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**Elegiac Adaptations:
Resisting the Closure of Mourning in Elizabeth Robinson's *Three Novels***

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2015

Dedication

For my parents

Acknowledgements

The individuals to whom I owe gratitude for their time and support with this project extend the bounds of this page. I am indebted to my advisors for their indispensable advice and encouragement, both of which were great comforts and sources of inspiration. Carol MacKay encouraged my idea to write on *Three Novels*, and her guidance and generosity have been matchless. Chad Bennett's expertise in poetics, as well as his thoughtful and incisive comments gave this paper and my prose focus. Many thanks are owed to Jeff Boruszak, whose patience, optimism, and emotional support seemed interminable founts, and who heard me through each draft. Sage Doshay's friendship through the years has been meaningful beyond compare and I am so grateful to her for reading anything I send her way. Finally, I would like to express my sincerest love and gratitude to my parents, without whom this project would neither be possible nor meaningful.

Elegiac Adaptations:
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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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Elizabeth Robinson's *Three Novels* (2011) is a lyric re-exploration of three Victorian novels: Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) and *The Woman in White* (1859-60), and George Gissing's *Eve's Ransom* (1895). Robinson ostensibly wrote the poems as an elegy for her father; however, *Three Novels* also unearths elegiac aspects of its source novels that have been previously unexamined by critics. Each of the Victorian source novels narrates a movement from an initial loss toward an eventual resolution, mirroring the traditional structure of an elegy: mourning is ultimately completed by the acceptance of a compensatory substitute for the loss. While the poetry in *Three Novels* emphasizes the presence of elegy in its sources, the poems themselves fracture the practice of normative mourning by rewriting these novels in the style of Jahan Ramazani's melancholic "anti-elegy" which forecloses the possibility of loss resolution. Because the loss is not neatly resolved, it becomes an object of focus. Reading the anti-elegy manifest in *Three Novels* creates a space to mourn the losses incurred by each

novel, thereby recuperating the overlooked figures of the female, the landscape, and the self that had been diminished by the narrative's drive to resolution.

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A Case for the Anti-Elegy

It has been said that the detective story has structural elegance because it begins with a murder and unravels neatly backwards to relate the cause of the murder: a solution. But this was not true of the first detective story. That story entailed no murders, only a loss, various losses.

Eventually a death. In truth, more than one death. And a murder after all.

—Elizabeth Robinson, “Origin Myth”

“Origin Myth” is the first poem in Elizabeth Robinson’s collection *Three Novels* (2011). *Three Novels* pays homage to three novels by two eminent Victorian authors: Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868) and *The Woman in White* (1859-60), and George Gissing’s *Eve’s Ransom* (1895), with a section devoted to each text, respectively.

“Origin Myth,” functions as a marker of the book’s framework, and a guide through which to reconsider the source texts. In a finely blocked prose poem, the speaker in “Origin Myth” lauds the structural neatness or “elegance” of the standard detective novel as one impelled by a certain momentum: someone is murdered, and the text labors to unravel the truth behind the murder. Yet, herein lies *The Moonstone*’s difference: this story does not begin with a murder. It begins with a theft, or, to use Robinson’s parlance, “a loss,” and throughout the novel, this initial loss begets greater losses.

The speaker eventually concedes that there is death within the pages of *The Moonstone*. In fact, there are a few deaths, and the final death is, indeed, a murder. Detective fiction is a genre bound by the rules of convention, and the presence of dead bodies is at the fore of an effective story: “There simply must be a corpse in a detective

novel, and the deader the corpse, the better. No lesser crime than murder will suffice.

Three hundred pages is far too much pother for a crime other than murder” (Van Dine).

The Moonstone is littered with death and murder. Yet Robinson’s poem calls the detective story’s narrative momentum into question, criticizing the push from problem to solution or loss to recovery, and instead urges readers to meditate upon the loss engendered by the initial loss.

In this way, *Three Novels* provides a new lens through which to approach these Victorian narratives. By meditating on the aspects of loss inherent to these novels, their narrative movement transforms into a practice of melancholic mourning, thereby stalling the problem-solution momentum inscribed in the form of sensation and detective fiction, and allowing for the voices that are silenced in the source texts to emerge. In an interview with *The Brooklyn Rail*, Robinson speaks to the loss that precipitated *Three Novels*:

After my father died, I felt such a bereftness that I went back to the books he first read to me and that we read together... Trying as an act of mourning, to reclaim a shared site with my absent father, I was really struck by how circumscribed the lives of the women characters in these books were, and how this places them in real peril. (Robinson)

Three Novels exists as a site of mourning for Robinson. The collection’s dedication reads, “To the memory of my father, Bruce C. Robinson, who first introduced me to these novels.” Not only does *Three Novels* mourn the absence of Robinson’s father, but it grieves for the voices silenced by their source novels as well. These silenced voices—females, servants, landscapes—are the ones which Robinson’s poems attempt to recuperate. This paper will use “Origin Myth” and the rest of *Three Novels* as a touchstone through which to re-approach the novels of Collins and Gissing. By re-

orienting these novels as dwelling in loss instead of striving toward resolution, this paper will unearth the elegiac aspect inherent to these fictions that has heretofore been neglected.

In its most traditional sense, the elegy as a genre is characterized by “the topics of loss and death and the speech act of lament,” and “its indigenous moods are sorrow, shock, rage, longing, melancholy, and resolution—often in quick succession” (Braden & Fowler 398). This schematic details the transition from lamentation to resolution and is central to Peter Sacks’s foundational study, *The English Elegy* (1985). Drawing on the established terms of Sigmund Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” Sacks defines the process of “normative” or “successful” mourning as that which begins with a loss, continues with a renunciation of the loss, and concludes with the mourner’s acceptance of a compensatory substitute for the original loss. As I will show, this form of loss resolution advanced by the traditional elegy is the form adopted and practiced in Collins’s and Gissing’s novels.

In contrast to Sacks’s study of “successful” mourning, Jahan Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning* proposes a theory defining the melancholic “anti-elegy.” Finding the work of successful mourning insufficient to a modern canon, Ramazani argues:

The modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss. To explore the paradoxically *melancholic* emphasis within modern poems of *mourning*, I recast the classical distinction between mourning and melancholia, shading it as a difference between modes of mourning: the normative (i.e. Restitutive, idealizing) and the melancholic (violent, recalcitrant). (xi)

Ramazani's inherently paradoxical melancholic elegy of "failed mourning" rejects the therapeutic work of normative mourning and elegy and yields "not so much solace as fractured speech, not so much answers as memorable puzzlings" (ix). The practice of melancholic elegy does not boast the productive and healing powers of its traditional forbearer, and Ramazani identifies its end as that which immerses itself in loss, rather than the achievement of resolution. The poems in *Three Novels* practice Ramazani's melancholic mourning and are exemplars of the "anti-elegy." Unlike the Victorian novels with which it engages, which ignore incurred losses in the movement to consolatory resolution, *Three Novels* rejects consolation in order to meditate upon and understand the loss left in each novel's wake. Robinson's melancholic elegies do not accept loss as a natural process, or a necessary occurrence within a narrative trajectory. Instead, they sit graveside, sentinels over an ever-filling tomb.

“The Moonstone”: An Anti-Elegy for the Overlooked

Of the three sections in *Three Novels*, “The Moonstone” makes its relationship to the source text the most clear. Robinson weaves plot elements together with a critique of Victorian propriety, inheritance and gender issues, and her personal investment in mourning to reimagine the novel as a site of loss. *The Moonstone* was a foundational text for the genre of detective fiction, and as we have seen, “Origin Myth” articulates the formal features that define the genre:

It has been said that the detective story has a structural elegance because it begins with a murder and unravels neatly backwards to relate the cause of the murder: a solution. But this was not true of the first detective story.

That story entailed no murders, only a loss, various losses. (Robinson 13)

Robinson underscores that the primary crime in *The Moonstone* is not murder, but theft; thus, from its incipient pages, the novel veers from the formula its primacy engendered. “Origin Myth” illuminates this difference while also highlighting the general form of the genre, which begins with the murder and moves backward to relate the murder’s cause, thus arriving at a solution. While *The Moonstone* does not revolve around murder, it adheres to this “structural elegance” about which many critics have commented. In his study of the genre, Tzvetan Todorov ascribes duality to detective fiction which consists of two stories: “the story of the crime and the story of the investigation.... The first story, that of the crime, ends before the second begins. But what happens in the second? Not much. The characters of this second story, the story of the investigation, do not act, they learn” (44). These separate stories eventually merge as the detective solves the crime; but the crime itself is never witnessed, only narrated by various, competing voices.

Consequently, this binary structure is one that is, according to Ronald G. Walker, “built around an absence: the crime which lies at the center of the story is never directly narrated, only retold second hand by the detective” (16-17).

The final line of “Origin Myth” affirms Robinson’s investment in elegy: “Eventually a death. In truth, more than one death. And a murder after all.” Part of *Three Novels*’ poetic labor involves the recuperation of characters forgotten by the fiction’s drive toward resolution. Within the pages of *The Moonstone*, six individuals die, some by their own hand, others by forces beyond their control, but the number is still staggering. These losses go little acknowledged, submerged by the mystery’s narrative momentum. Robinson’s “Moonstone” provides a space for sustained melancholic mourning—an act that the source novels overlook—thus yielding a melancholic elegy.

Robinson advances the exploration of the elegy’s role in detection fiction in “Surface,” a poem which comments on the narrative structure of the novel, while highlighting its converse relationship to elegy. The third stanza begins, “Each narrator makes tensile the cordage that marks his or her terrain, and/from above, the eye cannot help but note the pretty pattern that stands out/in their overlap. It remains nonetheless a barren site” (20). These lines mobilize visual and spatial imagery in order to lyrically reimagine the multi-narrational form of *The Moonstone*. In the novel, each character is charged with writing his or her own narrative portion of only that which he or she is most capable of relating. The aim of this record, according to Franklin Blake, possesses elegiac undertones. He explains to Gabriel Betteredge his motivation for putting the resolved story to paper: “The memories of innocent people may suffer, hereafter, of want of a

record of the facts to which those who come after us can appeal. There can be no doubt that this strange family story of ours ought to be told” (8). Blake proposes the idea of composing what becomes the narrative of *The Moonstone* as a consolatory exercise. In order to alleviate suffering, bring solace, and purify the besmirched memories of wronged individuals, the narrative must be told.

“Surface” reflects this elegiac impulse by drawing attention to the links between each narrative that yield a revelatory pattern in their movement toward resolution. The final line of the stanza, however, criticizes the narrative moment, noting, “It remains nonetheless a barren site.” “Surface” draws attention to the fact that despite the effort of Blake and the rest of *The Moonstone*’s narrative voices to mourn and find consolation for loss through writing, their efforts are fruitless and unproductive. The novel’s resolution—the discovery of the diamond’s thief—is not an adequate consolation for the loss its route to discovery has caused. By dwelling on the novel as a barren site, “The Moonstone” poems enact melancholic mourning.

The primary figure of elegy in “The Moonstone” is Rosanna Spearman, one of the most intriguing, puzzling, and objectified of *The Moonstone*’s wealth of characters. After being convicted for robbery, Rosanna earns a second chance as Lady Verinder’s housemaid. Due to her eccentric nature and hunched back, Rosanna stands apart from the rest of the house staff. Furthermore, her peculiar interest in the Shivering Sand, “the most horrible quicksand on the shores of Yorkshire,” makes her suspicious (Collins 77).

Rosanna’s obsession with the Sand plays a significant role in the recovery of the diamond. She admits to Betteredge that she feels drawn to the sands and that

“sometimes...I think my grave is waiting for me here” (78-79). While Rosanna does eventually find her grave within the Sand she earlier admits to seeing the faces of the Sand’s other “victims”: “It looks as if it had hundreds of suffocating people under it—all struggling to get to the surface, and all sinking lower and lower in the dreadful deeps!” (79). Rosanna’s vigil over the faces in the Sand performs the gesture of mourning, and her lament for them demonstrates the presence the elegy not only in the poem, but in its source narrative as well. However, *The Moonstone*’s narrative fails to repay the same rites of mourning to Rosanna that she offers to the Sand’s earlier victims. Rosanna eventually commits suicide by drowning herself in the Shivering Sand, finding her grave within it, and comprising the novel’s first embodied loss. Rosanna’s death goes ungrieved by the novel’s central characters, her impact erased.

While *The Moonstone* diminishes Rosanna’s effect on the narrative resolution, Robinson’s “The Moonstone” provides a space for mourning this neglected loss. The first of two poems called “Decorum” focuses on surfaces and appearances in order to reimagine Rosanna’s suicide in an appropriately respectful way. It lyrically recasts Rosanna’s story to emphasize her complexity as a character: “She was ugly. She was beautiful. Her appearance was altered./One shoulder was raised above another and made her a freak. Or her/lovely lips were compressed and drained of color. Always to be called lesser”(15). “Decorum” turns a sympathetic and focused eye on Rosanna Spearman, making her a subject of elegy rather than a pause on the way to resolution. The lines dwell on the contradictory aspect to Rosanna’s appearance, simultaneously ugly and beautiful. Her lips are “lovely,” yet their compression and lack of color portend

Rosanna's eventual demise. "Decorum" draws attention to Rosanna beyond her status as a servant or disabled body, and grieves for her loss. The poem continues its lament for

Rosanna:

Look how the feminine boot print leads to the shore and not back from it. How the landscape shimmies with this tide. Alas, the shore is soaked through and through with what one knows but does not tell, the courtesy of it, as it turns to quicksand—receptive, that is, to the weight of the visitor, blurring the footprint politely as it harries the rain. (Robinson 15)

Like Sergeant Cuff, the poem notices Rosanna's footprint leading toward the Shivering Sand but not back from it, signifying loss. These lines implicate the landscape for its ability to hide or reveal information; the weight of secrets liquefies the shore. "Decorum" closes by characterizing Rosanna as the Sand's visitor, allowing for the possibility of an eventual embodied return. The possibility of return disrupts the process of normative mourning that requires a sense of closure or resolution. Instead, Rosanna's "visit" to the Sand is exemplary of melancholic mourning by refusing this closural stance.

Robinson's elegy to Rosanna continues in "A Danger to Oneself." The poem begins with the language expected of an elegy, language that is clearly absent from the novel's short account of Rosanna's death: "The first of the fallen is now gone. She is regretted" (21). Loss, in its attempt at resolution, begets loss. The poem proceeds, "The soothsayer, our 'genius,' apparently/ designated her the villain when the greatest obstacle was her innocence. By/which I mean the manner in which she departed the world of firm outline/And forced herself into formlessness" (21). Rosanna's "greatest obstacle" was that her innocence seemed guilty because she knew Franklin Blake to be the real thief. In her suicide letter she revealed to Blake that her life was contingent upon his treatment of

her. When her final encounter with him proved his lack of feeling, she departs from “the world of firm outline and force[s] herself into formlessness” (Robinson 21).

Robinson’s invocation of a “world of firm outline” holds an array of meaning within the context of the novel. Surely, “world of firm outline” offers a characterization of the strict proprietary and behavioral codes to which the Victorians, particularly Victorian women, subscribed. Additionally, the idea of a “firm outline” fits well with the form of detective fiction, which consists of a loss and a resolution, and clear steps to get from the former to the latter. Even the multiple narrators in *The Moonstone*, arranged chronologically, offer a neat and firm outline. Rosanna removes herself from this world, opting instead for “formlessness,” which gestures toward the nature of her death. Rosanna’s death is a formless one because of the site of death: the Shivering Sand is an ever shifting and changing surface, and the loss of a body in the Sand is a permanent one. The body cannot be recovered. Moreover, characterizing Rosanna’s as a “formless” death, confirms her placelessness in the narrative trajectory. Because Rosanna obstructs the fiction’s drive to resolution, she is compelled to a state of formlessness.

Robinson’s critique of the novel’s diminishment of loss is apparent in “The Nightshirt,” which refers to the paint-stained shirt that proves Blake’s theft of the diamond. In the first line of “The Nightshirt,” Robinson alludes to the real life Constance

Kent murder case,¹ stating, “Contemporary history reveals that outside our fiction there was another/ shirt, and it, too, stained—but with blood. This narrative’s dilution turns/ blood to paint” (16). These lines specifically refer to the difference between the nightshirts in the real and fictional crimes: in the Kent case, the primary loss was a child, who was found dead in a nightshirt. In *The Moonstone*, the loss is the diamond and the paint-stained nightshirt belongs to the person who stole the diamond. The poem is particularly focused on the fact that Collins’s narrative is a diluted one. While *The Moonstone* is a novel inherently concerned with loss—that of the diamond—Robinson makes clear that all other losses, and primarily the loss of lives, are diminished or erased in the detective’s drive toward recovery and resolution. Therefore, the “dilution [that] turns blood to paint” extends beyond the Kent case allusion and instead critiques *The Moonstone*’s efforts to dilute all blood spilled on the way toward the diamond’s recovery. Loss is inherent to *The Moonstone*’s form—mystery and detection hinge upon a necessary loss; however, each step closer to the diamond’s recovery is a step that also bears other losses, ones which, like the death of Rosanna Spearman, are belittled or diluted, as Collins continually turns others’ blood into paint, instead of mourning loss.

“The Moonstone” poems conclude with the second poem entitled “Decorum,” which reckons with the novel’s end; but rather than expressing relief at the Diamond’s

¹ The Constance Kent case was a high profile child murder investigated in the summer of 1860. Taking place in the English village of Rode, the murder victim was four-year-old Francis Kent, who disappeared from his home and was found nearly decapitated, still dressed in his bloodied nightshirt in a privy on the Kent property. His sixteen-year-old sister Constance eventually confessed to the crime, though the initial suspect was the boy’s nursemaid. Many of the details from the Kent case served as inspiration for *The Moonstone*, particularly the struggle between upper and lower classes. In Robinson’s poems, the presence of a bloodied nightshirt figures significantly.

recovery, the poem dwells, again, on loss. The second stanza reads, “Our witness must profess us, then die. /Our adjudicator shall remove/ himself to exile, our servant recuse himself” (28). This stanza is a lyric restatement of many of the facts of novel’s plot: the witness, Ezra Jennings, oversees the laudanum experiment and dies thereafter; the adjudicator, Sergeant Cuff, retires; and finally, the servant, Gabriel Betteredge indeed recuses himself from participating in the experiment. And yet, within the novel, these losses are overridden by the discovery of the thief. The stanza draws particular attention to the death of the witness: the sentence ends with a period in the middle of the line. Furthermore, “witness,” rather than a specific marker of identity, allows for a substitutive ambiguity. Ezra Jennings, the man who witnessed Franklin Blake’s unconscious re-thieving of the diamond, is an obvious answer. However, the ambiguity of “witness” opens other possibilities as well. Rosanna Spearman, who discovered Blake’s guilt and died as a result of it, is a possible witness. Rachel Verinder, who actually witnessed Blake’s sleepwalking robbery of the diamond, is another. Though Rachel does not die, she, too, undergoes various losses as a result of the missing diamond. Robinson’s invocation of an unspecified witness highlights the multiplicity of loss inherent to *The Moonstone*.

The poem continues, “Our camouflage, our jewel, is lost to us forever. So we end. This is our/troth.” In a purely literal sense, this stanza speaks to the fate of the diamond after the death of Godfrey Ablewhite. The diamond is never physically recovered, or seen by its pursuers after the night of its theft. When Blake and Cuff find the disguised corpse of Godfrey Ablewhite, they also notice that “on the table stood a little wooden box, open,

and empty. On one side of the box lay some jewelers' cotton" (519). It is later revealed that the three Indians murdered Ablewhite and restored the diamond to its proper shrine.

In a letter to Mr. Bruff, Mr. Murthwaite writes:

After a lapse of eight centuries, the Moonstone looks forth once more, over the walls of the sacred city in which its story first began. How it has found its way back to its wild native land—by what accident, or by what crime, the Indians regained possession of their sacred gem, may be in your knowledge, but is not in mine. You have lost sight of it in England, and (if I know anything of this people) you have lost sight of it forever. (542)

The novel ends with a paradoxical moment of loss and resolution that is mimicked in "Decorum." Robinson, like Murthwaite, notes that the diamond is lost forever, despite the restoration to its proper place. Given this, "we end. / This is our troth" (Robinson 28).

The third stanza provides a closural aspect to the poem little seen in the "The Moonstone" poems, with a promise to end pursuit, to accept loss. However, "Decorum's" final stanza disrupts any attempt at closure and brings loss and mourning to the fore: "As the somnambulant gropes toward the site of loss, his beloved looks on/in polite and silent bliss" (Robinson 28). The final stanza revisits the sleepwalking figure of Franklin Blake, reaching toward "the site of loss," as Rachel Verinder watches in "polite and silent bliss." The poem's concluding image is at odds with the novel's depiction of the normative marriage between Rachel and Blake, and the return of the diamond to India—two consolatory conclusions appropriate to the traditional elegy. Robinson's image of Blake ceaselessly grasping toward, but never reaching a site of loss fractures the novel's restitutive attempts. Instead, the final lines of Robinson's poems on *The Moonstone* offer the image of Franklin Blake reaching for the diamond, embodying the cyclical and

ceaseless loss central to Robinson's invocation of the anti-elegy. This closing couplet emphasizes that within *The Moonstone*, loss is everywhere, and elegy abounds.

“The Woman in White”: A Feminine Eco-Anti-Elegy

The second section, a single poem based upon *The Woman in White* and sharing its title, is a vast departure from “The Moonstone” poems. Instead of neatly formed blocks of prose-poem stanzas, “The Woman in White” operates aggressively against lineation. In an interview with Tony Leuzzi, Robinson comments, “‘The Woman in White’ is meant to be one extended poem and the sections should drift, almost like weather on fields and hills, over the pages” (Robinson). The rendered effect is of sparse words scattered across a blank landscape, capturing the isolation felt by each of the novel’s characters. Furthermore, “The Woman in White” offers less narrative stability than “The Moonstone.” The poem is more fragmentary, both narratively and aesthetically, and offers less of a direct response to its source novel. Instead, “The Woman in White” disrupts the standard temporality of the novel by dwelling in moments concerned with female identity, inheritance, and landscape and their effects on loss and mourning rather than faithfully deciphering plot into poem.

“The Woman in White” fragments and dispels the standard trajectory of elegy that starts with loss and quickly moves through moods of shock and melancholy before ending with resolution. This divergence is partly owed to the different nature of loss in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. Because of *The Moonstone*’s detective fiction genre, its narrative partakes of a process akin to normative mourning that begins with the loss of the diamond, works through the resultant sorrow, and ultimately resolves the loss by displacing emotion from the unrecoverable diamond to the ultimate marriage between Franklin Blake and Rachel Verinder. The participants of the loss are purged of their

sorrow through the compensatory redirection of feeling upheld by the traditional requirements of elegy. Robinson's poetry inspired by *The Moonstone* disrupts this normative process through the refusal of closural or substitutive consolation. The poems, instead, adopt an anti-elegiac stance by immersing themselves in the losses the novel's arc creates but overlooks.

By contrast, *The Woman in White* is not traditionally deemed an example of detective fiction, and as a result does not begin with a central loss, but rather an unlocatable presence in the figure of the Woman in White. *The Woman in White* shares many structural and thematic features with *The Moonstone*, one of which is the presence of a detective figure who works to unravel a mystery, and *The Woman in White* juggles multiple mysteries within its narrative frame as well. The first and foremost of these mysteries centers around the identity of the eponymous character, Anne Catherick. Walter Hartright serves as the amateur detective who leads the attempts to reveal Anne Catherick's identity and the reason for her interest in the Fairlie family. As the narrative develops, the mysteries compound: What accounts for the change in Percival Glyde's post-marital behavior? What is his actual identity? What will become of Laura Fairlie? Each of these issues is intimately tied to feelings of loss, primarily the loss of the self, of reason, of property. Yet, like *The Moonstone*, *The Woman in White* ends on a similarly consolatory and normative note that bolsters Freud's definition of mourning. Walter and Laura, having appropriately mourned for Anne Catherick, find solace in their marriage and newly-formed familial relationship with Marian and their baby. Lost ends are neatly tied then forgotten.

Elizabeth Robinson's lyrical reworking of the novel rejects its closural trend in favor of a more oblique and melancholic figuration into poetry. Collins's novel is deeply entrenched in the normative mode of recuperating loss through traditionally elegiac terms. With this tradition in mind, Robinson's "Woman in White" offers an anti-elegiac meditation on the novel, filtered through a pastoral lens. In an interview with *The Brooklyn Rail*, she reveals her intention behind the poem: "What I wanted to do with this was create some sort of pastoral poem, one that was distinctly feminized" (Robinson). Robinson's "The Woman in White" transforms the loaded world of Collins's *The Woman in White* into a feminine pastoral.

The tradition of the pastoral is intimately linked to that of the elegy, and the pastoral elegy, according to Ellen Z. Lambert, "proposes no one *solution* to the questions raised by death but rather a *setting* in which those questions may be posed, or better, 'placed.' It offers us a landscape."(xiii). In her developmental study, *Placing Sorrow: A Study of Pastoral Elegy Convention from Theocritus to Milton*, Lambert describes the realm of the pastoral elegy as "a concrete, palpable world, a world in which the elegist can place diffuse, intangible feelings of grief and thereby win his release from suffering" (xiii). This tradition of pastoral elegy is firmly entrenched within the bounds of normative mourning that Robinson's poetry extends beyond. Furthermore, Lambert's account of the tradition focuses entirely on the male elegist, and offers no explanation for her dearth of female pastoral elegists. Anne K. Mellor speaks to this concern through an examination of the relationship between elegy and its female elegist. She hypothesizes that traditionally, poetry of pastoral suffering demands appreciation and

applause from its listener rather than sympathy. As a result, women avoided writing pastoral elegy because “they were rarely entirely confident of their status either as acknowledged connoisseurs of poetry or as successful professional writers” (Mellor 445). Furthermore, Mellor explains that the trend within traditional pastoral elegy — to provide distance between the elegist and the object of bereavement — was antithetical to the acceptable mourning practices assigned to early female elegists. For female elegists, she observes, “grief is a never-ending emotion, one that serves to sustain the powerful emotional bonds felt by wife for husband, mother for child, daughter for parents, friend for close friend, even beyond the death of the beloved” (445). While Mellor’s study concerns British female poets writing in the eighteenth century, it establishes a tradition of female elegy, pastoral or otherwise, that refuses participation in the normative mourning central to the elegy and instead turns to anti-elegies.

Though Robinson’s poem unfolds within a natural setting, her own account of the feminine pastoral beckons toward an ideology beyond the pastoral and closer to the ecological, while still dwelling in the anti-elegiac. In her *Brooklyn Rail* interview, Robinson elaborates upon her conception of the feminine pastoral:

The woman is a creature inhabiting a literal and figurative field. She is continuous with that horizon, but also a quarry within and upon it. To enact this, it seemed necessary to use the page visually, as a landscape. The poems are fragmented in the way a moving creature in a landscape is partially visible because it is in motion. It variously reveals and secrets itself. (Robinson)

By speaking of the novel’s central female characters as “the creature,” Robinson divorces the subjects from any humanist origin. Not only are the female characters “creatures” that inhabit the landscape, but they are “quarries,” as well, conflating female identity with

natural surrounding. Robinson depicts Collins's female characters as natural sources mined for human consumption, troubling Lambert's conception of pastoral elegy. The idyllic and sweet pastoral of classical tradition is troubled and made violent through Robinson's manipulation of the source novel and poetic genre. As a mode of grief poetry, Lambert's pastoral elegy is one that "consoles us by enfolding us in nature's sympathies," and effectively adapts the regeneration inherent in natural processes to the work of grief. Robinson's "The Woman in White" does not inherit this consolatory impulse of the genre, therefore rendering the poem a pastoral anti-elegy.

Robinson's conflation of the female creature and its surrounding environment allows for a subject of mourning that was unthinkable in Collins's time: the environment. While Robinson laments the loss of her own father, and the loss of female agency and identity in Collins's novel, she also mourns for the spare environment, and "The Woman in White" reads as an elegy for all three. Timothy Morton locates the elegy as an inherently ecological form. He asserts, "If ecology is often elegiac, elegy is also ecological. Whether or not it is explicitly ecological, elegy's formal topics and tropes are environmental" (252). As the pastoral elegist grieves for the loss of the beloved, he is also grieving with the environment that listens and echoes his cries. Yet, in the age of environmental crisis, "nature is the ultimate lost object" (Morton 252). In the pastoral elegiac tradition, the natural world acts as the objective correlative for loss, but Morton draws our attention to the contemporary moment in which "we have lost the objective correlative for loss itself, and have slipped away from mourning, which finds an appropriate way of symbolizing loss, back into melancholia, which has no way of

redressing woe” (253). Morton’s theory of the ecological elegy, like Robinson’s feminine pastoral, resists the normative confines of mourning inherent to traditional elegy, harboring the melancholic space of anti-elegy instead.

Robinson’s “The Woman in White” uses the tropes and metaphors of the pastoral coupled with the language of ecological mourning to explore the oppression and loss felt by women in the nineteenth century. In this manner, her poem works as an anti-elegy that resists consolation while grieving equally for female and environmental loss. “The Woman in White” opens:

The pastoral

Lies diaphanous on itself

pale tissue pulled from within There is no secrecy, only swathing—

The consolation of the flat world (33)

These first lines of Robinson’s “Woman in White” depict the landscape as a self-sustaining agent that generates internally. However, this image of self-sustainment isn’t an optimistic one—Robinson’s landscape isn’t idyllic or fruitful or sweet, but sheer and hazy, pulling from within itself because there is nowhere else to reach, a cyclical motion that mimics the emotional labor of melancholia. The image of this dreary landscape is compounded in subsequent lines:

Tissue of consolation

On the wan field wandering

What the narrator thought was a flawless passivity

was not (34)

The landscape is not only “diaphanous,” but “wan,” as well, offering an image of a sickly and hazy nature that slowly wanes into transparency, rendering it inaccessible, lost. The only note of solace—a “tissue of consolation”—for this loss is as threadbare as the object of grief itself. In this rendering of the pastoral, the natural cannot absorb and negate the grief of the human elegist because it is its own object of lamentation.

These lines also introduce Collins’s characters into the poem. “The narrator” refers to Walter Hartright, the novel’s male protagonist and first narrative speaker. Inhabiting the role of the amateur detective, Walter works to uncover the secrets of Glyde, Fosco and Anne Catherick, and to restore the identity of Laura Fairlie. The lines above gesture loosely toward Walter’s first meeting with Anne Catherick on the road to London: “There, in the middle of the broad bright high-road—there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London” (Collins 63). Collins’s description of Anne’s initial appearance depicts her as an environmental object that grew from the earth or fell from the sky, but is natural either way. In the context of “The Woman in White,” Anne Catherick is “wandering” on “the wan field” where she meets the novel’s narrator, but the act of “wandering” embodies her entire existence. An asylum escapee, Anne Catherick is homeless. She is of illegitimate birth. Being forced by circumstance to wander, Anne embodies the restless, anti-closural character of melancholic mourning central to the anti-elegy.

Later lines introduce the figure of “the creature.” “Creature” stands in for any of the novel’s three primary female characters, and enhances their tie to the landscape, as well as to their circumscribed social position. In opposition to the creature is “the narrator,” or Walter Hartright. The interplay between Robinson’s narrator and creature is one of misunderstanding and antagonism:

What the narrator supposed was perfect
was the creature rapt in its white fur
struggling soundlessly in
the trap (36)

As narrator, Walter Hartright interprets the female creature’s behavior as appropriate to her station, not realizing that condoned female behavior requires a certain level of circumscription. Robinson reveals in an interview:

What I remembered from my childhood hearing of [*The Woman in White*], and what struck me in my adult reading, was the way that the woman’s body was tied to property. Laura will inherit the family estate and so her body (as matrimonial property) is tied to ownership of the land. By contrast, she is a nomad. Her illegitimate sister wanders, homeless. Her half-sister lives in a state of contingency, as she has nothing to inherit, so only her blood and affection ties with Laura, thought not legally definitive, serve as a tenuous link to the possibility of a place, a home. (Robinson)

Robinson highlights the restricted conditions inherent to female life in the nineteenth century, and she manipulates her poetry to reflect it. If the creature serves as a metaphor for the novel’s women, its voiceless struggle in a trap is indicative of the social boundaries of the nineteenth century. Indeed, much of Robinson’s poem laments the beleaguered social conditions of the Victorian woman, but the manner of relaying this

lament is significant. The creature's struggle in a trap is not only a proscription against female oppression, but a harbinger of destructive human interference in the natural world as well. In this manner, Robinson writes a dual elegy that mourns the losses of women and the destruction of the environment.

Throughout the poem, the creature continually and helplessly witnesses the environment perish: "From within the snare she sees the field sheared/and bleached, nude or unfinished" (37). Most literally, these lines speak to an anxiety of diminishing natural resources. The field has been stripped of itself for human consumption. Within the context of *The Woman in White*, the socially ensnared female helplessly bemoans her loss of agency. In this particular instance, the creature represents each of Collins's female characters equally. Anne Catherick, Laura Fairlie, and Marian Halcombe each struggle against the loss of property, of identity, and of agency, helpless creatures ensnared. The poem continues to fuse the female and the ecological as victims of oppression and appropriation: "Terrain's flesh lovingly impounded, /beautiful field, bastardy, /These many forms of seizure" (41). These lines anthropomorphize the landscape by giving it flesh, compounding natural and female oppression. Therefore, "many forms of seizure" illustrates the appropriation of natural resources or, in the case of *The Woman in White*, to the manipulation of Laura Fairlie's estate, or of Anne Catherick's identity. Both the female and the natural suffer loss and oppression.

"The Woman in White" further explores female and natural loss in a single prose-poem stanza that stands in stark contrast to the remainder of the poem:

The abductor gently pried open the creature's mouth from which he

tugged the woolly thread that paralleled her. From which he took her colorless tongue. From which he took her. From which he pulled an endless length of peerless fleece. From which he lay as he lied upon the purity of the shawl that bound her as she was. From which her pure docility became a virtue. (49).

This prose interlude disrupts the loose, fragmentary lineation of the rest of the poem. As she remarked in her interview with Tony Leuzzi, Robinson resists justified lineation in the majority of "The Woman in White," in order to enhance the sense of pastoral and lyrically render a creature's movement across a landscape. Dispelling non-linear formation conveys the confinement felt by the creature at the hands of the "abductor." More specifically, this stanza illustrates the disparate ways a woman feels appropriative loss through a metaphor of taming the natural. The stanza portrays not only the abductor's total control over the creature, but his seizure of her voice as well. The abductor pulls various fibers from the creature's mouth: first a woolly thread, then her tongue, finally, an endless length of pure fleece. The fibers further substantiate the creature's animality while also suggesting that what the creature is losing is herself. The strands the abductor pulls come from within the creature and are interminable, fusing the creature with the environment and the anti-elegy. Morton distinguishes the ecological elegy from its tradition, explaining, "progressive ecological elegy must mobilize some kind of choke or shudder in the reader that causes the environmental loss to stick in her throat, undigested. Environmental elegy must hang out in melancholia and refuse to work through mourning to the (illusory) other side" (256). Like the "endless length of peerless fleece" that the abductor pulls from the creature's mouth, an ecological elegy in its own

right, the loss of the creature's self and of the environment constitutes acts devoid of consolation that cannot be normatively mourned.

The final lines of "The Woman in White," like the rest of the poem, resist closure and consolation in an effort to draw attention to the female and to ecological loss:

Soft
little animal,
mild pelt it once wore

Diaphanous skeleton she lifts, to ward off the several
blows who

constitute world, gown, and endless downy lawn (58)

In the poem's conclusion, the woman has morphed from creature to animal. Modified by the language of waning and deprivation—pelt, diaphanous, skeleton—the animal is withered and near death, much like the diaphanous pastoral from the poem's first lines. The animal, now stripped of consolation, covers her pelt with a "diaphanous skeleton" as protection. Placed in an oppositional relationship to her surroundings, the animal wears her innards to ward off the oppressive forces of her society, her femininity, and the surrounding environment. The poem's final words, "endless downy lawn," operate emphatically in this context. Throughout the poem, the female creature and the environment suffered similar victimized fates. As the creature deteriorates into a suffering animal, the landscape grows soft and endless, making consolation an impossible and unattainable site.

“Romance (After *Eve’s Ransom*)”: An Anti-Elegy for the Unlived Life

Of the three novels comprising Robinson’s triptych, *Eve’s Ransom* seems an ostensible outlier. Critically overlooked, out of print, and lacking the popularity of Collins’s works, *Eve’s Ransom* appears an odd choice. Like the Collins novels, *Eve’s Ransom* adheres to the narrative trajectory of elegy by working toward resolution from an initial loss or problem that Robinson’s lyric adaptation disrupts. The novel’s male protagonist, Maurice Hilliard, doesn’t experience explicit loss by way of death or theft, but instead partakes of mourning for the self. Coined by Edward Engelbert, “elegizing the self” grieves for the unlived life. Engelbert asserts that certain nineteenth and twentieth-century texts exude a “modern sense of personal loss and dispossession, and a special kind of sadness that validates the belief that one’s life has been a series of missed opportunities”(8). The elegy for the unlived life encapsulates Hilliard’s sense of loss.

Born to a working-class family, Hilliard laments his station as a mechanical draughtsman while dreaming of a job as an architect. Circumstances such as insufficient education and funds keep him “in bondage to the gods of iron” (Gissing 45). After receiving an unexpected payment for a debt owed to his deceased father, Hilliard finally feels the weight of poverty and bondage lift. He resolves to fully live his life, exclaiming, “While this money lasts, I’ll feel that I’m a human being” (Gissing 34). He leaves his small town and travels across the Continent. Eve Madeley, the subject of his romantic obsession, lives a parallel life. Raised in the same town by a family plagued by poverty, Eve moves to London to improve her circumstances. After losing her job as a bookkeeper, she, too, comes into a small bit of money that allows her a brief moment of

careless enjoyment. Having seen a photograph of Eve at the home of a mutual friend, Hilliard's interest in her turns obsessive. Like Walter Hartright before him, Hilliard dons the guise of the amateur detective in order to learn more about Eve through espionage. Eve never returns his devotion and chooses to marry his wealthy friend, Narramore. The novel ends on ambiguously contradictory terms.

The focus of Robinson's "Romance," the only poem in the collection with a title different from its source, is Eve. Throughout the poem Robinson erases any gender distinction in order to relay the similarity of Eve and Hilliard's condition. Robinson explains to Tony Leuzzi, "In the novella, the central male and female characters are both people who have felt the humiliation and precariousness of poverty. The resources by which they combat their vulnerabilities are necessarily different because of their genders" (Robinson). Both Hilliard and Eve live precariously and in fear of poverty, but Hilliard, by virtue of his gender, has more tools with which to combat this fear. Eve's sole option is marriage. The novel ends on a consolatory note. Hilliard makes peace with Eve. Eve secures the stability and safety offered by marriage, but as Rachel Bowlby observes, she has "lost her individuality and become the mechanically reproduced aspect of the photograph" (Bowlby 50). This tense and ambiguous space of loss is where "Romance" dwells, cleaving the novel's consolatory efforts.

"Romance" opens with an expression of universal grief:

All life sets upon us like a dull, iron-colored grief,
and the discipline is
to realize we haven't died

yet. (63)

These lines replicate Hilliard's disquiet and grief at the start of *Eve's Ransom*. Upon receiving the money owed to his deceased father, Hilliard resolves "to live" after a lifetime of unaccomplished desires. His reminiscences reveal the thwarted ambitions of his youth: "In boyhood he aspired to a career of an artist, but his father, himself the wreck of a would-be painter, rudely discouraged this ambition; by way of compromise between the money-earning craft and the beggarly art, he became a mechanical draughtsman" (Gissing 45).

Furthermore, the stanza illustrates the presence of elegy in the poem and its source novel. The opening lines of "Romance" gesture toward the "unliving lives" that Gissing's protagonists face. To put it another way, the characters of *Eve's Ransom* enact a reverse-elegy: they begin in a figurative state of their own death, and attempt a progression toward life. Rather than failing in mourning for a death of another, Hilliard and Eve mourn for themselves and, in the novel, feel consolation that "Romance" diminishes. The subsequent stanza of "Romance" offers an ominous but empty gesture toward the consolation Eve and Hilliard achieve:

In the story, the protagonist has no basis for hope.

In the story, the protagonist ends with a shout of joy,

and we believe this exclamation. (63)

This stanza introduces the gender-neutral subject of "the protagonist" in order to erase the boundaries between Eve and Hilliard. Indeed, at the start of *Eve's Ransom*, both protagonists are hopeless, burdened by poverty and tenuous social conditions. By novel's

end, both have achieved a certain state of complacency. After witnessing Eve’s happy marriage to Narramore, Hilliard finds rest in a short visit to the country. It’s winter. The natural world surrounding him is laced with snow and frost. In contrast to the frozen foliage surrounding him, Hilliard, “a free man in his own conceit, sang to himself a song of the joy of life” (Gissing 379). Hilliard’s joyous song finds its lyric twin in the stanza above as “a shout of joy.” The following line implicates the readers and sheds doubt on the sincerity of Hilliard’s joy, by emphasizing our belief in it. While Gissing offers an image of Hilliard, finally consoled of his mechanical grief, “Romance” troubles Hilliard’s solace, thereby disrupting attempts at normative grief.

The denial of the consolation reached in the source novel is further explored later in Robinson’s poem:

The difficulty of understanding is so large that the character must put its hands out to hold up its head, must furrow its brow.

It must be willing to wait indefinitely. (64)

The gender-neutral character yearns intensely for understanding, but finds it unattainable. Even adopting the postures of understanding, of concentration, cannot engender it. Like the ceaseless process of melancholic mourning, the character can only wait. The poem continues to dwell on the absence of consolation. In later lines, Robinson writes:

At the core of the story is a fundamental hollowness

.....

At the core of the story is a contradiction that refuses to lead the reader to a state of resolution. The nature of the story is to generate

a tension that remains suspended over the ending, like a landscape held
over its actors: they can go nowhere. (68)

“Romance” identifies an unresolvable tension that Gissing’s source narrative yields. *Eve’s Ransom’s* narrative is propelled by way of suspension. For readers, we find the normative act of consolation depicted by the marriage of Eve and the joyous song of Hilliard lacks substance. It is hollow. While Gissing labors to demonstrate the accomplishment of normative mourning, “Romance” speaks to the reader experience, which is one of deferred consolation. Consolation is devoid in the novel’s afterlife as well. The stanza’s final image offers a still-life in its most literal sense. Robinson’s disruption of consolation leaves her agents stranded: “they can go nowhere.”

Closing Without Closure

In an interview with her publisher, Elizabeth Robinson attests to the influence of her father's memory in the composition of *Three Novels* and of "The Woman in White" in particular: "The poem is for me full of ghosts, not just the various characters of the novel, but the active presence and voice of my father in this work. I wrote it very consciously as a way of mourning his death." Robinson's practice of mourning as embodied by *Three Novels* is more exemplary of a melancholic mode of mourning than the more normative one initially defined by Freud. There is no consolation for the loss of her father—even the creation of *Three Novels* as the substitutive medium of mourning offers no recompense for her loss.

As a collection of poetry, *Three Novels* breathes new life into the novels of Wilkie Collins and George Gissing, and in doing so, highlights the subtle yet prevalent elements of loss central to the narratives of *The Moonstone*, *The Woman in White*, and *Eve's Ransom*. By recuperating each of the novel's overlooked losses, Robinson partakes of the project of Neo-Victorianism, which, according to Cora Kaplan, works to "include a self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and race and empire, as well as challenges to the conventional understandings of the historical self" (2). With this emergent tradition in mind, Robinson recovers the novels' losses by subverting the classical tradition of the elegy. The poetry in *Three Novels* reacts against the elegiac mode that promotes a process of mourning that works through loss, yielding consolation. Yet in the world of *Three Novels*, no consolation can assuage the loss of the female body and voice, of individual identity. Nor can any consolation recover

and substitute the loss of a father. *Three Novels*, therefore, exists as a doubly melancholic site of mourning. Not only do the poems resist and subvert the normative elegiac mode of their source narratives, but they refuse the substitution of themselves for the loss of Robinson's father, as well. As such, *Three Novels* directs attention to the elegiac inherent to the works of Collins and Gissing. Through the mechanisms of the anti-elegy, *Three Novels* disrupts the basic economy of elegy that assumes a trade of compensation for loss, offering instead a space to mourn ceaseless and compounded loss and recover silenced voices.

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