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# Language in the Garden: Transcendentalist Legacies and the Problem of Metaphor in Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead Novels

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## ABSTRACT

This article interrogates two established critical approaches to Marilynne Robinson’s fiction. First, by analysing the Gilead novels’ engagement with nineteenth-century Transcendentalism, the article challenges the centrality of metaphor to Robinson’s literary project. I show how, in these novels, Robinson resurrects the nineteenth-century divide between Emersonian metaphor and Thoreauvian metonymy. There has been a recent critical move to understand Robinson’s fiction in relation to modern and contemporary literary forbears, but this article shows the complexity, contradiction and self-criticism that inheres in Robinson’s engagement with Transcendentalism. Secondly and connectedly, my argument complicates the current critical consensus that the home is the most significant locus of these novels. I argue that the indoor domestic spaces of the novels are associated with the metaphorical language that Robinson is critiquing and, in turn, that their garden spaces are associated with a form of language that has a more tangible relationship to action and process.


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“[H]e’s not as abstracted as he used to be”.<sup>1</sup> So says Glory Boughton, the protagonist of Marilynne Robinson’s 2008 novel *Home*. She is speaking to her brother Jack about the Reverend John Ames, an elderly preacher whom the siblings have known since childhood. Glory is referring to Ames’s somewhat detached deportment, but her description of him resonates with his own theological and literary pursuits; he is a scholarly character with a self-confessed “interest in abstractions”.<sup>2</sup> Though Robinson’s fiction is itself frequently dense, theoretical and metaphysical, Ames’s “interest in abstractions” is represented as a source of consternation throughout *Home* and the other novels in the same series, *Gilead* (2004), and *Lila* (2014) – at the time of writing, a fourth novel, *Jack* (2020) has recently been published. These novels are all set in the fictional town of Gilead and tell the interweaving stories of a cast of characters from the Ames and the Boughton families which are each headed by an elderly minister. In them Robinson articulates arguments about US American political history and Christianity. Like Ames

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<sup>1</sup>Robinson, *Home*, 81.

<sup>2</sup>Robinson, *Gilead*, 163.

she is a Calvinist thinker who is interested in the relationship between language and the nature of belief. This interest can be traced to her admiration for the works of nineteenth-century Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Emily Dickinson, from whom she inherits a method of writing by analogue. However, crucially, Robinson departs from Ames in her additional interest in the way in which language relates to and precipitates action. It is this interest that leads to the attitude of mistrust towards abstraction that Glory articulates in *Home*. In this article I suggest that the (first three) Gilead novels display an anxiety about the usefulness of abstracted metaphorical language and, in turn, reach towards a form of language that has a more tangible relationship to action.

My argument has two parts. First, I suggest that the Gilead novels warn that always deferring to the unknown or to the limits of language can prevent it from having a concrete relationship to the material world. To make this claim, I reassess the influence of Transcendentalism on the Gilead novels. Robinson frequently cites her appreciation of the use of metaphor in the American literature of the mid-nineteenth century and critics have tended to accept Robinson's own description of this legacy as being one of figurative language. However, it is my contention here that the Gilead novels attempt to seek out a firmer relationship between word and world than the one offered by metaphor. To do this, I show how they resurrect the divide within Transcendentalism between metaphor and metonymy by analysing the novels' invocations of Emerson and Thoreau. Though critics have recognised the importance of Transcendentalism for Robinson's work, none have paid sustained attention to the ways in which these writers and the internal complexities of Transcendentalism surface in her work. There has been some recent work that contests this use of language as a straightforward debt to the nineteenth century. For example, Robin Vogelzang has read an aesthetics of doubt and uncertainty consistent with modernism in Robinson's use of metaphor and Erin Penner argues that the dialectic structure of *Lila* is an engagement with *As I Lay Dying* (1930).<sup>3</sup> By reassessing and analysing places in which the Transcendentalists surface in the Gilead novels, I show instead how Robinson herself problematises her inheritance from the nineteenth century. Secondly, I argue that this tension between different types of language is mapped onto the spaces of the novels; interior domestic spaces are associated with abstracted metaphorical language and gardens are associated with a metonymical form of language that has a more tangible relationship to process and action. The space and place of home has been identified as a major concern of Robinson's work. This is immediately apparent in the titles of her first and third novels, *Housekeeping* (1980) and *Home* and Bridget Bennett writes that "[m]etaphors of home create [...] a signature quality" that connects all the texts across her literary output.<sup>4</sup> This "signature quality" has been explored by Fatima Zahra Bessedik, who argues that the development of identity is tied to the space of the home in *Housekeeping*<sup>5</sup> and Shannon L. Mariotti suggests that, throughout her fiction, Robinson represents the practice of housekeeping as part of an ethos of impermanence and caregiving.<sup>6</sup> Though some critics have begun to identify

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<sup>3</sup>Vogelzang, 744–54; Penner, 277–98.

<sup>4</sup>Churchwell, Bennett, and Gray, "Marilynne Robinson: A Critical Conversation," in *Marilynne Robinson: Critical Essays* (unpublished manuscript, October 14 2019).

<sup>5</sup>Bessedik, 559–76.

<sup>6</sup>Mariotti, 21–55.

more negative implications to Robinson's conception of home. For example, focusing on the house as a site of indebtedness and beginning to link it with Robinson's use of language, Aaron Mauro writes that, in *Gilead* "metaphor is bound to fundamental problems within the home."<sup>7</sup> I go further and suggest that across the three Gilead novels that I consider here, Robinson sets up the internal spaces of the house and the church as essentially Emersonian and metaphorical and the heterotopic spaces of the garden and the graveyard as Thoreauvian and empirical. In internal spaces language is abstracted, metaphorical and performative whereas in heterotopic spaces language has a tangible relationship to action, process, and material transformation.

Therefore, to move towards a form of language that has a more tangible relationship with the material, Robinson enacts across the three novels a gradual progression away from the house as the locus of the narrative. Though the plots of the three novels are connected, each one works as a discrete text; there are significant differences in the narrative perspective, form, and temporal span of each book. Indeed, most critics focus on one or two of the Gilead novels at a time, but by looking at the three novels together, I expose the ways in which they work in concert with one another and can track trajectories across them.<sup>8</sup> This approach exposes a pattern in the use of home and garden spaces across the series. Though critical attention to home in Robinson's work has perhaps included the garden within its conception of domestic space – gardens are themselves extensions of the domestic space and retain many of the associations of houses – there has been no critical work that attends to the peculiarities of the ways in which garden spaces are invoked in the novels. *Gilead* is an epistolary novel set in 1956. In it, the narrative is very much bound to the house. Ames writes his letter from his office and details his domestic routine both before and after his second wife, Lila comes to live with him. Thus, the novel is always narrated from the vantage-point of someone inside looking out. Ames's internal perspective is most strikingly apparent when it comes to his relationship with Jack Boughton, the favourite but estranged son of his oldest friend. Part way through the narrative Jack returns to Gilead. Ames is wary of Jack, whom he paints as a manipulative and unpredictable character with a dark past. Over the course of his narrative, Ames slowly reveals his reasons for mistrusting Jack; as a college student he fathered and abandoned the child of a young girl. Jack's motives for returning are unclear until near the end of the novel when he confides in Ames that he is married to a Black woman named Della, and that they have a mix-raced son, Robert. Jack has returned to his childhood home to see whether this family would be accepted in Gilead. This disclosure transforms Ames's view of his friend's son and, after his realisation that Jack's family would not be welcome in Gilead, leads him to alter his perception of the town. As Ames nears his death at the end of the novel, he recognises the limitations of his own viewpoint and experience in the world. The second novel in the series, *Home*, narrates the same events as *Gilead* but from the Boughton household. The novel is told mainly from the perspective of Glory, the youngest Boughton child, who, now approaching middle-age, has returned home to care for her ageing father after her marriage plans collapse. The novel largely focuses on Glory's relationship with her brother.

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<sup>7</sup>Mauro, 149–66 (155).

<sup>8</sup>An article by Rachel Sykes is a notable exception (Sykes, 108–20).

As they inhabit the same space the two siblings gain each other's confidence and mutual understanding grows between them. In this novel we are given more insight into Jack's life away from Gilead and Robinson shows many of the interactions between Ames and Jack from the perspective of the latter. Though much of the novel's activity is within the home and the Boughton house a prominent space within the novel, the garden becomes an increasingly important site. Jack and Glory work in the garden together and it is here where understanding and sympathy grows between them. In *Lila*, houses are almost dispensed with entirely. The novel begins with a scene of ejection from the home, with the child Lila sat on the stoop of the house where she was born.<sup>9</sup> Though Lila had been an elusive figure in the previous two books, we are here given insight into her history and emotional life. The narrative moves seamlessly back and forth between Lila's past, roaming the Dust Bowl under the protection of her adoptive mother, Doll, and her life when she first moves to Gilead. Many of the characters in this novel make their homes outdoors and, when she comes to Gilead, Lila lives in a cabin outside of the town. She then later marries Ames and moves into his house where she often feels uncomfortable and restrained. Despite feeling affection towards Ames, she fantasises about leaving Gilead to resume her life of wandering. Lila is a skilled gardener and finds solace in the labour and care that she performs in the garden. Over the course of the three novels Robinson thus gradually expands the world of Gilead and in doing so, piece by piece, dismantles both the limited viewpoint and setting of the first book.<sup>10</sup> This movement is concomitant with the increased sense of disquiet attached to houses in the novels.

As the narrative moves outside of Ames' subjective viewpoint, so too does it move out of the house and into the garden. The characters associated with the different spaces are separated along a generational divide. The two elderly preachers, Ames and Boughton, are both largely confined to the house and typify the uses of language associated with the house and the church. They both read extensively, debate etymology, sermonise and perform marriages and Baptisms. Ames is interested in literature and the philosophy of language. Robinson represents him as losing himself in books due to his own lack of worldly attachments, his first wife and child both died shortly after he was married. On the other hand, Reverend Boughton, whose homelife was filled with the worldly blessings of a wife and six healthy children, is depicted as having a too-comfortable relationship with language; he speaks with felicity and teases others for their grammatical errors. In *Home* Robinson explicitly critiques Boughton's relationship with language by juxtaposing his offence at the Lord's name being taken in vain with his defense of police brutality towards Civil Rights protesters.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore his grammatical pedantry intimidates Lila and inhibits her desire to join in conversations. The differing but connected approaches of the elderly preachers towards language is frequently challenged throughout all the novels by Jack and Lila. These two characters focus on the practical application of language; they question the old preachers, impelling them to pin their sermons to real world scenarios and to account for the implications of what they say. In one particularly important scene that appears in both *Gilead* and *Home*, Ames, Lila, Boughton, Glory and Jack discuss the doctrine of predestination. Jack, and later Lila,

<sup>9</sup>Robinson, *Lila*, 3.

<sup>10</sup>This movement away from the home continues in *Jack* which is set away from Gilead in St. Louis and begins with a lengthy scene in a graveyard (Robinson, *Jack*, 9–62).

<sup>11</sup>Jack swears in direct response to witnessing the violence on the television (Robinson, *Home*, 101–2).

challenge Ames and Boughton who are unable to accept the reality of what this teaching would mean for most people.<sup>12</sup> After this conversation Ames says of Jack: “[t]hat’s one thing that has always been strange about him. He treats words as if they were actions. He doesn’t listen to the *meaning* of words, the way other people do [emphasis original].”<sup>13</sup> Ames’s own emphasis on the meaning of words and his frustration with Jack’s focus on the actions associated with them is a striking moment of distinction between their approaches to language. Jack’s approach is further evident in *Home* when he expresses a distaste for the subjunctive.<sup>14</sup> This highlights his emphasis on ways in which language might lead to action rather than the potentialities it could gesture towards. Lila too has a more action-based relationship with language. Before she comes to live in Gilead, Lila has only received one year of formal education, she is not fully literate and during her early life, she is unaware of the received terms for things in the world, for example “The United States of America” or the seasons; “[t]here was a long time when Lila didn’t know that words had letters or that there were other names for the seasons than planting and haying”.<sup>15</sup> Instead of the commonly used, metaphorical names for the seasons such as “spring” and “fall”, Lila understands the turning of the year in relation to the actions that she performs at different times. She uses language that refers to the way that she moves through the world rather than as a self-referential entity that is abstracted from the material. Across all three novels, where Ames and Boughton are associated with the house and the church, Jack and Lila are associated with the garden. Their relationships with these spaces mirror the way in which they use language.

## Metaphor and Metonymy in Transcendentalism

In a frequently cited interview with Thomas Schaub, Robinson describes the importance for her thought and writing of “the great ones” of nineteenth-century American literature – Emerson, Thoreau, Melville and Dickinson.<sup>16</sup> She says that, “the way they used metaphor was a highly legitimate strategy for real epistemological questions to be dealt with”.<sup>17</sup> Robinson argues that they use metaphor to “solve” the “problem of democratic culture” and to understand the nature of faith and reality.<sup>18</sup> For her, the value of metaphorical language when approaching these questions lies in its capacity to draw attention to its own inadequacy. She continues, “what they [nineteenth-century writers] are all trying to do is use language as a method of comprehension on the largest scale, at the same time using all the resources of language and absolutely insisting that language is not an appropriate tool”.<sup>19</sup> This contradiction is the central motivation throughout Robinson’s body of work. Her fiction and essays all manifest the belief that the use of language to communicate the nature of reality and experience is urgent and necessary. But they simultaneously suggest that language can never succeed in conveying the precise nature of reality, it can only gesture towards it.<sup>20</sup> Robinson inherits from

<sup>12</sup>Robinson, *Gilead*, 170–5; Robinson, *Home*, 228–38.

<sup>13</sup>Robinson, *Gilead*, 149.

<sup>14</sup>Robinson, *Home*, 151.

<sup>15</sup>Robinson, *Lila*, 10.

<sup>16</sup>Schaub and Robinson, 239.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 241.

<sup>20</sup>This approach is particularly prevalent in the 2012 collection *When I was a Child I Read Books*.

nineteenth-century writers an imagistic and metaphorical use of language that communicates the complexity and mystery of experience by acceding to its own insufficiency.

Critics have drawn particular attention to this strain of inheritance in Robinson's first novel *Housekeeping* (1980).<sup>21</sup> This book began as a series of metaphors that she wrote while completing her PhD and later strung together to form the novel.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the consideration of metaphor's effects and capabilities was central to Robinson's early approach to writing fiction. Schaub suggests that this kind of composition replicates that of Emerson's essays which seem to be constructed "phrase by phrase and paragraph by paragraph".<sup>23</sup> However, over twenty years after the publication of *Housekeeping* and ten years after the interview with Schaub, Robinson's belief in the productive nature of metaphor's ability to gesture towards the indescribable seems to have wavered. This can be seen in the Gilead novels. Mid-way through *Gilead* Robinson includes a metafictional moment in which Ames considers the writing of Emerson. Prompted by seeing the moon in the still light evening sky, Ames describes the process of constructing a metaphor:

The moon looks wonderful in the warm evening light, just as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of the morning. Light within light. It seems like a metaphor for something. So much does. Ralph Waldo Emerson is excellent on this point.

It seems to me to be a metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within light of existence. Or it seems like poetry within language. Perhaps wisdom within experience. Or marriage within friendship and love.<sup>24</sup>

Ames's process here is reminiscent of Robinson's own when writing *Housekeeping*; he first comes up with the image of the lit candle in the daylight and then decides on its application. Though he is unable to settle on a particular connotation and instead reels off a host of potential meanings. By making Ames's reflection on the nature of metaphor lead to an abstract idea, Robinson dramatises the way in which metaphor points towards the unknowable. Ames basks in the mystery of the metaphor, admiring its gestural quality rather than gaining any specific insight. The image itself is one of nullified effect. The lit candle is impotent in the daylight; it becomes a primarily aesthetic and affective object and loses its value as a useful one. Notably Emerson is Ames's reference point for the creation of his metaphor. Ames describes Emerson as "excellent" on the vague notion that "so much" is a "metaphor for something". Thus, Robinson here associates Emerson with an unspecific and abstracted way of thinking.

Robinson's protagonist is comfortable with the inadequacy of language and the finite nature of human comprehension; he writes "I have wandered to the limits of my understanding any number of times".<sup>25</sup> However, over the course of *Gilead*, we are shown that this propensity to dwell in abstraction has prevented Ames from fully engaging with the world that he inhabits. Too accepting of his own lack of understanding, Ames's does not

<sup>21</sup>For example, Joan Kirkby writes that '*Housekeeping* evokes and improvises on recurring motifs and whole structures and patterns of resonance from the works of earlier American writers also preoccupied with the interaction of nature and art, Dickinson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Emerson and Poe' (Kirkby, 92–3). And Thomas Gardner has shown how the novel builds scenarios around images from the poems of Emily Dickinson (Gardner, 9–33).

<sup>22</sup>Sarah Fay, "Marilynne Robinson, The Art of Fiction No. 198," *The Paris Review* 186 (2008).

<sup>23</sup>Schaub and Robinson, 241.

<sup>24</sup>Robinson, *Gilead*, 136.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 217.

properly interrogate his beliefs, nor does he manage to translate them into action. Most crucially, Robinson shows the clergyman's failure to address the racial violence and discrimination of 1950s US America. Indeed, Susan Petit argues that Robinson constructs Ames's letter to his son in a way that pointedly elides mention of contemporaneous debates about segregation and misreads occasions of racial violence in Gilead.<sup>26</sup> Though he is a devout man who always strives to behave empathetically, Ames's good intentions repeatedly fall short of meaningful action against injustice. I suggest here that it is Ames's "interest in abstractions" that prevents him from understanding prevalent material problems in the world that he inhabits. Robinson avers that the understanding generated by metaphorical language always recognises its paucity. As she shows across the Gilead novels, it is therefore in danger of remaining abstracted and removed from a tangible relationship with the world. In writing Ames the way that she does Robinson shies away from her previous confidence in metaphor's potential for generating understanding. In doing so she performs a critique of her own values and intellectual influences. Emerson was a trained minister and, as Lawrence Buell puts it, the "first modern American public intellectual".<sup>27</sup> His approach to language is that of a clergyman; he is trained to interpret and teach the Bible. Emerson's manner of approaching thought by analogue, through parable or symbol is entrenched in the tradition of Christian teaching. In the novels, Ames and Boughton are also both trained ministers. Ames, into whose inner life the reader is given far more insight than Boughton's, functions as a sort of avatar for Emerson. He is venerable, scholarly and distracted. Robinson herself, as well as being a prominent novelist, is also a public intellectual and perhaps the foremost Christian commentator in contemporary America. Robinson's increased anxiety about the nature of metaphorical language is thus an anxiety about the function of Christianity in American society. Indeed, as a Calvinist thinker, it is perhaps her own qualms about the doctrine of predestination that surface in scene that I mention above. Furthermore, as Schaub suggests above, her own writing process is reminiscent of Emerson's just as Ames's is. There is therefore a triangulation between her own authorial voice, that of her interlocuter, Emerson, and that of her character, Ames. Though at times Ames seems to speak with Robinson's voice, in the above passage she subtly rebukes his approach to language. The Gilead novels thus stage a reckoning with Robinson's own intellectual forbears, her religion, and her own practice of novel-writing.

I turn now to the most well-known articulation of Emerson's theory of metaphorical language and founding doctrine of Transcendentalism; the 1836 essay "Nature". Though this passage has often been analysed, it is necessary here to cite it in full:

Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance. *Right* originally means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind*; *transgression*, the crossing of a *line*; *supercilious* the *raising of an eyebrow*'. We say the *heart* to express emotion, the *head* to denote thought; and *thought* and *emotion* are, in their turn, words borrowed from sensible things, and now appropriated to spiritual nature. Most of the process by which this transformation is made, is hidden from us in this remote time when language was framed; but the same tendency

<sup>26</sup>Petit, 119–37.

<sup>27</sup>Buell, *Emerson*, 9.



may be daily observed in children. Children and savages use only nouns or names of things which they continually convert into verbs, and apply to analogous mental acts.<sup>28</sup>

Emerson here notes how words which, at some point in time, named specific physical processes or objects have come to denote abstract concepts. He describes how this history of the words has been obscured for contemporary users of language. His assessment that children and “savages” make visible this linguistic process is a derogatory one, but it does emphasise both the flexibility and materiality of the child’s use of language. As Emerson sees it, the child is less entrenched in the systems of language and thus uses words in ways more tied to their material referents. The conversion of nouns into verbs shows language literally being translated into action. The attribution of this characteristic to the language use of children shows Emerson, imposing a generational divide on the use of words. Emerson separates his own metaphorical language from that of children; for him, the material referent has been forgotten. We also see this generational divide in the Gilead novels; it is the elderly preachers who are connected with Emersonian philosophy and younger characters have a more pragmatic relationship with language.

For it is not only Ames whom Robinson associates with Emerson. His lifelong friend and “alter ego” Reverend Boughton is also shown espousing similar theories and beliefs to the Sage of Concord.<sup>29</sup> In *Home* Robinson has Boughton directly paraphrase the above section of “Nature” when he holds forth on the nature of God’s grace:

He loved to reflect on the fact that grace was never singular in its effects, as now, when he could please his son by forgiving his friend. “That is why it is called Spirit,” he said. “The word in Hebrew also means wind. ‘The Spirit of God brooded on the face of the deep.’ It is a sort of enveloping atmosphere.” Her father was always so struck by his insights that it was impossible for him to tell those specific to the moment from those on which he had preached any number of times. It had made him a little less sensitive than he ought to have been to the risk of repeating himself. Ah well.<sup>30</sup>

Like Ames, Boughton neither gains nor conveys any specific insight about his present situation. Instead, he merely recycles previous sermons. He is therefore employing a rhetorical flourish rather than solving the particular affective and philosophical problems he is responding to. Robinson represents him as pompously taken with his own erudition and Glory as an indulgent rather than attentive listener. His understanding is circular, repetitive, and self-referential. The generalised nature of Boughton’s insight is also present in the point itself. The enveloping nature of grace or God’s Spirit reflects his own lack of specificity. Boughton uses the same point as Emerson does, about wind and spirit, to describe the way in which language becomes abstracted. His repetitive ‘insights’ are similarly abstracted from the circumstances he speaks of. Robinson thus shows Emerson’s idea being invoked in the service of an unsystematic, abstracted and essentially useless thought.

However, Robinson’s changed approach towards metaphorical and abstracted language is not a departure from the nineteenth-century literary models that have been identified in her work. Her association of Emerson with an unspecific and overly

<sup>28</sup>Emerson, 18.

<sup>29</sup>Robinson, *Home*, 5.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 224–5.

stylistic form of rhetoric is part of a broader discussion that already existed in the nineteenth century and continues in criticism today. Contemporaneous writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville all critiqued and mocked Emerson's tendency towards abstraction.<sup>31</sup> However, though all these writers were dismissive of Emerson's approach, they all used symbolism and metaphor extensively in their fiction. Robinson's anxiety about abstraction and her critique of Ames and Boughton is not aimed at abstraction itself, but rather at an over-reliance on abstraction. The characters of Ames and Boughton, both subscribe to the idea that language itself will effect change, but they are ultimately unable to transform their personal morality and spirituality into action in the world. Robinson does not see inner transcendence as unable to coexist with or lead to action but rather, she suggests that it is not enough on its own.

Robinson thus finds a more appropriate literary model in the work of Emerson's mentee, Henry David Thoreau. Though Robinson references Thoreau as a major influence on her use of metaphor, critics often see his writing as, instead, characterised by the employment of metonymy. Indeed, Thoreau's metonymic language has conventionally been seen as a corrective for Emersonian metaphor.<sup>32</sup> As Sean Ross Meehan puts it, these two authors represent, with Thoreau on the one hand and Emerson on the other, "the empirically or ecologically concrete vs. the imaginatively or rhetorically abstract, the literal world vs. the figural word."<sup>33</sup> Emerson's arguments in "Nature" epitomise his approach to language whereas Thoreau's approach is typified by his assertion that "[t]o be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts" but is "to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically."<sup>34</sup> Thoreau is the practical face of Transcendentalism, able to apply the ideas of Emerson. This can be seen in the penultimate chapter of *Walden*, "Spring". Here Thoreau describes the earth as "express[ing] itself outwardly in leaves."<sup>35</sup> Thus, like Emerson, he conflates the natural world with language though his emphasis is very different from that of his mentor:

The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. *Internally* whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and *leaves* of fat, (λείβω, *labor, lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing; λοβος, *globus*, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other words,) *externally* a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of lobe are *lb*, the soft mass of the *b* (single lobed, or B, double lobed,) with a liquid *l* behind it pressing forward. In globe, *glb*, the guttural *g* adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat. The feathers and wings of a bird are still drier and thinner leaves. Thus, also, you pass from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly. The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit.<sup>36</sup>

Thoreau likens the patterns in a sand bank to linguistic signs. Like Emerson, Thoreau here traces etymology and connects words with material objects, though instead of showing how the names for abstract concepts were once terms of material processes

<sup>31</sup>Poe's story 'Never Bet the Devil Your Head' (1841), Hawthorne's novel *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) and chapter 35 of *Moby Dick*, 'The Mast-Head' (1851) all satirize the Transcendentalist movement.

<sup>32</sup>This has been argued by Donald Worster in *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (1977) and Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1999).

<sup>33</sup>Meehan, 301.

<sup>34</sup>Thoreau, 15.

<sup>35</sup>Thoreau, 273

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

he chooses words that refer to material things. He dwells at length on the pronunciation of these words, on the way in which they sound and how it feels to speak them. This passage is thus, foremost, an occasion of humans interacting with the words and through them with their own materiality. A page or so later than the above quotation Thoreau writes that “[t]he earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied [...] but living poetry like the leaves of a tree.”<sup>37</sup> He then goes on to say that both earth and “the institutions upon it, are plastic like clay in the hands of the potter.”<sup>38</sup> Thoreau thus emphasises human interaction with the earth and the natural world. The image of the potter shows humans literally making tools out of the earth. Thoreau thus represents a dynamic relationship between tools and language. In *Walden* he describes the transformation of both the material world, and by token of that, language to as a route to effect tangible and material change. Though Thoreau is never explicitly invoked in the Gilead novels as Emerson is, his resonance is felt across them. Most explicitly, when Lila first comes to Gilead she lives in a structure reminiscent of Thoreau’s cabin by Walden Pond but also in all the statements Jack and Lila make about the relationship between language and the world.

### Houses and Gardens in Gilead

Both houses and the concept of home are a prominent motif throughout Robinson’s fiction. All four of her novels explore the nature of home as symbol and affective category and the space of the house is an important setting in each of them. Throughout the Gilead novels Robinson pays close attention to the interiors and structures of the Ames and Boughton houses as well as the churches of each of the two ministers. These two types of internal spaces are by far the most frequently used spaces across these three novels and they are also linked to one another – not least because of the Biblical understanding of the church building as “God’s House.”<sup>39</sup> The Gilead novels develop this connection and these spaces are both presided over by Ames and Boughton, the spiritual patriarchs of the texts.

Houses are the private sphere designed to foster the individual. In his unfinished magnum opus *The Arcades Project* (1927-40) Walter Benjamin wrote that “[t]he private individual [...] needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions.”<sup>40</sup> Benjamin thus sees the house as a site in which personal beliefs are fostered and can become monstrous. In both the British and American literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the nooks and recesses of attics and cupboards are frequently associated with secrets and repressed desires as, for example, in Thornfield Hall in *Jane Eyre* (1837), or they denote stasis and decay as in Dickens’ appropriately named Satis House from *Great Expectations* (1861). Emily Dickinson likens the mind to a haunted house in “One Need Not Be a Chamber To Be Haunted.”<sup>41</sup> And in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1798) there are disastrous consequences to the claustrophobic and inward-looking atmosphere

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 275.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>This phrase is most famously used in the Gospel according to St Luke; Mary and Joseph lose the twelve-year-old Jesus and, when they find him in the temple, he says to them ‘Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’ (Luke 2. 49 (KJV)).

<sup>40</sup>Benjamin, ‘Exposé of 1935: Paris, the capital of the Nineteenth Century,’ in *The Arcades Project*, 8.

<sup>41</sup>Dickinson, ‘One Need Not Be a Chamber To Be Haunted’ in *Emily Dickinson: The Complete Poems*, 333.

within a family home. Though Robinson's aesthetic is decidedly less Gothic than these texts, she draws on the atmosphere of unspoken tensions and repressed or static ideas that they develop in their internal spaces. As she writes in her essay "Imagination and Community" (2012) the "shrinking of imaginative identification which allows such things as shared humanity to be forgotten always begins at home."<sup>42</sup> For Robinson then, home always has the capacity to limit thought, empathy and understanding.

This is evident in the Gilead novels. The house and the church both engender particular approaches to, and uses of, language. They are both associated with written forms of language: books of fiction, poetry and philosophy, letters, sermons – which Ames explains that he always writes and then reads word for word to the congregation – and, most importantly, the Bible.<sup>43</sup> The house and the church are also variously associated with performative speech acts such as marriage, blessings, baptism, and prayer. They are thus places where language is produced, analysed, and given authority. However, the communicative potential of these practices is often diminished; they are frequently repetitive, restricted or without an audience. For example, though Ames and Boughton, debate their interpretations of the Bible, these discussions never succeed in shaking either preacher from his convictions.<sup>44</sup> As Ames says to Lila, "Boughton and I have been worrying the same old thoughts our whole lives."<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Ames's sermons lie unread in boxes in the attic of his house. In *Gilead* he describes their physical bulk, marvelling at the quantitative mass of his life's work.<sup>46</sup> However Ames's emphasis on their physical dimensions renders the sermons heavy and inert, their content forgotten and irrelevant. Additionally, in *Home*, returned and unread letters are a frequent motif. We are told that, as a teenager, Glory wrote to Jack pleading for him to acknowledge his daughter and, over the course of the novel, Jack writes many letters to Della which are returned unread. The language that is associated with the house and the church is thus represented as being circular, impotent, or closed off from wider society.

However, these uses and relationships with language are undercut and challenged by the alternative ones found in the novels' gardens. Frequently a focal point of children's literature, gardens are places of play and leisure as well as of labour. In both Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) and Phillipa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958) the garden is a dream space in which the protagonists navigate their emergence into adolescence. In the former the plants literally speak and in the latter Tom plays with Hattie in the garden as an escape from his loneliness. In these texts, gardens are places of imagination and interaction. Perhaps most important though is Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *The Secret Garden* (1911) in which the garden is a site that facilitates the processing of grief and trauma to allow for growth and regeneration. This relationship with healing is also present in adult literature and writing; in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) the garden is the site of Clifford's recuperation as well as Phoebe and Holgrave's courtship. Where the house has represented the individual and the secretive, the garden has frequently connoted process and communication. David E. Cooper suggests that gardening is a form of communion

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<sup>42</sup>Robinson, 'Imagination and Community' in *When I was a Child I Read Books*, 31.

<sup>43</sup>Robinson, *Gilead*, 21.

<sup>44</sup>Robinson, *Home*, 5.

<sup>45</sup>Robinson, *Lila*, 127.

<sup>46</sup>Robinson, *Gilead*, 22.

with the natural world.<sup>47</sup> A view he takes even further in his suggestion that famous gardeners “From Pliny [...] to Vita Sackville-West” were “inveterate correspondents.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the garden’s relationship with language has a biblical precedent; in Genesis God tasks Adam with naming the animals in the Garden of Eden.<sup>49</sup> The performative act of naming is a way in which language is brought to bear on the material world. These biblical connotations have reverberated throughout Anglo-American literature; the garden is the Edenic space that much of the Western canon has dramatised either a return to or rejection from. For example, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) begins in the garden, “upon the lawn” as a signifier of Isabel Archer’s innocence, before her movement into experience and knowledge in the home of Gilbert Osmond.<sup>50</sup> The garden is thus a place in which one is seen to be closer to God before language has been corrupted. Perhaps more importantly here though is the garden of the New Testament, the site of the agony in the garden.<sup>51</sup> In this story Jesus’s humanity and struggle are emphasised and the garden emerges as a place in which resolve, faith and courage are examined, threatened and ultimately restored.

As in these examples, the gardens of the Ames and Boughton homes are sites of conversation, exchange, and play. Robinson’s characters meet people from other households, swap bounties from their gluts of produce and the protagonists reminisce about their own childhoods as well as describing the games of the novels’ youngest generation of characters. Robinson thus represents gardens as far more communicative, dynamic and generative sites than homes. For Michel Foucault gardens are heterotopic spaces.<sup>52</sup> He argues that heterotopias have the power to both reflect and disrupt the dominant myths and structures of society. Foucault argues that the garden is the oldest example of the type of heterotopia that “is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.”<sup>53</sup> They are therefore places of opposition and conflicting ideas or realities. This allows them to be sites of conversation and pragmatism. Ideas can be exchanged and challenged rather than reinforced and abstracted. One such contradiction in the Gilead novels is the question of ownership. Mauro sees Robinson’s representation of the house tied up with debt and private ownership, but this is actively resisted in the novel’s gardens; Lila muses that ‘[a] garden never really belongs to somebody else if you’re the one that takes care of it’.<sup>54</sup> Though gardens are part of the same system of private property as the house, Robinson represents them as places that can hold contradiction, in which, as Foucault has it, ‘dominant myths’ can be challenged.

Indeed, the garden is necessarily a site of contradiction. As I state above, most critics have included the garden within the remit of the domestic space. Indeed, caring for a garden shares much with the labour that happens in the house; weeding, watering and planting are not dissimilar to cleaning and cooking. However, the garden operates as a liminal space between the interior, human world of the home and the outside,

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<sup>47</sup>Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, 75.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 81–2.

<sup>49</sup>Gen. 2:19 (KJV).

<sup>50</sup>Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 19.

<sup>51</sup>Matt. 26:36–46 (KJV).

<sup>52</sup>Michel, 237–44.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup>Robinson, *Lila*, 221.

unknown of the wilderness. Wilderness is a key concept in US American society, and indeed for Robinson, who writes in her 1998 essay on the subject, 'I am the kind of American whose family sought wilderness generation after generation'.<sup>55</sup> The dichotomy between home and wilderness frequently appears in the Gilead novels. Ames, in particular often makes reference to the wilderness, which seems to mean anything outside of his hometown; he says, '[t]hat is how life goes – we send our children out into the wilderness. Some of them on the day they were born, it seems for all the help we can give them'.<sup>56</sup> The wilderness thus become synonymous with anything unknown and uncontrollable. The Gilead novels are set in the mid-western state of Iowa a region that is seen as the heartland of America and is characterised by the pioneering values of the nineteenth century. Indeed, we frequently see literary representations of the wilderness being tamed and transformed into fields as, for example, in Willa Cather's 1913 novel *O Pioneers!* Joseph H. Lane Jr. argues that all four of Robinson's novels are Westerns that are interested in the 'uniquely American', 'practice of homesteading in the wilderness'.<sup>57</sup> Lane thus sees Robinson's fiction as reproducing this familiar dynamic of humans carving out a space for themselves within the unknown. I suggest here that the garden figures in this dynamic as an in-between space, where humans work in concert with the natural world. Indeed, Robinson writes in 'Wilderness', 'I think we must surrender the idea of wilderness, accept the fact that the consequences of human presence in the world are universal and ineluctable, and invest our care and hope in civilisation'.<sup>58</sup> The garden, as a place where human industry meets with, and cultivates nature thus emerges as just such a place. For Robinson, the garden is a site in which where action and thought meet; where human society negotiates with the other and the unknown.

In the Gilead novels, the home and the garden are associated respectively with the abstraction, action divide in the Transcendentalist movement. These two central concepts of Robinson's fiction, home and metaphor, are bound to one another. The seminal work of Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) has shown how the material structure of the house harbours intangible memory and affect. This is a profoundly metaphorical process; abstracted affects attach to material signifiers. Correspondingly, metaphor itself functions as a sort of home for meaning; the intangible or indescribable comes to rest in language that cannot fully accommodate it. Houses and their contents function as analogues for memories and affects, just as the material signifiers in metaphor are analogues for meaning. On the other hand, the heterotopic space of the garden is associated with a more tangible relationship between actions and words. This is reminiscent of Thoreau's writing, which is primarily concerned with being outside in the natural world. In *Walden* the act of writing is always concomitant with interactions with the natural world, planting beans, tending crops and observing the wildlife in and around Walden pond. For Cooper the garden is "an epiphany [...] of the relation between the source of the world and ourselves".<sup>59</sup> This claim suggests a far more elemental relationship between the individual and the material world than does metaphor. When understood in relation to language, this suggests a more concrete

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<sup>55</sup>Robinson, "Wilderness", 245–54.

<sup>56</sup>*Gilead*, 135.

<sup>57</sup>Lane, 57–89 (65).

<sup>58</sup>Robinson, "Wilderness", 246.

<sup>59</sup>Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, 151.

relation between language and the world, the individual and the other, rather than the individual and the self.

### Playing with Language and Space in the House and the Garden

In the passage from “Nature” that I quote above, Emerson describes how early users of language are particularly cognisant of the relationship between word and the material world. Thoreau similarly writes of the freshness and formative nature of the child’s experience. Though for him the emphasis is on the child’s empirical observation of the world, rather than the way in which she mediates this through language:

Every child begins the world again, to some extent, and loves to stay out doors, even in wet and cold. It plays house, as well as horse, having an instinct for it. Who does not remember the interest with which when young he looked at shelving rocks, or any approach to a cave?<sup>60</sup>

For Thoreau, the child recreates the relationship between humans and the world through “play[ing] house.” The domestic imaginary is thus seen as a way to interrogate the relationship between the individual and the world. Scenes of children playing are frequent in the Gilead novels. I have been arguing that in the Gilead novels, garden spaces are places in which there is a tangible relationship between language and action, whereas in internal domestic spaces, language bears an abstracted relation to the material world. Here, I compare passages from each of the Gilead novels; one from *Home*, that focuses on the garden; one from *Lila* that shows children playing within a house-like structure; and one from *Gilead* that takes place on the porch. In the garden, meanings shift between word and thing and there is a tangible relationship between the two. In the house, or house-like structure, meaning is reused and recreated so that its association with the material world becomes more and more removed and then becomes buried. On the liminal space of the porch, the status of the relationship between language and the material world is fraught and undefined. Unlike the circular conversations between the elderly ministers, the boxes of unread sermons in the Ames’s attic, and the Boughton house full of unread and unreadable books, these scenes represent children experimenting with the relationship between language and the world, testing its boundaries and creating it anew. Emerson’s assessment that children are more sensitive to the relationship between language the material world, is present in different ways in each passage from the Gilead novels that I analyse here. In the garden language is translated into action and in the house we see the process of abstraction taking place. On the in-between space of the porch, language is used to systematize and make sense of the world, but it does not manage to effect change within it.

At the beginning of *Home* Glory comes back to *Gilead*. Now in her late-thirties, Glory has returned to the family home after the man she was to marry has broken off their engagement. The novel is filled with scenes inside the house that are coloured by strained dialogue between Glory, Jack and their father. Both Glory and Jack are concealing their precise circumstances from their father so the conversations between them all are freighted with unspoken secrets and difficult memories. The novel’s internal spaces are thus characterised by language that is stilted, mysterious and unused. The scenes in

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<sup>60</sup>Thoreau, *Walden*, 27.

the garden act as counterbalance to the domestic spaces in the novel. To illustrate this, I look at a scene in which Glory reminisces about her childhood in the garden after a particularly strained conversation with Jack in which the siblings are shown beginning to confront the difficulty of their shared past.<sup>61</sup> This conversation happens in the house and then Robinson moves the characters out into the garden to ameliorate the pain and anxiety associated with the inside. As the youngest Boughton sibling, Glory was the only one still living at home when Jack's first child was born. She cared deeply for Jack's daughter with whom she maintained a relationship until the child's death at the age of three. In this exchange between Glory and Jack, the latter remarks that Glory is lucky not to have conceived an illegitimate child during her prolonged and curtailed engagement. Glory, mourning both the loss of Jack's child and her own childlessness is hurt and brings up the attempts she made to contact her brother after he abandoned his daughter; "[b]ut I'm trying to tell you, there was so much more than shame in all that [...] That's what I tried to say in all those letters I sent you."<sup>62</sup> Jack replies, "[t]hen I guess I should have read them."<sup>63</sup> The unread letters show language going nowhere, articulated but abortive. Through Jack's tactless remarks, Robinson demonstrates language being used in a truncated, inward-looking way. This creates a void of communication between the two siblings. Try as they might, their use of language is thwarted by a lack of common understanding.

This scene of failed communication is immediately followed, after a section break, by a descriptive passage that focuses on the garden. Glory's restoration to the site of her childhood frequently sends her into nostalgic reverie; she describes scenes of her past life, remembering her siblings and parents as they were twenty years before. Here, she watches her brother work in the garden and her mind drifts to childhood memories of playing there. Robinson represents the garden as a place in which language is instrumentalized and where meaning is created through a dynamic relationship between words and the material world. She writes:

Jack had added to the garden, sunflowers and snapdragons and money plants, several hills of cantaloupe, a pumpkin patch and three rows of corn. He rescued the bleeding-heart bushes from a tangle of weeds and tended the gourds with the tact of a man who believed, as all Boughtons did, that they thrive on neglect. When her brothers and sisters were children they had made rattles of the gourds when they dried, and bottles and drinking cups, playing Indian. They had carved pumpkins and toasted the seeds. They had pretended that silver disks of money plants were dollars. They had pinched the jaws of snapdragons to make them talk, or pinched their lips closed to pop them. They had eaten the seeds of sunflowers when they were ripe and dry. They had opened the flowers of bleeding hearts to reveal the tiny lady in her bath. Corn on the cob they had all loved, though they hated to shuck it, and they had all loved melons.<sup>64</sup>

This initial sentence makes an overt tonal shift; by changing to a descriptive mode after the miscommunication-riddled exchange between Glory and Jack, Robinson contrasts the circumscribed language of the siblings with a markedly less anxious form of communication. The garden is thus a communicative space marked by cooperation and

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<sup>61</sup>Robinson, *Home*, 156.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 157.



continuous process. In keeping with this communicative atmosphere, Robinson describes the garden simply, with a list of what is found there, providing a sort of inventory of its contents. This systematic use of language imposes order, mirroring the way in which Jack regains control over the garden. Descriptive language works as a form of labour; it does the groundwork for the text, creating images and scenes for the reader. Thus, the nature of Robinson's language here reflects Jack's actions. Through his work restoring the garden, Jack atones for his past mistakes. However, echoes of Jack and Glory's conversation surface here; Robinson contrasts Jack's 'tact' with the gourds with his lack of it on the previous page. His approach of nurture by neglect similarly reflects the abandonment of his first child and his separation from his second. Glory's memories are thus tinged with traces of the present, just as the present is haunted by the past. Though still fraught with contemporary stresses, Glory's memories have a palliative function, easing the grief of her relationship with Jack. Here, the clear descriptive prose offers respite for both the reader and for Glory from the false starts of unread letters and misunderstood meanings in the previous scene.

The passage mediates between the opposing categories of play and labour, collapsing them into one another; the children's play is a form of labour, and their labour a form of play. Glory describes the actions of her brothers and sisters bringing produce in from the garden and drying it; transforming the gourds into functional objects, rattles, bottles and cups. Robinson here depicts depression era thrift, the Boughtons make use of every possible part of the plant, gleaned all they can from the land. This active form of engagement with the land mirrors the instrumentality of Robinson's descriptive language. Despite the comprehensive and descriptive nature of this passage, the children's actions are always moving between practical domestic actions and imaginative play. Though they have made tools serviceable for ordinary domestic life the children also use the cups and bottles to create imaginary worlds, "playing Indian." The Boughton children's interactions with the plants thus takes place in the realms of both the real and the imaginary; though they are making use of the gourds in a quotidian manner, they are also enacting a form of make-believe. Throughout the passage, Robinson's language fluctuates between active domestic labour and the more imaginative work of representation. In between drying and preparing vegetables, the children play with the flowers of snapdragons and bleeding-hearts, finding images within them. There is a movement in the passage between hands and mouths; the Boughton children make tools and then eat pumpkin seeds, they shuck the corn and then eat that. They use their fingers to pinch the petals of the snapdragons and in doing so create mouths so that they are making the plants speak. Therefore, the children are literally making the material world produce language. The children's movement establishes an equivalence and interchangeability between the linguistic and action so that their use of language is shown as being in active relation to their movements. In this way, the children's behaviour mirrors that of Thoreau in *Walden* who similarly moves between active propagation on the land and writing. Though Robinson here distinguishes between written and spoken language; Glory's inert letters are contrasted with the children's agile fluctuation between speaking and doing, imagining and literally transforming.

The "money plants" literalise the relationship between the material world and language a step further. The plants are named, metaphorically, for the resemblance of their leaves to coins. Through play the children imagine that the leaves *are* coins. This

imaginative transformation means that the plant's metaphorical name returns itself back upon the material world; the metaphor is reappropriated and shapes the way in which the children engage with the plant. Through their play with the money plants the children activate the plant's metaphorical name, it is reinvigorated by use. Robinson thus depicts a dynamic relationship between words and the objects that they name or describe. The Boughton's use of language and action here corresponds with Emerson's assessment in 'Nature' that children show a greater awareness of the material referents of words. They literalise the metaphorical name of the money plant, uncovering the "hidden" processes of language. In the garden, language is used in direct relation to action; here, Robinson constructs it as a space in which language is instrumentalized and where meaning is understood through a dynamic relationship between words and the materiality of the world.

In *Lila* there is a passage remarkably like Glory's garden remembrance in which the novel's eponymous protagonist remembers playing in cabins at the worker's camps that she and her companions occasionally stayed in. Like Glory in the passage from *Home*, Lila has been prompted to reminiscence by reflecting on her current location; she is in the abandoned cabin at the edge of Gilead in which she shelters at the start of her relationship with Ames. Lila simultaneously hopes that he will not visit her there and imagines that he might; "[b]ut if he [Ames] did come, she hoped it would be in the morning. Those little white moths fluttering over it made that raggedy old meadow seem almost like a garden."<sup>65</sup> Lila's ambivalence towards Ames visiting her cabin is exemplary of her conflicted feelings towards domesticity across the novel; she is both protective and ashamed of her living space. When she eventually leaves to move into Ames's home, Lila feels constrained by its traditional early twentieth-century form of domesticity. But equally, she takes pride in household chores, particularly gardening. Here, by noting the likeness of the meadow to a garden, Lila takes pleasure in the simulation of domesticity. The fact that it is a simulation of domesticity is important, Lila feels constrained by domesticity, but takes pleasure in spaces that are adjacent to it. It is this feeling that prompts her to remember her childhood play in the worker's cabins, which are similarly domestic adjacent spaces. Robinson writes:

When they were children they used to be glad when they stayed in a worker's camp, shabby as they all were, little rows of cabins with battered tables and chairs and moldy cots inside, and maybe some dishes and spoons. They were dank and smelled of mice, and Marcelle made everyone sleep outside except when it rained, but they always had a cabin, and they kept everything they carried in it during the daytime. And Lila and Mellie and the boys, when they weren't working, played that it was their house or their fort or their cave. They would search it for anything that might have been left there, and if they found half a bootlace or a piece of broken cup they would make up stories about what it was and why they were lucky to find it. Once, Arthur's boy Deke found a penny that had been left on the railroad track and squashed flat. He held it up to the door and put a nail through it. Somebody sometime had nailed a horseshoe above the door of a cabin they had for a week, and they felt that this must be important.<sup>66</sup>

Here, Robinson begins describing Lila's memory in precisely the same manner as she does Glory's in *Home*; "[w]hen they were children [...]" The broken cup and the coin

<sup>65</sup>Robinson, *Lila*, 44.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*

repeat the imagery found in the passage from the previous novel. However, Robinson here constructs space in a drastically different manner from how she represents the garden in *Home*. Though she retains the comprehensive, listing of descriptive features, these features are destabilised by their careworn state. In *Home*, Robinson represents the garden as a space where both objects and language are used practically. Unlike this, here the worker's cabins are not serviceable as domestic spaces; the cabins are dirty and infested so Lila and her people choose to sleep outside. The cabins do not fulfil their requirements as spaces for shelter. With their everyday clutter, they function as a representation of domesticity rather than a container or facilitator for it. In this way, Robinson represents them as the likeness of a domestic space rather than usable living quarters. They represent domesticity rather than function as it.

This is evident in the way in which the children interact with the space. In the passage from *Lila*, the children enact a different form of play and use the objects in a way distinct from the Boughtons. Both extracts show groups of children working in concert with one another to create fictions; both sets of children refashion space through make-believe. However, in *Lila* the play is more driven by narrative and more symbolic. Where the Boughtons "play Indian", romanticising life outdoors, these children construct the cabin as a mythic space; it shifts from being a house, to a fort, to a cave. This mobile form of interiority marks an increased level of metaphorical interaction with the space. With each imagined manifestation of the cabin that Lila describes it becomes further removed from ordinary domesticity and increasingly unmoored from its physical properties. In this way the cabin behaves like words, such as the ones that Emerson describes in "Nature", that start out as descriptors for a physical object or state but, through use, lose the sense of their original referent. The children transform the space using their imaginations so that, for them, it becomes linked to, but removed, from its physical structure. The nature of the imagined spaces the cabin becomes also represent the process through which language becomes abstracted. The shift from house to fort is a movement to a less penetrable form of interiority; meaning becomes locked in and closed off. The further transformation to a cave is then a shift to a mythologised space that carries a host of symbolic associations. As a cave, the space becomes an entirely allegorical one. However, it also connects language to an elemental or, as Emerson would have it, 'savage' form of domesticity. The children's construction of space thus shows the concept of domesticity becoming essentialized and then abstracted.

In this imaginative domestic space, as opposed to the imaginative garden space in *Home*, objects lose their intended use value and gain a symbolic value instead. Whereas Glory and her siblings transformed objects into cups, Lila and her friends find a broken and worn-out cup and fashion for it a new, imaginative, and symbolic use. In doing so, they take it away from its intended purpose, just as the repeated use of words removes them from their material referent. Similarly, the coin that Deke finds has been altered and made strange, so that its metaphorical value as currency is no longer valid. Instead, Deke invests the coin with his own significance using it to mark their territory. Like the horseshoe though, it is an undefined importance, it has a significance that evades language. The children see themselves as 'lucky' to find these discarded items and tell stories about them. Thus, the changes that they effect are shifts in perception rather than material transformations. The Boughton children literally transform objects to help them construct imaginary worlds whereas Lila and her friends build

worlds and stories around objects. Therefore, in this passage from *Lila*, it is language itself that effects change rather than the translation of language into action that is shown in *Home*.

These two passages, so similar in imagery and set up see Robinson defining the relationship between space and language in markedly different ways. In the garden, language is translated into action and in the house, language is performative and changes perceptions of the material world rather than its physical properties. I turn now to a scene on the porch. Here, Robinson shows the relationship between word and world in a state of flux, with neither approach able to be resolved.

In *Gilead* we see Jack bringing the fruits of his labour in the garden to swap with Lila; “Jack brought gourds, a whole stack of them. Your mother sent him back with green tomatoes. Oh, these late, strange riches of the summer, these slab-sided pumpkins and preposterous zucchinis.”<sup>67</sup> Here, in place of the coins in the previous passages the vegetables themselves become objects of exchange, removing the metaphorical nature of the transaction entirely. Like Glory in *Home*, the vegetables and the space cause Ames’s thoughts to drift into childhood recollection. He describes a memory of his father and grandfather shelling walnuts on the porch in a rare moment of conviviality. Ames says, “[t]hey loved each other’s company when they weren’t at each other’s throats, which meant they were silent, as they were that day.”<sup>68</sup> Robinson thus sets up the porch as place of quiet ceasefire, the two preachers able to get along after dispensing with language. Ames notes the tedious nature of their labour over the walnuts before, after a section break, returning to the present moment and describing Robby and Tobias playing with the gourds:

You and Tobias are on the porch steps sorting the gourds by size and color and shape, choosing favorites, assigning names. Some of them are submarines and some of them are bombs. I suppose I should be expecting another visit from T.’s father shortly. All the children play at war now. All of them make those sounds of airplanes and bombs and crashing and exploding. We did the same things, playing at cannon fire and bayonet charges.

There is certainly nothing in that fact to reassure.

Cataract that this world is, it is remarkable to consider what does abide in it.<sup>69</sup>

In this liminal space the relationship between language and action is unstable. Unlike the extracts from *Home* and *Lila*, Ames is primarily observing children at play rather than remembering his own experience. He is thus more separate from the action he describes than are Glory and Lila. Ames describes the boys naming and categorising the vegetables that Jack has exchanged with Lila. This form of play is again different from those represented in *Home* and *Lila*. Sorting and categorising are common forms of childhood play that allow the child to navigate the relationship between language and the world. By creating a taxonomy for the gourds, Robby and Tobias test out the ways in which descriptive words apply to different objects and in doing so experiment with the boundaries of the literal. Though their engagement with the gourds is not limited to this form of play, they also treat the gourds symbolically, naming them after bombs and submarines.

<sup>67</sup>Robinson, *Gilead*, 218.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 219.

In this passage, the children's actions with the gourds shift between an assessment of their material characteristics and their symbolic names. Robinson contrasts the calm and methodical process of sorting the gourds with the way they are represented imaginatively as weapons and military vehicles. In this way the boys are caught between using words in direct relation to action and using them metaphorically.

Ames does not approve of Robby playing war; he is uncomfortable with the confluence between the language and small-scale action of the children's play and the wider actions of the nation. The novel is set shortly after the start of the Vietnam war, to which Ames, a staunch pacifist, is opposed. However, earlier in the novel Ames says that if he lives to see the election later that year he will vote for the re-election of Eisenhower.<sup>70</sup> It was under Eisenhower, a former military general, that the USA's military involvement in Vietnam escalated into full warfare. Ames's voting intentions, seemingly inconsistent with his hatred of war, are motivated by a fidelity to the Republican party, the party of his grandfather. Thus, his politics are built on names rather than on action; he is averse to the symbols of war but does not take an active stance against it. This is partly because Ames's conception and hatred of war is theoretical rather than practical. In the above passage he does not distinguish between Robby and Tobias's Vietnam inspired war games and his own childhood re-enacting the American Civil War. Instead, he understands war in an unspecific and abstracted sense, which allows him to divorce it from political action. Ames's inability to reconcile language and the world reflects the discordant elements of the children's play. On this liminal space of the porch, the relationship between language and the world is ill-defined and in flux. This prevents it from either effecting change through performative language or inciting change through action.

By engaging with these mainstays of criticism on Robinson's fiction – Transcendentalist legacy, metaphor, and home –, I have approached her work, contrary to the arguments of this essay, from the inside. In staying with the influences, methods and themes that Robinson identifies in her own work, we are able to expose the complexities and self-scrutiny that inhere within them. Though she places a high value on introspection, abstraction and indeterminacy, the Gilead novels show how a complete accession to these modes of thought can forestall any meaningful impact they might have in the world. Though she values the labour of creating a home and recognises the affective pull that home spaces exert, Robinson also remembers their exclusionary power. This method of self-critique allows us to think more carefully about the relationship between language and action, between word and world, as both a reminder of what literature can do and as a warning of its limitations. This can, in turn, help us to go out into the garden and make change in the world.

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<sup>70</sup>*ibid.*, 107.

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