Mystery as a theological theme in the writings of Marilynne Robinson

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

The novels of Marilynne Robinson have been seen as the primary source of insight into her theological reflections. The purpose of this study is to challenge this assumption by claiming that her essays are an essential theological companion to her novels. The study explores the theme of mystery in Robinson's essays and selects three episodes from the Gilead trilogy to show how the same theme emerges in the novels. The study also claims that Robinson employs contrasting methods of discourse to express a common theology across the two genres. A conceptual model developed by Rowan Williams in his book *The Edge of Words* is used as a framework to demonstrate this claim. Finally, the study suggests that Robinson's open approach to religious thought has the potential to appeal beyond the confines of Christian orthodoxy. In summary, by offering a unified approach to Robinson's theology across both genres, the study seeks to provide an innovative perspective on her overall work.

Contents

1. Introduction

1i. Overview

Marilynne Robinson is predominantly known as a writer of fiction. Her four novels have won prizes and critical acclaim but her five volumes of essays are less widely read. As a result, the novels are usually seen as the primary source of insight into her thought and the essays play a secondary role. In this dissertation, I will challenge this assumption and will show that the essays provide essential insights into her theological thought. In order to demonstrate this claim, I have chosen to focus on the theological theme of mystery and argue that this theme is foundational for Robinson, as it frames her approach to both the nature of reality and her religious humanism. She uses the concept to express the unknowability that is at the heart of human experience which, she maintains, is the source of the human impulse for religion.[1] The dissertation will also explore how Robinson articulates the theme of mystery, claiming that she employs the dynamic power of language in contrasting, yet effective, ways across both the essays and the novels.

The first section will start by looking in detail at what Robinson says about mystery in her essays. It will take an incremental approach and will introduce the reader to the theological reflections that underpin her religious humanism through a series of stages. It will then look at examples of how some of the same ideas emerge as themes in the Gilead novels. The second section will ask how Robinson articulates the theme of mystery. It will begin by considering how she recognises both the power and limitations of language to shape our experience of reality. It will then borrow a conceptual framework suggested by Rowan Williams in his book *The Edge of Words*[2] to explore how Robinson herself expresses her theological reflections across her essays and novels. The intention is to reinforce the claim that Robinson expresses common theological themes by employing different types of discourse across both genres. The final section will summarise Robinson's approach to the theme of mystery as an open approach to religious thought and will consider her potential appeal to exclusive humanists. By

[1] Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015), p. 212.
[2] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

encouraging an awareness of mystery, Robinson is inviting her readers to explore new understanding and to trust their own experience.

In this way, I will demonstrate that the tendency to treat the novels as the primary source of insight into Robinson's theological reflections is misplaced. Instead, I will show that by exploring key theological themes from her essays we can achieve a deeper understanding of the religious humanism which underpins her work as a whole.

1ii. Biographical summary

Robinson was born in 1943 in Idaho, USA. Her father worked in the lumber industry and the family moved many times along the Washington/Idaho border during her childhood. She received a good education and was much influenced by her older brother, who encouraged her to study from an early age. After graduating from high school in 1962 she studied English at Pembroke College, now part of Brown University. She completed her PhD at the University of Washington in 1977 on the subject of Shakespeare's play *Henry VI Part II* and from 1990, until her recent retirement, she worked at the Creative Writing workshop at the University of Iowa.

She began her writing career in 1980 when she published her first novel, *Housekeeping*, to critical acclaim. Her next novel, *Gilead*, did not appear until 2004, followed by *Home* in 2008 and *Lila* in 2013. These three novels are all set simultaneously in the fictional Iowan town of Gilead. Alongside the novels, she has published five collections of essays, usually based on talks and lectures that she has been invited to give, the most recent being *What Are We Doing Here*? in 2018. These cover a wide range of topics including theology, politics, history, education and economics. There is a strong contrast between the two genres. Whilst the novels gently explore the inner lives of a limited number of characters, the essays are polemical and often contrarian in spirit. Her reputation as both an author of fiction and a public intellectual has steadily increased over recent years.

As I will be exploring theological themes in this dissertation, it is relevant to consider how Robinson's faith might influence her writing. In her personal life, she is a Congregationalist, although she writes little about personal piety or ritual and is reluctant to talk about her own faith which she says "does not readily reduce itself to simple

statements."[3] However, in one rare example she does recall her childhood religious experiences in a partially autobiographical essay from the *Death of Adam* collection.

> I felt God as a presence before I had a name for him, and long before I knew words like 'faith' and 'belief' I was aware to the point of alarm of a vast energy of intention, all around me, barely restrained, and I thought everyone else must be aware of it.[4]

As an adult, she became strongly influenced by the theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and she recalls a particular incident as an undergraduate when she came across a passage in his book '*Doctrine of Original Sin Defended'* in which he uses the apparent continuity of moonlight as an analogy for the continual renewal of the world by the will of God.[5] His sense of ongoing emergence immediately set her free from the determinism of much of what she was studying at the time and led her to a different way of seeing the world, one based on openness and aesthetics rather than narrow reason. His vision introduced her into a way of seeing the universe "that is orderly, without being mechanical, that is open to and participates in indeterminacy, and even providence."[6] This in turn influenced her approach to religion. Instead of seeing faith as adherence to a set of doctrines, it became a liberation of thought, a response to the continual renewal of the world moment by moment, as described by Edwards. She believes that this liberation of thought recognises the complexity of experience and becomes "an ongoing instruction in the things that pertain to God."[7]

Robinson has a distinctive approach to understanding and interpreting her experiences. She says she is preoccupied with religion and it is, therefore, only appropriate that it should be the subject of her work. She was warned to expect some resistance to these preoccupations, but when the resistance did not materialise, she felt an increased confidence in her own judgements.[8] This confidence has two main consequences. Firstly, it has meant that she is not intimidated by the social pressure from critics of religious thought who associate it with an outdated and simplistic worldview.[9] She is also drawn to unfashionable theologians, such as John Calvin (1509-1564) and

[3] Marilynne Robinson, *Death of Adam* (New York: Picador, 1996), p. 261.
[4] Robinson, *Death of Adam* p. 228.
[5] Marilynne Robinson, 'Credo' in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 36, 2008, no 2, p. 27.
[6] Marilynnne Robinson, 'Jonathan Edwards in a New Light' in *Humanities* Vol. 35 no. 6 (2014) pp 14-45.
[7] Robinson, 'Credo', p. 26.
[8] Marilynne Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2018), p. 207.
[9] Robinson, *Death of Adam* p. 260.

Jonathan Edwards, both of whom speak directly to her own experiences. Her ongoing interest in a wide range of subjects underpins all her work, but is particularly apparent in her essays, where her distinctive polemic covers many topics including science, politics and history. Secondly, she believes in the importance of being well informed and for understanding arguments from first principles. As a result, she spent more than twenty years between the publication of her first and second novels reading extensively, making a point of going back to primary sources. This independent approach has made her unwilling to accept the broad consensus on any topic, preferring instead to make her own arguments in a way that satisfies her personal standards of reasoning. These cover a wide range of issues, including some of the fundamental questions of life, such what makes us human and where we belong in the cosmos. She is particularly interested in reinstating individual experience as a source of religious intuition and she explores this theme in both her essays and her novels. In the novels, she is constrained by the limits of the characters she creates, but in her essays she allows herself the freedom to range from one subject to another, drawing on her own experiences selectively to satisfy her own mind. Both approaches will be looked at in detail in the next chapter.

1iii. Studies of Robinson's writing

Robinson's novels have prompted much interest and commentary. Her first novel, *Housekeeping*, was received to critical acclaim in 1980, winning the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for a first novel and *Gilead* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2005. Her fiction is densely written in a distinctive American voice and provides a rich source of interest for literary criticism. A number of themes have been explored by commentators, including her democratic aesthetic, her sense of place, the importance of the ordinary, and the issues of race and American identity. There is also an acknowledgement amongst some commentators that theology plays a significant role in her fiction. For example, Andre Brower Latz contends that "Robinson's novels are a form of sophisticated and subtle theological reflection. [….] They show what theological reflection and belief might mean for a way of life and how they can inform a view of the world."[10] At the time of writing, there has not been as much work published on her essays. In his book *Understanding Marilynne Robinson,* Alex Engbretson analyses both

[10] Andrew Brower Latz, 'Creation in the fiction of Marilynne Robinson' in *Literature and Theology*, Vol 25, No. 3, (2011).

her essays and her novels with a view to providing a deeper insight into her novels. He acknowledges that contemporary culture tends to place the novel in higher regard than the essay, which is often seen as mundane and lacking in imagination. Nevertheless, he argues that Robinson herself has devoted significant effort to her essays and that it is therefore possible to infer that she sees them as carrying the same intellectual weight as the novels.[11]

Yet few commentaries have been written on the links between the essays and the novels, particularly on any theological themes that they might have in common. One example of is Todd Shy's critical essay *Religion and Marilynne Robinson*, where he claims that Robinson's humanistic interpretation of Calvin expressed in her essays can be traced through to the narrative of *Gilead*. He claims that across the essays and the novel "We are clearly in the same sea, which is the human condition, either with or without God."[12] He claims that her interpretation of Calvin is strangely modern, as she moves "attention away from the majestic heights of Calvin-style revelation to the local authenticity of the individual – the narrator, for example, in Gilead."[13] This shift, he argues, reflects the approach of modern theology, which tends to build an understanding of God upward, from individual experience.

Anna Hadfield and Roger Berkowitz, in *The Romance of the Self,*[14] draw a different connection between the essays and the novels. They concentrate on Robinson's concern about the growth of exclusive humanism during the 20th century, which assumes that experience can be reduced to scientific or social scientific description. This devalues the personal testimonies of consciousness, subjectivity and intuition as authentic sources of understanding. In contrast, they argue, the traditional religious humanism proposed by Robinson recognises human beings as exceptional and acknowledges the possibility of unresolvable mystery. The contrast between religious humanism and exclusive humanism arises from different approaches to reality. The religious approach preserves mystery whereas the secular approach implies it can be mastered. Hadfield and Berkowitz then note that Robinson moves away from her concerns about the impoverishment of humanity expressed in her essays, to explore a vision of religious

[11] Alex Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), p 100.
[12] Todd Shy, Religion and Marilynne Robinson, (Critical essay), Salmagundi, 2007 (155 156), p. 258.
[13] Shy, p. 254.
[14] Anna Hadfield and Roger Berkowitz, 'The Romance of the Self' in *A Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson*, ed. by Shannon L. Mariotti and Joseph H. Lane (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 2016), pp 253-272.

humanism in her novels. They argue that Robinson shows "how religious faith – faith in the way Robinson conceives of it, in the sense of recognising the ultimate mystery of existence - can awaken and heighten perception, make the world more real and meaningful."[15] Her novels therefore concentrate on the essential mystery of the human being as a unique individual. Both these articles make theological links between the essays and the novels by recognising the religious intuition that underpins both forms of creative expression.

This study takes the opportunity to explore the relationship between the essays and the novels in more depth by identifying particular theological themes from the essays and seeing how they also emerge in the novels. The emphasis will be on the power of human consciousness as a source of religious intuition, which is a theme in both the essays and the novels. By exploring these links, we will achieve a more unified perspective on Robinson's writing and enhance our understanding of the religious humanism which underpins all her work. Hadfield and Berkowitz's sense of the crucial importance of mystery is a helpful starting point and will be the focus going forward.

1iv. Mystery as a theological theme

As Hadfield and Berkowitz claim, one of the key differences between exclusive humanism and religious humanism is their approach to mystery. This is a concept open to a number of interpretations, depending on the context. Firstly, there is the mystery of scientific complexity which may or may not be resolved with the growth of knowledge. Whilst it is likely that there will be areas of knowledge that will always lie beyond the capacity of human understanding, the mystery of what is not known is not perceived as meaningful or coherent. This is the approach to mystery that is associated with exclusive humanism. Secondly, there is the mystery of religious intuition, a dimension of human experience which senses or discerns that we are immersed in a deeper reality than that which is made known to us through our normal perception. This religious intuition is interpreted as an experience of the divine and is the approach to mystery that Robinson explores in both her essays and her novels. It is clearly distinguishable from the mystery of scientific complexity. Thirdly there is the mystery of divine unknowability, which has traditionally been explored by theologians, confident that the faith they have been given

[15] Hadfield and Berkowitz, p.265.

is fundamentally coherent. This approach explores mystery, not as an aspect of human experience, but as characteristic of God. For traditional theologians the reality of God exists independently of human experience.

This traditional approach to theological mystery is summarised by Karen Kilby, in her article *Seeking Clarity.*[16] She reviews some of the most influential theologians of the past, all of whom believed that the faith they had been given was in some way coherent and could therefore be explored without being undermined. She acknowledges that there is a danger that the theological concept of mystery can be a refuge for intellectual laziness, yet she argues that it can also help to advance clarity and deepen understanding. Indeed, an unwillingness to ask questions about faith can be the indication of a rigidity or a fear that it cannot withstand deep thought. Although theologians are unlikely to increase our understanding of divine unknowability, Kilby maintains that theology ought to deepen, rather than to reduce mystery. Her first example is Aquinas who said we cannot know what God is, only what he is not. His life's work was to ask questions, to weigh up various answers, which only lead to further questions. However, underpinning this fragmented activity was a belief that the faith he had been given was fundamentally coherent. Similarly, Augustine's search for clarity arose from a deep confidence in his faith which allowed him to acknowledge his confusion and to ask questions about many aspects of the Christian tradition. His confidence was sufficient to dispel any anxieties that the questions might undermine the faith he sought to deepen. He did not expect answers. Instead he accepted the ongoing search, undertaken with divine assistance. Kilby also claims that mystery is at the centre of Rahner's theology. For Rahner, there is one mystery which underpins all existence and to which we are all predisposed or drawn. This mystery is ungraspable and incomprehensible and yet we experience it. As Kilby says, for Rahner "everything we do is surrounded, embraced, upheld by a fundamental relationship which we cannot understand. […….] Mystery is fundamental, the realm of what we can grasp, only secondary." However, this mystery is not entirely inaccessible to us. "Every human act of knowing or willing is undergirded by an awareness of the infinity of Being and therefore God."[17] This divine communication is given to the depths of every individual by God, experienced either consciously or unconsciously, as grace. For all these theologians, the mystery of God is fundamental and exists independently of human

[16] Karen Kilby, 'Seeking Clarity' in *The Routledge Companion to the Practice of Christian Theology* by Mike Higton and Jim Fidor (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 2015).
[17] Kilby, p. 68.

experience. They seek to speak about God in a way that is appropriate to the nature of God.

In contrast, rather than explore divine unknowability, Robinson approaches mystery from the starting point of individual experience. Although she is reticent about sharing reflections on her personal life with her readers in her essay 'Psalm Eight' she explains that she has spent her life watching, "not to see beyond the world, merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes."[18] In these few words she expresses her approach to reality. For Robinson, the world is not divided into that which is known and that which is unknown. Instead, we are totally immersed in an irresolvable mystery, which is beyond our comprehension, but which can, in a limited and partial way, be understood through our powers of religious intuition.[19] Yet she does not ignore traditional wisdom and draws much from the writings of Calvin[20] and Edwards[21] in particular, as they both emphasise the importance of humankind as a manifestation of the mystery of God.

This emphasis on humankind can also be found in the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). According to Keith Clements, Schleiermacher saw consciousness the source of all religious experience.[22] The emotions, properly understood, point to an infinite and eternal reality which is grounded in the everyday. He did not distinguish between the natural and supernatural but saw consciousness as the medium through which the mystery of God is manifest in the world. This manifestation, although experienced by individuals, is profoundly communal and can be shared through the careful use of language. For Schleiermacher, therefore, the purpose of theology is not to articulate God's purpose for mankind, which cannot be known, but instead to communicate the shared characteristics of individual piety through the development of church doctrine and dogma. Schleiermacher was a controversial figure and was accused of reducing the subject matter of theology to a simplified focus on human feeling. However, his claim that experience is the foundation of religious awareness was influential and, as we will see, his approach has much in common with Robinson's own

[18] Robinson, *Death of Adam*, p. 243.
[19] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 206.
[20] For example: Robinson, *Death of Adam*, pp 174-206, Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, pp 64-65 and pp 227–239.
[21] For example: Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, pp 73-88, Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* pp 183-199.
[22] The brief summary of Schleiermacher's thought that follows is based on: Keith Clements, *Freidrich Schleiermacher, (*London: Collins, 1987*)* pp. 35-65.

emphasis on consciousness as a source of religious intuition. His stress on the importance of language as a way of sharing the mystery of religious experience is also a theme that emerges for Robinson, who expresses concern that the subtleties of traditional religious language can often be overlooked or unappreciated.[23]

The theme of mystery is not without challenges. Robinson uses the word when she wishes to emphasise unknowability, yet the ideas that underpin the concept are present throughout her work. She wishes to encourage her readers to deepen their imaginative response to the profound complexity in which they are immersed. She is puzzled by the "tendency, in the churches and in society as a whole, to push aside mystery as if it were a delusion of ignorance or fear that can have no relevance to people living in the real world."[24] She is also wary of statements about belief and her reflections on mystery are often explored by challenging the assumptions that underpin exclusive humanism. However, in her experience, open ended mystery manifests itself as an intentional force which can best be interpreted through the language that has traditionally been associated with religious tradition. The next chapter explores her approach to mystery in more depth.

[23] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 37.
[24] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things,* p. 151.

2. What does Robinson say about mystery?

This chapter will introduce key themes and concepts in Robinson's approach to mystery. The analysis will begin with the essays, which she acknowledges are contrarian in spirit and which are mainly concerned with what she sees as the cultural impoverishment and decline in generosity that increasingly characterise public life.[25] She wishes to hear passionate arguments about these changes and is therefore willing to answer to her own conscience, standing out against custom and consensus if necessary.[26] In her most recent collection, *What Are We Doing Here?* she explicitly states that she is too old "to mince her words".[27] She resists the tendency towards a restricted view of human capacity that she believes dominates modern thought and wishes to reanimate the spirit of religious humanism by encouraging creativity in all its forms.[28] In addition, as Hadfield and Berkowitz point out, she concentrates on her concern about the growth of exclusive humanism in the 20th century, which devalues the personal testimonies of consciousness and assumes that human experience can be explained solely by social scientific or scientific description. As a result, she devotes considerable effort in her essays to undermining the assumptions of exclusive humanism. However, as we have already noted, she also feels obliged to account for her own religious preoccupations, so the essays also include aspects of her personal theological reflections. The first section of this chapter will seek to draw out some themes from these theological reflections by employing a staged approach to her treatment of mystery. The second section will look at how some of these themes emerge in the Gilead novels.

2i. Mystery as a theme in Robinson's essays

Robinson's essays are her personal reflections on particular topics or themes. She admits that she undertakes what she calls an "archaeology" of her own thinking,[29] with the intention of exploring her own assumptions. She has published five collections of essays between 1996 and 2018, many of which are transcriptions of lectures that she has been invited to deliver and are therefore prompted by a particular audience and occasion. Each essay stands alone, yet themes do emerge. One of these is her treatment

[25] Robinson, *Death of Adam*, pp. 1-3.
[26] Robinson, *Death of Adam*, p. 262.
[27] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. xiv.
[28] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 33.
[29] Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2012), p. 93.

of mystery, a flexible concept which she uses in many different contexts. The style and content of the essays mean that her thoughts are often scattered through her writings yet some of her insights are expressed in a poetic prose which often reflects the mystery that she is wishing to express. Although the essays are a distinctive mixture of her own theology and her concerns about the quality of public life, they do provide a rich source of insight into her thought which helps us to understand her work overall.

In order to look at the theme of mystery in detail I have chosen to use an incremental approach, which will lead a reader who is interested in Robinson's theological reflections from an initial question about meaning and purpose to the deepest mysteries that are at the edge of the articulable. The intention is to start with Robinson's challenges to some of the certainties of reductionist thought in which she lays out her understanding of the nature of reality and the limits of human understanding. This leads to a broader treatment of mystery as experienced through the complexities of human consciousness or the soul and the structures of meaning that we construct for ourselves to address these mysteries. The final stage moves on to a more theological approach to mystery, exploring Robinson's views on the relationship between the mind and Being in more depth. The approach carries some risks. One of Robinson's key concerns is to always respect the complexity of the reality in which we are immersed. Drawing out threads in her thinking in this way could be seen as falling into the reductionist trap that she is so keen to avoid herself. However, in my view it is worth taking the risk for two reasons. Firstly, her theological reflections underpin her religious humanism which in turn informs her approach to her politics, her understanding of democracy and her concerns about what she sees as cultural impoverishment. Understanding her theological reflections therefore helps us to understand her approach to other aspects of her thought. Secondly, in her recent essay 'Faith' she notes that religious concepts such as God and the soul tend to trigger scepticism and that agnosticisms and atheisms have gained in prestige in recent years. She believes that as a result, many liberal Christians are "baffled by the loss of the conceptual vocabulary of religion and … for the language that can speak of and for the radical, solitary, time-bound self"[30] and have given up too much ground in concession to the progress of scientific knowledge.[31] She implies that she seeks to offer a more subtle and nuanced Christianity, yet the style of her essays means that her theological

[30] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 88.
[31] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 210.

reflections are often obscured by her polemic and are not easily accessible. This approach therefore seeks to provide some structure to her reflections by proceeding through the following stages.

a. The possibility of mystery and the limits of human understanding

   This first stage invites the reader to consider the possibility of a mystery that cannot be resolved. It considers the experience of awe and wonder that can prompt reflections about our origins and meaning. It also challenges some of the assumptions of scientific determinism by reminding the reader of the limits of human understanding.

b. Mystery and human consciousness

   The nature of human consciousness is at the heart of Robinson's reflections, which she claims is profoundly complex and improbable. She wishes to reinstate the testimony of human experience as a reliable witness to the possibility of a deeper reality.

c. Mystery and religious intuition

   The final stage draws together Robinson's reflections on the relationship between the mind and the cosmos, suggesting that humankind is created in the image of God. Consciousness becomes a source of religious intuition and for Robinson herself, this intuition finds its expression through the Christian mythos. It is at this stage that her approach clearly diverges from exclusive humanism which sees mystery as incoherent and without meaning,

a. The possibility of mystery and the limits of human understanding

The initial stage in this developmental approach is to consider the possibility of mystery, and we will begin from Robinson's first principles. When we consider reality, we are presented with incomprehensible complexity. We each construct models to navigate our way through the world based on our experiences, our pre-dispositions and what we can access through our senses. We compare our models with one another, ask questions and build instruments to help us find answers. However, we can never ignore the scale of the task and our own limitations. As Robinson says

> There is a tremendous play in reality or, to put it another way, there are far too many layers and orders of complexity in all of Being to abide the simple accounts we try to

> make of things. This complexity is dynamic because from moment to moment every layer of complexity opens up any number of variables. [32]

We rely on language to try to make sense of the world, but "we will never know or find words for any meaningful fraction even of the aspects of reality that are available to our strategies of comprehension."[33] We therefore need to accept that we live within a mystery which is far beyond our capacities to comprehend. If we try to make sense of our experience by using words such as 'accident' or 'randomness', these "can only be thought of as relative to our expectations."[34] Our knowledge can never be anything more than partial, nor can we assume that what seems possible and reasonable to us can be extrapolated to the reality that lies beyond the structure of our experience.[35]

Robinson's sense of awe and wonder is pervasive. She says that there is "there is something irreducibly thrilling about the universe, whatever account is made of it."[36] This thrill draws her to science as a method which extends the limits of human understanding by careful and systematic experimentation and she takes an active interest in new theories as they emerge. Her own contribution to a sense of awe is often conveyed through her distinctive and poetic prose, far removed from the precise language of the scientific method. In the following passage she marvels at our current account of the creation of the universe, whilst reminding us that we must never be drawn into simplification in order to satisfy any desire we may have for certainty.

> In the beginning was a very remarkable atom that blossomed into the cosmos and is blossoming now as every thought anyone will think tomorrow, in the accelerating rush of space toward who knows where towards what no-one knows. We must step back and acknowledge that any account of that initial moment that make that event seem straightforward and common place are deeply wrong. Nothing else could be true, considering what it has yielded.[37]

This reference to current models of the origin of the universe reflects Robinson's lay interest in developments in science and show that she is in tune with a changing context. She claims that many of the arguments against religion often take issue with a worldview which is based on a cosmology that is often hundreds of years out of date.[38] This saw the world as created by an all-powerful God and governed by timeless and fundamental laws

[32] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 102.
[33] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 208.
[34] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 48.
[35] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 91.
[36] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 47.
[37] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 46.
[38] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 211.

which can be understood by the application of reason. The subsequent success of science to uncover these laws has strengthened its status in the popular imagination, often at the expense of religion, which has been seen to lose ground.[39] Yet Robinson is asking us not to be over influenced by these limited arguments against religion and to consider the possibility that we are immersed in a deeper reality which is both beyond our understanding yet is open to be explored.[40] Rather than feeling threatened by science, she encourages anyone with religious doubts to subscribe to *Scientific American*, which she is certain will only strengthen their sense of the grandeur of God.[41] As we saw earlier, she sees religion as a liberation of thought and wants us to appreciate that "the world is as wonderful in its mystery as any theology could hope to express and that science, rather than impoverishing it of mystery, lavishes new marvels on us day by day."[42] Both science and religion should be seen as legitimate ways of extending our appreciation of reality.

This first stage in this developmental approach therefore provides some context. It does no more than set the scene for exploring further, yet it already gives us some key insights into Robinson's theological reflections. Readers may be content to admit to a sense of wonder at a wider mystery, and to leave the matter there. For others, the possibility of exploring mystery through the powers of human consciousness may be resonate. These readers may be willing to proceed to the next stage, where we explore what Robinson sees as mystery experienced through human consciousness.

b. Mystery and human consciousness

Robinson claims that the status of science in the popular imagination has also influenced attitudes to the nature of humanity. The deterministic worldview that has dominated both the popular and the scientific imagination since the time of Newton has undermined the contribution that individual experience can make to our appreciation of the universe and our part within it. At the time of the Renaissance there was a great flowering of human capacity and a veneration for human potential which prompted a wealth of art and literature. This formed the basis for the humanities, which flourished alongside science through the 17th and 18th centuries. However, by the end of the 19th century, Darwin's theory of evolution began a process that suggested that the scientific

[39] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 210.
[40] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 217.
[41] Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books,* p. 11.
[42] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 46.

method could successfully provide an exhaustive explanation of human experience. Instead of individual experience being a source of authentic insight into reality, we came to see ourselves as the outcome of an impersonal evolutionary impulse which favoured the survival of the fittest and which undermined the possibility of human agency. In the Darwinian worldview, we are at the mercy of impersonal forces over which we have no influence.[43]

Robinson responds to what she sees as this impoverished view of the human condition by reinstating the status of experience as an essential and deeply fruitful source of insight.[44] She points out that the human brain is the most complex object known to exist in the universe and that although we cannot know that conscious life has only ever appeared on earth, we do know that it is extremely rare.[45] These facts should encourage us to value, rather than to denigrate, our gifts. There are three main threads to her argument. Firstly, our human capacity to respond to select, order and experience the world is a source of wonder.

> And why does the reality that contains us cohere as it does and can only be of one substance with that primal storm? What strange nexus is this that has let us feel becalmed? We look at the collisions of galaxies and are amazed. We should be more amazed that our cities stand, our bodies pass through maturity and aging, our selves are rooted in and derive from a past that cannot be avoided and is nowhere to be found.[46]

This sense of being comfortably embedded in the universe is highly improbable, as if a "gentle spell prevents us from grasping the situation."[47] Reality is composed of energy in different forms yet we arbitrarily select some aspects of this energy and label it as physical, encountering it as lawful and coherent. Yet if we were the size of atoms everyday items would appear to us as clouds of energy.[48] Robinson further argues that our failure to acknowledge the arbitrary nature of our labelling means that the distinction between the physical and the non-physical might help with simplistic enquiries but can lead to a dualism that excludes essential aspects of experience, defining them as non-existent.[49]

[43] For fuller accounts of Robinson's views on the changes since the Renaissance see *Darwinism* in Robinson, *Death of Adam*, pp 28–75 and *Humanism* in Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, pp. 3-16.
[44] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 102.
[45] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 83.
[46] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 231.
[47] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 211.
[48] Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books,* p. 10.
[49] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 232.

Secondly, we are immersed in the mystery of time.[50] It provides the context for all our experiences, for change and for constancy, for all our gains and all our losses. We depend on this constancy to uncover lawful patterns, which allow us to hypothesise cause and effect. At a deeper level, we should acknowledge that the reality we experience is emergent. Although we rely on time to navigate the world, we are always standing on the frontier of what is and what is to come. By reminding us that our experience is embedded, moment by moment within the constraints of time, Robinson encourages us to be aware of the profound transience of the world which we see as apparently stable, governed by the patterns we label as cause and effect.[51]

Thirdly, the capacity of the human mind is a profound source of wonder which cannot be captured by reductionist explanations of neural activity. Robinson is fascinated by the emergent properties of the mind, particularly the sense of self awareness. The atoms in our brains are replaced many times in our lifetimes, yet our sense of self is continuous and coherent, developing through an inner dialogue and informed by a shared understanding with the experiences of others. This ability of the self to maintain an identity from one day to the next throughout a lifetime is remarkable, accumulating loyalties, language, culture, habit, and learnedness. She regrets the loss of the traditional understanding of the word soul, which in earlier times would have captured the deep sense of self-awareness that we experience when we appraise and consider our own thoughts.[52] The "magnificent energies of consciousness" converge in the self, or the soul, and it is here that "questions of right and wrong are weighed, love is felt, guilt and loss are suffered."[53]

These three elements of Robinson's case for reinstating the importance of the testimony of individual experience are all underpinned by a sense that we are so deeply immersed in mystery that we are unable to take a truly objective view of reality. The arbitrariness of our experience suggests that

> The reality we experience is given, in the sense that it is, for our purposes, lawful. [.....] It is given in a deeper sense in that it is emergent [....] The word 'emergent' implies a source, 'an arising from'.[54]

[50] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 90.
[51] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p 90 and Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, p. 185
[52] For examples of further comments on the soul, see Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 212 and 215, Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 9 and pp. 81-82.
[53] Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, p. 9.
[54] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 90.

We create webs of meaning within this given reality which enfolds and upholds us, yet we "have no way of knowing the true nature of the reality in which we are immersed, of the substance of which we are composed."[55] Although our perception of the world is the "locus of human mystery"[56] we nevertheless participate in this complexity in a meaningful way.

Having introduced the possibility of mystery in the first stage, Robinson now introduces unexplained links between human experience and the arbitrary nature of reality and time. Although the reader may be impressed by the power of human consciousness, they may be satisfied to explore its possibilities through the arts and the sciences without recourse to religion. Alternatively, they may simply accept the mystery of consciousness as an aspect of scientific complexity, a mystery that may (or may not) eventually be resolved within the framework of the scientific paradigm. For them, the mystery of what is not known holds no possibility of meaningfulness or coherence. However, some readers may be willing to accept the possibility that Robinson's claims about the nature of consciousness could point towards a deeper reality. If so, they may wish to take the next step of considering consciousness as a source of religious intuition.

c. Mystery and religious intuition

In the third stage of this approach, we start to see how Robinson explores the mystery of human consciousness more deeply. Our arbitrary experience of scale and time suggest that we bear a likeness to a deeper reality that is both given and emergent, and which reflects the possibility that we are a "radical, qualitative change in the natural order."[57] Furthermore, we can look beyond the boundaries of reason and draw on our powers of intuition to explore this deeper reality which "is rooted in a profounder matrix of Being than sense and experience make known to us in the ordinary course of things."[58] Despite our human limitations, we can therefore trust our intuition that we are part of an ultimate reality which is beyond the structure of our experience. The insight also suggests that the emergence of the human mind might mysteriously be part of a

[55] Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, p. 192.
[56] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 9.
[57] Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, p. 199.
[58] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 40.

providential purpose beyond our capacity to understand. Robinson captures this great conceptual arc between the mind and the cosmos in the following passage.

> Being is addressed to mind as mind is addressed to Being. Both should be thought of as emergent. Being, infused with its roaring history and on its way to somewhere or something, but given the difference between its time and ours, as if paused to tolerate our contemplation of it. And then the mind reaching after it. To call it Deus Absconditus would not be wholly wrong since it is both hidden and manifest, elusive and radically sustaining.[59]

It is this relationship between mind and Being that lies at the core of Robinson's theological reflections, placing humankind at the centre of creation and giving every life sacred dignity and moral significance[60]. The sense of this relationship can lead to an awareness of profound connection between individual human beings, experienced as a heightened, joyful consciousness of a shared participation in a deeper reality.[61] It also finds expression in the human impulse for religion.

> Let us say that religion explores the ancient intuition that there is an energy behind experience, something not sufficiently like the reality accessible to us to be captured in the language that has developed to accommodate ordinary experience.[62]

This feeling of "an over-plus of meaning in reality" which cannot be accounted for in its own terms binds all religious people together in a search for shared metaphysical meaning.[63] This does not mean that mystery is replaced with certainty. Robinson is aware that religion can have a reputation for discouraging questions, often expecting an allegiance to a doctrinal faith. However, for Robinson, religious thought opens up possibilities, rather than closing them down and the truth of religion is therefore not to be found by making statements about the existence of God, but through the exercise of an individual's religious intuition. However, this individualistic approach does not mean that tradition should be ignored. Instead, the collective wisdom of religious thought, accumulated over many generations, should be appreciated as a rich source of insight and poetic language.

[59] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 102.
[60] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 9.
[61] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 215.
[62] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 228.
[63] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 206.

Although religious intuition is a universal human characteristic and all metaphysical questions are meaningful, Robinson herself identifies with the Christian mythos, which provides a framework for her own theological reflections.

> I take the Christian mythos to be a special revelation of a general truth, that truth being the ontological centrality of humankind in the created order, with its theological corollary, the profound and unique sacredness of human beings as such. The arbitrariness of our circumstances frees me to say that that the Arbiter might well act towards us freely, break in on us in forms and figures we can radically comprehend.[64]

This passage is key to understanding Robinson's theology. Her foundational claim, that humanity is at the centre of the created order, reveals divine intent.[65] Christianity is a particular revelation of this truth which provides the framework through which she expresses her own religious intuition. Her faith does not arise through the exercise of reason and it is therefore not subject to the conventions of objective proof.[66] Instead, it takes its authority from her personal experience interpreted through her understanding of the Christian tradition. She regards her faith as a gift, as a way of participating in the divine attributes of givenness of reality.[67] Although she broadly accepts the terms of Christian orthodoxy she is still prepared to question. In her essay 'Metaphysics' she claims that there can be a tendency to treat some matters with confident assertion which are beyond human interpretation. She suggests that the doctrine of predestination is an example of these difficulties, as the issues it raises about justice and free will are intractable. As a result, the doctrine has been the source of unhelpful division and dispute within Christianity. When we come to look at Robinson's Gilead novels later in this chapter, we will see how she explores this type of dispute in her fiction. Similarly, she admits that she struggles with the both the problem of evil and the doctrine of atonement, which she leaves for others to interpret. She concludes that there are aspects of the human condition where it is better to acknowledge ignorance rather than invest in misplaced confidence.[68]

This third stage takes us into the core of Robinson's theological reflections. From claiming the unique character of human consciousness described in the second stage, she moves to a cosmic scale, introducing the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between

[64] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 222.
[65] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p.37 and p. 128.
[66] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 80.
[67] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 80 and p. 189.
[68] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 192 and pp. 198-199.

mind and Being which places humanity at the centre of creation and which implies that the givenness of reality is a revelation of divine intent. Although she has accepted the framework of Christian orthodoxy for exploring this reality, she is willing to question aspects of its doctrine and confirms that her experience has lead her "to a kind of universalism that precludes any notions of proselytizing."[69] Her ongoing commitment to mystery is evident but whether she takes the reader with her to this stage depends upon whether their own experience resonates with the sense that the world cannot be accounted for on its own terms and that a higher order of reality calls for a religious response.

Summary

This review of Robinson's reflections on the theme of mystery draws selectively on material in her essays with the intention of identifying some of her key insights and then placing them within a framework. I suggested earlier that she appears to seek to convey what she believes is a more traditional, nuanced Christianity. I also suggested that the approach carries some risks because Robinson herself is not setting out to approach the subject in a systematic way. However, these theological themes matter for a number of reasons. Firstly, as we saw with the comments from Hadfield and Berkowitz, it is Robinson's religious humanism that gives her writing its distinctive character and therefore her approach to mystery is foundational. Secondly, her emphasis on the sacred significance and dignity of each individual underpins her politics, her economics and her interpretation of American history. It provides a wider, profounder view of reality which reflects the full richness of experience and which contrasts with the what she sees as the more limited view presented by the exclusive humanists she seeks to challenge. Thirdly, one of her motivations is her obligation to account for the fact that her religious preoccupations are the subject matter for her work. This does suggest that she is seeking to articulate the source of her religious humanism, and it is for this reason that she gives us insights into her own religious imagination, informed as it is by her faith in the authority of subjective experience.

Could this open, creative approach to faith, appeal to an agnostic or even to an atheist? The staged approach outlined above can help us to answer this question. The experience of a sense of mystery that prompts awe and wonder is widespread, as is the

[69] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 206.

appreciation of the complexity of conscious awareness. It is possible for anyone to accept that they are immersed in mystery without feeling the need to embrace a religious outlook, yet for Robinson it is the religious outlook that provides an essential framework of insight through which the energy behind experience can be shared and expressed. She recognises that her position is one of faith, yet by approaching mystery in with an open mind, she is suggesting that the boundary between faith and reason may not be as rigid as is often supposed. Her arguments may persuade an agnostic or an atheist to question the assumptions of their own position but, as Robinson herself would acknowledge, their willingness to adopt a religious outlook will ultimately depend upon the authority of their own subjective experience.

In summary, Robinson's approach to theological issues in her essays takes a wide perspective. She shares aspects of her religious imagination, drawing on her own religious intuition and her experience of awe and wonder. She is seeking to encourage her readers to think for themselves and to resist the certainties of reductionist thought. Her central project in her essays is to encourage the testimony of individual experience in the face of what she sees as the cultural impoverishment of exclusive humanism. However, she does not use her essays as to explore the complexities of the inner life. For that, we now need to turn to her novels.

2ii. How does the theme of mystery emerge in Robinson's novels?

We have seen that in her essays Robinson gives us an insight into her religious intuition. Her sense of mystery underpins her reflections, which in turn inform her overall perspective. Prompted by particular events or invitations, the essays present her single voice at a particular moment in time. When we turn to her novels, her perspective is transformed in two main ways. Firstly, we move from her single perspective to the multiple perspectives of the characters she creates, which gives Robinson the opportunity to look at the role that communication can play in both creating and possibly resolving misunderstandings and conflict. Secondly, the dynamic setting of the narrative form provides the opportunity for change over time. As the characters reflect on their experiences and communicate with one another, their relationships with one another develop in response to new circumstances.

The fictional town in 1950's Iowa, the setting for her Gilead trilogy, provides a well-defined context with clear boundaries and a settled social structure. Daily domestic tasks and predictable encounters reinforce the uncomplicated and homely atmosphere. There are only a few characters, who are explored in depth. Robinson takes immense care to ensure that they are credible and behave consistently and, as a result, they are rounded and three dimensional, with both flaws and virtues. The storyline hinges around the friendship of two ministers in the town, John Ames, a Congregationalist and Robert Boughton, a Presbyterian, both of whom are now approaching the end of their lives. In the first novel, *Gilead*, John Ames is the narrator and is seeking to convey some of the wisdom he has accumulated through his quiet life by writing a series of letters to his young son whom he will not see grow up. The second novel, *Home*, explores the relationships between Boughton and two of his adult children and their collective relationship with John Ames and his family. The third, *Lila*, centres on John Ames's young wife Lila, who was previously homeless and who appeared in Gilead unexpectedly, only a few years previously. There are only five main characters in all three novels: John Ames, his wife Lila, Robert Boughton and two of his adult children, Jack and Glory. Jack has always been a difficult character and at the time of the novels, he has returned to Gilead after being out of contact for nearly twenty years. All five characters have overlapping experiences. The old men, Boughton and Ames, have been friends since their childhood in Gilead. Jack and Glory are part of Boughton's large family of eight, all of whom left Gilead when they became adults. Lila is the total outsider, having uncertain origins and

having lived a life on the road with a group of itinerant labourers since her early childhood.

The limited range of characters gives Robinson an opportunity to explore their inner lives in depth. Each novel is constructed around the perspective of one individual. *Gilead* is written in the voice of John Ames himself, and *Home* and *Lila* are written from the point of view of Glory and Lila respectively. The reader is therefore wholly absorbed in one account of events and the character's unique perspective is reinforced by the way in which Robinson records the reflections as they occur. The narrative switches from present to past to present again, rather in the way in which the conscious mind moves seamlessly from the immediate experience to distant memory and back again. By capturing inner thoughts in this distinctive way, she invites the reader into a deeper encounter with the character. The structure is loose and flowing, leaving only an impression of the overall arc of the narrative.

In comparison with the essays, the novels therefore look at life in all its lived complexities and untidiness. Instead of the unchallenged voice of Robinson's own reflections, we have the dynamic potential for both growth and conflict between multiple perspectives. In particular, by setting the context within a shared Christian tradition, one of the themes Robinson is able to explore is how these dynamics can be played out when considering the deeper questions of life. The plots do not set out to convey an overt religious message. As in her essays, Robinson is not seeking to proselytise. Instead, the shared context and vocabulary provide an opportunity for her characters to question faith and doubt within the broad confines of a single religious tradition, one that Robinson herself happens to share. Her main characters are true to themselves, especially when they seek to express their deepest convictions or lack thereof, and this gives them an authenticity which avoids sanctimony and cliché. However, they are also flawed and aware of their shortcomings. The plot lines do not follow predictable paths and it is this untidiness that helps to make the stories credible. There are no happy endings, although there are sometimes movements towards resolution. For example, the deeply flawed character of Jack who is the cause of much unhappiness and heartache, moves towards the possibility of accepting forgiveness as the story progresses.

In order to take this forward, we will look closely at three episodes in the novels. However, before embarking, it is important to notice the key role that John Ames plays at pivotal moments in all three novels. It is his reflections that are challenged by both Jack and Lila, and it is his responses, more or less adequate, that take the narrative forward.

When we look at how theological themes emerge, we can identify similarities between Ames's views as a fictional character and Robinson's views as an essay writer and public speaker. When we consider the specific theme of mystery in the novels, we can see that some of Ames's reflections on mystery are similar to those Robinson expresses in her own voice in her essays. She is therefore not creating a different take on mystery through the character of Ames. Instead, she is creating a character who broadly embodies her own reflections, even though they are expressed through a different voice. It is interesting to note that in *Gilead*, Robinson creates a fictional context that allows Ames's voice to be unchallenged, much in the same way that her own voice is unchallenged in her essays. When we look at the selected episodes, we will see that the introduction of other perspectives in *Home* and *Lila*, adds a layer of dynamic complexity not present either in the essays or in *Gilead*.

The three episodes that I have selected show how the theme of mystery recurs in different guises across the combined narrative of the trilogy. The first, from *Gilead*, is drawn from the earlier part of the letter from Ames to his son, before his reflections are interrupted by the arrival of Jack Boughton. The second is from *Lila* and follows Ames and Lila as their exchanges about mystery grow and develop as the novel progresses. The final example explores the way in which Ames, Jack and Lila engage with aspects of religious tradition, focussing particularly on the doctrine of predestination. Each example introduces more characters and therefore more potential for greater shared understanding or alternatively, possible misunderstandings and conflict.

a. The case against atheism

When Ames begins to write his extended letter to his young son, he sets out to record some of his family history. His style is conversational, and his account is informal and full of anecdotes. Rather than provide a chronological account, he simply records his memories as they occur to him, in much the same way as he would if he were to recount them through a series of conversations over many years. He says that he wishes to write the way he thinks, and as a result we learn much about his character, particularly as the novel progresses and the account becomes overtaken by the return of Jack Boughton, with all the memories that this unexpected event revives. As Ames adds to his letter, he is keen to impart some of the wisdom he has accumulated over the years both directly from his own experiences and from his extensive reading. He comments that the benefit

of being a minister means that the need to concentrate in the preparation of sermons throughout his life has provided him with the opportunity to reflect "on what is being asked of you, and what you might as well ignore."[70] He wrote most of them from the "deepest hope and conviction. Sifting through my thoughts and choosing my words. Trying to say what was true."[71]

One of most important pieces of advice that Ames gives to his son in relation to his faith is to think for himself, trusting in his own experience of mystery, even though the encounter may be fragile and uncertain. However, he is deeply aware that the authenticity of personal experience is frequently challenged. He encourages his son to be confident in his own experience but also to question and to doubt, provided that "the doubts and questions are your own, not, so to speak, the moustache and walking stick that happen to be the fashion of any particular moment."[72] One of these fashions of thought in the 1950's was Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* which was written in the mid 19th century, and which was influential when Ames was a young man. In the novel, Ames's brother Edward went to Germany to study and sent a copy of the book back to his family, and so Ames himself read it as a teenager. Edward and their father both subsequently lose their faith largely as a result of Feuerbach's influence. This caused Ames immense sorrow, especially as he felt that he and Edward had never found the opportunity to properly communicate about their understanding of Feuerbach's arguments. Ames is therefore at pains to try to explain to his son why Feuerbach did not have the same impact on his own faith. He sees this not as a religious issue but one of "the awkwardness of language"[73] when he writes that "Feuerbach doesn't imagine the possibility of an existence beyond this one, by which I mean a reality embracing this one but exceeding it."[74] Instead of acknowledging that we are immersed in a mystery beyond our comprehension, Feuerbach claims that God is a projection of the highest aspirations for both the individual and for society. Ames sees this as a fundamental misunderstanding.

> God is set apart – He is One, he is not to be imagined as one thing among many things (idolatry – this is what Feuerbach failed to grasp). His name is set apart. It is

[70] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux), p. 8.
[71] Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 22.
[72] Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 204.
[73] Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 162.
[74] Robinson, *Gilead,* p. 162.

> sacred (which I take to be a reflection of the sacredness of the Word, the creative utterance which is not of a kind with other language).[75]

For Ames, the attempt to defend a belief often unsettles it, because "there is always an inadequacy in argument about ultimate things."[76] He continues by trying to articulate his experience of mystery, which is beyond understanding yet deeply embedded in experience.

> We participate in Being without remainder. No breath, no thought, no wart or whisker is not as sunk in Being as it could be. And yet no one can say what Being is. [.....] God is at a greater remove altogether – if God is the Author of Existence, what can it mean to say God exists? There is a problem of vocabulary. [.....] Another term would be needed to describe a state or quality of which we can have no experience whatever, to which existence as we know it can bear only the slightest affinity. So creating proofs from experience is like building a ladder to the moon.[77]

Ames therefore believes that the influential attacks on religion which challenge the plausibility of a belief in God are meaningless. This insight is critical for him. He writes to his son "I must tell you this, because everything else I have told you…loses almost all its meaning and it right to attention if this is not established."[78]

Can we see a link between Robinson's reflections on mystery in her essays and Ames's own anxieties that basic misunderstandings result simply from different approaches to the nature of reality? Ames's response to the challenges of his time from Feuerbach echoes Robinson's own response to the challenges of critics of religion today. The argument in both cases is based on recognising that God, far from being a human projection, lies outside the categories of human experience. For both Robinson and Ames, the atheistic view is based on a false assumption which cannot acknowledge the deeper reality in which we are immersed. However, they are both aware of the limits of language, and therefore avoid summary statements that try to capture their beliefs. Ames warns his son directly about the dangers of proofs concerning the existence of God, yet still encourages him to reflect on his experiences in the light of the tradition in which he grows up. For Robinson, the key lies in the authenticity of religious intuition, which opens awareness to a wider, deeper reality, one that can only begin to be articulated and shared through metaphor, poetry and paradox. The way forward, for both Ames and

[75] Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 158.
[76] Robinson, *Gilead*, p 203
[77] Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 203 - 204.
[78] Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 164.

Robinson, is to continue to ask questions, to doubt and to explore. Certainty can never be achieved.

The case against atheism is therefore a good example of how we find a theological theme in Robinson's essays appearing in the novels in a recognisable form. We saw earlier how authentic religious intuition plays an essential role in Robinson's understanding of mystery in her essays. Here we see the same emphasis on religious intuition in *Gilead* and by making these comparisons, we can achieve a deeper insight into Robinson's work as a whole. In addition, some of the passages given to Ames have a similar poetic style to those written in Robinson's own voice in the essays and in some respects, Ames's unchallenged voice in his letter also resembles Robinson's unchallenged voice in her essays. The following examples will show how the introduction of additional voices in the novels adds layers of complexity not found in this first example.

b. The problem of suffering

The second example is from *Lila* and involves the ongoing dialogue between Ames and Lila on the theme of mystery which develops as the narrative progresses. Lila is an outsider who has experienced the life of an itinerant labourer and prostitute before coming to Gilead alone and by chance in her 30's. She shelters in an empty cabin on the outskirts of the town and looks for casual work helping the local people with domestic tasks. One Sunday she takes refuge from a storm by entering the church where Ames is the minister. A service is taking place and she impulsively joins the congregation. She finds that the experience resonates with her in a way she cannot explain and after returning a number of times, she goes to the parsonage to ask Ames some questions. Not only is there a forty-year age gap between them, but also their experiences and education suggest they have nothing in common. And yet there is a rapport between them which is, in part, the result of a shared religious intuition. Lila is an intelligent woman, but she had only one year of schooling as a child when she learnt to read and write and has no experience of the Christian tradition or the Bible. She uses few words and is unconventionally direct. In one of their early encounters she tells Ames that she has "just been wondering lately why things happen the way they do."[79] He responds immediately by saying that he has been wondering the same thing for most of his life, yet he honestly

[79] Marilynne Robinson, *Lila* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux), p. 29.

acknowledges that he is not able to answer the question adequately. She asks if that is all he can say, and he replies as follows.

> I think you are asking me these questions because of some hard things that have happened, the things you won't talk about. If you did tell me about them, I would probably say that life is a very deep mystery, and that finally the grace of God is all that can resolve it. And the grace of God is also a very deep mystery. You can probably tell that I have said these words too many times. But they are true, I believe.[80]

She leaves abruptly, and Ames is left to ponder on the conversation. He recognises that her early encounters with religion do not satisfy her search for meaning and that she is asking him to explain how the suffering she has experienced and observed can be reconciled with a loving God. Soon afterwards, he writes her a letter in which he expresses regret at his failure to respond to her question properly and his worry that she might think that he had not taken it as seriously as he should have. He tries to articulate his struggle.

> I feel it would be presumptuous of me to describe the ways of God. Those that are all we know of Him, when there is so much we don't know. [….] And I know it would be presumptuous to speak as if the suffering that people feel as they pass through the world were not grave enough to make your question much more powerful than any answer I could offer. My faith tells me that God shared poverty, suffering, and death with human beings, which can only mean that such things are full of dignity and meaning, even though to believe this makes a great demand on one's faith, and to act as if this were true in any way we understand is to be ridiculous. It is ridiculous also to act as if it were not absolutely and essentially true all the same.[81]

He is still not satisfied with his paradoxical answer and continues to reflect on this question and others that she asks as the novel progresses. Once they are married, he sometimes shares drafts of his sermons with her. In one, he returns to the theme in his letter.

> Then the reasons that things happen are still hidden, but they are hidden in the mystery of God. […] Our experience is fragmentary. Its parts do not add up. [……] When I say that much the greater part of our existence 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. Therefore, we have no way to reconcile its elements, because they are given out of no necessity at all except God's grace in sustaining us as creatures we can recognise as ourselves.[82]

[80] Robinson, *Lila*, p. 31.
[81] Robinson, *Lila*, p. 76-77.
[82] Robinson, *Lila*, p. 223.

In this series of exchanges, Robinson is exploring the problem of suffering. Despite his many years of reflecting on this issue, Ames knows that it cannot be explained within bounds of normal human understanding. For all its apparent simplicity, Lila's question is profound and therefore very difficult to answer. In his second answer he falteringly tries to open up the mystery, yet he knows that more can be said. In his third response he tries to capture the hiddenness of God by explaining that our fragmentary experiences mean that we cannot hope to see the wider reality in which we are embedded. Our partial knowledge means that we will not be able to understand why things happen the way they do, including human suffering. Lila replies that it seems to her that he wants "to reconcile things by saying they can't be reconciled"[83], thereby acknowledging that she accepts that this, too, is a paradox beyond human understanding. Ames has reflected about mystery over many years and will continue to do so. Lila's question has prompted him to struggle to put those reflections into words, even though he recognises that any attempt can only ever be partial. Nevertheless, he realises that it is his vocation to face these difficulties and not to avoid them.

Can we see any theological themes from Robinson's essays emerging from these exchanges? She does not tackle the problem of suffering directly in her essays. However, Ames's final response in which he refers to our partial experience of reality, echoes her comments on the limitations of human consciousness. As we saw in the earlier part of this chapter, she notes that we have no way of knowing the underlying nature of the reality in which we are immersed. By applying these reflections to the particular issue of the problem of suffering, Robinson is developing an abstract idea expressed in her essays and applying it to the fictional context of the encounter between Ames and Lila in the novel. In this example we can see that an aspect of the theme of mystery that can be found in the essays is employed less directly than in the previous example and the vocabulary is amended for the different context. The ongoing dialogue between Ames and Lila also introduces a dynamic character to these exchanges which prompt Ames to keep returning to the theme with new attempts to articulate what cannot be said. In the example from *Gilead*, his voice was not challenged. In this example Lila plays an active part in the dialogue, which evolves and develops as they grow towards a greater shared understanding.

[83] Robinson, *Lila*, p. 224.

c. The tension between experience and religious tradition

The final example picks up on a theme that appears in all three novels and involves multiple characters. We have noted that the shared Christian tradition provides a common ground that underpins the Gilead community. The key characters are part of two families, both lead by ministers. The expectation might be that they would broadly share an understanding of their faith, maybe exploring minor differences in doctrine, yet broadly in agreement. However, a superficial consensus masks an underlying tension between individual experience and religious tradition which Robinson explores with insight and sensitivity. Jack, the troubled son of Robert Boughton, has only recently returned to Gilead after a long absence. He finds his father's steadfast love for him difficult to bear, given the pain he has caused him by his behaviour as a younger man. He tells his brother that he feels isolated and set apart from his family.

> Sometimes it seems as though I am in one universe and you are in another. All of you. There are separate universes, you know. I happen to have one to myself.[84]

This isolation is partly because he does not share the faith he grew up with as a child. On another occasion he explains to his sister that despite his lack of a conventional faith he feels some spiritual needs and therefore continues to ponder the great truths he was taught.

> 'The fatherhood of God, for one. The idea being that the splendour of creation and of the human creature testify to a gracious intention lying behind it all, which sustains the world in general and in the experience of, you know, people whose souls are saved. Or will be.' After a moment he said, 'It is possible to know the great truths without feeling the truth of them. That is where the problem lies. In my case.'[85]

He knows that this is seen as a failing on his part, but he feels compelled to be honest and therefore cannot pretend to possess a faith he does not feel. His doubts reinforce his sense of isolation, yet he cannot ignore them. He decides to explore these concerns in a conversation with his father, Ames, Lila and his sister Glory, in an episode which features in both *Gilead* and *Home*. Jack is particularly troubled by the problem of forgiveness and asks Ames what he says to people who question predestination. Ames acknowledges in his account of the conversation that predestination is not a subject he likes to discuss, yet he knows he must respond.

[84] Marilynne Robinson, *Home*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2008) p.278.
[85] Robinson, *Home*, p. 109.

> I tell them that there are certain attributes that our faith assigns to God: omniscience, omnipotence, justice and grace. We human beings have such a slight acquaintance with power and knowledge, so little conception of justice, and so slight a capacity for grace, that the workings of these great attributes together is a mystery we cannot hope to penetrate.[86]

Jack laughs at this reply and Ames feels increasingly challenged and agitated. Nevertheless, he is not willing to "force some theory on a mystery and make foolishness of it, simply because that is what people who talk about it normally do."[87] Jack is expressing frustrations in the paradoxes that can arise from doctrinal statements of faith. Yet, for Ames the mysteries of God are beyond the powers of human comprehension so perhaps the paradox itself points the way to a deeper truth. Lila listens intently. We know that she has herself has struggled with the doctrine of predestination and how it might impact on the destinies of those friends she used to know who tried to lead good lives but who had never heard the Gospel. She is also aware that it is deeply troubling to Ames, who finds it does not accord with his faith in the universal grace of God. The conversation is inconclusive and finally ends when Lila says that anyone can change.[88]

We can see in this episode how Robinson opens up some of the themes that we saw in her essays. Firstly, with the characters of Ames and Jack, she contrasts different experiences of mystery. Ames feels the great truths of his religious tradition because they help him to articulate his experience. He is troubled when this leads to paradox and inconsistency, but nevertheless he accepts that the mystery of God is beyond his comprehension. Jack has also given these questions much thought yet does not feel these truths himself. Both are honest about their experiences, but only Ames can accept them as the basis for an authentic faith. Yet Robinson's treatment of Jack is not unsympathetic. He is not indifferent to the possibility of a mystery beyond his understanding, but his personal integrity means that he cannot pretend to accept the truths of the shared tradition, even if that would bring great joy to his father.

Secondly, Robinson is exploring the tension between religious tradition and individual experience. This is a theme that she considers explicitly in her essays and we saw earlier the she sees predestination as an example of a reformed Christian doctrine where the tension between justice and free will is intractable. In this episode, Robinson captures the discomfort that Ames feels at being challenged to defend a doctrine which

[86] Robinson, *Home*, p. 229.
[87] Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 173.
[88] Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 174 and *Home*, p.238.

both he (and Robinson) find hard to defend. Jack's persistent questions disrupt the relative stability of Ames's faith and the encounter is difficult, yet not entirely fruitless. Although there is no resolution, the possibility of communication is opened up, albeit falteringly.

Thirdly, the open language of religious discourse advocated by Robinson in her essays, does not avoid problems of misunderstanding and conflict. Even with the benefits of a common language, the sheer complexity of individual experience of mystery means that the possibility of effective communication is inevitably a challenge. In this example, Robinson provides an opportunity to explore the complex dynamics of interactions with multiple characters in a situation in which none of them are in control. In the previous examples Ames was either reflecting by himself or by letter or sermon with Lila, however now he has to respond to searching and deep questions about his faith from Jack, who is both well read and has a challenging manner. He acknowledges that his own faith is disturbed by the encounter. It is therefore in this example that Robinson shows that exploring mystery is particularly difficult in the unpredictable situations of lived experience. The abstractions reflected upon in the quiet isolation of the study are tested by the complex dynamics of real life.

Summary

In this chapter, we have seen how Robinson's treatment of mystery in her essays can be approached through a series of stages, each of which take us more deeply into her personal theology. This framework helps us to understand her personal theology, aspects of which emerge in her novels. The single perspective of the essays is replaced by the multiple perspectives of the characters in her novels, introducing new levels of complexity and nuance. In the Gilead trilogy, she creates a distinctive fictional setting in which the underlying theme of mystery can be found threaded through the narratives. Each character is portrayed as having a rich inner life, and they treat deep questions seriously. However, the randomness of events combined with the complex dynamics of communication, result in an untidiness which does not fit into neat resolutions. The examples I have selected show how the impulse to articulate religious intuition can sometimes lead towards a greater shared understanding, as in the case of Ames and Lila, but can also lead to conflict and misunderstanding, as in the case of the conversation about predestination. However, by carefully exploring these interactions, Robinson

seems to be saying that the struggle is worthwhile, even if it only leads to further questions and possibly more misunderstandings in the future.

Is it possible to say whether the essay or the novel is better suited to exploring these theological themes? We have seen that Robinson presents a confident, even contrarian voice in her essays in order to speak courageously about issues that she feels strongly about. She wants to make her points forcefully and therefore does not "mince her words". Whilst she may be sympathetic to doubt and uncertainty about religious faith, she does not reach out to any readers of her essays who may have no experience of religious intuition themselves. In contrast, the novels offer an opportunity to explore faith and doubt in a more sensitive way, particularly through the characters of Jack Boughton and Ames. In the case of Jack, it is his doubts that dominate his inner life and yet he cannot accept a faith he cannot feel. In the narrative of *Home* Robinson explores both the challenges and the importance of honesty in a situation where the pressure for Jack to conform to his father's expectations is so strong. In the case of Ames, his loyalty to his own sense of mystery also dominates his thinking even though he has to acknowledge that it is often beyond his powers to articulate. We saw earlier that in Ames Robinson has created a character who broadly embodies her own reflections. However, we can only speculate that aspects of Ames's deliberations in *Gilead* give us an insight into Robinson's personal inner life, in a way that she does not reveal in her essays.

The novels also offer other ways of exploring complexity. The introduction of multiple voices means that different perspectives, sometimes of the same events, can be explored and ideas can be challenged. The possibility of change over time also provides a dynamic element that is not available in the essays. The characters can respond to the changing context, within the limitations of their personalities. In her essay 'Grace and Beauty', Robinson reflects on the creative process that underpins her novel writing. She refers to a character has "having a palette or music"[89] which both constrains possibilities but also forms the basis from which variation is meaningful. In contrast, in her essays, Robinson frees herself from such constraints and as a result they do not show the same carefully constructed balance that one finds in the novels. As we have seen, her intention is mainly to make a strong case for independent thought and she therefore makes her points confidently. Yet, it could be said that by replacing the careful balance of the novels

[89] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 104.

with a wandering and eclectic approach in the essays, she fails to offer the sustained arguments that are expected in non-fiction. This can leave her reader with a sense of perplexity and disorientation that is not conducive to the complexity of theological reflection. Her topics range from the wonders of science, to the state of modern democracy to the nature of reality. Nevertheless, the essays provide important, albeit fragmentary, insights into the distinctive religious humanism that underpins her opinions on economics, politics and the challenges of democracy.

One approach to the comparison between the essays and the novels is to see them as different creative expressions of the search for shared meanings. In the case of the essays, the sharing takes place directly between Robinson and her reader whereas in the case of the novels, it takes place between the characters, with the reader taking on the role of observer. The key to approaching the comparison in this way is to acknowledge the importance of language as the medium for communication. In the next chapter we will see how central language is for Robinson herself and contrast the way in which she expresses mystery across both the essays and the novels.

3. How does Robinson articulate the theme of mystery?

We have looked in detail at the content of the theme of mystery in the essays and at how some aspects of this theme emerge in different ways in the novels, albeit in a recognisable form. The complexity of experience means that our deepest feelings and intuitions lie beyond the range of normal discourse. We now turn to the challenges of articulating the insights of religious intuition and explore the relationship between mystery and language. This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first, we consider Robinson's reflections on the power of language, its ability to construct meaning and to confine or extend our view of reality. In the second, we explore how Robinson's underlying religious intuition finds creative expression through the different types of discourse she uses in her essays and her novels. To do this we will use a conceptual framework suggested by Rowan Williams in his book, *The Edge of Words*. This will help us to explore further the underlying theological themes that feature in both the essays and the novels.

3i. The importance of language for Robinson

Robinson is fascinated by the power of words to shape and influence our thinking. Language is both limiting and empowering. It limits us in the sense that it restricts our imagination, and yet it can also empower us to develop new meanings and to share new understandings. Also, the way in which we use words to express our experience of reality has a critical impact on the experience itself. We have a shared understanding of words like love, joy, sorrow, compassion and fear, which take on a seemingly objective reality and which shape our experience. Yet when we consider unresolvable mystery, we are operating at the borderland of what can and cannot be said.[90] In order to look more closely at Robinson's concern with the power of language to influence our experience of reality, we will consider two contrasting examples. Firstly, we will look at Robinson's reflections the language of scientific reductionism, to see how our perspectives can be severely limited when we narrow our vocabulary. We will then turn to the more unrestricted power of the language of religion, exploring how this can extend our imaginations and open up possibilities. It is an indication of Robinson's distinctive voice

[90] Robinson's reflections on language appear in a number of her essays. This summary is based on her comments in *When I was a Child I Read Books* pp 20 -22, *The Givenness of Things* pp 77-78, and *What Are We Doing Here?* pp 69-70.

that these examples reverse the common understanding of where we find open and closed approaches.

a. Confining reality: the language of scientific reductionism

As we have already noted, one of the concerns expressed by Robinson in her essays is impact of the drift towards secularism. She sees this trend as linked to a loss of an appropriate language with which to articulate a sense of mystery. This danger is particularly evident in scientific reductionism where a sense of mystery has been undermined by an unjustified confidence in human powers of explanation. Robinson identifies a tendency to impose boundaries on reality that that are driven by the current capacity for science to explain and measure. In this way, deeper mystery is excluded as irrelevant and many important aspects of human experience are diminished as a result.

> We have not escaped, nor have we in any way diminished, the mystery of our experience. We have only rejected any language that would seem to acknowledge it.[91]

This narrowing of reality results in an impoverishment of our experience and a restriction in the sense of the depth and complexity in each individual life.[92] Robinson is concerned that the literalism of reductionist thinking cannot respond adequately to the complexity of experience, as it aims to drive all understanding into one vocabulary of description. This approach assumes that everything can be eventually explained and therefore leaves no possibility for unresolvable mystery. In order to do this, it often excludes factors that are not part of the reductionist worldview, such as self-awareness. For Robinson, our growing knowledge therefore carries dangers. We can easily fall into a false sense of control which ignores the deeper mystery in which we are immersed.[93] This tendency is encouraged by our urge to make sense of the world by imposing categories on our experience through our use of language, for example the delineations between subject and object, or between the material and the spiritual.

> There is a deeply rooted notion that the material exists in opposition to the spiritual, precludes or repels or trumps the sacred as an idea. [……] If a thing can be 'explained,' associated with a physical process, it has been excluded from the category of the spiritual. But the 'physical' in this sense is only a disappearingly thin

[91] Robinson, *When I was a Child I read Books*, p 188.
[92] Robinson, *When I was a Child I read Books*, p 187.
[93] Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, p. 197, Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 14 and Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 54.

> slice of being, selected, for our purposes, of the totality of being by the fact that we view it as solid, substantial.[94]

This approach to the notion of the material finds the concept of the soul problematic. Some neuroscientists make the claim that the soul does not exist because it cannot be found in any part of the brain. For Robinson, this reflects exactly the confusion between subjectivity and objectivity, between the brain and thought. Instead, she points out that creation is one phenomenon, comprised of energy in many forms. That energy is manifest both in the 'physical' object of the brain and in the fleeting 'spiritual' experience of human thought and feeling. We perceive the brain as substance existing through time and we can forget that is simply a form of energy in a particular state. The reality that both the physical and the spiritual are part of the underlying unity of being does not fit comfortably with the categories imposed by the restricted language which dominates some aspects of exclusive humanism. However, it is this distinction that can give science authority over religious experience in the popular imagination. Religious activity is seen as associated with a part of the brain and as science progresses it will show that there is no such place, the 'gap' in our knowledge will be closed and religious experience will have been demonstrated as delusional.[95] This tendency towards reductionism should be resisted because it replaces mystery with a narrowly defined form of certainty. If we can put aside this dualistic approach the concept of the soul is freed from having to belong to either the physical or the material dispensations.

> The difference between theism and new atheist science is the difference between mystery and certainty. Certainty is a relic, an atavism, a hulk we have outgrown. Mystery is openness to possibility even at the scale now implied by physics and cosmology.[96]

This example shows how the language of subject and object can displace the soul as a source of truth of a deeper reality. Robinson's project is to reinstate consciousness at the centre of the stage, thereby liberating experience to explore a more profound reality in a meaningful way.

b. Extending reality: the open language of religious discourse

One of Robinson's main concerns is therefore to avoid literalism and to resist the lure of certainty. The wider, deeper mystery in which we are immersed cannot be

[94] Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books,* p. 9.
[95] Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books,* pp. 192-197
[96] Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, p. 197.

resolved, only explored and deepened. Despite the fact that that "we have no language to express the scale of the experience we have" [97] the unnamed is overwhelming present and real for her. She claims that "as a writer, I continue to make inroads into the vast terrain of what cannot be said."[98] The power of language therefore lies in its potential to extend meanings and to bridge the gap between experience and expression. For Robinson, this power is often found in the writings of religious tradition and Christian literature provides a rich and fertile source of insight into the complexity of religious experience. Traditional phrases such as 'the beauty of holiness' and 'grace and peace' reflect a particular experience and evoke an aesthetic response which is are not captured by the less poetic language of much modern discourse.[99] It is for these reasons that Robinson proposes that we look to earlier writers who "lived in a cultural moment more inclined to hyperbole than to reductionism."[100] For example, she repeatedly acknowledges her admiration for Calvin and draws on certain themes within his reflections that align with her own. In the following passage she captures the complexity of his religious vision, with its blend of mysticism and metaphysics.

> His theology is compelled and enthralled by an overwhelming awareness of the grandeur of God, and this is the source of the distinctive aesthetic coherency of his religious vision, which is neither mysticism or metaphysics, but mysticism as a method of rigorous enquiry and metaphysics as an impassioned flight of the soul.[101]

She argues that wonder at the human soul is at the heart of Calvin's reflections, which see the "defining mysteries of human consciousness" [102] as proof of the divinity in man. As she explains, "The knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are an aspect of this wisdom that is sacramental in its reciprocity."[103] She acknowledges that her affinity for Calvin surprises her and is aware that by suggesting his metaphysics as a model for thought she is ignoring other excellent options (although she does not tell us what these are). However, she does say that his body of knowledge and scholarship "has been so broadly neglected as to appear new, and at the same time so deep an influence on my civilisation as to seem as I read it like the awakening of a submerged memory."[104] In

[97] Robinson, *Death of Adam*, p. 228.
[98] Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, p. 20.
[99] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* pp. 36-37 and *The Givenness of Things*, p. 212.
[100] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 216.
[101] Robinson, *Death of Adam*, p. 188.
[102] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 26.
[103] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 143.
[104] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things,* p. 145.

describing her own experiences of reading Calvin so clearly, she demonstrates the power of religious intuition articulated through the language of tradition. The words are deeply buried within the culture and have had a great impact on other writers who have also influenced her, such as Melville and Dickinson. By going back to the language of earlier traditions, Robinson is suggesting that connections are remade and enhanced.

As we saw in the introduction, Jonathan Edwards is an American theologian whom Robinson also admires, and she is particularly interested in his reflections on human emotion and knowledge.[105] He claimed that religious knowledge is beyond human knowledge and is grasped intuitively, experienced more like a sensation than a thought. However, although true religion is a matter for the heart, it is not purely emotional and therefore must be tested against reasonable criteria. It is Edwards's sense of the givenness of things that particularly appeals to Robinson. She explains that he sees the emotions as "arbitrary phenomena, in the sense that they reflect the intent of God in creating mankind."[106] These affections exist independently of any human being and are part of the aesthetic and moral order of the universe, which is also free standing. For Edwards, human nature arises from the ongoing relationship with the divine through the experience of the soul.

An important aspect of Robinson's deep affinity with the writings of Calvin and Edwards is, therefore, based on their use of language. She acknowledges that the words they use resonate with her personal sense of the givenness of the world and her aesthetic response bears witness to the mystery of her own conscious experience. When Robinson advocates returning to the wisdom of these earlier writers, she is recognising the power of the words themselves, not the interpretations of those words that followed. By taking this approach to the role of language, Robinson suggests that personal experience is a legitimate source of divine revelation, which is ongoing and emergent. It follows that religious discourse often has much in common with poetry, eliciting a unique response from every individual. By this reasoning, religious participation does not involve assent to a received set of statements. Instead, by offering a vocabulary that constantly opens up reality to deeper meaning, traditional religious discourse holds the key to ongoing fruitful engagement with the divine encounter.

[105] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 73.
[106] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 79.

To summarise, we can see that Robinson's own reflections on language reveal her awareness that the way in which we speak impacts directly on our experiences. She claims we have inherited a rich tradition of language which has the potential to extend our view of reality and open us up to new meanings and understanding. Certain words can resonate with an individual's own experience, and Robinson herself finds a particular affinity with the writings of Calvin and Edwards. In contrast, a limited, literalistic vocabulary closes down the possibilities of reality, and mystery itself cannot be recognised or expressed because the words are not available.

3ii. A framework for extending shared meanings

We will now move on from Robinson's reflections on language to consider her own use of different types of discourse across her essays and novels. In particular, we will be asking how Robinson uses language to create new shared meanings. To do this, we will use a conceptual framework that Rowan Williams proposes in his book, *The Edge of Words*. Williams's main purpose is to ask whether the way in which we use language can tell us anything about God. In the course of his reflections he provides a number of insights which I believe can help us to understand the relationship between the theme of mystery across Robinson's essays and novels and the way in which she uses different types of discourse across the two genres.

Williams's overarching question was to ask if the way in which language is used and structured helps us to speak about God.[107] As we have seen, this also an important theme for Robinson. Indeed, in her essays she claims that the way we express ourselves confines or extends our experience of reality. We also saw that this theme is taken forward in her novels as she explores the difficulties her characters encounter as they try to share their experiences of reality with one another. We will look at four main themes in Williams's reflections that resonate with Robinson's work. Firstly, he sees our environment as a unified network of communication which we are oriented to pick up and decode. From a religious perspective, this ability suggests we are oriented to an ultimate intelligible energy which shapes the intelligible particulars of the universe.[108]

[107] Williams, p. ix.

[108] Williams, p. 64.

Our environment is a manifestation of unbounded intelligibility expressed in bounded form. Williams acknowledges that this perspective can never be satisfactorily demonstrated within the rules of scientific discourse, but he does believe that our use of language can tell us something about the nature of reality that should not be ignored.

Secondly, one of Williams's key claims is that some characteristics of language demonstrate a power to engage with this wider reality. He distinguishes between the ability to describe and the ability to represent. Description is a straightforward mapping exercise between what we perceive and what we say. Representation seeks to "embody, translate, make present or reform what is said"[109] often through the use of metaphor, paradox and narrative. It is this aspect of the use of language which can actively generate new meanings and perspectives, enlarging the scope for communication. This creative power arises from language's dynamic instability, its incompleteness, its ability to surprise and to disrupt accepted patterns of thought.[110] However, we are not entirely free to say exactly what we please because language both constrains creativity whilst at the same time making new meanings possible. Language seems "unable to contain the conditions of its own possibility" yet behaves as if it is in the 'wake of meaning', as if we are "always catching up with a reality that is never standing still".[111] It is as if reality is paradoxically both given and yet always open to new understandings and perspectives. There will never be a point at which communication is exhausted and complete.

Thirdly, this unfolding of shared meaning points towards an over-arching coherence that suggests an "intelligible unity which implies a fundamental informing intelligence."[112] This unity lies beyond the structure of objects and concepts and therefore cannot be represented in in normal discourse. We have to ask the question as to whether it is possible to speak at all of "what is not dependant, not originated, not an item among others in the universe."[113] The temptation is to reply that we are confronted by a mystery which lies beyond our powers of expression.[114] Williams claims, however, that when we find ourselves in this situation, it is possible for us to change register in our speech, moving away from expectations that that we can reach any point of descriptive closure. For example, when certain types of religious discourse are put under pressure,

[109] Williams, p. 22.
[110] Williams, p. 170.
[111] Williams, p. 92.
[112] Williams, p. 120.
[113] Williams, p. 89.
[114] Williams, p. 88.

they can generate new meanings that gesture towards an underlying unity beyond human understanding. Words such as grace, forgiveness or blessing can be heard, assimilated and then taken forward, as their meaning is always incomplete. Rather than closing down possibilities, the language of religious tradition therefore invites further response, providing a dynamic framework for endlessly exploring what can and what cannot be said about an "intelligible structure outside the system of finite concepts and objects."[115] The search is for new horizons, not conclusive certainties. This approach will never lead to a definitive proof of the existence of God. Instead, it invites us to enhance and extend our ways of speaking that 'go with the grain' of what matters most in human experience. This is better achieved through the use of metaphor, paradox and narrative rather than by trying to articulate statements of faith.[116] We can also map where questions about Being enter our discourse, as pointers to places where language is being stretched and extended to create new meanings.

Finally, as has already been suggested, Williams sees the use of language as a profoundly collaborative activity and we search for shared understandings in a context we cannot master.[117] From a religious perspective this shared communication looks beyond the point where routine discourse "fails to exhaust what needs to be said".[118] It is as if we are grappling with something beyond ourselves, a place from which new openings can arise. This struggle also provides great challenges, as there are always uncontainable gaps between what has been said, what might be said and what cannot be said. We are aware that our understanding is always partial and evolving so the possibility of communicating with others often makes us hesitate. We look for common ground and the possibility of a shared agenda.[119] However, we are prone to misunderstanding and conflict, which leads to further self-questioning and often undermines confidence in future encounters. Effective communication is fragile and relies on trust.

[115] Williams, p. 172.
[116] Williams, p. 89.
[117] Williams, p. 93.
[118] Williams, p. 8.
[119] Williams, p. 92.

How does Williams's framework help us to understand Robinson?

Williams's reflections provide a helpful framework for considering Robinson's approach to mystery as they share a number of insights in common. Firstly, they both experience a sense of an ultimate intelligent energy that shapes the particulars of the universe, an overplus of meaning which lies outside the structure of normal experience and which cannot therefore be captured by ordinary discourse. As we have seen, this sense of unresolvable mystery is described by Robinson as a religious intuition, an awareness that reality is rooted in "a profounder matrix of Being than sense and experience make known to us in the ordinary course of things."[120] Secondly, both writers focus on the power of language to move beyond the deterministic relationship of cause and effect to create new meanings. In particular, the language of religious tradition plays an essential role in providing a framework for exploring what can and cannot be said. Importantly, both emphasise that this framework is not fixed and needs to be developed in the light of the dynamic and emerging character of our experiences. There is therefore an ongoing obligation to use the full power of language to test the authority of tradition against individual experience, trying to make sense of the full richness of the reality in which we are immersed. Thirdly, both acknowledge the complexity of experience and emphasise that the search for shared understanding is prone to misunderstandings and possible conflict. Yet the dynamic power of language to create new meaning can only be exercised by taking the risk of pushing at the boundaries of ordinary discourse and changing the register to a level where a deeper shared understanding might emerge. Finally, they both recognise that as any search for new meaning opens up onto an unbounded mystery, it is never possible to arrive at a conclusive proof about the existence of God, or even statements of faith. Instead, it is essential to explore unresolvable mystery collaboratively using the power of metaphor, paradox and narrative. These themes, which both Williams and Robinson share, underpin the theme of mystery in both Robinson's essays and her novels and her use of language provides examples of the way in which Williams suggests we can extend understanding and create new meanings. We will look at examples from both the essays and the novels.

[120] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 40.

a. Extending meaning: the power of poetic language in Robinson's essays

As we have seen, in her essays Robinson is exploring the mystery of her own religious intuition through reflecting on a particular problem or problems. She draws on her life experience, her reading and her scholarship to comment on a number of subjects including cosmology, science, history, economics and politics. Although her essays are predominantly polemical, she includes occasional passages of theological reflection. Her theology is therefore embedded in her prose, yet her language has a different register, as she moves beyond the point where, as Williams would say, ordinary discourse "fails to exhaust what needs to be said". These passages are more like poetry than prose. There are a number of examples in her essays, but we will look at two in particular. The first is from the essay entitled 'Theology' in the collection *The Givenness of Things* and is an example of Robinson using poetic prose to articulate her wonder at the mysterious nature of human experience.

> Let us say we live in a small model of reality, providentially scaled and ordered to serve us and content us for most purposes, beautiful enough to sustain our spirits endlessly, transparent enough to help us learn to see beyond it, and wrapped in a quiet of its own that lets us leave the roar of its origins to mathematics and its wild eons of unfolding to physics and cosmology. If this is not Providence, or miracle, it altogether awaits explanation in any other terms.[121]

Here Robinson is inviting us to extend our imagination beyond the normal categories of thought which we usually encounter in ordinary discourse. What is the nature of reality? What are the other possible explanations to which she refers? The poetry of her language reminds us that the fact of existence itself is truly remarkable and she encourages to appreciate the mystery in which we are immersed.

The second example is from the collection *What Are We Doing Here?* It is based on verses from Book 38 of the Book of Job and the language is more traditionally religious.

> Being is indeed the theatre of God's glory, that within it, we have a terrible privilege, a capacity for profound error and grave harm. We might venture an answer to God's question, Where were you when I created -----? We were there, potential and implicit and by the grace of God inevitable, more unstoppable than the sea, impervious as Leviathan, in that deep womb of time almost hearing the sons of God when they shouted for joy. And we are here, your still-forming child, still opening our eyes on a reality whose astonishments we can never exhaust.[122]

[121] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 221.

[122] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 49.

As in the earlier passage, Robinson encourages us to extend our imagination, only this time she is creating a great structure of meaning that conveys the scale of creation and captures her wonder at being at the heart of an all-embracing, cosmic narrative. This is not a passage that should be read literally. Instead, we should ask ourselves if the words resonate with our own hinterland of meaning, with our own experience of being part of an unfolding reality which is beyond our understanding. We are not being asked to 'believe in God' as an object amongst other within the universe. Instead, we are being invited to consider whether this structure of meaning echoes with our own experience.

These two passages show how Robinson can change the register of the discourse within her essays moving from polemic to what might be described as poetry-prose, in a way that can disrupt our expectations as readers. She acknowledges that she is not 'storming the heavens' for a definite argument that proves the existence of God. Instead, she is using what Williams describes as the dynamic power of language to disrupt the flow of discourse, uncovering fresh perspectives and asking new questions about the nature of Being.

b. Exploring the gaps in communication: the Gilead novels

We have seen that Robinson explores her own expansive imagination in her essays. Although she may begin with a problem or issue, she gives herself freedom to leave the theme and to introduce topics and ideas in unexpected ways, wandering across the normal subject boundaries of discourse. She invites the reader to wander with her, sharing her sense of wonder, her amusement and her frustrations along the way. In her novels, she takes a different approach. The fictitious town of Gilead is a settled community that superficially shares a reformist religious tradition, broadly embodied by John Ames. The various, interwoven narratives across all three novels focus on the disruption caused to his established assumptions and perspectives by the arrival of the outsiders Jack Boughton and Lila. Within this closely defined context, Robinson creates the opportunity to explore beyond the point where, as Williams would say, "routine discourse fails to exhaust what needs to be said."[123] These exchanges are fraught with difficulty, as the characters struggle to share honestly what deeply matters. In particular, we find them exploring their own understanding of their religious tradition. Exchanges

[123] Williams, p. 8.

that explore the boundaries of what can and cannot be said rely on high levels of trust, but, as Williams points out, it is only through grappling with the hinterland of meaning that belongs beyond these encounters that new understandings may emerge.

The narratives follow the characters as they struggle to articulate their religious intuition both to themselves and to one another. Key conversations provide turning points that encourage them to take risks and to push at the boundaries of conventional discourse in the hope of moving towards new meanings. However, the outcome in this search is uncertain. Encounters often involve conflict and misunderstanding, resulting in failure and damaged relationships. And even if a partial resolution is reached, it is only ever temporary, as the dynamic nature of language always holds the possibility of different interpretations and new responses. As Williams points out, the search is only for fresh horizons, not conclusive certainties. It is this sense of ongoing uncertainty that Robinson captures in her novels, reflecting the underlying mystery in which we are immersed. The timing of events is often tragic, as when Jack finally summons the courage to speak with his father honestly about his struggle with faith, only to find that his father no longer recognises him. Yet it is also possible sometimes to see a movement from conflict towards resolution, as in Ames's changing relationships with both Jack and Lila. For example, after their difficult conversation on predestination between Ames and Jack which we considered in the previous chapter, they speak again later and Jack asks if Ames can think it right that they share no common language and that there is therefore such a gulf between them. Ames knows that his own hope in the power of grace does not satisfy Jack, yet in this second encounter they move towards a shared understanding when Jack finally opens up and explains to Ames what has happened to him since he left Gilead as a young man. Ames begins to understand and they finally part having moved towards some kind of new meaning, whilst both preserving their integrity.

Ames is aware of the risks and difficulties of sharing this hinterland of meaning and in the following passage in *Gilead* he explains to his son that he should always be aware of the distances between people.

> In every important way we are such secrets from one another, and I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us, and a separate aesthetics and a separate jurisprudence. [….] We take fortuitous resemblances among us to be actual likeness, because those around us have fallen heir to the same customs, trade in same coin, acknowledge, more or less, the same notions of decency and sanity. But

> all that just allows us to coexist with the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us.[124]

This passage expresses the scale of the challenge we face when going beyond the point where routine discourse "fails to exhaust what needs to be said". Ames captures the fact that we can deceive ourselves into believing that we are communicating with one another simply because we have some superficial connections. Yet, as we have seen in these examples from Robinson's novels, these similarities can mask deep differences which may give rise to misunderstanding and even conflict but may also be create new shared meaning. However, the "utterly vast spaces between us" still exist.

Summary

In this chapter, we began by considering Robinson's own reflections on the power of language to explore mystery. We saw how she recognises the way in which we use words shapes our experience of reality and how she appreciates the potential of traditional religious language to consistently open up new meanings. We also considered her concerns about the way in which the limited vocabulary of scientific reductionism can confine our experience of reality, precluding the possibility of even acknowledging mystery. We then explored how she uses the power of language herself to expresses her religious intuition across the two genres. In order to help us understand how this expression arises from the same source, we used the conceptual framework suggested by Williams who emphasises the way in which the dynamic power of language can create new meanings that gesture towards an underlying unity which is beyond human understanding. Both Robinson and Williams share a sense of an over-plus of meaning, a religious intuition which suggests an underlying informing intelligence that lies beyond the structure of objects and concepts of human experience. This mystery can be explored by employing the dynamic and unstable qualities of language to create new meanings. These emerge as the result of an ongoing interaction between individual experience and religious tradition, constrained by the grain of what matters most in human experience. The process is always inconclusive, opening up new horizons and introducing new questions. Often these new meanings are generated when religious language is put under pressure and normal patterns of discourse are disrupted by new insights or

[124] Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 225.

circumstances. They are necessarily collaborative, relying on a high level of trust and a shared hinterland of meaning. The conceptual framework suggested by Williams therefore provides a structure that underpins both Robinson's essays and her novels. She combines her religious intuition with the experience of her religious tradition to articulate new meanings that explore the boundaries of what can and what cannot be said. In her essays she disrupts her polemic with passages of poetry-prose, whereas in her novels she explores the dynamic complexity of the relationships between her characters through narrative. By placing Robinson within Williams's framework, we can see that her essays and novels are not simply complementary, but instead employ contrasting methods of discourse to express a common theology.

Finally, we can return to the question asked earlier about the comparative effectiveness of the essays and the novels in the search for shared meanings. We have seen that in the case of the essays, this sharing takes place directly between Robinson and her reader and the disruptive poetry-prose will either resonate or not. In contrast, the search for shared meanings in the novels takes place between the characters, with the reader taking on more the role of observer who can appreciate the dynamics between the characters without necessarily sharing the religious perspective that underpins the fictional context. Both forms of creative expression arise from the same source, yet they elicit different responses from the reader. The comparative popularity of the novels can perhaps be partly explained by the wide appeal of the narrative form. However, the essays offer essential insights into Robinson's religious humanism, often expressed in distinctive poetry-prose.

4. What is the impact of Robinson as a theological writer?

4i. The theme of mystery as an open approach to religious thought

We have seen how the theme of mystery as an aspect of human experience can be identified in Robinson's essays and have looked at how aspects of the same theme emerge in different forms in the Gilead novels. We have then considered how Robinson emphasises the importance of language for shaping our experience of reality and how she uses different types of discourse to express her own sense of mystery. In the introduction, we also noted that Robinson invites her readers to explore new understandings and possibilities, to think for themselves. We will now summarise the key characteristics of this invitation before asking what impact Robinson might have made as a theological writer.

Firstly, she is inviting her readers to trust their own experiences and to recognise a deeper view of reality, one that acknowledges the mystery in which they are immersed. She does not try to make an argument about the existence of God but instead opens the door to the possibility of the transcendent, not as a supernatural 'other' but as embedded within the emerging immanent order. She captures this sense of givenness in the following passage.

> We know now that there is another reality, beyond the grasp of our comprehension, yet wholly immanent in all of Being, powerful in every sense of the word, invisible to our sight, silent to our hearing, foolish to our wisdom, yet somehow steadfast, allowing our days and years. This is more than a metaphor. It is a clear-eyed look at our circumstances. Let us say that this quasi-reality is accommodated to our limitations in ways that allow us extraordinary efficacy. To me this would allow a vast solicitude, and a divine delight in us as well.[125]

Secondly, Robinson believes that the power of human consciousness to make sense of this reality reflects a profound relationship between the universe and humanity. We find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, we have the improbable ability to sense order and continuity, to weigh up questions of right and wrong, to feel love and loss. On the other, we sense that we are immersed in a reality that is beyond the limited categories of our understanding. Our consciousness both fits within the

[125] Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, p. 224.

boundaries of this experience yet reaches out to search for new meanings on the edge of what can and cannot be said. We explore this sense that there is mystery behind experience that we can gesture towards, through the exercise of our religious intuition, yet never fully master. For Robinson, this mystery is best explored within the boundaries of the Christian tradition, which provides immense resources of wisdom accumulated over many centuries. By interacting with this tradition, meanings can be extended and enhanced, and the writers of previous generations have great insights which are just as relevant today as they were in the past. As we have seen, both Calvin and Edwards speak to Robinson in a way that changed her view of reality.

Thirdly, Robinson not only encourages an appreciation of mystery, but also challenges the assumptions of exclusive humanists. She is concerned with the tendency towards literalism, particularly in the works of some atheistic writers which, in her view, reflects a sense of misplaced certainty. There is a danger that language becomes deadened and can no longer convey the depth and subtly of religious experience. As we saw when we looked at Williams's framework, Robinson's approach acknowledges there is a need to go beyond the point where routine discourse fails to capture what needs to be said, whether through the use of poetry-prose or narrative. It can be argued that much of the vocabulary of religious discourse has lost its power in recent years, but the word mystery still has some traction. It is sometimes criticised for being vague, but for Robinson it is an invitation to think for oneself and to draw on personal experience. It is a word that offers a way into a wider and deeper view of reality. At its most basic, it is both a reminder of the limits of human understanding and a challenge to simplified accounts of experience that resort to glib certainties in the face of profound unknowability.

This summary shows that Robinson's approach to mystery falls broadly within Christian orthodoxy, even though it is expressed in her distinctive voice. It could be argued that her theological reflections are not original, and therefore do not add to ideas that are expressed elsewhere. However, there are two responses to this criticism. Firstly, as has been demonstrated, an understanding of her theology as expressed in her essays enhances our understanding of her writing as a whole. By drawing out theological themes from her essays, all her work can be more fully appreciated. Secondly, her approach to mystery in her essays involves an open approach to religious thought that might resonate with readers who appreciate her fiction but who do not subscribe to a religious worldview. We will now consider how this approach might appeal to exclusive humanists.

4ii. Robinson's potential appeal to exclusive humanists

We noted in the introduction that Robinson did not expect an audience, and therefore may not be concerned about the impact of her thought. Yet her actions suggest that she is keen to communicate and regularly accepts opportunities to speak and to be interviewed.[126] She is also currently writing another novel. These activities indicate an ongoing interest in public engagement, whether through fiction or non-fiction. In this final section we will ask whether her essays and novels, taken together, have the potential to appeal to exclusive humanists.

We have already noted that despite her emphasis on the authority of personal experience, Robinson's theology broadly falls within the boundaries of traditional Christian orthodoxy. However, she has an appeal outside the confines of Christianity and her novels are well received by a wide audience. She is recognised as having an authentic voice, yet the commentators tend to confine their reflections to her literary contribution, rather than her religious thought. I wish to make the case that this is a missed opportunity, as her willingness to take an open approach to religious issues has the potential to resonate with a wider audience. In order to make this case, I consider the analysis of certain characteristics of current culture proposed by Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age.*[127] Taylor argues that in the West we inhabit an immanent frame. This frame "constitutes a 'natural order', to be contrasted with a 'supernatural' one, an immanent world, over and against a possible 'transcendent' one."[128] The creation of meaning within this space has gradually become dominated by the natural order at the expense of the supernatural order. As time has passed, the conditions of what is plausible have been transformed, particularly as the result of the growth in scientific knowledge. According to Taylor we inhabit the immanent frame in different ways, "some of us want to live in it as open to something beyond; some live in it as closed."[129] However, contemporary pressures push us towards the closed view, particularly the powerful metaphor of 'coming of age', which assumes that our understanding accumulates through time. The metaphor, embedded within the immanent frame, suggests that we

[126] For example, the fifteen essays in the collection *What are we Doing Here?* were based on talks given between May 2015 and April 2017.
[127] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[128] Taylor, p. 542.
[129] Taylor, p. 544.

should have the courage to outgrow the comforts of the 'childish' world view of the supernatural order.[130]

Taylor is interested in how individuals respond to these cross pressures between open and closed world views.[131] All beliefs are now contestable, both for those who align with a religious tradition and those who do not. The world becomes more uncertain and the experience of doubt becomes more common. The immanent frame encourages a closed world view in which materialism and order dominate our thinking yet the human longing for transcendence has not disappeared and many people feel unwilling to settle for a closed approach.[132] They find that the flattened world of exclusive humanism does not resonate, and they are left unable to find a means to satisfy their deepest longings.[133] The naturalism of exclusive humanism does not acknowledge many aspects of human experience, including for example, the innate understanding of good and evil. In short, the closed world view involves a curtailed sense of reality and therefore fails to capture the fullness of human experience.

Robinson undermines the assumptions of the exclusive humanist approach. By emphasising the mystery in which we are immersed, she offers the possibility of a transcendental world view, one which can acknowledge the fullness of human experience, yet which does not require that plausibility be entirely abandoned. In so doing, she could appeal strongly to those who find that exclusive humanism does not respond to their deepest intuitions and experiences. However, by placing herself within the Christian tradition, she is questioning the dominant 'coming of age' narrative. For her, the Christian tradition, far from outgrown, offers a richness which modernity has largely forgotten, not only in the power of its language but in its openness to mystery and possibility. The ongoing task is to test the authority of tradition against individual experience. The tension with the 'coming of age' narrative is experienced by Robinson's readers in different ways. In the Gilead novels, they are invited into the inner lives of a set of imagined characters in mid 20th century Iowa. Although the religious context explores profound themes, as we have seen, readers can still appreciate the experiences of the characters without making a personal judgment on the theology which underpins the context. In contrast, the essays make a case for classical theism directly, in a way that

[130] Taylor, p. 560.
[131] Taylor, p. 600.
[132] Taylor, p. 595.
[133] Taylor, p. 717.

challenges the reader to respond. The tension with the 'coming of age' narrative is therefore harder to ignore and there is a tendency for the reader to react by interpreting the references to classical Christian thought through the lens of modernity. As we saw in the previous chapter, Robinson sees this difficulty as partly a question of language, with the rich vocabulary of traditional Christian thought being undermined by the recent tendency towards literalism.

Despite these tensions, is it possible for Robinson's theological approach to resonate with a wider audience than those already committed to Christianity? Clearly, individual responses are deeply personal, but the positive reception that her novels have received suggest that her writing opens up the possibility of an engagement with the Christian tradition, provided that it does not involve the limitations of literalism. This willingness is described by Rachel Verona Cote in *The Complicated Comforts of Marilynne Robinson*.[134] An agnostic, Cote read *Gilead* when she was grieving for the unexpected death of her mother and found Ames's religious convictions deeply appealing, particularly because he was honest about his doubts. She then turned to Robinson's essay collection *What Are We Doing Here?* in the hope of finding more explicit reassurance about her own uncertainties. Although Robinson presented positive vision of humanity, she did not provide the answers that Cote was hoping for, who then realised that she was expecting too much and that a glib certainty, in the face of profound complexity, is not realistic. Nevertheless, Robinson taught her how to see, and that helped her to regain her confidence in her own experiences. This example highlights a number of themes which show that Robinson can appeal to a wider audience. Firstly, she emphasises the authority of personal experience. She encourages her readers to think for themselves and not to be influenced by the social pressures of current consensus, whatever the topic. Secondly, she emphasises the complexity of experience and the limits of human understanding, encouraging an open approach, one that pursues questions rather than finding answers. Finally, she is keen to communicate her own loyalty to the nuances of the Christian tradition, which she sees as a rich source of insight that should not be ignored. Wisdom is cumulative and the insights of previous generations are still of profound value. All these characteristics mean that she represents the possibility of an open take, in Taylor's terms.

[134] Rachel Vorona Cote, The Complicated Comforts of Marilynne Robinson, https://lithub.com/the-complicated-comforts-of-marilynne-robinson/ [accessed 22 July 2019].

To summarise, although Robinson does not seek to make a distinctive contribution as a theologian or even a religious writer, she has the potential to resonate with a wider audience. She is keen to undermine the assumptions of the exclusive humanism yet is also willing to approach theological thought as an opening up, rather than a closing down of possibility. Although she does not seek to proselytise, it is clear that she also wishes to convey her indebtedness to the traditional approach to rationality contained within the Christian tradition, especially as it underpins her own reflections on politics, economics and history.

5. Conclusion

In the introduction I claimed that Robinson's essays are an essential theological companion to her novels. In order to demonstrate this, I began by looking in detail about what she says about the theme of mystery in her essays, focussing on her reflections on the power of human consciousness as the source of religious intuition and the over-arching relationship between mind and Being. I argued that these theological themes underpin her religious humanism and also explain her emphasis on the sacred significance and dignity of each individual. They also provide insights into her politics, her economics and her interpretation of American history, all of which are recurring concerns in her essays. Some of the same themes also emerge in the Gilead novels and three episodes were selected to show how Robinson explores mystery through the complexities of the lived experience of her characters. The strengths and weaknesses of the two forms of creative expression were compared and I concluded that whilst the novels provide an opportunity to explore the complexities of lived experience, the essays offer important insights into Robinson's approach to mystery which need to be included in the search for a deeper understanding of her thought.

The second claim was that Robinson uses the dynamic power of language to create new meanings in contrasting, but effective ways across the essays and the novels. A conceptual model developed by Rowan Williams provided a framework to explore this claim, which maintains that religious discourse is best undertaken using poetry, metaphor or narrative, rather than statement. We saw that Robinson employs two of these approaches in her writing. In her essays she uses the power of poetry to disrupt her polemic with passages of poetry-prose, whilst in her novels she uses the power of narrative to explore the challenges of articulating religious intuition at an interpersonal level. By placing Robinson within Williams's framework, we were able to see how she employs contrasting methods of discourse to express a common theology. Again, the strengths and weaknesses of both forms were compared. In the case of essays, the impact of the poetry-prose on the reader may depend upon whether they share a hinterland of meaning with Robinson. In contrast, the narrative form of the novels provides the reader with an opportunity to appreciate the dynamics between the characters without entering into to the religious perspective that underpins the fictional context. Yet the passages of poetry-prose also offer a powerful insight into Robinson's religious intuition.

How do these claims take us forward? We saw earlier that most academic interest in Robinson concentrates on her novels. By looking in detail at the theme of mystery, I have argued that this emphasis misses an opportunity to explore Robinson's thought from more unified perspective. Both Todd Shy and Hadfield and Berkowitz have identified some links between the essays and the novels, but there has been less interest in recognising any underlying theological themes that span both genres. I have argued that her essays are an important theological companion to her novels and therefore hope that this study offers an innovative perspective on her overall work. In addition, I looked at her possible appeal to exclusive humanists. Her novels are well received by a wide audience and a broader understanding of her approach to mystery that incorporates her theological insights in her essays might extend that appeal. As we saw with Charles Taylor's approach to secularism, contemporary pressures encourage a closed world view, one that ignores the possibility of transcendence. Her willingness to see religious thought as an opening up of possibility challenges these pressures and claims that the complexity of experience suggests that we are immersed in a deeper reality, one that is not made known to us through our normal perception but one which we can explore through the exercise of our religious intuition.

However, a number of questions still need to be addressed. It could be argued that Robinson places too much emphasis on humankind being created in the image of God and does not acknowledge sufficiently the human capacity for sin and evil. In an article which summarises this particular issue, Wesley Hill[135] argues that this emphasis on the positive aspects of human nature means that Robinson depicts an incomplete picture of the reality of human experience. In her admiration for Calvin and Edwards, she also ignores the importance that both placed on human depravity, preferring instead to concentrate on their approach to the world as an expression of the glory of God. She does acknowledge the human propensity for evil,[136] but does not pursue the theme in any depth, preferring instead to return to her emphasis on the wonder of creation and the positive qualities of human nature. This lack of balance is a legitimate criticism, especially as the human struggle with sin and evil is a central theme within the Christian tradition.

[135] Wesley Hill, Marilynne Robinson's Celebration of Humanity is Brilliant but Incomplete' *Christianity Today*, (April 2018).
[136] For examples of Robinson's references to evil, see Robinson, *The Givenness of Things,* p. 213, p. 227 and p. 236.

Another potential criticism is that her emphasis on the authority of individual experience avoids the role that revelation might play in the accumulation of religious wisdom. We saw earlier that Schleiermacher was criticised for seemingly reducing religious experience to subjective feeling and it could be argued that Robinson, who places humankind at the centre of creation, also concentrates too much on individual human subjectivity. When the experience of mystery concentrates solely on a personal intuition of God, attention is drawn away from what Todd Shy describes as "the majestic heights of Calvinistic revelation".[137] Furthermore, as Rowan Williams suggests in *The Edge of Words*, this emphasis can understate the possibility of a God who intervenes in the world, who acts to interrupt perceptions and thought processes. A God who can be found only through individual experience is one who is essentially passively waiting to be uncovered, rather than one who is active in the world.[138] By failing to provide her reader with any distinction between individual lived experience and divine revelation, Robinson does not address the role revelation plays in the way in which religion accumulates collective wisdom. Indeed, she occasionally challenges that collective wisdom herself by questioning aspects of church doctrine and her selective admiration for certain theologians reinforces her personal approach. We should remind ourselves that she sees religion not as a constraint, but as a liberation of thought and this is likely to lead to a tension between individual experience and religious tradition.

Finally, the breadth and depth of her thought has to be acknowledged. She simultaneously embodies both an open approach to religious thought and a particular type of Christian orthodoxy, one that informs her religious humanism and one which she finds plausible in the light of her own experience. Her contribution to innovative thought invites us to continue to create shared meanings, always seeking out new questions and broadening our imaginative horizons. In her own words, "I propose […] that we preserve as we can the heritage we have received and that we enlarge and enrich it for the sake of the coming generations."[139]

[137] Shy, p. 254.
[138] Williams, p. 1.
[139] Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* p. 38.

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