paul was raised in a strict atmosphere of reading, Bible study, and going to church” (4). He studied first at the university at Rennes, then at Sorbonne. Reagan speculates that Ricoeur initially “shied away from philosophy” perhaps because “he thought it would be a threat to his devotion to religion” (5), but was encouraged to tackle that which he was afraid of and, in so doing, he “made it his life’s work” (5). Having already begun his career as a prolific writer, Ricoeur was separated from his family for nearly five years during World War II, when he was taken as a prisoner of war. Even so, he gave philosophy lectures at the improvised “university within the camp”, which was even granted permission in the long term to give examinations (9). After the war, Ricoeur continued to lecture. He “resumed what would be a lifelong career as a prolific writer” (15), and has continued to be the John Nuveen Professor Emeritus in the Divinity School, the Department of Philosophy, and the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. His devotion to his faith and his philosophy were not in fact at odds, as he explains in the introduction to *Oneself as Another*, a book which was born of his Gifford Lectures on biblical hermeneutics in Edinburgh in 1986. In his desire to “pursue an autonomous philosophical discourse”, Ricoeur claims that the book version of his lectures rather “leads to a type of philosophy from which the actual mention of God is absent and in which the question of God, as a philosophical question, itself remains in a suspension” (24). In separating the disciplines of theology and philosophy, Ricoeur demonstrates his ability to explain

and grapple with a philosophy that is couched in his beliefs but which functions independently of them. Nevertheless, Ricoeur states that his philosophy “assume[s] the bracketing, conscious and resolute, of the convictions that bind [him] to a biblical faith” (24). His biblical parentheses echo Robinson’s notion of religion being a “framing mechanism” for her fiction; Ricoeur’s philosophy will only go so far – and thereafter, it must encounter God.

Given their religious content, Robinson’s books have been eagerly taken up by Christian critics worldwide, and most of the scholarship done on her writing has focused on her début novel: the purportedly feminist narrative of the only novel entirely unconnected with the Gilead trilogy – *Housekeeping* (1980). As for the more recent trilogy, its comparative novelty has returned very little critical work on the subject of loneliness as yet, especially relating to *Lila*. Mark Greaves, of the *Catholic Herald* in the United Kingdom, has published a work on “The Gorgeous Loneliness of Marilynne Robinson”, but it is little more than a book review. There are a number of reviews and editorials in Christian and Anglican journals; however, as her most recent novel was released in 2014, there is minimal scholarship covering Robinson’s most recent novels, and a general dearth in commentary relating to the subject of recognition or loneliness. Several critics, such as Haein Park, have put Robinson’s work in conversation with Jewish Philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, and establishing the identity of the self in the face of the other. However, marrying Ricoeur’s theory of strangeness to this loneliness in Robinson’s novels is largely under-researched. In my research, I have sourced few articles in which both Ricoeur and Robinson’s names appear together, and they are discussed fleetingly – a gap which my dissertation aims to address. I believe Ricoeur’s philosophy not only poses important questions about the nature of recognisability and strangeness, themes evident in Robinson’s novels, but having been raised a Protestant, Ricoeur’s philosophy is sympathetic to many Christian ideas present in Robinson’s work and which are relevant to his philosophies of selfhood and recognition.

An important issue to address at this juncture is the reason why this investigation of humanity’s inherent loneliness and its redemption should be addressed in fiction – why it is literature being used to expound and explain, and not sociology or psychology, for example. It is a question which concerns the potential of narrative text to *make accessible*. The arts and the sciences both rely on the expression of the self. Self-narratives are very conscious of the manner in which their communication imbues meaning. Equally, the value of literary narrative lies in its power to reflect reality as understood by its author. *Put another way, narratives create intimacy because the communication is not to a void; they reach out to establish a connection with a perceived audience;*

as Robinson says in her interview with Sarah Fay, “books are good company. Nothing is more human than a book” (“*The Art of Fiction*”). This intimacy not only opens up and makes accessible a channel of communication between the text and its reader, but also thereby awakens a desire in us, the readers, for interpersonal intimacy.

By Ricoeur’s reckoning, one’s experience of the other is encountered in narrative. He propounds a theory which requires that narrative, as well as describing, narrating and prescribing identity, is a “reciprocal constitution of action and of the self” which operates “on both sides of narrative theory, in the practical as well as the ethical sphere” (*Oneself as Another*, 140). Ricoeur credits Walter Benjamin, author of the essay “The Storyteller”, with the thought that “the art of storytelling is the art of exchanging of *experiences*” (164). He means that narrative not only comprises the actions of the self (the outworking of the self’s character), but it is also the communication of the self – its exchange if you will – with another self. Therefore it may be said that literary narrative also functions as parable: one can find oneself in the other. After all, Ricoeur says, the self has “the power to recognize [it]self in narrative” (22). *Narration and the narrated self* are both acts of discovery – of making the unknown known, making accessible the emotions, the thoughts, and the realities of one’s neighbour – another soul. The fictional merit of this project, therefore, lies in its function as a narration that invites a reader into that relationship of exchange. The value of pairing novels with Ricoeur’s theory is that the novels provide the perfect testing ground for Ricoeur’s narrated selfhood, illustrating the ways in which a self may be communicated. Robinson’s novels and her characters will also demonstrate the difficulty of communicating the self, and the possible gaps in self-understanding and self-communication during that exchange.

The identity to which Ricoeur refers, the self of his philosophy, is his own middle ground between the traditions of Nietzsche and Descartes, “at the point of intersection between two philosophical traditions” (17) which concerns the “[e]xalted subject” and the “humiliated subject” (16). Of the subject, he asks four questions: “Who is speaking? Who is acting? Who is recounting about himself or herself? Who is the moral subject of imputation?” (16), and thus creates an identity for the self *by means of interrogating it*. Therefore, the attestation of the self is made unstable, for it “lacks both guarantee and the hypercertainty belonging to it” (22). What he seems to suggest is that although the self has “credence” in itself (22), it is nevertheless an unknown entity depending on faith for any kind of certainty or constancy (in what it believes to know of itself or perhaps, he hints, in a Being outside of itself). What is seen here is a self which is unknown – which, moreover, is strange, even to itself – the very self from whom the self ought not to have any secrets.

For Ricoeur, this self, the *soi-même* of the original French, forms the split foundation: it is constructed of the French *même*, meaning sameness (a word also used in the context of comparisons), which Ricoeur calls the idem-identity; and *le soi*, the self, which he names the ipse-identity (2). These two manifestations of the *ipse* and *idem* identity may also be expressed as the ideas “character” and “keeping one’s word” (118). *Character*, Ricoeur describes as *sameness*: it bears “the distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same” (119). *Keeping one’s word* is the *selfhood* of identity. It is not “a finite pole of existence” (120), but is rather “attested by the reinterpretation of character in terms of acquired disposition” (120). Selfhood plots the “temporal dimension of character” (120). He repeatedly affirms, “selfhood [...] is not sameness” (116), because the identity-in-sameness is problematised by “the question of permanence in time,” (166) – or rather its *impermanence* in time. Thus the self can identify itself both in the sameness by which it has always known itself, and also despite the changes, wrought by time, which challenge that sameness.

The dialectic<sup>1</sup> of the self that he proposes, falls somewhere between what is *self* and what is *other*. It echoes Robinson’s themes of loneliness, which are examples/explorations of exactly such a disjuncture: an unachievable self-knowledge, and being nonetheless distinctly *other*. Lila, an unwanted child with a scattered existence as a sharecropper, for instance, finds herself in Gilead and falls in love and marries Ames, the pastor there, although he is from at least one generation older than she. While he loves her passionately, Lila considers that, despite all, the only inheritance she will pass on to her unborn child is her own desperate loneliness. It is a loneliness which continues to haunt her: “marriage,” she thinks, “was supposed to end these miseries” (*Lila* 96). Likewise, told via Jack’s sister Glory, the narrative of *Home* reports the return of the prodigal son, Jack, in fraught relationship with not only his family, but his namesake (and father’s best friend) John Ames. Somehow Jack finds himself bitterly alone and isolated, an estrangement he likens to “death” (208). All attempts made by his family towards reconciliation fail. *Home*, the emblematic location where one is supposed to feel most ‘at home’ and at ease, is strange and alienating to Jack – so much so that one day Glory discovers him half-drunk, attempting to suffocate himself with exhaust fumes. Although this distressing episode serves to make her even more empathetic, it simultaneously distances her from him, as it disillusiones her about the impact she may have had on him, and strikes her as an uncommonly selfish action, which holds in contempt all her efforts to love him out of his

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<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur uses this term almost synonymously with the term “paradox”, to describe his theory of the two manifestations of identity.

loneliness. There is something about loneliness, Robinson seems to suggest, that is both inherent and unavoidable and which, despite human effort, can never be overcome.

Whilst this strangeness is never fully assuaged or reconciled, there is yet some measure of connection through the redemptive act of recognition. In the marriage of Lila and Ames, it is recognising their similar states of loneliness which paradoxically connects them, as with Glory and Jack. Between Lila and her unborn child, itself somewhat of a stranger to its mother, her deep sense of connection and recognition redeems the child from being otherwise unknown. Ricoeur's philosophical book, *The Course of Recognition*, illuminates this hope of redemption which I have identified in Robinson's fiction. Ricoeur proposes that if "one derives 'recognition' (*reconnaitre*) from *connaitre* [to know], by means of the prefix re-" (Ricoeur 5), then recognition requires some sort of recurrence, having previous knowledge of that which is brought to mind. Alternatively, recognition acknowledges the possibility of "recognizing something one has never seen before" by means of "a sign" or "a mark by which we recognize" (6) – this is why the loneliness of one may be recognised by another lonely person. Recognition can also function as a sort of statement of belief, as Ricoeur says, an "active knowing of something under the sign of truth", whereby one "arrive[s] at" a conclusion (6) – as already imaged by Lila's love for her unborn child. In practice, these ideas initiate a discussion about the nature of recognisability and its uncanny capacity to know, and make familiar even that which is not.

This hope for redemption or recognition is the *making familiar*. Ricoeur proposes that "the first philosophical use of recognition" is "the pair identify/distinguish" (21). "To recognize something as the same," he says, "as *identical to itself*, implies distinguishing it from everything else" (21, emphasis added). What he proposes is *acknowledgement* in all its profundity, and an acknowledgement which finds that what is attributable to one's own self may be equally attributable to another. Ricoeur's theory proposes that the outcome of recognition means a distinguishing from everything else ('else' here signifying the innumerable variations of that which is *other*) and still identifying it nevertheless as "not other than itself" (21). Ricoeur says in his introduction to *Oneself as Another*, that this otherness is a

kind of otherness that is not (or not merely) the result of comparison [as] is suggested by our title, otherness of a kind that can be constitutive of selfhood as such... [It suggests] from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other. (3)

The self, in some middle space between the *absolute* and the *relative* “I”, must be at once strange to itself and strange to others, yet simultaneously intimate and connected because it is a personal experience which is also dependent on others. Even so, it is a personal experience which is universally<sup>2</sup> shared by. Practically, this means that there is little separation and little distinction between the Recogniser and the Recognised, such as Lila and Ames, because there is a Sameness (by which to be recognised) between the two that disallows othering. Ricoeur thus begins to reconcile the unattainable enigma of simultaneously being the *same* and *other*. I argue, therefore, that it is in recognition that strangeness is redeemed. *If I recognise your loneliness, it is because it is like mine, and so I recognise it, and thereby we have between us established a tenuous point of connection.* The character of Reverend John Ames talks of recognising Lila, who would eventually become his wife, from the moment she walked into his church. Although he had never before seen her, he could feel and understand her loneliness. His recognition is exactly what enabled him to reach out and redeem her from that obscurity. Recognition, in this instance, may also exist in knowing we cannot ever know one another – that we “coexist with the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us” (*Gilead* 225); nevertheless, we recognise something of a similar nature in another – the common denominator which Ames calls being “blessed and broken” (79).

Ricoeur explains that “the demand for recognition expresses an expectation that can be satisfied only by *mutual recognition*” (*The Course of Recognition*, 19, emphasis added). Selfhood is not built in isolation, but by the process of *being recognised* by another. In the treatment of her characters, Robinson is very conscious of their need for validation. This acknowledgement is potent enough to grant identity. Seen in the way her characters treat naming and family names, naming intends to foster relationships, and initiate connections. For Lila, speaking to her unborn child, the name ‘you’ (a word perhaps traditionally of ultimate othering) is indicative instead of her complete *recognition* of her child; because “no one else could say ‘you’ and mean the same thing by it” (*Lila* 244). Conversely, Jack’s rejection of being John Ames’ namesake seems equivalent to the denial of a relationship. Robinson furthers the idea of being recognised to include interpersonal relationships, as her character John Ames muses: “a thing that does not exist in relation to anything else cannot be said to exist itself” (*Gilead* 54). In Robinson’s view, the self cannot exist in solitude; it *needs* relationship outside of itself. Without the designation that comes from outside the self, the self cannot be felt to exist, cannot be recognised. This selfhood needs the validation from other selves

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<sup>2</sup> Universal to be understood as all-inclusive

which recognise it, and to whom it is recognisable.

Consequently, the concept of a neighbour shall become an important starting point from which ideas of reconciliation can be conceived. First and foremost, the idea of the neighbour, born of the Biblical parable of the good Samaritan, suggests the practice of selfless kindness to one who is in need – hence, to be ‘neighbourly’. Neighbourliness acknowledges the need of another and thereby *acts – despite the strangeness* of this other – for that person’s benefit. Much the same as philosopher Emmanuel Levinas muses on the potential for human connection through responding to the face, so Ricoeur’s theory of recognition references and requires an answering responsibility for the other. Indeed, in his essay for André LaCocque’s book *Thinking Biblically*, entitled “A Loving Obedience”, Ricoeur emphasises that the obligation of love “gives rise to responsibility for the concerns of others, in the sense that Emmanuel Levinas speaks of this in terms of the face, whose injunction calls me to care for others” (133). Thus, neighbourliness is that which something “summons to responsibility” (133). Far from muddying the waters in the discussion of selfhood, Ricoeur believes the self’s “fullest development” will only be taken on “in the studies in the areas of ethics and morality” (*Oneself as Another*, 18) – meaning its relation in a community of others. He argues that “the *autonomy* of the self will appear [...] to be tightly bound up with *solicitude* for one’s neighbor and with justice for each individual” (18). Epidemic estrangement is redeemed by this neighbourly act, in recognition of that isolation and the practice of acting to solace it. This complex relationship between the self and the other, now includes the universality of human brokenness. We now ask whether the role of recognition has potential only for *providing solace* in estrangement in identifying and distinguishing, or whether it includes a *redemption* of strangeness. In interpersonal practices of neighbourliness, is there potential for textual narratives to forge recognition beyond the pages? Having considered neighbourliness as necessary for recognition, how then can the Christian paradigm of neighbourliness corroborate and support the search for interpersonal and theological redemption in terms of recognising the other?

It is therefore unavoidable I believe, to approach the topic of recognition in a Christian text without using a Christian paradigm to investigate the potential of recognition in Christian theology. It is imperative to the integrity of this study that my analysis does not begin this theological debate ‘from the inside’ but allows it the scope which Ricoeur’s theory, positioned outside the canon of Christian literary and cultural critics, can offer it. For Robinson, this theory of recognition actually verbalises the next step – that is, hinting at a divine origin. Her character, John Ames, for instance, credits the enigma of human understanding to an “unknowable” God (*Lila* 223), and says therefore

that it is only through the “grace [...] sustaining us as creatures [that] we can recognize [...] ourselves” (223). Reminiscent of Calvin’s theology that a person must recover in God what he lacks in himself, Robinson suggests that the whole of the human condition, because it rests with a Being greater than us, can never be fully recovered or known by us. Moreover, this statement of Ames’s recognises that the identifying of self, and the recognition of both self and another, is a God-given grace. This theory’s natural conclusion, Robinson suggests, is that complete and perfect recognition – that which validates and grants identity – is of divine origin. Taking my cue from her, I will interrogate the nature of her philosophy of recognition and where it overleaps Ricoeur, into the realm of the divine, where full recognition of one’s humanity is somehow only to be found in God. In this way, the theologies of both Robinson and Ricoeur are met in their philosophy of the unattained and strange self. To apprehend these texts theologically, particularly when regarding these authors, would be to open up rather than foreclose the points of connection. Thus, to marry Robinson’s work with a theological paradigm stops just short of burdening it with religious dogma and opens up the text instead, by accepting its invitation to a more expansive reading. Her novels are born of, and continue in, a lively conversation with a tradition of theological criticism, which lays the groundwork on which her artistic manifesto is built.

This dissertation will be arranged not by a schematic analysis of each book but will rather organise discussion from each of Robinson’s Gilead novels according to principal theoretical arguments and thematic connections. The first chapter will introduce the possibility of narrative and its metaphoric potential to make humanity vicariously accessible to itself. The relationship of a reader to a text is, after all, mediated by its narrative, as the relationship of one person to another is, moreover, understood only by means of their own personal narrative exchange. In Robinson’s novels, there are several instances where the inability of her characters to communicate effectively is what invariably isolates them. As an introductory consideration of the limitations of one’s account of oneself, my first chapter will investigate how narrative silences and gaps can alienate (foreshadowing the third chapter which discusses the attempt to bridge the gaps between selves).

Secondly, I will make a thorough analysis of the strangeness of the self, and how Robinson’s fiction illuminates this strangeness through loneliness. It is Ricoeur’s book, *Oneself as Another*, which will provide the framework for this chapter, introducing the notion of one’s *own self* into the category of that which we find *other* and strange. This will require a more thorough understanding of Ricoeur’s theories of the idem-identity and the ipse-identity as the strange manifestations of the self, as well as his notions of temporality and attestation, which are both encompassed by

‘selfhood’. Having established a critical definition of this selfhood, I will apply this to the three-way conversation of Robinson’s Gilead novels, with special focus on the estranging loneliness which characterises its protagonists and the strangeness of spaces. Considerations of being ‘at home’, ‘going home’, and having no home, or being ill-at-ease where one would expect to feel comfortable, adds a new dimension to the exploration of Ricoeur’s strangeness of the self and expands on his definition of the self’s disassociation.

Thirdly, taking my cue from Ricoeur’s work, *The Course of Recognition*, I will outline his theory of redemptive recognition, which emphasises the identifying and distinguishing of the self, and the desire of the self for validation. In discussions of recognition via the face, this chapter will also make reference to the work of Emmanuel Levinas in his considerations of the face as the first point of connection with the other. As recognition aims to redeem strangeness and foster connection, Levinas’ theory of Proximity to the other proposes the solicitude of the neighbour, giving rise to Ricoeur’s theory of the metaethical superabundant gift. This is the recognition of the self via neighbourly acts which are unmerited and unconditional. In Robinson’s novels, the act of naming (recognition) and the practice of ceremonial blessing (validation) is enacted in this unsolicited giving and, furthermore, proposes the potential of redemption in the superabundant theology of love and grace.

While Robinson acknowledges the complexity of loneliness, she does not think of loneliness as meted out by chance or catastrophe. She has been quoted by Wyatt Mason as saying that loneliness is “not a problem” and should not be thought of in that way (“The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson”). Inasmuch as the recognition propounded by Ricoeur, Levinas – and Robinson herself, to some extent – can act as some sort of redemption, Robinson remains matter-of-fact about the self’s experience of being estranged. For her, this is merely a fact of human existence. However, the crux of the matter is not in poor reductions of religion’s potential for redemption, or recognition, or estrangement, but rather in the way this lonely strangeness reveals and interrogates the self. She says to Rebecca Painter in an interview for *Christian Literature*:

I am not sure religion is meant to assuage loneliness. Who was ever lonelier than Jesus? [...] I think loneliness is the encounter with oneself – who can be great or terrible company, but who does ask all the essential questions. There is a tendency to think of loneliness as a symptom, a sign that life has gone wrong. But it is never only that. I sometimes think it is the one great prerequisite for depth, and for truthfulness. (“Further Thoughts on a Prodigal Son Who Cannot Come Home, on Loneliness and Grace”)

With this in mind, we address loneliness not always as symptomatic of circumstance or broken relationship, but as an inherent condition which is shared by all humans – and which therefore unites all humans. Loneliness is acknowledged to be a condition which needs assuaging; however, it is a state which opens itself to a deep truthfulness, the encountering of a true self that is stripped of any guise of autonomy, or complete understanding of its selfhood. The truthfulness which it applies to itself enables the self to communicate on a similar level to other selves, and to recognise them. And this bare, inescapable estrangement is the condition which Robinson and Ricoeur suggest is the only launching point from which the self can attain truth, understanding, and its identity.

## Chapter One: Narrative Encounters

Novelist Marilynne Robinson and social theorist Paul Ricoeur both propose that literature is the first point of connection and of encounter with the other, thereby throwing the strangeness of self into sharp relief. For the purposes of this chapter in which the topic of otherness and literature is discussed, rather than basing the discussion strictly on an analysis of the novels, the focus will be more of a theoretical defence for literature grounded by Robinson and Ricoeur's theories pertaining to the way in which otherness and literary expression meet and overlap. . This chapter will set the tone for the rest of the dissertation by laying the philosophical framework which shall anchor the close literary analysis of the following two chapters on the strangeness of the self and of recognition, respectively.

If, by default, a definition of loneliness demands a sense of disconnection in inter-personal relations, one would imagine loneliness is surely subject matter for the anthropologists and sociologists. Yet Ricoeur proposes that literary narrative is the “vast laboratory for thought experiments” (*Oneself as Another* 148), where such discussions of the self – of its understanding of itself and the compilation of its own narrative time line – are mediated. For Ricoeur, the question of ‘who?’ is more important than the question of ‘what?’ because the event (the ‘what’) is owned by its predicate (the ‘who’). The scope offered by one’s self-narrative is the only means by which such a question can be answered. To view narrative in this light is also to begin to address the ethics and morality as it is in narrative – that is, one may argue, in literature – one meets other ‘selves’. Fiction is precisely the meeting point of consciousnesses where the reader is invited to occupy the imaginative space of the author, to meet and inhabit the characters with which one is presented. The paradoxical notion of ‘losing oneself’ in a book, is the point where the self – whilst immersed in other selves – nevertheless finds is enabled to embrace a most authentic selfhood.

### *What is Narrative?*

If narrative is to be the framework in which this question is shaped – analysing an identity as defined and embodied in literature – the significance of the narrative genre must first be established. Marilynne Robinson states in her essay, “Imagination and Community”, that as a writer she has to

deal with the nuts and bolts of temporal reality – from time to time a character has to walk through a door and close it behind him, the creatures of imagination have to eat and sleep, as all other creatures do. [she] would have been a poet if [she] could, to have avoided this obligation to simulate the hourliness and dailiness of human life. (20)

First and foremost, narrative is built from and defined by life, its ordinary events and daily routines. The narrative genre, and the entirety of literature to a certain extent, is confined to and informed by the human experience; “imaginary variations in the literary field,” Ricoeur says in his essay “Narrative Identity”, “have for their horizon our unavoidable earthly condition” (78) – by which he means that narrative is an imitation of life. Fiction and narrative are redeemed from abstractions of selfhood and identity – indeed abstractions of the human experience as a whole – because narrative *emulates and mimics* the same ‘unavoidable earthly condition’ or is at least imagined from that vantage point. “We equate life,” says Ricoeur, “to the story or stories we tell about it” (77). Marilynne Robinson, along a similar vein, proposes that in literature, “[w]e live on a little island of the articulable, which we tend to mistake for reality itself” (21). Narratives, in this light, may be mistaken, perhaps even substituted for reality; and there is consequently an extent to which one might say that what is narrated is reality, is life.

Therefore, it can be concluded that narrative is action, but an equally important component is the self to whom those actions belong. Expounding on Ricoeur’s theory, Mark Gignilliat, writing in *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, says that “the description of a character’s identity is made more readily available as one begins to look at the sequence of actions the character performs literarily as a display of the person’s character” (“Who is Isaiah’s Servant? Narrative Identity and Theological Potentiality” 126). Ricoeur says that the “conceptual network of action” (*Oneself as Another* 146) is the answer to the questions of ‘who?’ ‘what?’ and ‘why?’. The answer enumerates sequential action, and this will “form a chain which is none other than the story chain [...] spreading out in time the connection between these various viewpoints” (146). This means that the questions asked of an identity will return an answer made up of actions. The inquiry however, is empty without being “finite on the level of *attribution* to someone” (147, emphasis added). Identity cannot be termed unimportant without extracting it from the subsequent question “to whom does identity cease to be important? Who is called upon to examine for themselves the assertion of the self if not the self who has been put between parenthesis in the name of an impersonal methodology?” (76). Furthermore, the question of what matters would not arise “if there were no one to whom the question of identity mattered” (*Oneself as Another* 138). For the self, life events are “the touchstone

of the analysis of the self” (142). John van den Hengel, writing on “Paul Ricoeur’s *Oneself and Another* and Practical Theology” simplifies the question to “[w]ho or what is this self mediated by human action?” (466). He explains that Ricoeur’s theory is one in which the self is not “intuitively obtained” but uncovered by a “long detour of the traces of the self” (466), of which a person’s actions are the most telling trace of the person’s character. Therefore, it may be said that to look at a self through a history of occurrences, of actions and habits, is to reconcile the continuity of the events. At the heart of narrative, Ricoeur seems to suggest, are the answers to just such questions as these.

It is problematic, however, to organise the haphazard assortment of actions which the self performs. It is obvious to Ricoeur, for instance, that this configuration “participates in the unstable structure of discordant concordance characteristic of the plot itself” (142) – which may be particularly seen, for example, in the disruptive stream-of-consciousness style of *Lila*. In life, as in narrative, ‘plot’ is advanced by ‘concordance’ (by means of some sort of sameness as continuity) whilst containing discordant, unexpected ‘plot twists’ (yet selfhood is maintained despite disruption). A self’s history deals with an “interconnection of events” (140); actions which yet warrant “diversity, variability, discontinuity, and instability” (140). So one may say these interconnected life-events operate in the same way as any fictive plot line. It is therefore a self which is at once both *same* – predictable, continuous, and stable – and *ipseity* – a selfhood which nevertheless is itself in spite of disruption and variation. A character, when plotted along a narrative, demonstrates “that the narrative operation has developed an entirely original concept of dynamic identity which reconciles [...] contraries: identity and diversity” (143). Ricoeur affirms that the “identity of the character is comprehensible through the transfer to the character of the operation of emplotment” (143). Ergo, a narrative, a medium which necessarily contains both sameness and alterity, is a medium which is capable of containing a dynamic working representation of the complex identity of the self.

This self, however, cannot be understood by its actions only. Actions and character are shaped by each other. The character, being the “one who performs the action in the narrative” (143), is what makes character a “narrative category as well” (143). First, identity is “made comprehensible through the transfer to the character [by] the operation of emplotment” because it is recounted by its actions (143). Character and story seem to be interdependent. A story maintains constancy in “qualities of unity, internal structure, and completeness which are conferred by emplotment [so] that the character preserves throughout the story an identity correlative to that of

the story itself” (143). In other words, character develops only by the advance of the plot, and so, in life, a self develops by the actions and events it undergoes. There is a type of mutual reinforcement at work which permits “narrative [to appear] as the path of the character and vice versa” (146), and in this way, each can be said to “make the identity” of the other (148). If such a thing can be said of literature’s relation to its characters, one may regard the self through the history of its actions, which are in essence a narrative of its life.

This, however, poses the possible problem of *misreading* through actions. Ames sees Jack only as the agent behind a number of mischievous and possibly malicious childhood pranks; Jack would coat the stairs in molasses, or steal meaningful trinkets and books from Ames. These acts which are to him incomprehensible hinder his understanding of Jack: they are “sly and lonely” pranks (208). Only many years later, he at last begins to ask himself “How lonely would a child have to be to have time to make such a nuisance of himself?” (208). The character, when plotted by its actions, is an imperfect manifestation of the self because it is liable to misreading; blame, perhaps unfounded, is projected from one person onto another.

As to the act of narration, van den Hengel places language “within the more encompassing framework of action” (462). As such, language is yet another action by which the self may be understood, and misunderstood, because it is performed by the self, and van den Hengel deems all “human action is meaningful action” (462). Writing his narrative as a letter to his son Robby, Ames’ communication is intended to be the nearest representation of himself in the event of his death. His narration is fraught with anxiety about how he portrays himself. The communication of the letter-language is the only medium which shall connect them. It may be assumed that if a self is known by its actions, a self may also be known by its narrative, by what it communicates. Whether conversing in person or describing in fiction, language makes the self known by its actions, either by recounting them, or the action of speech. “The act of storytelling or narrating,” Ricoeur concludes, “appears to be the key” to a certain “type of connectedness” (“Narrative Identity” 77). Narrative, literary or otherwise, now begins to establish itself as a significant component in the investigation of the self. Therefore, by the expression of the self, narrative foregrounds the mediation between the self and the world.

*Narrative as Self on a Temporal Plane: Character and Keeping One's Word*

First, it is necessary to begin with a few fundamental definitions of Ricoeur's theory of identity, before investigating how it is aided by the temporality which narrative represents. I will deal more completely with his 'sameness' and 'ipseity' in my second chapter but will briefly sketch them here. Identity is defined by Ricoeur in two components: the *idem* and the *ipse* identity. The self, that which is "same", is thereby made recognisable for that sameness; this he calls the *idem*-identity. In this first category, Ricoeur identifies three manifestations of sameness identity, namely numerical, qualitative and that of uninterrupted continuity. Numerical sameness denotes "one and the same" thing whose opposite is plurality (116). I may identify a building because it is the same building which I have seen before. Qualitative identity, meaning "extreme resemblance" describes two things which "are so similar that they are interchangeable with no noticeable difference" (116), such as two coins. These two components of identity are fairly similar, and may both describe, for example, continuity in *narrative* by recurring or continuous characters. However, it is *after a period of time* that this similitude becomes complicated. If the opposite of numerical sameness is plurality, and the opposite of qualitative identity is diversity, then "growth or ageing," says Ricoeur, "operate as factors of dissemblance and, by implication, of numerical diversity" (117). Thus a third component, uninterrupted continuity, addresses these "ordered series of small changes which, taken one by one, threaten resemblance without destroying it" (117) – that is, "between the first and the last stage of what we consider to be the same individual" (117). Here we may visualise the development of an acorn to an oak tree or a person from infant to adult. It is encompassed by the category of sameness, somewhat uncomfortably, because it is a pattern of sameness which is expected and successive. An identity is known because we are able to recognise and credit ourselves with "a permanence [in time] which we say belongs to us" (118). Ricoeur proposes that this represents the narrated self by "two expressions [...]: character and keeping one's word" (118). Character is the self as *sameness*, which has been discussed, and which Ricoeur identifies as "the set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same" (119). Such marks might include various dispositions and habits so that "[r]ecognizing oneself in contributes to recognizing oneself *by*" (121), as one might with the archetypal hero/villain figures in folkloric tales. It "compounds numerical identity and qualitative identity, uninterrupted continuity and permanence in time" (119). Identity as sameness is the simpler of the two expressions of narrated self, because it is built from the re-identifiable traits which continue to mark it in the same way.

I deem this categorising ‘uncomfortable’ because the identity is nevertheless threatened when presented with a time line which disrupts this habit of sameness. The self must unavoidably meet unanticipated circumstances and must react *apart from sameness* without losing its identity. The question of ‘acting out of character’ complicates the identity of sameness. This is where the sameness, the idem-identity, departs from the selfhood, the ipse-identity. Identity cannot solely be defined as sameness because it allows for no “reinterpretation of character” (120), and is threatened by the merest variation. Thus, the thematic of *keeping one’s word*, of a “faithfulness to oneself” is a useful notion to keep in mind because it “marks the extreme gap between the permanence of the self and that of the same” (118). Where “acquired disposition” may render sameness in “reinterpretation of character” (120), one must then ask about *how the habit was formed*; even habits are formed at the point where the identity-as-sameness must act intuitively, form a new character trait. Ricoeur points out that “habit gives a history to character, but that is a history in which sedimentation tends to cover over the innovation which preceded it, even to the point of abolishing the latter” (121). In other words, there is a point in which character, even without losing itself, is destabilized; it retains its selfhood but acts out of what is its predictable, same character. This is Ricoeur’s “dialectic<sup>3</sup> of innovation and sedimentation” or of “the equally rich dialectic of otherness and internalization, underlying the process of identification” (122). It is this notion of the otherness of the self, an otherness whose converse is sameness, to which the ipse forms the Janus face of the idem.

This is where narrative becomes a necessary and unavoidable mediator of the manifestations of the self. For Ricoeur, it is the task of narrative identity to balance sameness and selfhood without losing the identity to one or the other. This seemingly paradoxical selfhood is something which is given dynamic working space in the time line of narrative, and where differences are exposed and distinguished. Certainly, these two manifestations of the self may overlap – however, the self in narrative presents a model where the self’s “permanence in time [is] besides that of character” (123). Now, Ricoeur says that the self, plotted along a narrative timeline, finds the “mediating function performed by the narrative identity” (*Oneself as Another* 148). In other words, the sameness of the character and its self-constant selfhood are two poles which narrative bears; variations which it both “engenders” and seeks out (148). Narrative combines “the perseverance of character and the constancy of the self in promising” (124). This ‘promised’ selfhood holds firm, and stays true to a self projected into the future. Narrative plots these two on a time line which

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<sup>3</sup> By this term, Ricoeur refers to the two overlapping definitions of the self which, although seemingly at odds with each other are in fact two manifestations of the self: that which is *selfhood* (*ipse*) and that which is *same* (*idem*).

allows the different manifestations of character – of sameness and the faithfulness of *selfhood* – to demonstrate their *relationship* to one another. The question of ‘who?’ above the question of ‘what?’ is answered by the identity asserting itself as *sameness*, (including disposition and habit), and *self-constant* in keeping one’s word. This is what van den Hengel calls “linguistic expressions of intentionality” (464). To combine intentionality with the idea of selfhood is to “[commit] the self to a *future* action in accordance with a word given in the *present*” (464, emphasis added) – thus presenting a case again where the two manifestations of identity, *idem* (sameness) and *ipse* (selfhood), are immutably intertwined and interdependent, so that selfhood is shown as self-constancy when identity can no longer be limited to ‘sameness’.

### *Narrative as Giving an Account of Oneself*

At this juncture, answering the question of ‘who?’ begins to suggest the idea of narrative as an account of oneself to another. Robinson herself, in an interview with Sarah Fay, says that sharing experience (in the form of an account) “means something *because* it is addressed to you” (“The Art of Fiction”, emphasis added). This narrative account is crucial to the understanding of the self’s character and narrative identity. According to Ricoeur, “the question of identity is deliberately posed as the outcome [*l’enjeu*] of narration” (“Narrative Identity 77) – something which may be seen in the example of Ames’ self-narration. One can establish an understanding of the *identity of self* through its *narrative identity*, or in other words, its account of itself. Subsequently, to ask *to whom* the account is made is a question principally of the intentionality of the account, and to conclude that it is for the purpose of articulating and communicating *to another*.

Before establishing to whom the account is made and why, one must ask what it means to give an account of oneself<sup>4</sup>. Now, this accounting of oneself appears in two ways: that of ascribing

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler has written much on the subject of *Giving an Account of Oneself*. While she shares several viewpoints with Ricoeur, her theory diverges too much to be encompassed within the bounds of this work. In her view, as in Ricoeur’s, it is difficult to make a complete account for oneself because so much of one’s identity is enmeshed in others’. She says that “we are formed in context of relations that become partially irrecoverable to us” and therefore there is an opacity to the self, which means for her that we “are formed in relations of dependency” (20). She suggests that the self lives *as if in answer* to other beings, and thus we establish our identity in the midst of theirs: for example, I “come into being as a reflexive subject” because I am “prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me” (17); an account “always given to another” (21). Thus her premise suggests that the identity’s account of itself is *not* story, but is built in a world of commonality *imposing itself* and controlling by violence. Butler says that giving an account means that one has to “avow a causal link” and “take responsibility for these actions and their effects” (10), as if in defence against an accusation, yet Ricoeur proposes instead that an account of oneself is merely the tracing of character.

an action to its agent, and that of attesting to oneself. If the self is traced through its actions, we now speak of an “action [which] is the possession of the one who did it, [...] that it belongs to one’s own self” (“Narrative Identity” 75). The process of ascription, which in essence is a narrative tool, illuminates the identity. Jack’s mischief, for example, could not be considered malicious, could not be considered anything, without being imputed to him and seen within a context of previous comparable actions. Additionally, we see that “all grammatical persons are subject to ascription” (“Narrative Identity” 75). Furthermore, there is no identity to which ascription cannot apply. As Ricoeur points out, even to say ‘I am nothing’ is an instance where “‘nothing’ would not mean anything if it were not assigned to an ‘I’” (80). All actions are given meaning only when traced back to the self whence they originated, and thereby ascribed to an identity. A person is made comprehensible because he or she is the subject of action.

The self, moreover, attests to itself in the form of a witness or testimony. Both Ames’ and Lila’s first-person narrative are examples of this, testifying to their experience or asserting a conviction of themselves. Ricoeur theorist Mark Gignilliat summarises well when he says that

understanding personhood or narrative identity is not best attempted by dislocating queries relating to motivation (why?), actions (what?), or agents of actions (who?) from one another, but by understanding these perspectives as interrelated and informing of one another. (127)

What he means is that the self is most itself in *all* of these categories, all of these queries, and not any *single* one of them. As Robinson-theorist Anthony Domestico suggests in his article “Imagine a Carthage Sown with Salt”, the truth-value of the credal assertion “I believe” makes the testimony unique because it is a “[mode] of inquiry” (14). For both Gignilliat and Domestico, these self-narrations are a form of query into what the self understands *of itself*, in order to make as complete an account as possible. In Robinson’s fiction, both the first-person narratives of Ames in *Gilead*, and that of *Lila*, act as forms of self-communication. Ames spends his narrative exploring memory and philosophy in his letter to his son. He says quite early in the book: “I believe I’ll make an experiment with candor here” (7), which sets the tone for the whole narrative, creating an expectation of the truthfulness of a testimony or even confession. In the case of Lila’s stream-of-consciousness narrative, Lila comes to understand herself by noticing and exploring her thoughts as

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Butler’s theory begins to diverge from Ricoeur’s because her dependency springs from a position of defencelessness and imposed expectation – whereas the dependence which Ricoeur proposes is one which simply means the acknowledging the impossibility of the self’s absolute, independent self-knowledge. In direct contradiction to Butler’s theory, Ricoeur suggest that account *is* narrative, is *story*, but is not untrue for that.

they come unbidden into her self-narrative. The mode of inquiry which Domestico proposes is an instance of coming to understand oneself and one's own identity when it is accumulated into a communicated account.

Premised upon the idea of keeping one's word, this is what Ricoeur calls an attestation of identity. The projection of the self into a future scenario or into a future self, is built upon the sameness-knowledge of the present and past: the self attests to itself, giving an account based on what it knows of itself. Attestation may also refer to creeds or confessions. If creeds are a science, as Domestico calls them, then the credal narrative of Robinson's novels acknowledge a status of self-examination and imperfect self-knowledge, instead going on assumption to predict future actions. The self projects itself in the future, and therefore is capable of explaining and justifying its actions (to itself) as if it were a testimony of self. Van den Hengel says that for a speaker to affirm "This is so" demonstrates that the "speaker of a language and the agent of action both make a commitment to the real that *takes them beyond themselves*" (470, emphasis added). Due to the self's incomplete knowledge of the future, van den Hengel shows how the promise of the future is nevertheless a commitment of more than the self can be sure of, even if it is attested with absolute certainty. Consequently, he names attestation "ontological vehemence" or "an affirmation not only about reality and about the world of action but also a mode of existence of selfhood" (470). What he means to say is that the self accounts for itself by means of attesting to itself: making claims and commitments (such as promises and commissives expressing intention), ascribing to itself some sort of future identity built on past constancy.

In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Lila*, the act of attestation seems to be the equivalent not only of confessing truth but of making truth. The title character, a wandering and lonely woman, has found unlikely love in the person of the village pastor John Ames. Little more than a year since he first found her destitute, eking out an existence in a shack outside of town, the now married Lila still continues to contemplate leaving as if there were nothing anchoring her to her marriage and home. She goes as far as planning where she would go and what she would do for a living, even as far as trying to convince herself that Ames would not be too affected by her departure. However, what her internal narration reveals and what she in fact says out loud differ significantly. In the following excerpt, Lila, pregnant, terrifies Ames by taking a long walk out of town one day, imagining herself to be fetching the last of her savings hidden in the shack, but finds herself returning home to his great relief. When he tells her so, she responds,

“I ain’t leaving. Farthest thing from my mind.” If this was not entirely true, it was true enough. “I just go off to look at pelicans and everything goes haywire. I don’t know. I thought I might as well get some use out of that money. Took me all summer to save up. [...] My child is going to have a big old preacher for its papa, and live in a good, warm house, and eat ham and eggs three times a week.” (168)

Throughout the books, Lila’s self-doubt and compulsion to leave is her constant recourse. Because of this she deliberately shies away from declarations of affection and from any signs of permanence or belonging in her home. Thus, for her to affirm to her husband that her unborn child would grow up with his father (even whilst she apparently entertains thoughts of stealing the child away with her when she leaves), seems to be the truer revelation of herself. After all, though her thoughts never exactly resolve on staying, throughout the book, she never does leave. It almost seems, to the suspicious and perceptive reader, that her *thoughts* are the false, constructed narrative she feeds herself, but what she chooses to *say* is ultimately when truth escapes her. At the end of the novel, having stayed despite herself, all doubt is finally cast aside when she says to Ames, “Did I ever tell you that? That I love you? I always thought it sounded a little foolish. But the way you talk, sometime I might regret putting it off” (257). He replies “I believe you said it a minute ago. You can’t love me as much as you do. Something to that effect” (257). It would seem that Lila never meant to leave, even though she has ostensibly been imagining it all along. Although this raises questions about the potential of narrative to be false, as her imagination even deceives herself, her self-narrative is what finally reveals the truth. And it is recognisable as an authentic narrative because her actions throughout the book confirm her verbal commitment to remain and *not* to leave.

In the light of this, the idea of an account needs to be further expounded: in the first place, this is a self which is *interpreted*, as is seen in the instance of Lila. Ricoeur says that “[n]arrative mediation underlines this remarkable aspect about knowledge of the self as being an interpretation” (“Narrative Identity” 80), and thus, as I have intimated, as potentially subject to misinterpretation. A self which “does not know itself immediately, but only indirectly” is only suggested by “signs of all sorts, which articulate the self” in actions and “narratives of daily life” (80). Consequently, Lila makes a fascinating test case because her interpretation of herself is either deliberately deceptive from a position of truth, or it is a misunderstanding of herself entirely – the authenticity of which the reader may judge based on the evidence of what her actions betray of her character. As Ricoeur says, “literary narratives and life histories, far from being mutually exclusive, are complementary” (*Oneself as Another* 163). Both construct, or interpret, identity. It is narrative in which the “figure-able” self is “narratively interpreted” (“Narrative Identity” 80) – that is, it is “a self which figures

itself as this or that” (80). When the self attests to itself, we may therefore conclude that it is narrative which has been determined, constructed, ‘figured out’, and summed up. According to Ricoeur, the self is navigated “by fragmentary practices, which have their own unity, life plans constituting the intermediary zone of exchange between the undetermined character of guiding ideals and the determinate nature of practices” (*Oneself as Another* 158). Moreover, as Ames never inquires about Lila’s previous life and deliberately avoids discussion about her brief time in a brothel, he seems further to suggest the possibility of reidentification in narrative. She says that she knew “her life was just written all over her [...] And somehow she found her way to the one man on earth who didn’t see it” (226), and yet Ames tells her that faithfulness is more than that. In answer to her inquiry he says simply: “I think I’m married to Lila now. Extremely married to her. And faithful as I know how to be” (226). He has already suggested: “Maybe you should just tell me those things, whatever they are, and you’d see that I didn’t care about them, and then you could trust me” (116). In his own way, Ames is telling her that her old life does not make a difference to him – not that he is ignorant of it – and it is an instance where his narrative makes it so: her attestation is all that he needs to be certain that it occurred, and yet his interpretation of it deems it an unnecessary chapter. Accounting for the self here means a project of understanding; an account which earnestly esteems its own faithfulness as a constant self but whose sincerest attestation may not amount to the whole truth.

Attestation is the point where Ricoeur sees the potential for the ethical side of identity: its accounting of and for itself demonstrates the basic idea of social responsibility and morality. He says if ‘character’ may be understood as that “by which a person can be identified and reidentified” and selfhood may be understood as “self-constancy” (165), then there is a sense of self-constancy being “conducting [one]self so that others can count on that person” (165). He therefore argues that because “someone is counting on me, I am *accountable* for my actions before another” (165). Thus, the ideas of “counting on” and “being accountable for” are united under the term “responsibility” (165). Here, the sense of self-identity is the beginning of an understanding of other identities. Ricoeur proposes that the “entire weight of the ethical questions falls back upon the question of identity” (*Oneself as Another* 137), and he explains by asking “how can we ask ourselves about what matters if we could not ask to whom the thing mattered or not?” (138). The questioning process leads the self to acknowledge the possibility of other selves in its attempts to make itself understandable to a third party. In other words, when making an account of oneself, this is the juncture at which the self is catapulted into the world of the other; personal ethics are defined by

responsibility and relationability to oneself and to others. The act of self-narration is akin to accounting for oneself in society. Ricoeur explains:

all grammatical persons are subject to ascription: for example, to the first-person in confession, the acceptance of responsibility (I did it); to the second person in warning, advice, and commandment (you shall not kill); and to the third-person in narrative. (“Narrative Identity” 75)

Now in the instance of self-narrative, it may be argued that the act of articulating the self is narration, almost as confession. Ricoeur elaborates this idea by saying that the “phenomenon of conscience maintains a sure kinship with attestation, which [...] mingles together being-true and being-false” because “illusions of oneself are intimately bound up with the veracity of attestation” (341). Confessing is an attempt to compile the authentic and veritable self in narrative. As testimony does, this attestation “links the witness and the conviction: it is the self enjoined and challenged to be the bearer of a promise or a hope” (van den Hengel 474). Ultimately, the self-narrative combines retrospect and intentionality, attempting to form a comprehensible whole in order for the self to be accounted for. It thus represents the point at which the self begins to form an idea of its identity-in-the-world – a world where it is responsible to and for other selves in interacting with other selves.

### *Narrative Gaps and Strangeness*

The self is evidently a self which is neither possess-able nor absolute, having only a meagre understanding of its interpreted identity. The self, although it expresses intentionality and commits itself to future actions based on its past actions, is unknowable; the commissive self cannot foresee or predict every eventuality. The event towards which it projects itself “is still future, it is not observable, it is not yet an event” (465). It “attests to itself as a project and not as a possession” (465). What this suggests is that the self understands its identity by faith. There is, says van den Hengel, summarising Ricoeur’s theory, “a confidence – an unverifiable confidence – in the self, in what the self says, and in what the self believes it can do. The self, in other words, exists as a belief, as a *fiancee*,’ as an assurance of truthfulness” (470); narrative has a “lack of an absolute guarantee of truth” (471). Furthermore, an act of attestation projects itself into a space of the unknown which exposes “the fragility of the kept word” (477). Thus the “self can attest to itself only in a broken manner because the experiences are disparate” (473). To Ricoeur, this constitutes “the imagined nothingness of the self [...] the existential ‘crisis’ of the self” (168). Selfhood has a gap, an absence,

in its understanding. If, as van den Hengel puts it, “the self attests to itself as a project and not as a possession” (464), the process of understanding, identifying and designating the self is not one which gives absolute answers. There remains a “lack of an absolute guarantee of truth” (470). Identity in this regard is illusory, it belongs to the realm of “imagination and belief” (Ricoeur 127). The extent to which the self can control and verbalise itself are themselves only limited channels of communication, and to a degree, the self is only partially known. Essentially, the self is strange to itself because it can never claim full understanding of itself.

Moreover, Robinson suggests the estranging potentiality of language. Language has a great power to communicate, but only to evoke – which to my mind expresses a limitation to power of articulation. She cites the “failures of language” (“Imagination and Community” 20), suggesting that language can do little more than inspire *impressions* rather than definitively communicate. Although words may “evoke a reality beyond its grasp”, they only have the power “to evoke a sense of what *cannot* be said” (20, emphasis added). It requires a great effort to “continuously attempt to make inroads on the ability to articulate oneself, and thereby to communicate via language” (20). Robinson talks about “the moment [one’s] language goes slack and [one’s] imagination disengages itself” (20), and “the moment in which [one’s] language becomes false” (20). Language, despite all its potency in narrative form, is not an all-encompassing mode of communication; in itself, it is an imperfect medium. Robinson’s character John Ames, ever more her alter-ego, expresses similar frustrations when he tells of any memory with great personal meaning and poignancy for him. One day when he was quite young, the only negro church in the area burnt down. Ames recalls the mournful work of the people, his father included, who had come to tend to the destroyed building. They were singing gentle hymns and sharing food and the boy Ames was watching them, eating a biscuit his father brought to him. He says “I can’t tell you what that day in the rain has meant to me. I can’t tell myself what it has meant to me” (109). By this, Robinson seems to suggest that the greater part of reality to which the self has access is made up of the “vast terrain of what cannot be said” (20), despite the attempt to narrate it.

These gaps also lie at the heart of Robinson’s novels. Naturally, the ability to effectively communicate and articulate oneself are crucial concerns to an epistolary narrative such as we find in *Gilead*. John Ames, its narrator, muses that

[John] Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behaviour, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than

morally judgemental in the ordinary sense. How well do we understand our role?  
With how much assurance do we perform it? (141-142)

By pondering the issues of the self's own self-understanding, and its assurance of itself, Ames is pondering the notion of personal artistry and performance. As Ricoeur does, he places the self in a somewhat blind position, suggesting that there is an element of faith to its performance because its understanding of its role is limited, and more to the point, may be doubtful of itself. Doubt, Ricoeur and Robinson seem to concur, is not something which necessarily hinders. The self of Calvin's metaphor does not diminish because of its self-doubt; it continues in spite of its limited knowledge. As Ames says later,

I think the attempt to defend belief can unsettle it, in fact, because there is always an inadequacy in argument about ultimate things. We participate in Being without remainder. [...] And yet no one can say what Being is. [...] you can assert the existence of something – Being – having not the slightest notion of what it is. (203)

The self, by this reckoning, is a self which exists in the sense that it believes in itself; however, this does not definitely describe it nor communicate it. Likewise, Ricoeur's self is one of faith despite the gaps in its self-knowledge, as attestation. This connection to witnessing or testifying, imputes that the narrative of the self testifies, however doubtfully, to itself.

Lastly, though not strictly relevant to discussions of articulating oneself, the reception (and possible misunderstanding) of self-narrative must be taken into consideration. Although, hypothetically, a self may be able to communicate itself via narrative and language however (un)successfully, these functions may be further broken down if received in ignorance and if no understanding is in fact passed between the self and its interlocutor/reader/audience. The contention between Ames and the self-exiled Jack recalls all of Ames' old animosity when Jack returns to Gilead many years later. On Sunday Jack visits his church, and Ames is quite unsure what to make of it. In an uncharacteristic move, he departs slightly from his notes, delivering a sermon which seems to affect Jack. However, Ames feels Jack is sitting in judgement on him and deliberately misinterpreting his words. He comments that Jack

treats words as if they were actions. He doesn't listen to the meaning of words, the way other people do. He just decides whether they are hostile, and how hostile they are. He just decides whether they threaten him or injure him and he reacts at that level. (149)

His narrative shows the fear of misapprehension (whether we believe it was in fact a vitriolic or hostile sermon is beside the point here). Ames is nervous of being misunderstood despite (what he

sincerely believed were) his best efforts. It is not within the bounds of this study to examine the reaction of a self-narrative *on* whoever it is communicated to. That said, it further illustrates my theory that a self cannot be fully known – either to itself or by another, nor can it even fully know what it has succeeded in communicating to that other. In this way, the gaps and failures in the narrative of the self function as a microcosm of the gaps and failures of the self’s understanding of its own identity (which I shall discuss in further detail in the next chapter). A self cannot be fully known, and therefore necessarily must be, in some way, strange to even itself in anticipating being received by others.

This strangeness may also be found in the manner in which a self-narrative is not only interpreted but fabricated. It seems that identity, unfixed and unstable, can only be attested to, however inadequately, from fragmentary and disparate knowledge of the self. Narrative, especially the narrative of the self, cannot aspire to a complete “unity of life” (*Oneself as Another* 162). Ricoeur says that narrating life or the self “must be seen as an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience” (162). In saying this, Ricoeur suggests the extent to which the self’s knowledge is limited, not only of life, but of its own totality: having little knowledge of its beginning, the absolute self is complicated in the first place because “nothing in real life [...] serves as a narrative beginning” (160). One is conceived “belong[ing] more to the history of others – in this case to [one’s] parents – than to [oneself]” (160). Secondly, what memory remains of one’s origins “is lost in the hazes of early childhood” (160). Even should exact beginnings cease to be of utmost importance, if the ipse identity is that which maintains self-constancy through whatever events it endures or forgets, then death, towards which a being is always moving, “prevents [one] from ever grasping it as a narrative end” (160), and by extension, fully exploring the self-constancy of an identity. In other words, the accumulated wholeness of self, its beginning and end, is a testimony which “will finally be recounted only in the stories of those who survive” that person (160). Thus one’s own lack of authorship, despite the privilege to be “coauthor as to its meaning” (162), means that the self-narrative is a “straining” genre (162), which can only attempt an absolute sense of identity, but never can achieve it. Ricoeur concludes that it is “precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively” (162). A lack of authorship equates to a lack of ownership of one’s self.

Thus the agent’s possession even of their own action is now under threat, and this “crisis within selfhood” points to the fact that “the very notion that my experiences belong to me has an ambiguous sense” (138). The very ‘mineness’ of self is thwarted for the sake of “a moment of self-

dispossession essential to authentic selfhood” (138). Paradoxically, the self needs to be its most authentic self by realising and acknowledging its gaps and blind spots. As “not the first but the final category of a theory of understanding” (461), van den Hengel explains that this is “an endless task of understanding accomplished only after painful critiques of the self. Ricoeur has continually proposed a more modest self who does not possess the self” (461). What this means to say is that the unresolved self, known by fragments and traces, is one which can never attest to itself in a manner which is in any way absolute: its beginnings and ends are not its own in the sense that they cannot be accounted for, or known, by the self. The histories of the self are irreducibly intertwined in the histories of others, and thus one’s ‘own’ actions are part of a chain which would not exist without the interactions and entanglement with another’s actions, the histories of a great number of others. Reverend Ames, after all, begins his narrative with his memories of growing up in that same house with his father and grandfather; the record of his son’s “begats” (10). Glory’s narrative in *Home* frequently recalls her childhood and the things that “her brothers and sisters could and did remember [...] the pooled memory they saw no special need to portion out among them” (8). Her life with her family is a history which is not, for her or any one of them, an individual thing. Ricoeur acknowledges this, saying that “whole sections of my life are part of the life history of others – of my parents, my friends, my companions in work and leisure” (161). After all, this is what he meant when speaking of a birth as belonging more to the life history of the *parents* than the child. We are presented with the “self, stripped bare” (168), which implies the “ethical primacy of the other than self over the self” (168). This proposes a comprehension of the self, indebted to others and operating within a community of others; a self whose own identity takes on the same strangeness within itself, being as unpossessable as the other-than-self.

#### *Narrative as a Space of Encounter with the Other*

The experience of narrating is one which presupposes an encounter with the other; it anticipates being heard, read or received in some way. When she discusses this with Wyatt Mason, Robinson expounds further that “[books] bring you one step closer” to the other (“The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson”). For Robinson, this begins merely with the task of writing itself. As she says to Sarah Fay in her interview: “I try to create a new vocabulary or terrain for myself, so that I open out [...] or open up something that would have been closed to me before. That’s the point and the pleasure of [writing]” (“The Art of Fiction”). Robinson here demonstrates that narrative can be a

means of exploring things which are foreign to her. Yet even before the narrative encounters an other, the experience of *telling* is itself an experience of something which is other, foreign. This can be seen in Robinson's books themselves. When Ames writes, he demonstrates a hyper-awareness of his language, precisely because he is now conscious of how it will be understood by another:

I don't write the way I speak. I'm afraid you would think I didn't know any better. I don't write the way I do for the pulpit, either, insofar as I can help it. That would be ridiculous, in the circumstances. I do try to write the way I think. But of course that all changes as soon as I put it into words. (*Gilead* 33)

Ames interrupts his letter-narrative in his concern that he will be misunderstood. This is not a reflection on his son's ability to comprehend him, but rather Ames' own anxiety about his self-portrayal. As Robinson suggests, in presupposing the other who will receive the narrative, Ames feels *himself* somewhat othered in his own account – he feels all the strangeness of self-representation. Yet, at the same time, Ames says of his narrative that writing it has “drawn [him] back into this world in the course of it” (272). Giving an account of oneself is an experience which alerts the self of its own strangeness in the world, particularly in its being *received*.

Accordingly, it is a function of narrative to operate as a mediator between the self and the world. Communication is that which makes something known to another. For Robinson, it represents engaging with a community. She explains that “we make language. A language is a grand collaboration, a collective art form which we begin to master as babes and sucklings, and which we preserve, modify, cull, enlarge as we pass through our lives” (21). Narrative as articulation is what constructs the self and through which the self participates in its communities. Language, Robinson continues, “is profoundly communal, and in the mere fact of speaking, then writing, a wealth of language grows and thrives among us that has enabled thought and knowledge in a degree we could never calculate” (22). Here, the art of articulation (not necessarily eloquence) is the act of communicating, equally by the act of speaking, or of writing, or by extension, of reading literature. It echoes Ricoeur's theory of “imaginative variations” which are “experienced as the existential mediation between the self and the world” (*Oneself as Another* 150). Narrative links to the imagination which Robinson further explains when she says that the “richness and refinement of language, and the artful use of language” testifies to its function “in the service of imagination” (23). She seems to suggest that narrative represents *a compulsion to become articulable*, to be made accessible to others, because, she reasons, as “individuals and as a species, we are unthinkable without our communities” (22). That being so, to narrate the self is to plot it on a plane where it is

imaginatively available to a community, which itself is an imagined entity. It is Robinson's own theory which defines "community as being a work of the imagination" (29). Narrative is the channel by which the self begins to open itself to being imagined. As Robinson says, each "enlarge[s] and enrich[es]" the other (33). I propose that the self is imagined, made accessible amongst equally imagined other selves by interacting in that space of narration, whether by confession, speaking, conversing, writing or reading. If storytelling is the exchange of experience, then imagination comprehends this exchange as one which is palpable and internalised, inhabiting another's shoes, and seeing through their eyes. This is the purpose of narrative.

Narratives, as van den Hengel summarises, "are also the space where the human experience of time is inscribed and *made accessible*" (478, emphasis added) – in other words, they are the channel which permits the re-appropriation and recognition of our own self in the narrative of an other self. The discovery of self in another is a prelude to the recognition (elaborated in my final chapter) in which the self begins to understand and acknowledge the similarities it shares with the other-than-self. The narratives provide the thought laboratory in which the self, to whom its own experiences are somewhat strange and ambiguously imputed, can relate and share experiences and perspectives through the strange narrative of the self. What appears to be unrealisable is resolved because, as Ricoeur says, "what is essential is that [stories] are conceivable" ("Narrative Identity" 77). Therefore, the narrative resolution between the self and the world is accomplished. Narrative is not measured by the extent to which understanding is transferred nor how successful the articulation of the truest self. Rather, narrative is measured by the extent to which it has *opened a bridge* between the two, making the transfer possible. Robinson illustrates it beautifully when she reflects that her library is her "cloud of witnesses to the strangeness and brilliance of human experience" (23). In short, it is the work of narrative, in spite of its gaps and misdirections, its discordances and doubts, to permit and engender that sense of communal participation, by itself being a means to communicate and participate in a community.

At this juncture, John Calvin suggests an interesting contribution to the idea of the self's beginning to look *beyond* itself. As Robinson herself confessed, in an interview with Sarah Fay for *The Paris Review*, "Calvin's thought has had a strong influence on her" ("Marilynne Robinson, *The Art of Fiction*"), and has similarly influenced the views of her characters. For Calvin, the human mind is being constantly driven to seek meaning beyond its own conceptualisation. He suggests that humankind, struck by the ugliness of their fallenness, is driven to seek beyond it. In terms of our discussion of self's encounter with that which is other-than-self, one might say that for Calvin, this

is the point where the self turns its attention to that which is other. In his book *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he explains that “there is a world of misery in people, we cannot look closely at ourselves without being struck and pierced with the knowledge of our misery, so we immediately raise our eyes to God” (23)<sup>5</sup> – a thought which Ames echoes, calling us “Blessed and broken” (*Gilead* 79). Calvin believes that it is the clearest way to self-recognition: that “a person never comes to the clear knowledge of himself unless he has first contemplated the face of the Lord” (*Institutes* 24), which ends in the person’s being so “pierced by the knowledge of his own weakness [...] after he has compared himself with God’s majesty” (25). Therefore we may extend this notion to the idea of the self being dependent upon a Being outside of itself, *one who is not myself*. The self’s contemplation of itself is built not from self-reflexive thinking but from *comparative* thinking. Indeed, Ames ponders the hypothetical possibility that “a thing that does not exist in relation to anything cannot itself be said to exist” (*Gilead* 54). Personal identity requires reinforcement from outside of itself – and in doing so, it moves beyond self-reflexivity to outward-looking, actively seeking an other.

### Conclusion

To conclude, the importance of narrative, whether it is articulated and organised by the self, or whether encountered in literature and fiction, cannot be valued enough as a method by which the self gains its sense of identity. Questions of personal identity are not irrelevant in literary narratives of identity and character because fiction is built and informed by life. Narrative consists of those events and actions of personal history and is translated and comprehensive by emplotment – that is, its plotting on a time line. As a person’s identity is revealed by way of their actions, manifested in sameness of character or self-constancy of selfhood, so a character is unveiled and understood by their actions – one of which is language, and the act of making comprehensible. Narrating the self, therefore, and giving account for oneself, is a means of describing and attesting to some self-constancy, whether past or present, which is justifiable as authentic selfhood. Yet the self’s account

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<sup>5</sup> Alison Milbank discusses something similar in an interview with Tom O’Loughlin, entitled “Why Study J. R. R. Tolkien?” for the University of Nottingham, when asked about the pertinence of literature for a theologian. She says that we are enabled to “see things as we were meant to see them: as things apart from ourselves” (02:32), and furthermore that this “kind of philosophical realism” proposes that “we can connect with that world through a kind of loving knowledge, and reading of a kind of otherness – and in that otherness, we find the real” (02:47). This is to say that the encounter with the other may become a bridge to the ultimate other – the divine, God.

is haunted by misunderstandings, misinterpretations, gaps and doubt. The idea of self-constancy is as much made up of faith, and built on its own interpretations, as it is made up of proof in the reidentifiable sameness of the past. Its self-understanding, though not entirely in doubt, can never account for itself absolutely. It is a self which is built on somewhat tenuous trust and a constant re-identifying and interrogating the self. The self is a *project* of understanding rather than a possession.

Narrating the self, furthermore, is a noticeable benchmark in the self's participation in a community of other 'selves'. At the point where social responsibility is defined by one's account of and for oneself, there are the undeniable beginnings of making oneself comprehensible and accessible for the purpose of being received by another. It proposes an access point through which the self is made available for discovery. It also proposes an access point through which the self may encounter and discover the other-than-self, other narratives and accounts of other identities all participating through this language of self-narration. The narrative of the self not only plots, extends and imagines the self, but places it within the realm of the conceivable to an other. If, as Robinson declares, narrative in the form of fiction is "an exercise for imaginative love, or sympathy, or identification" ("Imagination and Community" 20), then narrative operates in community with other selves and is capable of discovering these other selves.

## Chapter Two: Lonely Selves and Lonely Others

The self is a person's primordial and only first-person experience and for that very reason, is an entity which is closed-off and separate, as Paul Ricoeur illustrates in his book *Oneself as Another*. The complexity which he attributes to the varied notions and constructions of the self and its identity are divided into two categories, that of sameness-identity and that of selfhood. This theory extends not only to the philosophies of personal identity but also, as evidenced in my previous chapter on narrative identity, to the characters in narrative to whom identities are attributed. If the sameness of self is only one part of the self's construction, then it may be argued that there is a significant part of a self which, though still maintaining its selfhood, is not same – is other. In this chapter, I expound on the paradox of the otherness of self, a strangeness, which is found in the title of Ricoeur's book and at the heart of his philosophy. I put his theory in conversation with Robinson's three Gilead novels, namely *Gilead*, *Home* and *Lila*. This otherness of self in Robinson's characters is most apparent in the phenomenon of loneliness, and this chapter discusses and affirms the links between Ricoeur's otherness of the self as evidenced in the novels and characters of Marilynne Robinson.

The trilogy of Marilynne Robinson's Gilead novels may be said from the outset to have a strange relationship with each other – a relationship which makes their interplay no less compelling. I have named them a trilogy, not because each contributes an episode to a sequential story line as is typically the case, but for the sameness identifiers common to each book – dealing with the same characters in the same small town of Gilead, a small fictional town in Iowa, and told more or less within the same time frame. Yet each of the books operates independently, neither losing any of its significance nor jeopardising its potential to be understood as a story complete in itself. *Gilead*, the first, is epistolary, written by the character Reverend John Ames (who is nearing the end of his seventy-six years) to his seven-year-old son. These letters are principally meant to communicate things he wishes he could have told his son but fears he will not live to do so. The time frame of this, Robinson's first in the *Gilead* series, coincides with those of her next novel which revisits the same events to tell them again from a new perspective. *Home* tells of the return home of Jack Boughton, the estranged son of Ames' lifelong friend, Reverend Robert Boughton. In a dramatic

contrast to her first novel, *Home* is written in the third-person, the events recounted not by Jack, but his overlooked sister, Glory, as the narrative focaliser. Unlike other book series, Robinson's novels do not specifically define themselves as sequels or prequels, in the conventional sense of a fictional time line. *Lila*, the latest in the series, is the only one which may fit, albeit uncomfortably, into the category of prequel. It recalls her life, instances from her current marriage with Ames and her troubled upbringing, in a stream-of-consciousness style. Even though the narrative focuses largely on her meeting and early relationship with her husband, and up until the birth of their son, in a more or less chronological order, the narrative does not give the impression of having anchored itself to an actual day-to-day present reality which is distinct from her ever-present memories. For this reason, I find that even Robinson's novels possess a relationship of otherness *with each other*, despite their obvious connections, because of their stylistic and narrative differences.

In discussing Ricoeur's two modes of identity, sameness and selfhood, one may also begin to extend this definition to include interior and exterior personal attributes. Exterior, physical attributes of a person are as easily identifiable as the home they live in because of that acquired *sameness* of the shape and visually recognisable features. In fact, both corporeal identity and spatial indicators, such as the home, are crucial to Robinson's characters, especially those for whom Gilead has always been home. Being 'at home', therefore, may be easily comparable to the sense of belonging and possession one might have for one's own body. However, even that sameness of body is also capable of estrangement, altered by natural development or a change in circumstances, such as ageing or poverty, will be noticeable in a person's appearance. On the other hand, interiority – such as consciousness, conscience and relationship – is something rather more complicated and therefore less easily grouped in the category of sameness identity, as Ricoeur's argument for *selfhood* suggests. This selfhood comprises interior, non-visible signs, and – as in the instances of Robinson's characters – may be constituted by life experiences, personal histories and interpersonal relationships. But the gaps of selfhood, of the self's ability to know itself, will make a strong case for the inevitable outcome of *otherness of self*, the utter isolation which is what loneliness proves to be. My analysis will set Ricoeur's theory of the otherness within the self in conversation with its manifestation in Robinson's estranged characters. I will discuss an otherness which is exterior – with regard to the body, and including other exterior markers such as the home – as well as the self's estranging relationship with others and conscience, both of them interior understandings of the self.

*Strangeness of Self as Body*

Before launching a discussion of otherness, even in relation to the self, it is imperative first to summarise what is meant by Ricoeur's theory of the self. According to him, the self is an identity comprising two major meanings. On one hand, there is the sameness identity; that which Ricoeur refers to in his book, *Oneself as Another*, as the "idem-identity" (3). This is the most readily identifiable self because its sameness permits and encourages reidentification. This sameness distinguishes the self from the other-than-self, and encompasses all that might be attributed to a person "in the sense of identical or similar" (3). It is difficult to separate sameness identity from Ricoeur's second major meaning of identity, that of selfhood, or "ipse-identity" (3) because, as he describes this problematic, "the sameness of one's body conceals its selfhood" (33). The complication appears when a self may be faithful to itself, whilst simultaneously departing from sameness, as when a predictable character in fiction is met with an unforeseen circumstance, and sedimented habit – sameness – is no longer a possibility. This, in brief, is the difference between sameness of character and that which models itself as "keeping one's word in faithfulness to the word that has been given" (123).

Now, the body is one of the first of Ricoeur's "three modalities of otherness" (*Oneself as Another* 355), as it is the first point of connection the self experiences with the other: it is the exterior, tangible reality of an interior self. The self's visible and tangible body is what makes it the most readily identifiable. Ricoeur states that "the concept of a person is a notion no less primitive than that of a body [...] a single referent possessing two series of predicates: physical predicates and mental predicates" (33). These physical predicates refer to the exterior identifiers of a self, meaning a person's physical appearance. If sameness is that which is "unique and recurrent" (33), then the sameness of the self – that is, that which is capable of being reidentified as being the same person, the same self – can be identified by the sameness of the *body* of a particular person: for example, so-and-so's eyes are this colour, with hair that colour, a slight limp in left leg, etc. One's body is the place of its "belonging" (319), that is, the "constancy of a self that finds its anchor in its own body" (319). If identity is a two-sided coin, on one side, there is the self's physical being as the "public entity" and on the other side, its consciousness (34). They remain connected because the body may be understood to represent certain, not all, aspects of the self. It bears the marks of experience, of life. Ricoeur notes that not only physiognomy but also certain mental events and consciousness are attributed *to this localised space of body*. And thereby is introduced a theme of ownership: the 'mineness' of self-designation (to which I shall return later). A person's selfhood is externally

demonstrated by a body to which consciousness may be ascribed and whose physical attributes make the self capable of reidentification.

The corporeality of the self makes it very public, something which is well understood by Robinson's characters. Glory, for instance, is particularly sensible of the way in which a body may draw attention to her and distinguish her. She is known in the family as the one who "wept easily" (*Home* 15) – signalling emotions which might otherwise have gone unnoticed, or at least would not be so certainly attributed to her. And this is a personal feature which truly bothers her because it is the making public of the otherwise private consciousness, of her *self*. In *Home*, Robinson tells us that even though Glory, it

did not mean that she felt things more deeply than others did. It certainly did not mean that she was fragile or sentimental or ready to bring that sodden leverage to bear on the slights that came with being the baby of the family. [...] It really was irritating, and there was nothing to be done about it. [...] She thought how considerate it would have been of nature to allow the venting of feeling through the palm of a hand or even the sole of a foot. (15)

For Glory, her body, or at least its manner of emotional venting, is one of her peculiar, distinguishing traits. She wishes such emotional outbursts might be more easily hidden, such as concealed in a fist, rather than running down one's face. Moreover, that Glory's physical body is visibly affected by her non-visible consciousness and the specific affectations of her private self, is evidence of the body's capacity to betray traces of the self, traces which are strange to the self because they are involuntary.

The idea of the body betraying the self in these physical clues is also a subject of some concern to Lila. Coming into the town of Gilead for the first time, she is grateful though indignant at the charity which is shown her once people begin to understand her miserable circumstances – circumstances not only demonstrated by her desire to do odd jobs, but also by her appearance, so much so that people frequently give her old clothes, causing Lila to think to herself, "This is the very worst part of being broke. Everybody can see how broke you are" (40). Living a lonely but independent existence, she is constantly told and reminding herself that "[y]ou best keep yourself to yourself except" she reflects, "you never can" (*Lila* 70). The body, therefore, can be said to give clues about a self's interiority through external signs.

At this point, it is impossible to proceed in a discussion about the physical traces of oneself and the other without referencing Emmanuel Levinas, and his philosophical text *Entre Nous*:

*Thinking-of-the-Other*. For Levinas, the encounter with the other *begins* with the face. He says that “the relationship with a *being* is an invocation of a face” (10) – what Levinas-theorist Bernhard Waldenfels, writing in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, calls “the corporeal emblem of the other’s otherness” (63). It is “a relation in which [a person] is invoked. That being is man, and it is as a neighbour that man is accessible: as a face” (Levinas 9). This means that understanding an other necessitates being “in relation with the other face to face” (10). As with Robinson, the face is a vital clue to understanding and relating to an other. It is the primary source of information or communication *from* the other, available to read or be read. Waldenfels explains that by its expression, the face can *speak*, can communicate, “speaking which speaks *to me* before and beyond speaking *about something*, takes the feature of an appeal, call, interpolation” (69). For this reason, Levinas describes the face as *naked*, representing “extreme exposure, defenselessness, vulnerability itself” (45). At the same time, this extreme vulnerability is an invocation *because* of its neediness: it is so obviously liable to neglect. Yet the face, for all its readability is still as mysterious as the self, because it can never give absolute knowledge, whatever it may communicate. Waldenfels declares that it is not “something or somebody we can grasp” (76), and explains that the understanding of the face operates as “a mere way or mode [to understanding the other], i.e. as the other’s proximity” (76). Being face-to-face with the other requires proximity; it is an appeal which demands a response, a face which requires *reading*.

The specificity of the face as window to the soul is one which recurs frequently in Robinson’s novels. In his essay on “The Face of the Other”, Haein Park proposes that the character of Ames recognises that the power of the face and its appeal “[impose] distinctive claims upon the self” (113). It is an entity which Robinson seems to suggest gives insight to the soul. Likewise throughout *Lila*, this idea is made apparent. She considers:

If you think about a human face, it can be something you don’t want to look at, so sad or so hard or so kind. It can be something you want to hide, because it pretty well shows where you’ve been and what you can expect. And anybody at all can see it, but you can’t. It just floats there in front of you. It might as well be your soul for all you can do to protect it. What isn’t strange when you think about it. (82)

It would seem that for Robinson’s characters, it is not the eyes which are the windows to the soul, as in the popular idiom, but the whole face. It is undeniable information, moreover, which a person has no way to control or protect and cannot conceal, as Lila reflects. Floating “in front of you”, as if detached, the face lays bare the soul by its utter readability. Furthermore, the understanding of a face, Ames notes in *Gilead*, is not specifically in the reading of it but on recognising that it is

“astonishing”, acknowledging its “claim on you, because you can’t help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and the loneliness of it” (75). Already, this complicates the authenticity of selfhood’s communication (understood by such traces of the self – the physical appearance, the emotional signals like tears, and the utter readability of a face) because it is made public by the body of the person with or without their will or volition. Thus one might raise the question of the authenticity of the body as a communication of the self if that communication was unintended or unknown. Its otherness stems from the very fact that one does not expect that sameness identifiers, such as the body, are strange to the self from which they originate.

As a public entity, the body, therefore, makes itself *available to interpretation* by another. This is why the body can be understood to be the first point of connection with the other, not simply because the other-than-self may interpret a person by what his or her body betrays of him or her; the body becomes other to the *self* when it conveys meaning without the intent of the self. As Lila suspects, the face, or the body, bares the soul. What is made available for interpretation by the body *is* other, as if detached from the self. Because these traces, such as Glory’s tears and Lila’s readable face, are outside of their control. Indeed, it would seem that these demonstrations of the self are strange to their very own selves. There is “no telling what [Ames] might see in [her face]” Lila reflects (172), and adds “she’d been thinking that folks are their bodies. And bodies can’t be trusted at all” (172). The body is not trustworthy because it betrays their selves. Both Glory and Lila find their identities are given away; yet both women have no knowledge or intention of having made themselves public in that way. In addition, the extreme exteriority of the self indicates another way in which the self may be isolated from others, namely, by misunderstanding (as was intimated in my first chapter).

One can no longer assume that the body is an authentic identifier of a self. It is true that Ricoeur propounds the theory that “one’s own body is revealed to be the mediator between the intimacy of the self and the externality of the world” (322), and thus *selfhood* has an intimate connection with the *body*. However, Ricoeur does not deny that attributing characteristics to the body is fraught with ambiguity and paradox. One designates oneself as the originator of an action. For example, Glory’s tears are just that, Glory’s tears: an attribution, according to Ricoeur, “which is at once singular and permanent, is not intended for description but for empty designation” (29). Within the act of designation, the problematic is introduced when “[i]dentity is described as sameness (*mêmeté*) and not selfhood (*ipséité*)” (32). In saying this, he is warning of the danger of placing the identity’s main emphasis solely in the realm of sameness: for instance, to say that Glory

*always* weeps would create a paradox of identity if one day she no longer did. This is not to deny that sameness is intrinsic to the self. Rather, the notion of identity, if it can be said to be inseparable from the subject of the self, must necessarily be larger than its identifiable sameness for it must encompass inevitable changes without threatening selfhood. Furthermore, for a self to identify itself (self-designation) it must distinguish or designate itself apart from all other bodies which are ‘not mine’, and develop from his or own body a sense of ‘mineness’ – what Ricoeur calls a “pole of reference” of “ownness” (323). At the same time, the very notion of ‘mineness’ is thwarted. As Ricoeur explains, the “crisis consists in the fact that the very notion that my experiences belong to me has an ambiguous sense; there are different types of ownership (what I have and who I am)” (138). What is important to note here is that the body, as a source (in betraying traces) of the identity of a self, is now under suspicion because even the attribution of qualities to this body are made on the basis of empty designation and the unstable sameness of attributes. Hence, the self cannot be said definitively to possess any of them.

For example, the most obvious change to a physical body is the change wrought by the passing of time, general physical wearing down; ageing. Both Ames and old Boughton testify as to the strangeness of the ageing process. Laura Tanner, commenting on Ames’ “Looking Back from the Grave” calls it a constant shredding of the self: the “forced retreat into a position of observing a world in which he [Ames] gradually ceases to exist” (240). Having grown up together, Ames can recall Boughton’s late growth spurt, and how, for forty years thereafter, he towered over Ames. Physically speaking, this shows that there has already been much change to Boughton’s person. Now, as Ames tells in *Gilead*, Boughton is “so bent over I don’t know how you’d calculate his height. He says his spine has turned into knuckle bones. He says he’s been reduced to a heap of joints, and not one of them works. You’d never know what he once was, looking at him now” (44). Here is a body which reigned in its physical prime for forty years and is now diminished, and whose functions, once never questioned, are now accepted as faulty. Inversely, this *body* now affects Boughton’s *personality*, making him irritable and difficult – something which Glory excuses to Jack saying that “[Boughton] hates being feeble. And he’s had to put with it for a long time” (*Home* 78). The external strangeness of his own body has begun to intrude on and influence Boughton’s interior self.

Ames confesses to having a similar feeling of the sudden strangeness of his body when Boughton’s son Jack visits. He feels the sudden contrast as if, he says, “I’d stepped right into a hole, [Jack] was so much taller than I, than he’d ever been before. Of course I knew I’d been losing some

height, but this was downright ridiculous” (*Gilead* 105). It signifies a terrifying change wherein the body which seems familiar for its ‘ownness’ is suddenly made strange to Ames. And when Jack later helps him from a chair, Ames catches a look in the eyes of both his wife and son, painfully aware of the contrast made between the two of them, himself and Jack. The “failing” of the body (161), of “being left out” and a “straggler” (162), are some of Ames’ biggest fears. A family man, a great thinker and loving father, Ames fears that despite his interior idea of himself, he will be reduced to a “tremulous coot you barely remember” (161). The body betrays the person by its frailty and seems to draw a distinction between what once *was*, youthful prime and vigour, and what now *is*, an instance of the same body now turning strange.

One last note regarding the strangeness of the body is made by Ricoeur with reference to the body’s encountering of numerous other bodies. This foreshadows the second modality of otherness (that of the self in relation to others) because the body operates *within a group of other bodies* and understands itself by the rules it applies to the understanding of those other to itself. Ricoeur speculates that “if persons are also bodies, it is to the extent that each person is for himself his own body” (*Oneself as Another* 319). However, the self’s constancy through time, as has been demonstrated with both Ames and Boughton, cannot be so reliable an anchorage as Ricoeur’s theory suggests. And thus it may be concluded that the selfhood, as expressed bodily, is limited to a sort of ‘housing’ of the self and is less actually *demonstrative* of the identity of the self. The ‘mineness’ of understanding, moreover, is limited only to the self who designates this body as ‘mine’. To all others, it is simply *another body*, simply “the flesh [which] is also a body among bodies” (326). As Ricoeur highlights, “my flesh appears as a body among bodies only to the extent that I am myself an other among all the others” (326). Here we may draw insight from the title of his work; this is how the Self appears as Another, namely, as a body amongst other bodies – simply *another body* to all but itself. This implies that what is attributable to oneself is also capable of being attributed to another, for example, at the basic level of such attributes as brown hair or blue eyes. If you are other to me, then I must be other to you. Ricoeur extends this, saying it is not a case of “‘the same thing’ receiving two kinds of predicates, but ‘the same sense’ ascribed to psychic predicates whether they are assigned to oneself or someone else” (37). Thus, if all bodies but my own are *other* to me, then my body is other to someone else whose own body is *self* to him or her.

One may conclude that even the body, although the only tangible anchor for the intangible self, is itself strange: First, by the slippage of information which the body unwittingly betrays; second, by the strangeness of the process of ageing which causes drastic change to the sameness of

the body; and third, by the dilution of the self's strangeness amongst many other bodies capable of being attributed the same qualities.

### *Strangeness of Space*

As the title for one of the books in the trilogy and a theme which runs throughout, the connotations and associations of the concept of *home* cannot be overlooked. Having spent the whole of their lives in the same small town of Gilead, Ames and Boughton both have an established identity which has been rooted and grown in that place. Living in the same houses and preaching in the same parish, their homes figure *as* their personal histories; they are the unavoidable site of self. In the instances of Boughton's children, particularly Glory and Jack, the return to the home is akin to a return to point zero: a place of beginnings, of the solace and comfort that the familiarity of home represents.

The physical structure of the home may be said to possess both Ricoeur's forms of identity: it is simultaneously the *sameness* – which reidentifies the walls and roof as the same – and the *selfhood*, or permanence in time – made up of the experiences and memories. In the novel *Home*, Glory reflects that this “immutable terrain of their childhood” is still a space to her of “the pooled memory they saw no special need to portion out among them” (8). Like a memory bank, the Boughton home is a place where each of the Boughtons have invested some sense of self in the old house, and have spent time – their father, old Boughton, the most. He speaks of the house, Glory notes, “as if it were an old wife, beautiful for every comfort it had offered, every grace, through all the long years [...] It was a good house, [he] said, meaning that it had a gracious heart however awkward its appearance” (3-4). The house, credited with some sort of personhood by a family's experiences under its roof, now seems to reflect the identities of its occupants, if not playing some vital part in constructing those same identities as well, as an old wife might. When Jack arrives, after an extended absence, Glory is fascinated “to watch how this man, gone so long, noticed one thing and another, as if mildly startled, even a little affronted, by all the utter sameness” (54). The familiarity of the “stodginess and the shabbiness” (54) of the house is the homeliness of it, and their affection is for just such familiarity: Glory describes how she

saw him put his hand on the shoulder of their mother's chair, touch the fringe on a lampshade, as if to confirm for himself that the uncanny persistence of half-forgotten objects, all in their old places, was not some trick of the mind. Nothing about that

house ever did change, except to fade or scar or wear. [...] Why should a family with eight rambunctious children bother owning anything that could be damaged? (54-55)

What is demonstrated in Glory's musings is a whole childhood of memories: the eccentric character of the house made endearing by its timelessness (somewhat the shabbier for its age), and small insights afforded into the heart of the Boughtons' family ideals, such as abnegation (here seen as thrift) and practicality (in response to the liveliness of the children). It is the *sameness* of the house which proffers these insights. It has already been mentioned that for Ricoeur, when considering the sameness side of the identity, what is most readily identifiable is that which is "unique and recurrent" (Ricoeur 33). It is that which may be understood in the categories of "numerical identity, qualitative identity, uninterrupted continuity across change, and, finally, permanence in time which defines sameness" (Ricoeur 122). So much can be learned of their identities when interpreted by the home, and therefore, much of their identities can be said to have been constructed by the home in which they grew up.

This theme of being 'at home' and not being *at home*, is one which Robinson explores extensively in all her novels, particularly in *Home*. This is especially interesting when one considers that the nature of the faith which both Ames and the Boughtons profess finds its foundation in the spiritual realm and not the physical. Thus Aaron Mauro, writing on "Ordinary Happiness" in Robinson's novels, suggests that "earthly homes" for Robinson's characters are understood to be "only temporary, borrowed, and provisional" (6). Ames also suggests that strangeness is inherent in the human experience because spiritual beings cannot feel truly at home in a world purely physical, a theory thereby making all physical homes strange. Yet, Mauro also says that "Ames appears to admit that humanity's home is with God, but his own home also represents something special" (8). It is, Mauro theorises, the place of "adoption and forgiveness" (8), as in the Biblical story of the prodigal son who left his father, squandered his inheritance and returned, disgraced and wretched, to a unexpectedly warm welcome. The words uttered over this son who was "dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found" (11), are, for Mauro, the hallmark characterising the idea of 'going home' – the "living promise of recognisability" (11). This, at least, is what the home is supposed to represent.

In the novels, the home represents the hearth of familial comfort and acceptance. Despite the disappointment of on-going misunderstandings, old Boughton sees Jack's return as the herald of reconciliation and restoration: as Boughton says to him, meaningfully, "at least you're home now" (184), seeming to suggest that all can be restored from there. Glory describes the significance of

home to Jack, explaining “Now you know where to come when you need help” (330), to which Jack replies, quoting the Bible, “Yes. Ye who are weary, come home” (330). This cannot be the case, however, because Jack still chooses to leave at the end of the novel. Boughton, Glory and Jack all have demonstrated expectation that the home, perhaps because of the sameness of its pooled identity and memory and the implied returning to that previous innocence, will be the site of rest and comfort. It proves to be a vain hope because they have vested themselves entirely in sameness identifiers – not only in the house, but in the characters of themselves, their younger selves, defined by that house. For Glory, the home is now her shame; it is where she retreats without another option. To her it is “an embarrassment” to be “somewhere because there was nowhere else for you to be” (38). The unwilling return has made the familiarity strange; what before elicited affection, now rankles. When at the opening of the book, Glory is shown around the house by her father, she bemoans moving back, which she sees as a regression, noting:

[h]ow all the brothers and sisters except Jack had loved to come home, and how ready they always were to leave again. How dear the old place and the old stories were to them, and how far abroad they had scattered. The past is a very fine thing in its place. But her returning now, to stay, as her father said, had turned memory portentous. To have it break its bounds this way and become present and possibly future too – they all knew this was a thing to be regretted. She rankled at the thought of their commiseration. (8)

In this instance, the sameness of the house offers no establishment for the identity of the self because that identity correlative to the house is outgrown. Return is therefore the height of shame and regret. In fact, it is a recurring nightmare of Glory’s that she will be forgotten in that “empty house full of ridiculous furniture and unreadable books, waiting for someone to notice [she’s] missing and come back for [her]. And nobody does” (310-311). What might otherwise have been the foundation for reidentification by the other family members, of *belonging* at the very least, has become strange to Glory because it is neither a place of restoration nor of comfort. The nostalgia no longer hints at the roots of an identity. Rather, by forcing itself out of the past and into Glory’s immediate present and future, it seems forcibly to imply a regression to her past self, to her childhood as if, now that she is back, the years of experience and life passed beyond the house, count for nothing.

When Boughton laments at Jack’s departure that “[a]ll of them call it home, but they never stay” (308), one is alerted to the potential emptiness of the word “home” as a foundation for an identity of self. Mauro admits that for Jack and Glory this is an “experience of being uncannily

unhomed” by “being an exile at home” (12) – one which recognises the strangeness of the space which ought to welcome and draw in. Glory feels a failure for having returned, and the readers are made constantly aware that Jack is not ‘at home’ either. He is a stranger to ‘home’, “tapping his hat against his pant leg as if he could not make up his mind whether to knock on the glass or turn the knob or simply to leave again” (31). Lila too, as has already been mentioned, frequently makes reference to her half-formed plans to leave her husband, alerting us to the fact that she somehow does not feel the belonging that one expects a wife to feel with her husband, and of being a stranger in one’s own space – much like one can feel the strangeness of one’s own body.

The alienation one can experience in one’s own home is most poignantly seen in Jack, the prodigal son who is the ‘stray’ in his own home. It seems that even his own body is an uncomfortable shelter, not home at all. Unbeknown to them all, he constructs a “shanty” (*Home* 299) in the roof of the garage. Glory did note that the old house seemed to him as familiar as ever. However, nearing the end of his time at home, she discovers that his frequent and unexplained absences were retreats to the other shelter he had constructed for himself in isolation. When Jack eventually shows it to Glory – in order that she may confiscate the alcohol he’d been stashing away there – she is forcefully struck by its desolation: a low tent, which required her to kneel before she could see inside, made of a tarp thrown over a clothesline to keep off the rain and the bats, a floor of newspapers; a little jar of her cookies, a flashlight, some books and a picture on a makeshift shelf. She describes:

The dark little room smelled strongly of whiskey and sweat. It seemed almost domestic, and yet there was a potency of loneliness about it like a dark spirit lurking in it, a soul that had impoverished this crude tabernacle to stand in the place of other shelter, flesh. She thought, What if he had succeeded in dying, and then she had found this, so neatly and intentionally made out of nothing anyone could want, with the fierce breath of his grief still haunting it, the blanket still tangled? [...] He would be embarrassed that she had seen and touched his secretiveness, which was so like shame, so like affliction, that they could hardly be distinguished. [...] [She] stayed where she was, kneeling there, amazed at what was before her, as if it were the humblest sign of great mystery, come from a terrain where loneliness and grief are time and weather. (297-298)

This refuge, so like a body with “flesh” and “breath”, seems to be an extension of Jack’s person in a way that their home never was. What is most powerful in this extract is that despite returning home, ostensibly to reconcile with his ageing father, Jack does not feel himself belonging. Moreover, Glory is grieved to discover that in spite of all the efforts made to welcome him, to make him feel at home and accepted amongst them, his makeshift, comfortless hideout was a better refuge to him

than their own home. It bears the marks of Jack's sorrows and his loneliness better than the old house does and for this reason, Glory's comprehension of her brother is shaken profoundly. Yet, in being granted access to this shanty of his, she has been given insight not only into the circumstances of his absence – that is, where he was and what he was doing when no one could find him – but significantly, she has been given privileged information. Regarding Jack's relationship to Glory and their father, the shanty proves to her that he remains an outcast, as evidenced by this removal of himself from them all. As a body betrays traces of the self, so Jack's hideout betrays the secret afflictions he has been concealing from them all. Jack's hideout makes the space of their home strange even to Glory now, as it was strange to him, because she realises how aptly Jack is described by this new base, finding himself better suited to the shanty than his home. The shanty is also estranging to Glory for the very fact of its giving her an unexpected view of Jack, however insightful the revelation might have been.

Consequently it may be said that it is *people* who give spaces their significance and their meaning, a meaning which is assimilated from the personalities which fill them. Just as a body has meaning attributed to it because of the selfhood that is attributed to the body, so spaces take on personalities, selves almost, until they are almost as human as the selves who occupy them – as if an extension of that person. Lila notes this when, on returning from a long walk, she visits Ames' office, and is startled to find him absent; she says the “room just felt like he should be in it” (*Lila* 158). She reasons that this is “a whole roomful of somebody's days and thoughts and breath, things that are faded and they don't see it, ugly and they don't care, things worn by their habits, [and] it seems strange to walk in on that when you're almost nothing more than a cold wind” (158-159). Here it would seem that the space belonging to a person is as intimately part of their personality as a body might be said to be an extension of the self – a space perhaps more real to that self than to another person intruding in that space. A stranger (or even a guest) in someone else's home, might feel their own intrusion because the whole environment is invested with another's personality, tastes, pursuits, little indicators of habits. As Lila says, you can pick up something and “feel for a minute how theirs it is” (158). As the face of Lila's theory is an unprotected and obvious insight into a person's life, apparent to anyone, so Jack's hideout and Ames' office are so invested with *their* life, even their breath and the scents of their body, it might as well be part of them. For this reason, even spaces are made strange. They are estranging to the one who visits it and estranging when they are no longer there: Ames' office is strange because it is as if he has departed from his very body in leaving it.

### *Strangeness of Self*

Thus begins a discussion of the otherness inherent and encountered in the self before even encountering others. To speak, then, of loneliness as a sort of death, or an insufficiency to mortal existence, is no longer an incomprehensible comparison. Sensations of isolation and of separation, of being left behind, are as present in death as they are in physical and emotional alienation. This is due in part to the fact that the body ends ultimately in death – as Ames reminds us, sardonically naming himself “Moriturus” (160). For Laura Tanner, this understanding of life is haunted by the anticipation of absence, “the enormity of anticipated loss” (227). Jack confides to Glory that when, as a child, he heard them all singing inside the house without him whilst he was out wandering, he would ponder whether he’d been forgotten and this, he says, “felt like death in a way” (*Home* 288), to be so close but to be separated and excluded from the family. For Lila, as a lonely and unloved child, there is a very real sense of her being as good as dead to those who should have taken care of her. And when she is found by a hardy woman, known simply as ‘Doll’, she has one clear memory of that time: of Doll who softly “had said to her, Live” (47). It would seem as though, had it not been for Doll’s intervention, the rejection and neglect Lila had suffered would have killed her. As Lila puts it, “if you’re just a stranger to everybody on earth, then that’s what you are and there’s no end to it” (79). This brand of strangeness as a sort of death is one which follows all Robinson’s characters in *Gilead*. Moreover, death is the greatest possible separation of selves, leaving a vacuum in its wake which might also be described as loneliness. Ames already feels the cold premonition of how he will be diminished in death. He says of “the images in [his] mind, because they are so beautiful” that he “hate[s] to think they will be extinguished when [he] is” (*Gilead* 184). He calls it a “mortal insufficiency to the world” (280). Robinson seems to suggest that the whole of existence is a complexity so overwhelming and large that any notion of human significance or connections is not equal to it. Ames calls it an existence which is “unknowable” (*Lila* 223). As Lila says, it is as if the whole world is telling you “Existence don’t want you” (125), and for her, existence is synonymous with “[h]unger and loneliness and weariness and still wanting more of it. Existence. Why do I bother?” (75). But even lying down one day and “[letting] the world take her life away” (219) was not an option because the “world don’t want you as long as there is any life in you at all” (219). In Robinson’s view, the greatest plight of mortality, the reason for such ultimate and persistent dejection and loneliness, is that there is absolutely nothing that the human being can do in the face of it: inherent loneliness is a fact, mortality inevitable, and existence exhausting. Thus the

disconnection suffered by lonely people does seem to be a death; a disconnection from life, proper.

The isolation of the self is further exacerbated by the unstable anchorage of a self when the self proves to be strange to itself. In my previous chapter, attestation was discussed as a mode of credal faith in oneself, committing oneself to a form of expected future identity – but from a position of relative ignorance. When a self experiences suspicion of its own behaviour, the “aporias of attestation” become the “aporias of personal identity” (Ricoeur 302). In other words, the self experiences and knows itself in fragments; there are gaps in its own self-understanding. Such gaps have already have been alluded to: the self may be traced by way of facial, bodily and physical or spatial cues, even without the person’s full knowledge of having communicated any meaning at all. This means to say that if a person may be capable of things without knowledge of communicating them, so also the person may be similarly ignorant of what he or she shall be in the future. The self attests to a faith in a future version of itself, therefore, an unknown self. Lila, for instance, surprises herself by saying to Ames “I don’t think we better do this [...] I can’t marry you” (*Lila* 86), and a few moments later, finds herself tearfully snapping, “I want this so damn bad. And I hate to want anything [...] I want you to marry me! I wish I didn’t” (89). Whether in denial about her feelings or not, the surprise of her admission is genuine, and therefore is distressing to her for being truly unforeseen. This is of crucial importance to my theory because at the last, some years later, she is forced to confess to Ames that it seems she doesn’t “even know herself, everything’s so different” (188). It is a case of the self’s being so strange and so unknown even to itself because it is capable of ideas, emotions and so forth, even without one’s own knowledge.

Now, it has been made clear from the above examples that much of one’s self identity is dependent on interactions with *others*, that a person’s entanglement in a life constantly involving other selves makes it impossible to think of the self without others. After all, the body is understood, albeit estranged, because it is a tangible corporeality like any other body. Likewise, Ricoeur says that “in our experience the life history of each of us is caught up in the histories of others [...] Whole sections of my life are part of the life history of others – of my parents, my friends, my companions at work and in leisure” (161). Consequently, this fact that “the entanglement of the history of each person in the histories of numerous others” (161) makes the individual no more than a “coauthor” (162) to his or her own existence. Thus we may conclude that the self and its identity are intricately entwined with the lives, and therefore selves – countless other selves – and that the self therefore requires interaction with the other-than-self in order to fully comprehend its *own* identity. Indeed, as Ricoeur explains, drawing on the significance of the title of

his book, *Oneself as Another*, “the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that one passes into the other” (3). This means that discussion of the self unequivocally necessitates the other-than-self, and the interactions between them both.

### *Strangeness of Self-And-Other*

Robinson’s characters all demonstrate something which casts them a little bit apart from the rest. Indeed, she seems to deal only in the realms of the marginalised and overlooked. Glory, for example, the youngest in a respected and religious family, confesses to Jack that her ‘failed engagement’ was a relationship without such a commitment, and to a married man – something which would disgrace her family if it became known. Jack, her brother, who for no apparent reason felt ostracised and alone, was in fact the person with the least excuse to feel so, having grown up in a loving family environment. For Ames the exile is his vocation (also shared by his friend Boughton). As a preacher, he experiences a sort of reverent distance from others; they “want you to be a bit apart,” he says (6). And moreover, Ames is a little odd and seemingly eccentric – once the reader can see past his profound and beautiful narration and see through it to his quirks. Due to insomnia, Ames spends the nights wandering about the town, pondering the other families through their windows and praying for them – and then spends the majority of his day ensconced in his study, with a “tendency to live so much in [his] own thoughts” (163), also praying. It is a habit which, when one sees through the eyes of his new wife Lila, is reclusive and difficult to understand, and so she too suffers from another sort of loneliness. Again Robinson surprises because this is not what one might expect from a woman so recently married to a man who loves her dearly. However, this, Ricoeur explains, is natural: estrangement is inherent to humans and inevitable. He says that the “fact of otherness is not added on to selfhood from the outside, as though to prevent its solipsistic drift, but that it belongs instead to the tenor of meaning and to the *ontological constitution of selfhood*” (318, emphasis added). Thus Robinson’s eccentric characters are as strange in and of themselves, as any other person. Strangeness is not a quirk peculiar to the eccentric and marginalised but inherent to every person. In other words, for Ricoeur as for Robinson, *selfhood is inextricably comprised of otherness*. Strangeness is part of the reason the other-than-self is foreign to the self. So to say that otherness belongs only to the-other than-self is, Ricoeur demonstrates, a grave error because as Robinson’s characters have already discovered, the

self manifests strangeness within itself.

Armed with this realisation, Ricoeur further expounds his theory, saying that what we are able to recognise about ourselves must necessarily be attributable to others. This is an assumption which seems to encourage misinterpretation between selves. Already foreshadowed in the discussion of the body as one amongst other bodies, Ricoeur explains that “I cannot speak meaningfully of my own thoughts unless I am able at the same time to ascribe them potentially to someone else” (38). (This will be an important link between the self and the other when the attribution of similar experiences is discussed under the heading of recognition in my following chapter). Its significance to the critique of the self’s strangeness lies in the implication that this attributive connection makes the self open to interpretation by anyone. This is a reciprocity which is relevant for my study because it explores the self as being one which is interpreted, not only by the self (as in the case of giving an account of oneself, seen in my previous chapter) but also as potentially (mis)interpreted by another. This means that the gaps of the self’s understanding are complicated by the gaps between the self’s understanding of *itself* and exacerbated by the identity which *others attribute* to it. Put another way, one’s understanding of an other can never move beyond a single person’s own first-person understanding. Practically speaking, in terms of our theory of loneliness, the self which is built of relationship with others is further isolated from them by the gaps of understanding which make them incomprehensible to each other, as Ames is strange to Lila and Jack is strange to Glory. Thus all selves are equally capable of isolation.

For this reason, the self is often isolated further by its encounters with others owing to misunderstandings and the strangeness between selves. Lila and Ames, though loving and considerate of each other in their marriage, find themselves nonetheless estranged from each other. Lila is herself great cause of concern for him when she goes for walks and absently leaves behind her wedding ring. She is “in so many ways unknown to him” Glory notices (*Home* 238), and Lila too, frequently considers the strangeness of their relationship in her own narrative:

I am married [Lila thinks], I am Lila Dahl, and Lila Ames. I don’t know what else I should want. Except for the shame to be gone, and it ain’t. I’m in a strange house with a man who can’t even figure out how to talk to me. Anything I could do around here has been done already. If I say something ignorant or crazy he’ll start thinking, Old men can be foolish. He’s thought it already. He’ll ask me to leave and no one will blame him. I won’t blame him. Marriage was supposed to put an end to these miseries. (*Lila* 94)

Despite the institution which should bind souls together, to Lila, her position in Ames’ life is as

temporary and vulnerable as ever. She feels that the fact of their union cannot repair the abyss of understanding between them: he is an educated and philosophical man, and she is a recently redeemed vagrant, with no education and only a history of hardships. Robinson uses this as an example of the disjuncture between persons. One would expect that somehow the vows of commitment would dispel this loneliness and insecurity. And yet here is such a case of loneliness and grief poised on the brink between, on the one hand, the identity of wife – by which she thinks she ought to feel unconditional acceptance and understanding – and on the other hand, the person she was before, lonely and distrustful. Before, the word ‘married’ had only meant to her “there was an endless, pleasant joke between [a couple] that excluded everybody else and that all the rest of them were welcome to admire” (75). Although this analogy demonstrates a certain lack of understanding, it nevertheless points to Lila’s expectation of inclusion, at last, in something, if only the private joke of marriage. Yet here she finds herself still outside of it, still excluded, and exactly who she was before, despite any efforts made by Ames to convince her otherwise. And worse, it is a feeling that Ames shares, as Lila notes to herself “[t]hey’d been married a year, no, almost a year and a half, and he was still as lonely as ever, and that scared her” (186). Even now, although they are in relationship that brings each person closer to the other than ever, the disjuncture between them is still cause for strangeness, alienation and loneliness.

It is something which may be described as uncanny, this combination of recognisable features (that is, attributable features), and the gaps which nevertheless bar persons from complete understanding. Jack is the uncanny son<sup>6</sup>, somehow simultaneously “indecipherable and transparent” (*Home* 189). He is almost never “without his disguise” of some sort (254). Even readers can never

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<sup>6</sup> In his essay “The ‘Uncanny’”, Sigmund Freud described the ‘uncanny’ as an aesthetic relating specifically to certain manifestations of the feeling of fear. A key feature of the uncanny is the anxiety or dread occasioned by “something repressed which *recurs*” (90), and because the uncanny recurrence is “in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind” (90). The uncanny may also relate to the “effacing [of] the distinction between imagination and reality” (93) – thus “nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing [other translations say a ‘secretly familiar thing’], that has undergone repression and then emerged from it” (94). As the disgraced son, Jack is uncanny because he is the one whom the family would rather forget about, and now, changed by the many years they have been apart, Jack is somewhat (secretly) recognisable, and familiar, recurring from a long-ago past. However, Robinson diverges slightly from Freud when she attributes the adjective of uncanny to Jack given that, in Freud’s view, calling a *person* uncanny is to “attribute to these [evil] intentions the capacity to achieve their aim in virtue of certain special powers” (91). Jack is not credited with magical gifting – however, his return, the exiled son, to the home which had not seen him for a good number of years, may indeed make his presence, his *recurrence* there, somewhat uncanny. He is, as Freud puts it, “something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light” (90). One may further this concept, in the discussion of the strange other, to say that the term ‘uncanny’ may be liberally applied to all ‘others’ because there is enough in them which is familiar (in that they are human, and share certain similar features and habits), but simultaneously are other, and unfamiliar identities.

have closure that complete comprehension of his character is attainable, whereas full comprehension is attainable in the cases of Robinson's other characters (to some extent). This may be due to the fact that we are never offered Jack's perspective and thoughts directly. By contrast, Ames, Lila and Glory each have their own version of events in a separate novel and the reader is given first-hand insight. Ames, Lila and Glory are each available to study in a way that Jack is not. From a purely literary point of view, this is another reason Jack may be seen to be distant and strange. As Ricoeur demonstrates that each person is limited to their own first-person perspective of others, our readerly interpretation is dependent not on our first-hand understanding of him, but rather on second-hand tales from another character's comparatively limited understanding – even though we are afforded both Glory and Ames' narrative description. The problematic of understanding others is compounded in this scenario, each tale of which is limited to someone else's interpretation who is not in fact the self. This circumstance alone embodies Ricoeur's allusions to the impossibility of knowing the other at all. As Robinson herself admits in an interview with Wyatt Mason: there is an "overabundance" to human life which ensures that humans "predictably, are incomprehensible to each other" ("The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson"). Furthermore, Robinson says in an interview with Sarah Fay that despite the "emotional entanglement" she feels with her characters, the "minute that you start thinking about someone in the whole circumstance of his life to the extent that you can, he becomes mysterious, immediately" ("Marilynne Robinson, The Art of Fiction"). It seems to suggest the impossibility of knowing another, even to the extent that the authors and readers do not know their characters.

Jack is a person whom nobody has ever been able to know completely, least of all himself. He still remembers Glory's words to him as a child, on coming back from some or other mischief that has set their parents worrying all over again, where Glory demanded of him "What right do you have to be so strange?" (*Home* 38). He recalls it to her, saying, "What right did I have to be so strange? A good question" (133). Despite this, Glory begins to feel throughout the novel that they have made some progress, sharing their sorrows, gradually trusting each other. She yearns to be helpful to him and to 'rescue' him, the brother she adores, and he is in obvious need of solace and comfort. However, the tragedy of realisation comes when, after a difficult conversation with Ames, Jack does not come home. Glory, sleepless with worry, goes out to look for him and finds him miserably drunk in the garage, sloppily carrying out an attempt to suffocate himself with exhaust fumes, his socks and best shirt stuffed in the exhaust pipe of the car he'd been repairing for his father. In that moment, every hope Glory had of reconciliation and healing is dashed, and her trust

in him is thwarted. For him, the shame is complete: “I failed as a lowlife”, he tells her bitterly, “but not for want of – application” (257). The family too, Glory reflects after sending him to bed, had lived in fear that he would be unreachable; that he

would really leave, that he would truly and firmly put himself beyond the reach of help and harm, beyond self-consciousness and all its humiliations, beyond all that loneliness and unspent anger and all that unsalved shame, and their endless, relentless loyalty to him. [...] She had tried to take care of him, to help him, and from time to time he had let her believe she did. That old habit of hers, of making a kind of happiness for herself out of the thought that she could be his rescuer [...] it was as far beyond her power to soothe or mitigate as the betrayal of Judas Iscariot. (258)

Unintentionally but irrevocably Jack is distanced from his family, and not only to Glory, the only person to witness this scene. They are ever trying to pull him in, remaining loyal to the last, but still Jack finds himself on the outside, here more than ever, because he recognises with grief that “his one friend [is] lost to him” (260) because of the grief this scene causes Glory. As for Glory, she finds all her worst fears realised, like “the saddest fantasy she ever had of the worst that might have become of him, except that he was breathing” (260). For all his efforts, it seems for a short while that the pain of this severed relationship might at last have succeeded in killing him in her eyes. The good estimation of his character up until that night and the indications of healing which she thought she had observed in him were the product of what Jack, ever disguised, allowed her to believe. The reader is made aware of how desperately wrong a person may be in their relations and interpretations of another – for the reader is deceived along with Glory. This is not to attest to the defectiveness of self-communication but rather to the irreconcilable otherness of the self. This same self is never understandable even to itself. For example, Jack later apologises, asserting that he would not have done it had he been sober – showing that it was a circumstance even he could not have predicted of himself. Therefore this is a self which can then have no expectation of ever being understood by the other-than-self. So susceptible to misinterpretation, the self is further alienated within itself because another’s interpretation may so easily be inaccurate. The self’s own mystery is the final word in its lonely state and its isolation is absolute.

### *Self as Conscience*

Ricoeur’s final modality of otherness is the otherness of the self enjoined, as if by a voice or perhaps a conscience. Moreover, the idea of conscience making account of oneself to oneself is one

which Ricoeur identifies as the “primordially and authentically” which mark attestation (348) – that is, what we attribute to ourselves and declare ourselves to be. In his theory, conscience is “that place par excellence in which illusions about oneself are intimately bound up with the veracity of attestation” (341). It is a “strange(r)ness... by which conscience inscribes itself within the dialectic of Same and Other” (348) because it is a voice seemingly detached as a third party from the essential self. Thus Ricoeur’s idea of ‘Conscience’ is altered “in its own way ‘beyond good and evil’”(348). In other words, his conclusion concerning the function of conscience is not limited to judging merit in the conventional fashion. It does relate to ethics, and by this he means a consideration, or perhaps even just an awareness, that reaches beyond the closed-off self and entertains the idea of other-than-self. Now, the disjuncture both of the self’s attestation to itself and of itself (as seen in my previous chapter), of the self’s understanding of itself (and subsequently other persons’ interpretations of that person), are all examples of how the voice of the self may be seen as other. Ricoeur also likens this voice to “phenomena such as injunction or debt” (341), in the sense that this voice calls upon the self and requires an answer. Merely “[l]istening to the voice of conscience would signify being-enjoined by the Other” he says (352), because it forces one’s self-awareness to beyond oneself<sup>7</sup>.

It is here that otherness, construed as people in a context of social obligation, intrudes on the self and demands the self to respond (an idea which shall be further expounded in the following chapter). Lila, in spite of her absolute aversion to feeling indebted to anyone – she declares that “being beholden was the one thing she could not stand” (*Lila* 40) – finds herself unable to avoid interaction and involvement with others – being enjoined by them and acting in response to their expectations. In short, the self cannot operate in complete independence to the world at large. Ricoeur explains that the idea “suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that *one cannot be thought of without the other*, that instead one passes into the other” (3, emphasis added). The otherness of self in this instance is a case of the *intrusion* of the other into the realm of the self. When Lila finds herself indebted to another, a circumstance which she reviled, she also finds herself in a situation she neither anticipated nor desired. One may conclude that the injunction of the other-than-self upon the self is another

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<sup>7</sup> At this point, this idea of the self’s consideration of beings beyond itself would naturally lead, in the context of Robinson’s fiction, to a discussion of God, who exemplifies the absolute other. However, I leave those discussions to my final chapter where discussions of divine recognition better lend themselves to the analysis of God and Christian doctrine as both other and yet familiar.

occasion is estranging, being in the position of a self enjoined or indebted, owing something of itself and not as independent as it might have imagined.

In his final chapter on the ontology of the construction of the self, Ricoeur explains that the “being of the self presupposes the totality of a world that is the horizon of its thinking, acting, feeling – in short, of its care” (310). What he means by this ‘care’ is that with histories so wound up in the lives of others, it is impossible for the self to act, to think, to be separate from any reference to other selves. Ricoeur links this to an ethical framework by connecting it to the Biblical idea of the Golden Rule – ‘do as you would be done by’<sup>8</sup>. The greater implications of the Golden Rule are best left to discussions of recognition to the following chapter in which its significance to the response demanded by the self is better understood. However, let it be granted that Ricoeur’s theory of the conscience is as a form of self which not only pre-empts interaction with the other-than-self, but which expects the self to act in response to a world of other selves. Thus, the self finds itself enjoined by a world of the other, “called upon” and “affected in a unique way” (342). Behavioural customs and social etiquette are very basic examples of the manner in which selves operate *with regard to others*, learning to establish patterns of existence which constantly check themselves against social obligations, such as the time when Lila is called upon to recognise the significance of always wearing her wedding ring only *because of what it means to her husband*. And if the self lives by its interactions with other selves, and those selves are other, then the self feels the multiplied loneliness of interactions with them.

### Conclusion

We may conclude with Ricoeur that the self is an entity whose self-knowledge and sense of self-possession are both limited and complicated. Inextricably constituted of an otherness which cannot be displaced, the self’s loneliness is complete. The practical outworking of this philosophy in Robinson’s characters explains their suffering sensations of estrangement and the loneliness which springs from it. If, as Ricoeur argues, the self is strange to itself, there is no wonder in the ‘strange(r)ness’ which follows Robinson’s characters. When that which one assumes will always be trustworthy as a sameness-identifier (such as one’s body or one’s home) proves unstable or is

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<sup>8</sup> As can be found in the gospels of Matthew (19:19) Luke (10:27) and Mark (12:33) “to love one’s neighbour as oneself”.

undermined, the self is made strange. What one took to be reliable for reidentification, for anchorage of the self – in the way that one’s body always looks the same, or one’s house will always be one’s home – is unable to offer that same foundational sense of self. The body ages and the home no longer is nostalgic or welcoming.

This strangeness of self is a condition so inevitable and debilitating that it affects the self’s relation to others. In a world where the self is limited only to its first-person interpretations of others, the relationships which seem ostensibly to bind selves also can be a further cause of loneliness. Disillusioned with connection, the self finds that no matter what progress is made, whatever little victories of recognition or trust, it cannot dispel the otherness of which it is inevitably comprised. Lila, Ames, Glory and Jack may all learn more of each other but there remains an abyss of understanding between them where signs are misinterpreted, habits are exclusive, and old insecurities are not solved by the promise of commitment. Thus otherness, by way of the ‘voice’ of conscience, of one’s own self, of exterior sameness of self and interaction with the other-than-self, is irreducible to the understanding of the identity of self – and its inevitability is apparent. Moreover, that strangeness is so foundational to the self means that the loneliness of the self is unavoidable. It has been demonstrated that institutions such as marriage and family, shared memory and spaces, even bodies – though all significant to the self’s understanding not only of itself but of the world in which the self finds its identity – are neither authentic nor comprehensive indicators of a person’s identity or selfhood. Nor are they remedies for this loneliness: the self nonetheless suffers strangeness.

However, this is not to say (as shall be demonstrated in the following chapter) that the depressing outlook for the self is no more than irredeemable isolation and bitter loneliness on all fronts. If what is attributable to me is also attributable to you, even if it is otherness and strangeness, this is *exactly the point of connection*, of recognition, which Ricoeur seems to suggest as a sort of antidote to the strangeness of the self, although its potentiality for connection does not subvert the inevitability of the ‘strange(r)ness’ which is the self.

## Chapter Three: Recognition and its Redemption

In his work *The Course of Recognition*, Paul Ricoeur explores the use of the word ‘recognition’, examining its lexicographical make up and common usage, and its potential to establish connection and relationship. As my previous chapter concluded, the irreconcilable strangeness of self presents a picture of absolute estrangement; the self’s strangeness prohibits a complete understanding even of itself which then extends to the impossibility of true understanding and connection with an other. However, this is not the complete story. During the course of this chapter, I demonstrate how recognition, beginning with the paired concepts identifying and distinguishing, establishes not only recognition *for* and recognition *of* another, methods by which the self begins to define and construct its own identity, but also how the course of recognition initiates a practical understanding of the ways in which a self may interact with the other-than-self in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* trilogy. In an interview with Wyatt Mason, Robinson helps us to understand how this might be achieved when she suggests that “[w]e remember Moses saying ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself.’ But he also said, ‘Love the stranger as thyself.’ This is not unimportant” (“The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson”). The practice of recognition is one which Ricoeur, Robinson and Emmanuel Levinas have credited to the Biblical idea of the Neighbour, of unmerited responsibility and care for a stranger. Although Haein Park has written an article on Robinson’s fiction with reference to the facial recognition of Levinas’ theory, there is little work which has otherwise been done on the subject; thus much of this chapter theorises from the ground up. This chapter focuses on the relationships of Jack Boughton particularly his relationship with his sister Glory, and his namesake Reverend John Ames, as they form the greater part of the subject matter in both Robinson’s novels *Gilead* (2004), and *Home* (2009), which tell of Jack’s return to his family home after a twenty-year-long absence – Jack being the stranger in question. Recognition proposes, furthermore, that the self defines itself by the counterpart *being recognised*, and therefore a kind of demand for validation. This trope is more exclusively seen in Robinson’s final novel *Lila* (2014), the unusual prequel to the events of the first novels. By Ricoeur’s reckoning, this need for assurance is not a practice of reciprocity but of mutuality; it is not exchange but shared

understanding where strangeness, for example, can be the very factor which enables a community of similarity. Even so, the self is undeserving of the overabundance of the act of neighbourly recognition which supersedes all deserving.

In this lies the potential for redemption of the self's strangeness. It is the very loneliness of Robinson's characters which enables them to see the loneliness in others. In her novel *Home*, Jack and Glory's connection is their sense of estrangement and failure which paradoxically bridges the divide between them. It is the sorrow and loneliness in Lila by which Ames recognises her as a kindred spirit, and ultimately it is what enables him to love Jack and to bless him. Completely uninitiated in reaching out to another, these uninvited gestures of relationship and recognition unite what Ricoeur's theory names the practice of the gift, its capacity to begin relationships and invite exchange. In the discussion of Robinson's books, I focus especially on these practices of gift-recognition with regard to the gift of a name – selecting names for children in the complicated naming-after of Robinson's characters – and that of blessing as a instances of restoration or reconciliation.

In “The Economy of the Gift: Paul Ricoeur's Poetic Redescription of Reality”, William David Hall extends the concept of the gift beyond a practice of reciprocity in the gift exchange – where one gesture expects an equivalent return – to a gift which *supersedes obligation and reciprocity*, one which refutes a “logic of equivalence” and proposes instead the “love command as the competing logic of superabundance” (199). Much has been written on gift theory, and generally the consensus is that the gift signifies obligation and return-value. Marcel Mauss, in his essay “Gift, Gift”, explains furthermore that this concept of the gift is a “pawn” (29), easily manipulated, to both good and dangerous ends of exploitation and obligation. However, Ralph Waldo Emerson pronounces that the only pure gift can be *of oneself*, a criteria only love (given) can fulfil. He calls this love the “god of gifts” (“Gifts” 27). Herein lies the redemption of my theory: the capacity to love beyond one's means or another's expectations – specifically in Glory's relationship with Jack, Ames' relationship with Jack, and Ames' relationship with Lila. This is ‘gift-love’ as proposed by Ricoeur and also by the theologian John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* – a text in which both Robinson and her characters are very well-versed. Thus, they demonstrate that the influence of the Biblical pattern of loving one's neighbour manifests itself in practical gift-love, enacted in partnership the doctrines of grace and forgiveness proposed by Calvin, Robinson's characters and Robinson herself. The moral imperative to love one's neighbours – even one's enemies – as one loves oneself is where recognition of fault, of debt, of unfamiliarity – Ricoeur's

estranged and lonely selves of my previous chapter – may be met with Ricoeur’s gift of superabundance, even forgiveness. Thus we find recognition’s potentiality for restoration and redemption of the lonely self.

### *Identifying and distinguishing*

Before embarking on an exploration of *The Course of Recognition* itself, it is necessary to begin with an understanding of what is meant by the word ‘recognition’. Ricoeur begins his musings on *The Course of Recognition* with an extensive analysis of the definitions of the word ‘recognition’ as found in the dictionaries *Grand Robert de la langue française* and the *Emile Littré Dictionnaire de la langue française*. It is worth noting that there are as many as twenty-three definitions in the *Grand Robert*, and from these twenty-three definitions – and the more concise list of definitions in the Littré version – Ricoeur tables three main characteristics of recognition:

1. To grasp (an object) with the mind, through thought, in joining together images, perceptions having to do with it; to distinguish or identify the judgement or action, know it by memory.
2. To accept, take to be true (or take as such).
3. To bear witness through gratitude that one is indebted to someone for (something, an act). (12)

It is clear in the list that the work of recognition partly comprises identification by which one may recognise something due to the mind’s initiative in recalling it from a previous encounter - as Ricoeur says, “the one that derives recognition (*reconnaître*) from *connaître*, by means of the prefix re-” (5). One may also know someone or something by “a mark by which we recognize” (6). The definitions also include the concept (meaning 2) of “avowal” (8) – a theme which is not given very much attention in Ricoeur’s book (and which features more prominently in my first chapter in the discussion of *confession*). And lastly is the “surprise guest” definition, namely, “recognition-gratitude” (8). That particular connection is perhaps more lexicographically comfortable in the original French as both the word for ‘recognition’ and ‘to be grateful’ may be translated to the same noun and verb: *reconnaissance* and *reconnaître*. Let us, for the present, begin by directing our attention to the nature of the original *identifying and distinguishing*, as the umbrella-term under which all recognition may be categorised.

This pair of identifying and distinguishing constitutes a large portion of Ricoeur’s theory; at the heart of his analysis, this is what makes all recognition possible. These acts, he explains, are

moreover co-dependent; that “[i]n order to identify it is necessary to distinguish, and it is in distinguishing that we identify” (25); it is to recognise, as Ricoeur says, “something as the same, as identical to itself and not other than itself” (21). At its most basic function, this means recognition is built from the act of singling out, and by so distinguishing, identifying a singularity. Glory Boughton, in Robinson’s *Home*, is able to identify her brother Jack, the lost son of the Boughton family, when he arrives on the doorstep of their family home after a twenty-year absence. When Glory sees Jack, at first all she notices is his *strangeness*. Recognition seems under threat, despite him being her brother, when she ponders “whether she would have recognized him if she had passed him on the street” (31). However, she is assured she has recognised her brother because of certain characteristics which were familiar to her – such as his choice to enter through the kitchen door, as in the days of their childhood, and the memory of his behaviour from their infancy where he was similarly “distant and respectful and tentative. In this at least, he was so much like the brother of her memory that she knew one hard look from her might send him away” (32). These behavioural marks echo Ricoeur’s first definition of recognition, that of recognising by the “images and perceptions” of something or the “memory” of it (12). Glory may thus recall to mind the Jack she had known and link it to the unfamiliar man before her.

However, Glory’s descriptions of Jack as “a thin man in a brown suit” (31) are notable for their unfamiliarity and there is a difficulty in this recognition because, Glory muses, “[i]t was as if she had spent the years preparing herself to know him when she saw him, and here he was, tense and wary, reminding her less of himself and more of those nameless strangers” (40). Jack’s recognition is even more difficult because when he says her name Glory notices a hesitation which seems to signal that “he was not absolutely certain which sister he was dealing with, [or] maybe because he did not wish to seem too familiar” (32). Despite the difficulty of that first recognition, despite their social unfamiliarity, it is imperative to note that what enables the encounter to take place is the very fact of Glory’s recognising him and therefore treating him as her brother. The first words she says to him are “Jack... I was about to give up on you. Come in” (31), demonstrating recognition by name, connecting this “thin man in a brown suit” (31) to the brother of her memory. Already, the ultimate restoration which recognition affords is foreshadowed in this instance of Glory redeeming Jack from unfamiliarity, so that the question of whether she would recognise him passing on the street no longer threatens misrecognition. Robinson appears to propose that the ties of family prompt the most significant forms of identifying and distinguishing, where possibly no other familiar indicators are available. Although on the occasion of their first meeting Jack might

almost have been a stranger – not merely for the change in his appearance but the unfamiliarity of their uneasy interactions with one another – Glory nevertheless welcomes him to their home simply because she knows he is family, not because she knows *him*. Able now to distinguish this man as Jack, her brother, Glory is, because of that distinction, enabled to identify, to treat him, as such – and he vice versa.

Though we have marked the capacity of the meanings implicit in the pairing identifying and distinguishing to identify something or someone *for* what or who they are, there is another way in which recognition may distinguish, and that is the process of identifying *with*. Although each person is estranged from each other by the uniqueness of their own peculiar struggle, identification *with* paves the way for empathy. In this way, Glory and Jack are able to distinguish what Ricoeur calls the “most authentic identity” (21) of each other. In the first of a series of meaningful exchanges between them, Jack has just come from a troubling conversation with his ailing father’s ignorant efforts to address past hurts. Injured and vulnerable by this conversation, Jack finds himself opening up to Glory a little, confessing a concealed proclivity to alcoholism, which he had hoped never to share, to which Glory responds in kind with a confession of her own. The recognition of Jack’s having confidence in her is exactly what prompts Glory to respond in a fashion which honours his trust in her with a corresponding trust in him. (This is where the recognition of Ricoeur’s theory begins to overlap with his subsequent definitions of gratitude). Glory confesses that whilst all this time she had led her family to believe that she had married (and the dissolution of the relationship had brought her home), the truth is that she had never been married to this man who in fact was married to someone else whilst courting her. What is important to this scene is that Jack, though initially he laughs at the confession, realises the magnitude of the confession for Glory, and apologises, saying, “I hope you’re not mad at me, Glory. I don’t know why you wouldn’t be” (*Home* 123). Jack shows that he recognises *her*, that his reaction had hurt her, is able to imagine her anger had good and just cause. His apology and repentance eventually persuades Glory to trust him with the rest of her secret. Significantly, Jack’s telling observation, a little while later, proves that the crux of the exchange is the mutual understanding which enables it. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe I have just been told that *I am not the only sinner* in this family” (125, emphasis added). This realisation of Jack’s cues the reader why such an exchange was made possible. It was because Glory had also had experience of similarly ostracising secrets, lies which she felt she could not reveal to the family, that she was able to hear and respond to Jack and vice versa. The significance of these confessions is that they mark a point at which the

relationship of the characters becomes trusting and in that trust, they become vulnerable. This is what Michael Vander Weele, writing on “Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and the Difficult Gift of Human Exchange”, calls “recognition of shared flaw and fellow feeling” (230). Glory and Jack are able not only to identify each other as worthy of entrusting secrets but also to identify *with* each other in recognising shared experience and vulnerability.

This suggests the next step is of a mutual recognition, an understanding which exists between individuals. For Glory and Jack, the sharing of their ‘sins’ demonstrates what Ricoeur calls “[t]he course of self-recognition [that] ends in mutual recognition” (187). He explains that

the trajectory of the sovereign act of recognition-identification [...] puts us on the way toward the problematic of being recognized, implied by the request for mutual recognition [...] In this sense, recognizing oneself occupies the midpoint of this long trajectory. (92)

This is the point in Ricoeur’s theory where recognition involves empathetic understanding between selves. Self-recognition, when placed alongside another self, not only enables comparison against that other but also, Ricoeur suggests, seeks mutuality. In my previous chapter, the concept of self-identifying came by way of attribution, being a means by which the self designates an identity to itself; the self-attribution progresses now to the ability to equally attribute what one attributes to oneself *to another*. As Ricoeur puts it: “[t]he other is over there, where I could be if I were to move. In this way, imagination makes the other’s “here” coincide with my “over there” (155). The imagination functioning to construct and ascribe to itself may also be employed to imagine for oneself another’s point of view. The mutuality which, as we have seen, exists between Jack and Glory, for example, stems from understanding of the common ground between them; not only the distant memory of childhood and home, but also their ‘sins’ and secrets, and the fact that each has experienced great suffering and loss. Thus self-recognition paves the way for an attribution which meets out the same qualities to another, on recognising in them some quality or characteristic known intimately to oneself.

Thus indignation is the natural response to misrecognition because one makes oneself vulnerable to reactions, as is seen by Glory’s hurt when Jack laughs – what Ricoeur deems being “taken as insignificant. Deprived of approbation, the person is as if nonexistent” (191). (As seen in my previous chapter, this is an instance of isolation which seems as extreme as death). Jack testifies to this, admitting to Glory that when he’d once come in to find the whole family gathered without him, he’d thought they had “forgotten all about [him], and if felt like death in a way” (*Home* 288).

The indignation, anger or hurt with which a person responds to a “struggle for recognition” actually “constitutes a structure of transition between the experience of disregard, felt as anger, and the choice to become a participant in the struggle for recognition” (200). Though Ricoeur continues in an analysis of responses to this humiliation of the self – whether it disarms the self, mobilises the self, or provokes self-assertion – the point he makes implicates both Jack and Glory. Ricoeur explains that “it is indeed our most authentic identity, the one that makes us who we are, that demands to be recognized” (21) – it is a “call to others” (96). Jack and Glory’s relationship with each other is such that their confidences to each other are tacit requests for the other’s approbation and similar response. In itself, the fact of their opening up to each other initiates, albeit symbolically, the interaction between and acknowledgement of their most authentic selves. The reconciling work of recognition can already be seen here where Jack realises his error in laughing at Glory, and Glory shows her acceptance of his apology and forgiveness by continuing to confide in him. In the choice to confide, each thereby recognises and affirms the other.

#### *Redemption for Strange Selves in Understanding*

Both Ricoeur and Robinson suggest that the self is not doomed to the insurmountable obstacle in the way of inter-personal understanding and communication. On the contrary (as has already been intimated), it is the identifying of similar strangeness – equally ‘sinners’ as is the case for Glory and Jack – identifying in each other enough similarity to make recognition possible, thus redeeming the strangeness to some extent. Recognition which has permitted Lila to recall the circumstances of her own destitution, for example, also enables her to empathise with the homeless boy she meets in cabin outside of Gilead. Her unparalleled insight into his misery stems from her own experience of hopelessness and destitution. She is confident of her understanding of him and she can read him within minutes of meeting him. She observes: “[k]indness was something he didn’t even know he wanted, and here it was. It made him teary and restless, and he was trying to seem to repay it” (*Lila* 148). It is only similarity which afforded her such confident assessment, because she could recognise in him exactly what she had experienced. Indeed, Ricoeur foresees estrangement would be irredeemable if not for mutual recognition: “the struggle for recognition would lose itself in the unhappy consciousness if it were not given to humans to be able to accede to an actual, albeit symbolic, experience of mutual recognition” (153). The mutuality to which Ricoeur makes reference does not merely signify the reciprocation of a similar gesture – *I recognise you that*

*you might recognise me* – but an understanding which does not arise from the formulaic exchange of obligatory giving-back but from a “mutuality that circulates between us” (231). What this means for the estranged self is that *by virtue of its otherness, it is perfectly positioned to understand the similarity of another’s estrangement*, and therein lies the potential for the redemption of strangeness, of otherness, of loneliness.

In light of the influence of the Samaritan on recognition and the Neighbour, the questions which now presents itself asks what the influence of a Christian theological doctrine can add to the act of recognition and redemption. At this juncture, the virtues described in the story of the good Samaritan suggest a bridging of the gap between the strange selves in proposing cardinal Christian virtues such as charity (love) and grace which are associated with the concept of the Neighbour. Rebecca Painter, in her essay “Loyalty Meets Prodigality”, demonstrates in Robinson’s novels that openness fosters a spirit of understanding between characters – this is the same bare-faced honesty and correlative vulnerability of Glory and Jack’s conversation. What is needed, in her view, is “fellow feeling” (336); the ability to recognise similar passions or sorrows in oneself as in another. This is something which she seems to suggest is inspired by “the prodigality of divine compassion” (331); that is, the nature of God’s love towards humanity. The recognition of mutuality is the heart of the doctrine of the Neighbour, a doctrine born of Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan. In his essay “The Socius and the Neighbour”, Ricoeur explains that the practice of neighbourliness is the “the personal way in which I encounter another” (99). He says that “[b]eing a neighbor lies in the habit of making oneself available” (99). The Samaritan of the story acts as a Neighbour in caring for a victimised Jew who has been attacked and robbed. In Ricoeur’s theory, he embodies “the category of Stranger [...] the category of the non-category” (99). He explains that strangeness was a label that both the Samaritan and the victim shared: the Samaritan was “near because he approached, distant because he remained the non-Judean who one day picked up an injured stranger along the highway” (108). In his attention to the needs of his fellow man, the Samaritan demonstrates, says Ricoeur, “a gesture over and above roles, personages, and functions” (99-100), a practice which innovates “hypersociological mutuality” (100). The recognition afforded the victim by the good Samaritan is one which overleaps strangeness, not only of never having encountered each other before, but of each being a representative of two nations hostile to each other, and invites empathetic understanding.

In his book, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, Levinas declares that “it is as a neighbour that a man is accessible: as a face” (9), that neighbourly relation requires proximity. He

says that “this facing of the face in its expression – in its mortality – summons me, demands me, claims me: as if the invisible death faced by the face of the other – pure otherness, separated somehow from all unity – were ‘my business’” (45). Levinas theorist Bernhard Waldenfels describes Levinas’ theory of ‘proximity’ as one which naturally invokes the parable of the neighbour “who has more to do with the stranger’s than with the friend’s face. Proximity does not coincide with affinity” (75). Thus the neighbour’s actions are due to his being close enough to see another’s need, and such responses are not necessarily summoned by any pre-existing relation. Vander Weele describes this as “the other side of recognition: effort” (217). What he means is that one cannot easily arrive at the position of recognising or recognised. To illustrate his point, he cites two fundamentals, “openness to transformation” and more importantly, “the blessing of forgiveness” (225) – efforts which are necessary requirements before recognition can be achieved. Although Levinas’ theory is confined to the face – as the site of encounter with the other – I would venture to apply it to the entire encounter with the other which, in its posture of strangeness, is likewise naked and vulnerable: an appeal embodied. As he says himself, it is not merely an object, but “rather *somebody* [to be] responded to” (Levinas 69, emphasis added). In Levinas’ theory, the encountering of the other is an invocation, where its very otherness calls for an effort, a *response* and some degree of *responsibility for* the other.

Part of the work of recognition is the ability to recognise in others what one knows of oneself, as suggested by Ricoeur in his book *Oneself as Another*, (discussed in my previous chapter). When Lila, now married and cared for, discovers a homeless boy sheltering in a small shack outside of town, she is able to empathise because she remembers having once sheltered there herself. And strangely, he seems to have significant insight into her. Although nothing had changed apart from a blanket crumpled in a corner, when the boy finds her there, he claims the shack – stating “[g]ot my stuff in it” (145) as evidence. He appears to recognise something in her suggesting to him she was equally rootless and might dispute rights to the shack, which provokes him to assert his ownership. Yet the boy gradually trusts her enough to speak about himself a little bit and reveals that he believes he has killed his father, that he has now run away and, not knowing where to go, has been staying in the shack for a few days. Lila demonstrates complete comprehension of his predicament.

That’s how it is, [Lila] thought. Keep to yourself. So long as you can do that, you’re all right. Then somebody finds you in a corner somewhere, and you ain’t even there to hear them say, What a pity. And that seems better than asking for help. She said,

“I can understand that. I do. I know how you feel around strangers. I feel the same way. So you can trust me.” (153)

What is interesting about this exchange is that Lila does *not* identify herself as a stranger, though this is their first meeting. It is a fellow feeling which they share, the experiences of keeping to oneself, and that destitute loneliness of runaways, which allows Lila to exclude herself from the collective ‘strangers’ about whom they both feel wary and uncomfortable. She reflects later that “[i]t seemed almost as if she had lied to the preacher when she said she didn’t know that boy” (169). There is something about him which is just so familiar to her, as if he had been “at the edge of her sight all those years [...] his whole life just that terrible little ember of pride, meanness and kindness all that he had to shelter it with, and the injured fearfulness that comes when anybody at all might do you the worst kind of harm, just by the way they look at you” (169). Additionally, in this instance, Lila is encountering herself in some sense, seeing from the outside the destitution and poverty which Ames must have seen when he first met her. This also allows her new insight into what Ames must have felt at the time – and perhaps why she is able to be sensitive to the boy’s insecurities as well as show enough compassion to make him trust her. Such insight into this boy not only suggests that Lila has drunk deeply of that exact same suffering but also has experienced rootlessness herself, sheltering in that same shack because she had nowhere else to go and no one to run to. This marks an important step along the course of recognition, namely it is the mutuality of fellow feeling which fosters understanding between selves.

Acknowledging this fellow feeling between persons could thus be said to be a mark of validation; a case almost of granting another’s sufferings because one has experienced them personally and knows their peculiar anguish. Robinson’s writing is not too shy to dwell on general devastation and misery in the world, and the crisis within the self, its own knowledge of its misery. Her novels seem to deal with sufferings – especially as sorrow. Ames’ sorrows which constitute “a great part of the substance of human life” (*Gilead* 118) echo Glory’s description of Jack with the Biblical imagery of a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief and as one from whom men hide their faces” (*Home* 331). Yet there is a sense of community and subsequently, a sort of comfort in the validation which is afforded by that suffering. In Ricoeur’s words, it almost communicates “a tacit request for approbation that can serve to reinforce its self-assurance” as a “call to others” to approve its identity (96). This explains Glory’s “unwelcome realisation” (*Home* 72), that despite all Jack had become to the family, and the self-imposed separation from them, “she loved Jack and yearned for his approval” (72). Thus when Jack says to her, “You never bother me, Glory. It’s

remarkable how much you don't bother me. Almost unprecedented" (118), it is the approval she has been yearning for. Later he also admits that leaving her would mean being "forever alienated from our little sister, on whom we have become surprisingly dependent" (173). It is a sort of reconnaissance, gratefulness, his understanding her need for affirmation from him after they had both been so open with each other. Thus we see the outworking of Ricoeur's third definition of recognition: "[bearing] witness through gratitude" (12), that Jack acknowledges Glory's efforts and his dependence on her. He realises the importance of affirming Glory and rewarding her trust and love in him, even finding some pleasure in it for himself: "when he saw she really was pleased, he smiled" (118). Jack shows himself to be equally as aware of Glory's desire to forgive him and to love him, when he comprehends her pleasure in his recognition, and acknowledges it.

Indeed, this same type of approbation is equally attributable to persons who are strangers; in this way strangers are redeemed from relative obscurity in being acknowledged – as with the encounter between Lila and the boy in the cabin. Likewise, Ames describes seeing Lila and feeling as if he recognised her from the moment she walked into his church. He tells her later:

There are people you seem to know the first time you see them. And other people you might spend your whole life with and never really know. The first day you walked into the church, that rainy Sunday, I felt as though I recognized you somehow. It was a remarkable experience. It was. (167)

It is interesting that Ames should use the word 'recognise' when there has been no previous encounter to recall from memory, no relation by which he should know her, and no indication or sign in her appearance or behaviour which might make her familiar in any way. Significantly, once they are married, there always seems an imminent threat that she will one day decide to leave him. In fact this is exactly what he fears she had done on the day she met the boy. When she recounts her meeting, speaking passionately about the misery of the boy, Ames' eyes fill with tears and softly he says "I did know you. I do know you" – to which she replies, "That's good. I guess" (168). It validates Ames' understanding of her character but, even more importantly, it proves that his initial recognition, even when she was still an outsider and a stranger, was authentic recognition. What is especially unusual about this authentic recognition is that it is not knowledge which is afforded just anyone – the family ties which, as we have seen, do not automatically unite Glory and Jack. Thus, what Ames propounds is a recognition that *goes beyond* recollection or familiarity. This is a recognition which seeks to recognise that which it has no reason to recognise, which seeks to grasp and hold something new. Even so, he proves that the relationship of recognition is completed in the

fact of his identifying and distinguishing Lila. His notice of her pulls her in from her solitary life.

### *Naming as Recognition*

One of the most meaningful ways in which recognition is displayed in family relationships, as set forth by both Ricoeur and Robinson, is in the naming of children. In Robinson's novels there are notable examples of this, each name chosen bringing with it the legacy of the person for whom the child is named, and which confers that legacy upon the son. Typically, a name is the recognition of civil institutions, but also its own form of defining and distinguishing within a family. Ames' narrative, for example, is an account for his son which his wife teasingly names his "begats" (*Gilead* 10). A name is a confirmation of an individual's place in a story or history. Ricoeur describes the naming process not only as "[assigning] a fixed place in one's lineage" but as a "transmission of life, [...] transmission of the family legend; transmission of an inheritance of commercial and noncommercial goods; a transmission finally summed up by the assigning of a name" (193) – or, as Boughton says to Jack, "[m]y life became your life, like lighting a candle from another" (121). Naming confers identity upon a child. The characters of Robinson's novels put the tradition of naming-after to interesting use. Jack is in fact named John Ames Boughton, a gesture of friendship and honour by Boughton for his friend Ames who at that stage had lost both wife and infant (this before his meeting and marrying Lila). Ames' and Lila's son is named, in return, Robert B. Ames. At the close of *Home*, it is further revealed that Jack's only son is also named for Jack's father: Robert Boughton. The practice of naming is one by which, in Ricoeur's definition, "one can read degrees of kinship" (192). Analysis of the process of naming, therefore, is an insight into the identity which is being conferred upon the recipient beyond the practicality of civil identity.

In the first instance, in Robinson's *Gilead*, John Ames alerts the reader to the discrepancy of mis-naming, and of namelessness signifying a regrettable and rootless state: a misrecognition. In his narrative, he gives an account of the brief life of his daughter, to whom he refers by the name of Rebecca. On the day of her premature birth when Ames was away from home, his wife died in childbirth, and so Boughton, in ignorance of her parents' wishes, had baptised the child Angeline just before death claimed her too. Though Ames returned in time to hold his daughter for a few minutes, he affirms "[s]he'd have been Rebecca, but Angeline is a good name" (20), and never again refers to her as Angeline. It is not a name's appeal which is at stake here but the concept of the naming party's choice, the decision of identity made on behalf of the identity of the child.

Namelessness, therefore, is treated as a tragedy because it is understood as a lack of identity, and moreover, a lack of a naming body who might take an interest. The child from Jack's misspent youth is never referred to by name (the mother's family refusing to have anything to do with Jack's), and though she died at three years of age, the child's headstone read simply "Baby" (*Gilead* 181). Lila, a neglected, unwanted child never knew her last name, and when she was picked up by a woman whom everyone knew simply as Doll, Lila went to school writing her last name "Dahl" (46) assuming that was who she belonged to. It echoes Ricoeur's musings on the demand for recognition. While Lila had no surname by which to recognise herself, nobody transmitting that sense of identity and belonging, she attempts to fill the gap herself, designating herself as family of the person closest to her: Doll. If the nameless suffer a lack of identity, of self and of belonging, then the inverse is true of the naming process: that it *confers* sense of identity, of self and, in mapping the child's place in the family genealogy, naming confers belonging as well.

The recognition by a name, being as it were, the "object of transmission" (Ricoeur 194), means that the child learns *to* "recognise [it]self as such" because he "*was* recognised" as such (194, emphasis added). Here, the 'being recognised' also alludes to the possibility of the child's being a carrier of meaning on behalf of the naming party, a demonstration of the namesake's significance to the family. If naming is a continuation of a man's family identity in that his son is named after him, then where the relation between the one named and the original is less direct, a sense of identity is conferred which is built from the original. So in a way it is natural that Ames is slow to understand that Jack has a peculiar relationship to him, as Jack was named for Ames. And little Robby Ames, Ames' son, proudly tells his full name to Jack - "Robert B. [...] B. for Boughton" (*Home* 193), thereby demonstrating his understanding of an affiliation with the Boughtons – to which Jack replies "I believe that is the best name in the world" (*Home* 193). The regard these men had for each other is demonstrated in their choice of names, and links the identity of their sons into both families, though Jack's connection with Ames is somewhat difficult.

But Jack's comment on Robby's name has further implications. As Jack develops his confidence in Glory, he reveals that he in fact has his own son, born to his black wife – except that the anti-miscegenation laws of the time forbade its legitimacy. Jack had actually come back to Iowa in the vain hope that as one of the few states without the laws of racial separation, he might be able to make a home for them with his Gilead family. He is sorely disappointed with his father's noticeable racism and apparent inability to either understand or forgive. Now convinced that his father would never accept them, Jack leaves bereft of hope and utterly wretched, believing Della,

his wife, has finally succumbed to her family's disapproval of him and has broken with him at last. When Glory is left mourning his departure, a car pulls up, bringing Della looking for him. On finding Jack has left, Della prepares to leave herself but Glory stops her, showing her both recognition and acceptance when she asks "You're Della aren't you. You're Jack's wife" (333), and Della replies, "Yes I am. I am his wife" (333). It is a momentous occasion for Glory to meet the wife Jack so dearly loves, and understanding, through Jack's revelations, the love Della has that she would come looking for him. Glory's knowledge and willingness to accept Della – her tears at having the privilege of meeting her, and inviting her inside – are merely the love and acceptance she afforded to Jack overflowing onto his family. This is all because "Della was Jack's wife, she said so herself, and it made all the difference" (334). When Della exits the car, moreover, Glory overhears her saying to the child with them, "Robert, you stay in the car" (332). The significance of this is overwhelming – Glory feels that "[her] whole life has come down to this moment" (339). Jack had never told her the name of his son. A junior Robert Boughton – Jack had named his son for his father. Here Jack's love is evident both for his father and for this child in giving him the family name. It is a sharp contrast to his first child of so many years ago, miserably unrecognised as 'Baby'. Glory recognises the child's place in their family, her nephew, when she fondly observes to herself "Jack had a beautiful child, a beautiful son, who would some time turn Boughton, no doubt, and lose his prettiness to what they called distinction" (336). By thinking of the child in this way, she grants him their family, identifying him unmistakably as a Boughton. Despite hiding them from his family in fear of their reaction to the inter-racial relationship, Jack gave his son the legacy of the Boughton name. More than that, even though estranged for so long from his father, a relationship fraught and difficult, Jack honours him with a namesake. In the gift of the family name to his son, Jack, for his own part, is redeeming his new family from its unrecognised state and reconciling them all to his own family.

As it transpires, a name represents a sore point between Jack and Ames, an unaddressed crisis of identity, and the obstacle – the misrecognition – which must be overcome before they can be reconciled. At Jack's christening, Boughton surprises Ames with his choice of name for his son, and Ames, nonplussed, later confesses "[his] feelings at the time were a little more complex than [he]'d have wished" (177). He feels he cannot concede this honour. In her essay "Finding Flannery O' Connor's 'Good Man' in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*", Susan Petit describes Ames' feeling. To him she says, it was "a pointed statement that the Boughtons were so fertile that they could symbolically give him one of their children" (305) at the height of his loss and loneliness.

Jack does not make it much easier for him as his relation to Ames means plaguing him especially. A prankster and petty thief, Jack later also fathers a child with an impoverished girl in her teens – a child whom he ignores entirely and who dies a few short years thereafter. Years later Jack admits he has done the one thing he feels Ames “cannot forgive” (*Home* 289). The relationship between them was never easy for Ames, especially Jack’s neglect of his child in the face of Ames’ greatest loss. Yet Boughton once called him “the father of [Jack’s] soul” and Ames says of it in his letters to Robby:

I can’t endorse the phrase, any soul’s father being the Lord only. There’s much for me to ponder in that fact. Better that I should reject my own son – which God forbid – but you are the Lord’s child also, as am I, as we all are. I must be gracious. My only role is to be gracious. Clearly I must somehow contrive to think graciously about him, also, since he makes such a point of seeing right through me. (140)

His anxiety here is apparent, struggling to come to terms with his actual role in Jack’s life, and feeling the hypocrisy of treating him graciously when his true feelings might be very different. Moreover, Jack was never convinced by the display. The name presented an obstacle to Ames’ connection to Jack, but also to Jack who had a tendency sardonically to call him “Papa” (again, evidence of the misuse and misrecognition of a name). By the use of this ostensibly intimate term, Jack is equally distanced from Ames: he tells Glory that when he saw Ames one day: “I began to be charming, you know. A little oily [...] I called him Papa. He deserved it, too. He hadn’t even mentioned to the wife that my father honoured him with a namesake” (132). Petit perceives that this name is both illustrative of Jack “not giv[ing] up the hope that Ames would help him as a father would, though he is also needling Ames for rejecting him” (310-311). For both Jack and Ames, the names by which they are known to each other represent a crisis in the conferral of identity, where the name was not the redemption of recognition.

Reconciliation therefore seems also to be in recognising by name. Ames speaks regretfully of the baptism, ultimately stating a desire to “christen him again” because he had been “so distracted by [his] own miserable thoughts” to bless Jack properly (215). All these years later, he explains that on hearing the name chosen, a surprise by Boughton, “his heart froze” and all he thought was, “This is not my child” (214). Furthermore, no one ever referred to Jack as John Ames. There was no sense of filial relationship; the name ‘Papa’ is only ironically used by Jack and Ames never acknowledges Jack’s name, not even to his wife, until he is forced to. Ames begins gradually to think more compassionately of Jack, progressing to the point where he can assert “Jack Boughton is my son [...] By ‘my son’ I mean another self, a more cherished self” (215), but notably, does not

yet use Jack's full name. It is only after much praying and pondering that, in their final conversation before Jack leaves Gilead again, the old hurt is laid to rest when Ames sees Jack leaving and accompanies him to the bus stop. When they get there, he offers to bless Jack, and his benediction is this: "Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father" (276). His use of Jack's full name (*his own name*), reconciles not only by the recognition of Jack as a 'son', a family member of Boughton but also by acknowledging his own relation to Jack, specifically by using the name which had been an obstacle between them. Susan Petit takes this even further, saying that this reconciliation amounts to treating Jack at last as his "adoption son" (313), especially because at the same time, Ames gives to Jack his copy of *The Essence of Christianity* – something which Petit notes is a book he meant to bequeath to Robby. Recognising Jack by his name, a name which had caused so much strife between them, was the final act of redeeming the relationship because of the conferral of the name. Only then can Ames say to Boughton, "I love him as much as you meant me to" (*Gilead* 279), and mean it.

The last 'name' which requires further analysis in our discussion is the peculiar and weighty significance attached to the word 'you' – which Lila espouses as the most genuine expression of love and recognition. It is typical of Robinson's imagination, as we have seen with the tradition of naming after one's father, to explore and implode the expectations of tradition. In this instance, the word 'you' is one which is assumed to bear the weight of ultimate othering: you are *you* because you are not *me*; *me and then you*. It is something which might be understood in Ricoeur's terms as the initial stages of self-recognition, where "the relation between same and the other was that of exclusion" (150). So it seems in *Lila*, when contemplating the impending birth of her child and the fate of Ames' erstwhile wife who had died, along with her daughter, in childbirth, Lila finds herself talking to her own unborn child:

You. What a strange word that is. She thought, I have never laid eyes on you. I am waiting for you. The old man prays for you [...] Both of us think about you the whole day long. If I die bearing you, or if you die when you are born, I will still be thinking, Who are you? (244)

It seems Lila understands how distancing the word might be, that there is the 'we' of herself and her husband, praying and thinking about the child ceaselessly, that the child is only the 'you' object of their contemplations. However, she immediately answers herself with these words:

there will be only one answer out of all the people in the world, all the people there have ever been or ever will be. If we find each other in heaven, we'll say, So there

you are! [...] And it would be the only thing that mattered, because no one else could say “you” and mean the same thing by it. (244)

Lila reclaims ‘you’ in that instead of othering the child, she finds in its use the most extraordinary meaning by which one might identify with absolute conviction another person’s most authentic self, surpassing given names. In her view, the bond which connects them pre-dates the actual naming of Robby and is nevertheless an intimate relationship. Lila feels, in the instance of her recognising a son in heaven whom she might never meet on earth, that she could communicate a world of meaning because she was the only one who could say ‘you’ with that weight, with that recognition. When Ames wakes beside her while she is pondering these things, she affords the same to him, naming him simply “You” – to which he laughingly replies “Who else?” (245) and her answer is “Nobody else in this world” (245). It is an instance, despite the choice of word, which bears both Ricoeur’s identification and distinguishing, being confident of its ability to recognise. The intimacy by naming a person ‘you’ – “So there you are!” (244) – is not, as in the examples of the previous case studies, due to the selection and assigning of a specific name. Robinson furthers the category of the name-gift in going beyond the actually named to the meaning *conferred by the one who names*.

### *Recognition as Given, as Gift*

The next logical step is to develop our working definition of recognition into something like a gift. It already has been established that the significance of recognition-granted is that the recipient is not necessarily a deserving recipient (although he may invoke a response from the potential giver), as in the story of the Samaritan. At this juncture it becomes necessary to make reference to theories of the gift as described by others who have written formative essays on the subject. Jacques Derrida, who addresses the concept of the gift in his book *Given Time*, claims that there can be no gift because the gift becomes a requisite for obligatory counter-exchange. The gift, he says, is “annulled” each time “there is restitution or counter-gift” (12). Derrida proposes that in order “to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt. If the other *gives me back* or *owes me* or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift” (12). In his view, the gift cannot be recognised as gift, nor even remembered as such, otherwise the act of giving has been corrupted. Similarly, Marcel Mauss in his canonical essay “Gift, Gift” examines the etymological roots of the word ‘gift’ which links it to the word for

‘poison’ (a comparison which does not translate comfortably into English), and this colours the rest of his speculations. He proposes that the gift is open to manipulation, liable to become a “pawn” (29) in the constant circling of “services and counter-services” (28). It is, he says, a “magic potion, the delicious charm, [and] can be either good or bad” (31). Although Ricoeur agrees that true giving should be without obligation or expectation of response, in his theory *disinterested giving is not impossible* (which Derrida believes it is), he proclaims that even though the gift is susceptible to such manipulation, true giving must take care that it does not invoke a “logic of reciprocity” (Ricoeur 228). Recognition then must be a giving which is neither demanded, nor exacts recompense.

Truly mutual recognition, says Ricoeur, “[follows] the model of the reciprocal ceremonial gift” (153) which he holds in strict contrast to the “logic of reciprocity” (219) which is an exchange susceptible to a circle that may be “either vicious or virtuous” (228). Expanding the concept, Ricoeur explains that ‘gift’ is symbolic of commercial and non-commercial gifts, which means that “we can find the gift in every form or what is priceless” (237). As developed by his theory, ‘gift’ now grows to include abstract gift forms. The scenario of Glory and Jack exchanging confidences might be seen as a form of gift exchange. The logic of reciprocity is certainly what Jack refers to when he assures her that “[t]his doesn’t have to be an exchange of hostages or anything” (*Home* 122). The exchange of hostages, or of deeply secret truths, would be the logic of exchange: a secret for a secret. By assuring her that this is not the case, Jack echoes Ricoeur’s continuing reflections that the truly mutual recognition, the authentic gift-giving is that which expects no reciprocal return. Ricoeur assimilates this attitude of giving under the Greek heading of “agape (in the biblical and postbiblical sense)” (219), charity love, the “concept of the neighbor” and that of the “dialectic of love and justice, opened up by this act of drawing near to someone” (222). He speculates that this *agape* seems to “refute in advance the idea of mutual recognition, inasmuch as the generous practice of gift giving, at least in its “pure” form, neither requires nor expects a gift in return” (219). In having no expectation or no reason to deserve a gift, this definition opens up the possibility of conferring the recognition, or *agape*, on a *stranger*. Here, recognition is not so much the memory or the indicative mark of recognition, but rather its capacity to identify and distinguish; the language speaks of *conferring* a sort of identity, not merely acknowledging it. This is not to say that the function of distinguishing, specifically, is lost, but rather that it has the potential to accredit anyone, thus to make familiar rather than only to recall its familiarity. Robinson as we know has spoken of Biblical principle of not just loving one’s neighbours as oneself, but extremes of loving strangers

too. Thus, it is possible to see the act of recognition as an *agape* model, lavished abundantly. Hall, who has written extensively on Ricoeur's practice of the gift, explains that the gift in its ideal form is not a reciprocal exchange of self-interest, but rather originates "precisely out of the benevolence of the giver" (190). The gift of Ricoeur's theory of recognition is not one of equal and opposite reaction but of "superabundance" (199), of benevolence. The model of gift-love is in practice the process of turning a stranger, even an enemy, into one's neighbour, and approaching what is strange and unfamiliar in a manner which *makes* it familiar.

Even though motives and services might be compromised by obligation, what is significant in the gift is that it is an exchange *between persons*. In his introduction to *The Logic of the Gift*, a book which compiles the essays of Mauss, Derrida and Ralph Waldo Emerson amongst others, Alan Schrift acknowledges the gift's expected cycle of countering reactions, but explains that:

Where commodity exchange is focused on a transfer in which objects of equivalent exchange value are reciprocally transacted, gift exchange *seeks to establish a relationship between subjects* in which the actual objects transferred are incidental to the value of the relationship established. (2, emphasis added)

With this, he explains that the power of the gift is neither the object given, nor the reaction elicited by the action – whether it be counter-services, obligation, reconnaissance or indignation at exposed vulnerability<sup>9</sup>. Schrift suggests that it is the nature of the gift to establish relationship and thus the intimacy of gift giving recalls Emerson's gift of love, as a gift which builds a connection between parties: "The only gift is a portion of thyself" ("Gifts" 26), he says – which echoes Ricoeur's neighbour making itself available to another; it requires self-emptying and self-sacrifice. Emerson further explains that "[w]hen I have attempted to join myself to others by services, it proved an intellectual trick, - no more. They eat your service like apples, and leave you out. But *love them*, and they feel you, and delight in you all the time" (27, emphasis added). Thus, Schrift's contemplation of the *subject* of gift leads naturally to the *object* of the gift: the nature of the true gift, the disinterested giving, is the gift love which amounts neither to service nor counter-service in a mercenary exchange. For Emerson this was love, the "genius and god of gifts" (27). By my reading, this unconditional virtue is the hallmark of true recognition which reaches beyond strangeness and draws into relationship.

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<sup>9</sup> Emerson believed that the gift brought regret that one's "independence is invaded" or shame "that the donor should read [one's] heart" ("Gifts" 26).

Following this model, the significance is paradoxically removed from the object identified and distinguished (as anyone may now be a recipient), and the focus is instead on the benevolence of the giver – that is, grace. That is to say that the act of recognition is not dependent on the object, but the subject’s initial choice to identify and distinguish that object, the subject’s grace to bestow without measure. As Haein Park explains in the essay “The Face of the Other”, it is a reorientation of vision which requires “the intervention of God entering human history as the radical Other” (105). In his view, knowledge of the self is inextricably intertwined with knowledge and understanding of God. He sees “Ames's this-worldly spirituality” – that is, that Ames is not only focused on the invisible divine but is also able to see beauty in physical existence – “cannot be separated from his knowledge of God as the wholly other, as one who is the origin, fulfilment and final affirmation of human existence” (116). Practically, this paradigm invokes quite a radical concept, namely, that as a human, no person could ever know or assert anything absolutely because any aspiration to absolute identity is borrowed ostensibly from God as the only absolute being. Ames corroborates this when he says to Lila,

Life on earth is difficult and grave, and marvelous. Our experience is fragmentary. Its parts don't add up. [...] When I say that much the greater part of our experience is unknowable by us because it rests with God, who is unknowable, I acknowledge His grace in allowing us to feel that we know any slightest part of it. (*Lila* 223)

Again, this assertion follows the pattern of returning the focus to the benevolence of the giver. In Ames’ argument, existence is a mere copy of something which is infinite and unattainable in any measureable degree. Any claim to knowledge of another person, of oneself or of God, is born up in and born of God himself. Susan Petit already claims something similar for, in her understanding, the love shown by humans is a picture of divine reality on a broader scale. She says “a father’s unconditional love of a son, no matter how unworthy, is an image of God’s love for any person, no matter how sinful” (313). In a similar fashion, we might then assert that the practice of gifting and, therefore, of grace elsewhere in Robinson’s novels, is inseparable from the concept of divine grace and benevolence on a likewise grandiose scale.

As both families in Robinson’s novels are headed by preachers, the practice of blessing (as in the case of a baptism or christening), both demonstrate identifying and distinguishing, as well as the sort of gift-love which I have been describing. It represents repentance and adoption into the family and the faith. Ames describes it as a “birth, a death and a marriage” (*Lila* 222), conferring identity in the same way that the name-gift does. For Ames, the experience of laying his hand on his

daughter Rebecca “just to bless her” (*Gilead* 64), for example, moves him deeply, which he remembers every single time he christens a child thereafter. He recalls also a litter of kittens which, as children, he and Boughton had baptised, being the “very pious children from pious households in a fairly pious town” that they were (25). They lost track of which of the miserable creatures had been christened and which had not, and were greatly worried that some might have “been borne away still in the darkness of paganism” (25) by their indignant mother. Despite the humour in this scene of a young boy attempting to shower salvation upon unsuspecting cats, this nevertheless marked his first foundational experience of giving a blessing. He feels himself to be a vehicle of something greater than he, which does not originate from him but is rather conveyed through him. The encounter coincides with Ricoeur and Hall’s theories that espouse superabundant (and in this case, supernatural) gifting as its model. As an older man, Ames describes its potency to Robby:

Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. [...] There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn’t enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time. (26)

His experience of blessing echoes the Ricoeurian idea of self-recognition co-existing with the recognition of others when Ames describes really feeling the ‘mysterious life’ of them both in the act of blessing, even to that which is not human – an animal other as an object of blessing. The importance of this is not in the kittens as the recipients of blessing-gift but that the gift is undeserved; nothing requires and no one asked Ames to baptise the cats. Yet Ames’ blessing both distinguishes and acknowledges the object now blessed – not only cats, any child he thereafter baptised in his church. Robinson, in this episode, shows how the act of blessing may be understood as an act of benevolence, a gift-love which recognises, which acknowledges the sacredness of its object and constitutes authentic understanding – “really knowing a creature” as Ames says (26). The depth of recognition portrayed by Ames “really feeling its mysterious life” harks back to Ricoeur’s notion that the ‘being recognised’ involved the acknowledgement and validation of one’s “authentic identity, the one that makes us who we are” (21). When Ames also baptises Lila at the christening of their son, he says, apologetically: “we have to keep you with us” (*Lila* 257). The blessing may therefore be categorised as the recognition-gift in the noncommercial sense, for its capacity to engender understanding between two parties, and as a gesture which demonstrates a supramoral and superabundant giving.

By this measure, the worthiness of its object can no longer be a category for recognition, which brings us to Robinson's estimation of superabundant grace enabling the restoration between people. As Ames begins to understand his deep-seated love for Jack, he similarly affirms that "Love is holy because it is like grace – the worthiness of its object is never really what matters" (Gilead 238). Grace, in Robinson's books, represents the foundation behind the restorative gift-love and unique, unconditional benevolence of redemptive recognition – a theme which under-girds all her novels. Grace, as Ames says, is "the great gift" (183) and it exists in forgiveness – as Vander Weele has already suggested. Ames speculates that "one sufficient reason for the forgiveness of debt is simply the existence of debt" (183) and by so saying, he acknowledges the strangeness of self which bars all human connection because of its strangeness to itself; he identifies the necessity of forgiveness to "restore, and liberate" those others (184). This is why we may affirm that the reconciliation of relationships is crucial to the work of the recognition-as-gift, superabundant giving. Ames muses furthermore:

[t]here is no justice in love, no proportion in it, and there need not be, because in any specific instance it is only a glimpse or parable of an embracing, incomprehensible reality. It makes no sense at all because it is the eternal breaking in on the temporal. (272)

Here, Robinson suggests a philosophy which places love in the category of the divine and the infinite, following the Ricoeurian notion of superabundant *agape* without proportion or calculation. For, as Ames says to Jack, "grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways" (273). In the language of Ricoeur's recognising via *agape*, this is exactly the point where the noncommercial gift *commences* and or *restores* relationship. Gift-love for Robinson, consists of bestowing grace to the undeserving (hence its overlap with forgiveness) – akin to the instance of the bestowing superabundant, unlooked-for recognition to strangers. The superabundant gift is intended to bridge the gap between the persons – a bridge which may be thought of in terms of debt and forgiveness of debt – and in that way, to *restore*.

For example, the blessing at Jack's christening or rather, the lack thereof, poses an obstacle to Ames' relationship with Jack, which needs to be bestowed *again* before they can be reconciled to each other. It suggests that true recognition requires reconciliation but that this reconciliation is enabled by superabundant giving. Previously, I mentioned the instance of Boughton's surprising Ames with a namesake at the baptism, instead of the "Theodore Dwight Weld" which Ames had been expecting (214). In his letters, Ames expresses regret about his performance of the sacrament,

too surprised and conflicted to truly bless Jack. He describes how “coldly [he] went about [Jack’s] christening, how far [his] thoughts were from blessing” that day (215), and speculates this is the reason he can affirm that he had “never been able to warm to [Jack], never” (215). Yet he immediately corrects himself:

I am glad I said that [...] Because now I realise it isn’t true. And that is a great relief to me.

I do wish I could christen him again, for my sake. I was so distracted by my own miserable thought I didn’t feel the sacredness under my hand that I always do feel, that sense that the infant is blessing me. Now that is a pity. (215)

Ames’ feelings did compromise his usual conviction that he was bestowing a blessing at Jack’s baptism. However, Ames here discovers that he does not completely lack good feeling towards Jack. He feels he has jeopardised the potential for deep relationship because when he thinks of Jack, he has all these years only held on to that first crucial memory which was characterised by his own “miserable thought” and *not* the blessing which should have united him to the infant as it had with so many others. Realising this, he now expresses his desire, a *need*, to bless Jack, and feel that sacredness of his mysterious life, and that connection he feels between his soul and the one he blesses. Without that feeling, he seems to realise, any efforts of restoration will be in vain.

It is imperative for their reconciliation that Ames should give the blessing to Jack once again, but properly this time. Ames first attempts this when Jack comes to him one final time before leaving Gilead again, and ends up telling him the whole miserable story of his life since leaving his family, of his near destitution and the rejection he’d experienced at the hands of Della’s family and the anti-miscegenation outside of Iowa. Ames then embraces him, moved beyond words by “just feel[ing] the loneliness in him” (263). There is also the regret that he “was supposed to be a second father to [Jack]” and “wanted to say something to him to that effect” (263), and manages at last to see “some sort of equivalency between [Jack’s] failings and [his own]” and to say to Jack, “You’re a good man” (264) – a fact which Jack later recounts to Glory with some amazement, adding, “Imagine that” (*Home* 322). Finally we see the commencement of fellow feeling between them; that Ames can at last begin to understand Jack. However, he realises, in their very last encounter at the bus stop as Jack prepares to leave Gilead for good, that something *more* is required. He attempts to give Jack money – though Jack only accepts half – then he adds “The thing I would like, actually, is to bless you” (*Gilead* 275). Jack wards off Ames’ fear that he might be embarrassed. Removing his hat, he receives Ames’ hand, almost resting his head against it, and Ames recounts that he “did

bless him to the limit of [his] powers, whatever they are” (275) – a phrase which suggests to the reader that Ames spent all his strength in this effort. Here is the gift in its truest form, that of superabundance and grace, and the act which redeems Jack to Ames at last. Ames can finally say of the blessing that “[n]othing could be more beautiful than that, or more expressive of [his] feelings, certainly, or more sufficient, for that matter” (275). Ames says that “it was an honor to bless him. And that was also absolutely true. In fact [he]’d have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment” (276) – an idea, incidentally, which echoes Glory’s feelings on her encounter with Della and little Robert Boughton, that her “whole life [had] come down to this moment” which made all the intervening hardship worthwhile (*Home* 339). This most potent form of giving is that which is done by the model of superabundance, which overcomes and forgives all the years of misrecognition and estrangement between them.

This is not to say, however, that the superabundance of grace is sufficient to dissolve all debt, offence or misrecognition between selves: it is not a radical levelling which paints each person with the same colour – that would be to deny the individuality of each and *cause* misrecognition. Ames muses on the offences of Jack against him and is honest in admitting both his and Jack’s faults, saying that “[t]o say a thief is a brother man and beloved of God is true. To say therefore a thief is not a thief is an error” (177). Likewise, Ricoeur, in his conclusion on *The Course of Recognition*, reminds us of

the original asymmetry in the relation between selves and others, which even the experience of peaceful states does not manage to abolish. Forgetting this asymmetry, thanks to the success of analyses of mutual recognition, *would constitute the ultimate misrecognition* at the very heart of actual experiences of recognition. (261)

Ricoeur is not here contradicting his previous speculations about the mutuality of recognition. On the contrary, he proposes that to ignore that gap, or debt between the two parties, allowing it to go unacknowledged and forgotten, would falsify recognition – the very opposite of identifying a person’s most authentic self. If these gaps in understanding, debts against each other, miseries and sorrows, are in Ames’ eyes, “a great part of the substance of human life” (118), then ignoring them or washing over them would constitute a denial of who a person is – the very substance of misrecognition. Thus, the superabundant does not deny the debt of its object; it is the very gap which makes the recognition what it is. Restoring from exclusion, from strangeness and loneliness, this is what the work of the Neighbour, of grace, does. Without that separation, there is no place for it. As Boughton has affirmed to his children all through their childhood: “If you forgive [...] you

may indeed still not understand, but you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace” (47). He reiterates the notion that forgiveness does not infallibly equate to immediate understanding but that it opens the way for grace to do its work of reconciliation. The recognition-gift aims to redeem its object, not to perfect it to a condition where it is may unrecognisable to its original, but still recognisant, as Ames says, of “the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us” (225) – recognition of a state which acknowledges both the self’s previous obscurity *and* its present restoration.

### Conclusion

In answer to the irreconcilable loneliness of the self, recognition addresses the abject and absolute strangeness. By identifying and distinguishing a person, recognition begins by the act of singling it out and conferring or validating its identity for being what it is, thereby forming a sort of relationship which draws in. The notion of identifying *with* thus initiates a community of selves who recognise in themselves something equally attributable to another. As Calvin proposes, “there is a world of misery in people [and] we cannot look closely at ourselves without being struck and pierced with the knowledge of our misery” (23). Similarly, in Robinson’s novels, sorrows and suffering specifically, experiences involving loss and desolation, are what unites these persons.

Thus, Ricoeur’s conceptualisation of noncommercial and ‘superabundant’ recognition is one which suggests *giving*. Built on the model of the Neighbour in the good Samaritan tale, this giving is the conferring of recognition and validation by which restoration of the strange self is made possible. It has been demonstrated how naming is a key factor in the struggle for identity, and how the assignation of a name both *establishes* an individual’s position and identity in a family and validates its *belonging* to that family. This is why a lack of naming may represent misrecognition and a crisis of identity. It is the signal of a *lack* of love to Jack’s illegitimate child that she is unnamed, and confirmation to the sons of Robinson’s stories of love (that their parents had both for them and for the people for whom they were named). In tropes of grace and forgiveness, the divine-inspired gift-love, the *agape* of the Neighbour, is that it *reaches out*, not necessarily to those it recognises as being familiar in some sense but also has the potential to recognise *without* familiarity. It is the act of recognition itself which identifies and distinguishes the unfamiliar and therefore, which ultimately recognises and *makes* familiar. It is the language of divine giving, where there is neither reward nor recompense, but restitution – grace sufficient to supply one’s needs and

bridge the gap between selves. Therefore, as Vander Weele explains, “our radical separation from each other is not the whole truth” (225). Our theory does not expect to comprehensively solve the strangeness of the self. It acknowledges that there remains a potential for misrecognition. Nevertheless, it does not by any means diminish the potency of recognition. However successful the superabundant giving, the reaching out to the impossibly alienated self, of initiating a relationship in grace, is the promise of restoration and redemption from that strangeness.

## Conclusion

So what may one say in answer to this? Both Marilynne Robinson and Paul Ricoeur have presented arguments in favour of loneliness, or strangeness, as an unavoidable human condition, and yet both suggest that although the strangeness of the self is definite, the possibility exists of human interaction which both understands and works past the gaps which divide the selves – in literature, in communication, and in the superabundance of giving, acting as Neighbour. In turn each of these represents a series of actions and reactions which have the potential both to *alienate* – by way of misunderstandings, inarticulate or incomplete communication of the self – and to *reconcile* – in actions which draw in strangers, which acknowledge the fellow feeling between humans and shared experiences and which can act in response (in responsibility) to a human appeal. There is an aspect of reverence for the complexity of the soul in this; its complete mystery in relation to any absolute creed or knowledge. As Ames says “it seems to me to be presumptuous to judge the authenticity of anyone’s religion, except one’s own. And even that is presumptuous” (197). He recognises that one can never lay a claim to absolute understanding of oneself or of others. Although this means that all people are strangers to themselves and to others, it is no obstacle to the work of humanity in responsibility to and for one another. There is commonality shared in human sorrows, joys, loves and losses.

### *Strangeness in Literature*

Robinson’s writing excels in giving access to strangeness in a way which makes it personally recognisable for her readers. In his review of Robinson’s fiction and her essays “Religion and Marilynne Robinson”, Todd Shy affirms her success, saying that

[o]n the one hand, she scorches the neglect and caricature of traditional religion; on the other, she gives us a rare and convincing portrait of simple, complete piety. The narrator of *Gilead* is, if anything, too good, too saintly; the essays vitriolic and exaggerated. [...] In this way, the portrait of orthodoxy sometimes asserted in the essays as Calvinism is nuanced and textured with more humanist ideals. (251)

Shy explains how Robinson’s writing reconciles worldviews which might otherwise be grating or inconceivable. A character like Reverend Ames, a reclusive, introverted and somewhat eccentric pastor, is an obvious example of Robinson’s unapologetic Calvinism manifested in an endearing yet

“convincing” portrait of a very human man, working through his convictions in daily life. Robinson’s work thrives in bridging the gap between different states of mind. Mark O’Connell, writing for *The New Yorker*, states he loves “how [Robinson’s] writing puts [him] inside an apprehension of the world which is totally foreign to [him], and that [he has] often approached with borderline hostility”. He adds that through her fiction he has “actually felt what it must be like to live with a sense of the divine” (“The First Church of Marilyne Robinson”). With her characters, it seems that Robinson has opened access to a world which might otherwise remain foreign, hostile and strange. By presenting a view of God through the eyes and the everyday struggles of ordinary people, Robinson invites the reader to identify with a person *first*, when encountering a new perspective, as it is the *person* who gives the narrative its credibility. As Lila says similarly of her experience going to watch films, “[s]he had told herself that she went to the movies just to see people living, because she was curious. She’d more or less decided that she missed out on it herself, so this was the best she could do” (*Lila* 208). Thus we find that the experience of the other is most readily found in fiction.

In interactions between persons, the self is therefore communicated via story, via narrative: we are the stories we tell. It is a commitment to one’s description of oneself, a testimony which shall be taken as true by another. In this, the self is responsible beyond itself and to another for a version of itself presented amidst a world of others. It marks the point where the self’s focus ceases to be internal and is instead turned outwards, preparing to be received and interpreted by a third party. This is especially true of the first-person narrators in Robinson’s texts. In the same way that one may take her essays to accurately reflect her character and convictions, one may also understand Ames and Lila, for example, by their first-person narration. Lila’s unorthodox declaration of love for Ames, for example, is the testimony, the public self-commitment to an identity, and therefore is the measure by which she will be identified. Yet the self is interpreted so that Lila’s past history is something which Ames does not take to be indicative of her character. Together they forge a narrative which is the most authentic mediator of their identity between themselves and each other.

Robinson’s *Gilead* novels demonstrate a thorough understanding and long-term contemplation on the subject of loneliness, strangeness and isolation. In terms of narrative, and inter-personal interactions, one may be known only by how much one communicates. We learn to understand and imagine the character of Ames through the narrative which he shares with us, as Lila is shown through hers. Similarly, the character of Jack is known and understood only insofar as

he reveals his narrative to Glory. Lack of articulate and timely self-narrative is the cause for a number of misunderstandings between them. Ames, for example, is far more ready to sympathise and to imagine Jack's perspective once Jack has confessed his anguished story: illegally married to a black woman at the height of the 1950s American anti-miscegenation laws. As each person can boast no more than a mere first-person understanding of him- or herself, making oneself accessible to another is a vital step towards mutual understanding. Already at this point the theory of the strangeness of *self* begins to suggest external *others* because it is the knowledge that there are others which becomes the measurement of the self; it initiates an understanding of a self *amongst others* – and that those others may all be equally attributed the experience of isolation. In accumulating what one knows of oneself into some form of self-expression, the self already demonstrates a desire to be received, validated or at least noticed by another. However, should this prove unsuccessful or incomplete, as it surely will, the isolation of selves is compounded because the attempt to make oneself available to another still varies in its success.

As the first site of encounter with the other, narrative – whether it be dialogue or, by extension, literature as a whole – represents a vital means by which the self begins to think outside of its own first-person consciousness and to conceive of other selves. It is something which unites all manner of persons; the vicarious experience of seeing through another's eyes. As Lila reflects on the experience of the cinema; “she was dreaming some stranger's dream, everybody in there dreaming one dream together. [...] Like sparrows watching the sun come up, all of them happy at once, no matter that the light had nothing much to do with them” (*Lila* 208). This appears to be Robinson's understanding of purpose in literature: that in everyone's attempt to see through another's eyes, to be open to another point of view, is to be united somehow to the others who are experiencing the same thing. In experiencing the other, anyone is simultaneously a stranger to him- or herself, yet in the company of numerous others who experience the same thing. In this way, literature represents both the strangeness and recognition I have been proposing.

### *Strangeness in Selves*

The self experiences its strangeness in numerous ways, both internally and externally, as the idem-sameness and ipse-selfhood identities encounter complications in the re-identifying of the self. Whilst the body may be publically ‘same’ in that its corporeality is visible and tangible to anyone, the body is also liable to misrecognition, liable to alteration from the sameness by which it

reidentifies itself. Changes in appearance due to ageing, circumstances or wear, can cause misrecognition. Glory who barely recognises the gaunt, older Jack when at last he arrives on the doorstep, and Ames who can scarcely recognise his current self against the man he once was – these instances prove the threat which physical change poses to recognition, to identity. Moreover, the body may react, or betray emotion without the knowledge or volition of itself – such as readable facial expressions or like Glory’s tears. Lila on first coming to Gilead, and even the urchin she later discovers in the shack, are both betrayed, despite their efforts, by their impoverished appearance. Although neither intended to betray such destitution because they could not bear the thought of pity, their appearance gave them away. This is the sort of thing Emmanuel Levinas means when he speaks about the abject vulnerability of the other; it cannot help but to betray itself. Lila knew that her pitiful state would elicit a response and similarly, Levinas proposes that the utter defencelessness of the other is an invocation because its dependency is so very conspicuous.

A self may also experience strangeness from a space in which they ought to feel ‘at home’ – whether it be the feeling of being at ease in one’s own body or the physical structure of ‘home’. Even here, where the home ostensibly represents the sameness persisting from childhood days, and the hearth of comfort and familial recognition or inclusion, Robinson shows how expectation of comfort in ‘home’ can be an estranging experience. Home no longer represents comfort for Glory and Jack. Although they recognise the enduring sameness of the house, unchanged since their childhood, their return is nevertheless soured because the house and its associated memory is no longer representative of their identity. For Glory, the return is nothing more than a failure to live independently from the home. To feel ill-at-ease where one expects most to feel at home is an experience which is doubly estranging – and thus, when she finds Jack’s shanty it consolidates the absolute abyss between them because it shows her how much and how long she had been mistaken about his feeling at home. And it seems that the strangeness of the self is irredeemable.

### *Reconciliation in Recognition*

This is why Robinson suggests there is a call, and moreover a human requirement, which needs to go *beyond* the other’s strangeness. Acknowledging this, Ricoeur proposes the pairing of identifying and distinguishing as the foundation of recognition; it implies and brings about both a singling out, and conferring identity – of distinguishing one among many. The importance of this recognition is due to the ever-changing self, whose sameness (*idem*-identity) cannot be counted on.

Because of the changes wrought over time to the self's identity – though not its *selfhood* (*ipse-identity*) which persists despite alteration – the work of recognition cannot be imputed to *actual* recognition: over time the self's attestation and understanding of itself changes, as does its constant, natural (even if expected) maturation – it is no longer 'same'. Thus, the self cannot claim ever to fully possess itself.

This is how the language of giving imposes itself upon the language of recognition. Recognition is not always a case of *reconnaitre*, of re-knowing something one has previously encountered, because it is liable to change and strangeness within itself. Lila can be recognised by Ames, something about her appearance and her character, without having ever been encountered before. Despite the changes wrought on Jack by several years of hard luck in his absence from his family, Glory may recognise him by his mannerisms, the way he behaves, and the fact that his arrival was anticipated. Lila may recognise destitution and the fierce independence of the runaway boy because it is something she has herself experienced. As recognition was not prompted in these instances for its own sake, one may attest to the gift-character of recognition. Indeed, it may be said that if it does not warrant an immediate, inevitable, re-knowing *reconnaissance* in an encounter with another, recognition must then be something which is capable of being *given* without its being *warranted* at all. In direct contrast to the models of gift theory proposed by Mauss and Derrida, the gift of recognition requires no obligatory response – there is no 'exchange of hostages': *I recognise or acknowledge you that you might recognise or acknowledge me*. It may be received whether or not it was looked for.

In this way, the connections between Robinson's work and Biblical parables are more apparent. A connection manifests in the story of the prodigal son, as Jack – whose self-exiled lifestyle squandered the wealth and or relationship with his family, but who was nevertheless received on his return with warm welcome. Another connection is that of the good Samaritan, from whence came the notion of the Neighbour, and neighbourly practices as an act, self-sacrificial and unmerited, in response to the need of another. It is not a kindness which is meant to be repaid, nor indeed *can* be repaid. Levinas affirms this when he says that the vulnerability of the other provokes a response of proximity, as with the Biblical neighbour – of kindness for one's fellow man who is in need. The self, after all, is only accessible as a neighbour. It needs the identity which recognition validates. In Robinson's books, this is granted via naming and blessing in the form of superabundant giving, grace. In this way it resembles Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'god of gifts', love, because in its abundance it has no thought of recompense or obligation. On recognising need in

another, it merely applies itself to meet that need. Jack, for instance, has done nothing to provoke any favourable response from Ames. And while his childhood pranks and antics may have been a misguided bid for attention, it is only when Ames extends forgiveness for his “old bitterness of heart” (Gilead 274) that he can reconcile the relationship with Jack. Similarly, the relationships between Glory and Della, Glory and Jack, Lila and Ames, Ames and Jack – are all relationships whose reconciliation is marked by the grace which is extended them, and the fellow feeling, the mutual (equally attributable) recognition which enables it – that is, which recognises that the other has suffered, or is capable of suffering a similar thing to oneself. It is, as Robinson says, a question of “will people shelter and nourish and humanize one another?” (“Family” 89). Robinson acknowledges the need for reconciliation which is capable of making other humans ‘human’. But this is a work, an effort which requires the ability to empathise. She describes it as a “creative work, requiring discipline and imagination” (89). It begins when the self begins to imagine through the other’s eyes, and concludes in the attribution of basic humanity equally to the other-than-self.

Alan Schrift, Paul Ricoeur, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Marilynne Robinson are in agreement that the giving of a gift is that which has relationship for its goal. Schrift, having been exposed to the leading theorist on the subject of the gift is capable to affirm that, in all instances, the focus moves demonstrably away from the *objects* exchanged, and toward the *persons* between whom the exchange was made. The naming and the sacraments of baptism, for example, are otherwise meaningless gestures. What it *represents* on behalf of *whom* is the crucial detail: christening is the marker of identity, of relationship to God and to the family by a chosen name. Thus recognition is afforded to restore or to build relationship.

It has been seen how relationships which are ostensibly the point of connection can also be isolating. Lila and Ames, despite their love for one another, are lonely even so, and Jack remains exiled, an outsider, despite his family’s best efforts and hopes. What is important, however, is the work which is accomplished by recognition *within* these unions. Glory, for example, draws Jack into relationship by confiding in him, sharing her sorrows and secrets to show him that he’s “not the only sinner in the family” (*Home* 125). Thus, she establishes a bond to reveal their mutuality and presents an equal vulnerability. As with the conferral of identity in the act of naming, this is an acknowledgement of Jack as a person and a friend which affirms their resemblance and connection over and above the proverbial ‘family ties’ (which had not succeeded in fostering relationship before). In the words of Boughton, as he sees his family together in his last days, “Calvin says it is the Providence of God that we look after those nearest to us” (273): here is a logic of

superabundance which requires acting upon proximity to afford recognition, not acting upon recognition. Ricoeur summarises it well when he says that “[o]ne does not *have* a neighbor; I make myself someone’s neighbor” (“The Socius and the Neighbor” 100).

### *The Question of God*

The paradox of the mystery of self – both its loneliness, and recognition afforded without *reconnaissance* – is a paradox which Robinson sees as originating from and summarised in God – and in this I shall conclude my theory. What it comes down to, as she says in her interview with Aaron Mauro, is that “[o]ur essential encounter with the world is with the image of God. Which is always the other” (“The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson”). Indeed, Ames suggests that Christ was capable of mutual feeling and recognition because “God shared poverty, suffering, and death with human beings, which can only mean that such things are full of dignity and meaning” (*Lila* 77). By this, Robinson acknowledges that life is “fragmentary” (*Lila* 223) and we cannot know anything – or anyone, for that matter, even ourselves – absolutely. As Ames says, “the greater part of our existence is unknowable to us because it rests with God, who is unknowable” (223). Robinson proposes not only the mystery (strangeness) of the divine, in that its being lies outside human comprehension, but also that whatever inroads to knowledge and relationship that are made are only the grace of the “eternal breaking in on the temporal” (*Gilead* 272). Hence, Ames suggests that it is God’s grace in “allowing us to feel that we know any slightest part of [our existence]” (*Lila* 223). For this requires a love, as Robinson says, without “justice” or “proportion” (272) – something unmerited, superabundant: “only a glimpse or parable of an embracing, incomprehensible reality” (272), which Robinson and Ricoeur suggest are encapsulated in the Being of God.

And there we may conclude that amidst the misrecognition and the bitter loneliness of the soul, what is required for its redemption is a superabundant gesture of recognition and of welcome; of mutual sorrows and mutual isolation; but an effort nonetheless which *gives* – in self-sacrificial embrace which ignores all gaps of strangeness and whatever separation. Now Ames, ever Robinson’s own voice in her fiction, summarises the entirety of my thesis on both redemption of loneliness by the recognition of strangeness when he muses that “the Lord loves each of us as an only child, and that has to be true. ‘He will wipe the tears from all faces.’ It takes nothing from the loveliness of the verse to say that is exactly what will be required” (280).

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