

**Not Representing Jesus:
Fictional Approximations of Jesus in Contemporary Literature**

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

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Abstract

In this thesis I begin by showing that historical, theological and fictional representations of Jesus are often based on reductive readings of the Gospel narrative and can lead to dogmatic statements about who Jesus was. I argue that some authors of contemporary fiction approach the biblical text in a more imaginative way, and that by misreading the Gospels they are able to approximate the teachings of Jesus, without depending on the creation of explicit Christ-figures. I have called these narratives fictional approximations of Jesus. I use Harold Bloom's theory of misreading, George Steiner and Valentine Cunningham's notions of heresy, and Frank Kermode, Geoffrey Hartman, and Terry Wright's use of Midrash as a way to set out a methodology for reading contemporary fictions by Marilynne Robinson, Denis Johnson, Tim Winton and J. M. Coetzee in conjunction with the Gospel narratives. I show how they misread and rewrite the biblical text, explore the way in which they approximate Jesus's teachings about forgiveness, love, grace, and hope, and how such misreadings allow for a fresh appreciation of the Bible.

In the Introduction I show how Reza Aslan's *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* is a contemporary example of a reductive way of reading the Gospels and contrast that with the way the fictional approximations of Jesus misread the biblical narrative. In Chapter One I set out in more detail the parameters of the fictional approximation as a method of misreading that moves towards, but never arrives at, a complete identification with the source. In Chapters Two to Five I show how the fictional approximations of Jesus respond to the Gospel narratives by close-reading Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*, Johnson's *Angels* and *Jesus' Son*, Winton's *Cloudstreet*, and Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* in parallel with relevant passages from the Bible.

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Introduction

And further, by these, my son, be admonished:
of making many books *there is* no end;
and much study *is* a weariness of the flesh.
Ecclesiastes 12:12

Jesus sells books. Ubiquitous and pliable, Jesus continues to make headlines, cause protest and division, creates online and global controversies, appears in sit-coms and films, is the topic of talk-shows, theatre productions, art exhibitions, theological disagreements, historical arguments and is endlessly parodied, appropriated and politicized. Jesus draws crowds; Jesus sells tickets, trinkets, and kitsch. Jesus is Marxist, Capitalist, CEO and peasant, one of *them* and one of *us*. If this seems an unfair assessment of Jesus it is important to understand that the grammatical subject in the opening sentence is a commodity, iconic and tenuously linked to a historical person through a frightening and ever-expanding array of diverse theories and conspiracies, but a commodity nonetheless. Jesus has become a sure sell in a market that improbably seems to resist saturation. Improbably because the study of Jesus depends on a small group of texts, none of which were written by Jesus himself.

There is, however, something peculiarly problematic with much that is written about Jesus in general, and specifically in the way that some historians, theologians and authors of fictional texts make use of the four canonical Gospels. This thesis is a response to some of the work about Jesus produced in the twentieth century and the last fifteen years. It stems from a frustration with the combined representational models of Jesus evident in the so-called quest for the historical Jesus, dogmatically determined theological interpretations of the person of Jesus, and explicit representations of Jesus in fictional material that frames itself

in language of authenticity and truth; a frustration, more specifically, with those texts that make dogmatic claims about their own version of Jesus while basing those claims on a reductive reading of the Gospel sources. In this introduction I will give an example of such a reductive reading of the Gospels in the recent work of Reza Aslan and begin to set out my thesis' argument that there are contemporary authors of literary fiction who respond to the Gospels imaginatively through a process of misreading, and that, rather than form dogmatic claims about Jesus's life, these narratives become ways to explore important aspects of Jesus's teaching such as forgiveness, love, community, hope and hospitality. I have called these contemporary narratives fictional approximations of Jesus.

The authors of contemporary literary fiction I have chosen to include in my thesis are Marilynne Robinson, Denis Johnson, Tim Winton and J. M. Coetzee. The fictions that these authors create do not provide new evidence for where Jesus came from or what he wore or ate, or even why he was crucified, but these fictional narratives, through their engagement with the Gospel narratives, approximate Jesus's own stories and teachings and emphasize, not the personality of Jesus, but those elements of his teaching that have survived in the stories recorded by the four evangelists. I will further elaborate and define the terms of the fictional approximations in Chapter One, but it is important to explain here what I mean by the term *misreading*. Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973) explains poetic influence as follows:

Poetic Influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets, – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation.¹

The misreading understood in Bloom's terms then is always first a response to a

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 30.

precursor text, but never merely an imitation. Misreading is the process of the struggle with precursor texts; it is an imaginative mistranslation. Misreading is reconfiguring elements of one text into a different narrative, and in so doing creating a work that re-interprets the precursor narrative. It is then a way of critically interpreting and imaginatively responding to one narrative through the creation of a new narrative. In Chapters Two to Five I will argue that the authors of the fictional approximations approach the biblical text in a way that allows them to rewrite or misread the Gospel narratives without including in their narratives an explicit portrait of Jesus, or a Christ-like character. Jesus's status as a creator of stories and riddles that are often difficult and ambiguous, as well as misunderstood, becomes more important for these authors than questions surrounding the historical details of his life.

For a reader and interpreter of literary texts there is no doubt that the Gospels are problematic and enigmatic. Even though compared to modern novels the Gospels are relatively short, they contain aphorisms, riddles and parables all contextualized within a dual narrative movement – geographically through first-century Palestine and temporally decelerating from the first thirty years of Jesus's life, to three years of ministry, to one passion week, to the last day, crucifixion and resurrection. The Gospels contain stories of miraculous healings, scenes of violence, public proclamations, private explanations, secret dialogues, sermons and personal prayers. They require a concentrated effort on the part of the reader because the internal structure resists a superficial reading made possible only by focusing on small parts of the text. The inherent difficulties of the individual Gospels are further exacerbated by a comparative study of all four. There is no space here for a lengthy discussion of these aspects of the Gospels, but a look at a few passages in Matthew will help illustrate the ambiguous nature of some of

Jesus's pronouncements.

Matthew writes that Jesus travelled around Galilee 'teaching' in the synagogues and 'preaching the gospel of the kingdom' (Matthew 4. 23). The gospel here is the Greek word *εὐαγγέλιον* (*euaggelion*) and literally means the good news. The word was often used in the context of an imperial proclamation, initially when a military victory was announced and later especially proclaiming the ascension of a new emperor.² The exact meaning of Jesus's good news is, however, immediately problematized by the way in which Jesus explains the kingdom through a series of similes and parables. The kingdom is like a mustard seed, like a treasure hidden, like a valuable pearl; it is also like a field in which wheat and weeds grow together, or a net full of good and bad fish. In addition, the road to life is 'narrow' and 'few find it' (Matthew 7. 13–4), and Jesus speaks about the kingdom in parables so that his audience 'seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand' (Matthew 13. 13), but also 'That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.' (Matthew 13. 34–5) Jesus asserts: 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.' (Matthew 13. 44) And later Jesus says:

Have ye understood all these things? They say unto him, Yea, Lord. Then said he unto them, Therefore every scribe *which is* instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man *that is* an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure *things* new and old. (Matthew 13. 51–2)

This later pronouncement indicates that the one who comprehends the

² For a more detailed exploration see *εὐαγγέλιον* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and others, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); for a discussion of the use in Matthew's context see R. T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005).

significance of the kingdom would share from his treasure, but this saying is made ambiguous by the addition of the 'things new and old', whereas earlier Jesus made a distinction between the old and new when he stated that:

Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved. (Matthew 9. 17)

Grouping these sayings together shows an obvious thematic repetition in Matthew of hidden, secret, parable, treasure, old and new, but these terms are used interchangeably and sometimes in different senses all together. While the old wine is often interpreted as a reference to the Law of Moses or the traditions of the Jewish people that are superseded by the new covenant of Jesus, the 'scribe' who is instructed in the meaning of the Kingdom of heaven has a treasure containing both old and new things. The kingdom of heaven is the treasure hidden in a field, discovered and then hidden again, selfishly, so the one who found it can keep it. The path to life is hidden in such a way that few find it, but the parables are told apparently not to explain how to find it but specifically so it remains hidden. There is then a sense in which the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven is simultaneously revelation and concealment; that there is something old and something new. When we begin to think of the hiddenness of a thing as the good, however, we are confronted with the parable of the talents in which the servant who hides his talent in the ground is punished for doing just that. (Matthew 25. 14–30)

I have so far limited the references to the Gospel of Matthew to show that these ambiguities are not the result of differences between the Gospels, but are clearly internal to the individual Gospels. If we add Luke's Jesus's statement that 'Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is

within you' (Luke 17. 21), the difficulty of understanding Jesus's 'good news' about the kingdom is only further complicated, not least because it becomes increasingly difficult to understand what the 'good' refers to in the 'good news'. The reader of the Gospel is then faced with the difficult task of wrestling with the ambiguities the text presents.

There is, however, a clear difference between struggling with a text and simply reducing it to fit one's own agenda. The attempt to find a historically credible Jesus more often than not involves both a reduction of the Gospels and the need for a dogmatically charged conclusion. One recent example of this peculiar way of reading the Gospels is Reza Aslan's *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (2013). Since Aslan's work adds remarkably little to previously argued theories about the historical Jesus it is difficult to justify its popularity. However, a Fox News interview with Aslan caused some controversy surrounding the question whether a Muslim scholar should, or could, write a biography of Jesus. This controversy helped place the book at the top of the New York Times Bestseller List in the week following Aslan's TV appearance.³ The fact that *Zealot* was published only a few years ago, combined with its financial success, shows that Jesus as a topic of controversy remains current, and it also makes the book a perfect subject to compare to the fictional approximations of Jesus. Aslan's introduction states his purpose and his method as follows:

[...] writing a biography of Jesus of Nazareth is not like writing a biography of Napoleon Bonaparte. The task is somewhat akin to putting together a massive puzzle with only a few of the pieces at hand; one has no choice but to fill in the rest of the puzzle based on the best, most educated guess of what

³ *Zealot* remained in the top five for eleven weeks, from August 4 to October 13, 2013, and a further three weeks in the top fifteen. As it made its exit from the top fifteen it was replaced at the top of the list with Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard's *Killing Jesus: A History* (2013). *Killing Jesus* remained in the top fifteen for thirty-three weeks and is now a National Geographic Television film that aired on March 29, 2015, a week before Easter. See <http://www.hawes.com/2013/2013.htm> and <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/killing-jesus/> [accessed 06 April, 2015].

the completed image should look like. The great Christian theologian Rudolf Bultmann liked to say that the quest for the historical Jesus is ultimately an internal quest. Scholars tend to see *themselves* – their own reflection- in the image of Jesus they have construed.

And yet that best, educated guess may be enough to, at the very least, question our most basic assumptions about Jesus of Nazareth. If we expose the claims of the Gospels to the heat of historic analysis, we can purge the scriptures of their literary and theological flourishes and forge a far more accurate picture of the Jesus of history. Indeed, if we commit to placing Jesus firmly within the social, religious, and political context of the era in which he lives –an era marked by the slow burn of a revolt against Rome that would forever transform the faith and practice of Judaism– then, in some ways, his biography writes itself.

The Jesus that is uncovered in the process may not be the Jesus we expect; he certainly will not be the Jesus that most modern Christians would recognize. But in the end, he is the only Jesus we can access by historical means. Everything else is a matter of faith.⁴ (Emphasis in original)

I quote at length an uninterrupted passage to allow Aslan’s argument the immediate context in which he places it. There are some obvious problems with the passage, first of which is the analogy of the puzzle: whether an educated guess can be made about what a puzzle *should* look like depends on what number of pieces the puzzle consists of and what percentage of pieces is missing. Since Aslan earlier in the introduction states that ‘in the end, there are only two hard historical facts about Jesus of Nazareth upon which we can confidently rely’ (xxviii), namely that Jesus was a Jew and that he was crucified, it follows that based on these two pieces it would seem improbable that anyone could build a completed puzzle, no matter how educated the guesswork might be.

The hard facts Aslan depends on are found in Josephus, a first century historian who, according to Aslan, gives us the ‘earliest and most reliable nonbiblical reference to Jesus’ (xxv). This may well be true, but while Aslan claims that the Gospels need to be purged from their literary and theological flourishes to uncover the true historical Jesus, the sole ‘reliable’ historical facts are not in any

⁴ Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (London: The Westbourne Press, 2014) p. xxxi, further page numbers in the text.

way different from what the Gospels claim about Jesus. Since the Gospels then clearly contain 'reliable' historical facts, Aslan has to prove both that some parts of the Gospels are historically reliable, and that other parts can be proven to be unreliable as historical sources the way they have been preserved. The question that arises, and one which Aslan does not answer, is how he can decide which parts of the Gospels are merely literary and theological flourishes. Below I will show how Aslan proceeds to use the Gospel texts to make his point, but it is this lack of clearly delimited criteria for the distinction between fact and fiction at the outset of his work that enables Aslan to make a purely subjective selection of what he deems is or is not historical. This should warn his readers that Aslan is not searching the text for a historical Jesus latent in the Gospels, but rather that he imposes a predetermined portrait of Jesus onto the texts. Because the criteria for deciding what is historical or theological and literary is determined by whether a particular aspect of the Gospels fits within the parameters of the Jesus Aslan is trying to find, it is no surprise that the portrait of Jesus he uncovers is precisely the one he has been looking for, and that Aslan 'can confidently say that two decades of rigorous academic research into the origins of Christianity has made [him] a more genuinely committed disciple of Jesus of Nazareth than [he] ever was of Jesus Christ.' (xx)

Aslan's conclusion, that Jesus should be understood as a Jewish Zealot, although surprising in the current political climate, is, however, not the main problem with his work. He is right to assert that there are other scholars who will agree with some of his conclusions, even if they do not agree with all of them, and, for those who are familiar with the current research around the historical Jesus, there is nothing new in Aslan's book, something he readily admits to as well.⁵

⁵ For the video of the interview see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGHzVyn7NJY> [accessed 8

While some have gone as far as to suggest that Aslan's whole premise is a mere restating of S.G.F. Brandon's 1967 work *Jesus and the Zealots*, it is not surprising that the study of the historical Jesus becomes such a repetition of claims and counter-claims.⁶

Aslan is not the first to assert that:

[...] the Gospels are not, nor were they ever meant to be, a historical documentation of Jesus's life. They are not eyewitness accounts of Jesus's words and deeds recorded by people who knew him. They are testimonies of faith composed by communities of faith and written many years after the events they describe. Simply put, the Gospels tell us about Jesus the Christ, not Jesus the man. (xxvi)

Aslan's claims about the Gospels, although certainly not as unanimously accepted by biblical scholars as he seems to indicate, actually undermine the use of the Gospel narratives in his quest for an historical Jesus.⁷ If the historian, or biblical scholar, knows and accepts that the Gospels are not historical documents, then the question becomes surely whether they can be reliably used to arrive at an historically accurate conclusion. This unexplained contradiction between on the one hand a claim that the Gospels can be used to find a historical Jesus, and, on the

April 2015], for a transcript of the interview see <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2013/07/29/fox-news-must-apologize-to-reza-aslan/> [accessed 8 April 2015] In 'Reza Aslan, A Jesus Scholar Who is Hard to Pin Down', *Washington Post*, 8 August 2013, Aslan is quoted as saying that 'he sees his book as a way to "re-package" the story of Jesus "in an accessible way for a popular audience to read and enjoy. If you're a Bible scholar, there's nothing new.' http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/reza-aslan-a-jesus-scholar-whos-hard-to-pin-down/2013/08/08/2b6eee80-002b-11e3-9a3e-916de805f65d_story.html [accessed 8 April 2015] This is however a stark contrast to his claims in the Fox News interview where Aslan states that he is 'actually quite a prominent Muslim thinker in the United States' and that *Zealot* is 'an academic work of history'. The book itself, although clearly written for a popular audience, similarly starts by stating Aslan's academic credentials.

⁶ For a debate about the veracity of Aslan's claims about himself see http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/reza-aslan-a-jesus-scholar-whos-hard-to-pin-down/2013/08/08/2b6eee80-002b-11e3-9a3e-916de805f65d_story.html [accessed 28 April 2015] Aslan emphasizes in his interviews and in his book the fact that he is a scholar of the New Testament, and that he has spent a significant amount of time immersed in 'rigorous academic research', if we grant that the book is written by a scholar, however, it certainly is not a scholarly work.

⁷ A problematic omission from Aslan's bibliography is Richard Baukham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (2006), and although Aslan does refer to some articles by Maurice Casey in his end notes, Casey's argument for an early date for Mark in *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of His Life and Teaching* (2010) also receives no mention in Aslan's work.

other hand the claim that the Gospels were never meant to be ‘a historical documentation of Jesus’s life’, is emblematic of the woeful state of published work paraded as new insights in so much of the debates surrounding the historical Jesus.⁸

Aslan’s own stated purpose, to reclaim ‘the Jesus *before* Christianity’, is even more problematic if the Gospels are, as he claims they are, texts made up by Christians to explain who Jesus was for them, stripped of any historical accuracy but clothed in theological and literary language to confirm already-held beliefs. If the Gospels are fictions, the notion that Aslan, and others like him, can use these questionable documents to find the real Jesus seems, if not preposterous, certainly dubious. If the Gospels do contain historical facts then reading them as if they do not is problematic; if they do not contain historical fact then reading them as if they do is equally problematic. This seems to be the double bind for the historian looking for an authentic, historically accurate portrait of Jesus in the Gospels. This double bind is also precisely why each individual historian inevitably creates a Jesus who is remarkably close to the their own political or religious position. The pacifist will find a non-violent Jesus; the capitalist will find a Jesus who made rich

⁸ Since the field of study comprising research about the historical Jesus is too large to condense into a simple good/bad binary, it is important here to state that Aslan’s work should not be assumed to be indicative of the scholarly material that is produced as part of the quest for the historical Jesus. Its popularity does make it a good subject for criticism because Aslan’s work has been purchased by a large group of people who may not be familiar with the scholarly debates. However, even though there are scholars who take the Gospels more seriously than Aslan does, and do take into account the difficulties of subjective selection, the quest for the historical Jesus, as should be self-evident by the terms it employs, is a search for a historically accurate portrait of the man Jesus, and since the extra-biblical evidence for what we know about Jesus is so little, searching for the historical Jesus will inevitably need to be an interpretation of the Gospel material. To make a claim about Jesus that is different from previous research then often includes making claims about accuracy and truth that become dogmatically inflected. For an early survey of the field see Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1911). For more recent scholarship see E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (1993); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996), *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003); Charlotte Allen, *The Human Christ* (1998); Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews* (1999); Geza Vermes, *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (2000); Dale C. Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (2009), *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (2010); James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (2010). For a scholarly view opposed to the quest for the historical Jesus see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (1996).

friends; the communist will find a Jesus who lived in community; the Marxist a proletarian comrade Jesus. Since Aslan acknowledges that the quest for an historical Jesus is an 'internal quest' and that scholars often see 'their own reflection in the image of Jesus they have construed', the question for Aslan's readers remains what he finds attractive about a Zealot Jesus.

This list of different interpretations of Jesus could go on, but it is often because of the process of purging the Gospel text that a reader can, and will, find ways to create a portrait of Jesus that retains some aspects of the Jesus of the Gospel narratives while being skewed in one direction. The pacifist will always need to explain, or ignore, the fact that Jesus 'made a scourge of small cords, [and] drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables' (John 2. 15) and that he said that he 'came not to send peace, but a sword' (Matthew 10. 34). The wealthy will have difficulty with the command to 'sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor' (Luke 18. 22), but those who claim Jesus as an ally for poverty alleviation struggle to make sense of the anointing at Bethany and Jesus's, seemingly angry, outburst that 'the poor always ye have with you' (John 12. 8). Although there might be plausible explanations for all of these verses that allow people of different persuasions to retain the portrait of Jesus they prefer, the point remains that Jesus does not fit neatly in one particular representation.

To achieve a clearly-defined portrait of Jesus, the parts of the Gospel narratives that do not agree with the desired representation then become those parts that are considered unreliable, contested and unhistorical, or they are explained in such a way as to conform to the completed puzzle. This way of reading the Gospels is not exclusive to those looking for an historical Jesus, but has a long history in theological readings and interpretations as well. My thesis does not set

out to disprove the conclusions of historians and theologians, as much as to challenge the way in which the Gospel texts are read and reduced by their methods. Aslan's approach to the Gospels sees the literary character of the texts as a contamination; dross that needs to be purged from the Gospels so as to leave a purely historical set of statements that will show the truth. This complete disregard for the literary character of the texts can, however, be resisted when readers take the Gospels seriously as literary achievements.

There is already a well-established area of studies that looks at the relationship between the Bible and literature, and it will be helpful here to delimit more specifically how my work relates to that larger field. Frank Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (1979) still remains one of the most important literary critical approaches to the Gospels to date, and although I will show further in Chapter One how his work relates to my own thesis, it is important here to establish that Kermode's approach to the text of the New Testament was first and foremost an acknowledgement of the literary character of the text and that it was this aspect that allowed him to approach it as a secular critic. Kermode's interpretation of the Gospels is illuminated by his recognition of literary tropes and repeated images. His comparison of James Joyce's 'Man in the Macintosh' to Mark's enigmatic 'boy in the shirt', for example, shows how an understanding of the Gospels as literature can encourage a surprisingly fresh reading of the ancient text.⁹ Rather than claim that the author of Mark must have been a clumsy translator who tried hard, but ultimately failed, to create a coherent narrative out of the collected sayings of Jesus, Kermode allows for the possibility that the Gospel of Mark is a sophisticated literary narrative.

Gerald Hammond responded to Kermode's work, as well as to the work of

⁹ Frank Kermode, chapter III: 'The Man in the Macintosh, the Boy in the Shirt' in *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (London: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 49–73.

James L. Kugel, Northrop Frye, and Robert Alter, in two articles in *Critical Enquiry* in 1983. He starts 'The Bible and Literary Criticism – Part I' as follows:

Offering the Bible as a text for the attention of literary criticism used to meet opposition or indifference. Opposition came from the two extremes, from those who were appalled by the probable trivialising of Holy Scriptures, and from those who remembered it as a tedious book which they were subjected to at Sunday School, associated with their parents and oppressors, and which their free adult selves wanted nothing to do with. Of the two the second response is still respectable in some circles [...]

Now, though, things are changing, and the Bible has moved towards the centre of some of the most advanced of critical concerns, influencing many attempts to describe and interpret narrative, poetry, myth, and history. [...]

It is an indicator of the Bible's vitality that these three books should be so good and so radically different.¹⁰

More than three decades of scholarly work since then has recognised the literary aspects of the Bible as vital to the understanding and interpretation of the text, but also that it is the 'Bible's vitality' that allows it to be the source for different approaches. Both Alter and Kermode's approach to the Bible depended on their resistance to the charge that the Bible was a collection of 'primitive and simple', endlessly redacted folklore. It was precisely by treating the Gospels as complete sophisticated literary narratives, rather than a collection of unconnected sayings and stories, that Kermode was able to recognise and interpret recurring symbols and themes in a way that had not been considered by biblical scholars.

Hammond saw Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) as the 'impulse, for in tracing the *influence* of the Bible upon Western narrative [...] he opened the Bible up to modern literary criticism'. And further 'if Auerbach gave the impulse, Frank Kermode applied the *coup de grace* in *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979) by both making great use of Biblical

¹⁰ Gerald Hammond, 'The Bible and Literary Criticism - Part I' in *Critical Inquiry*, 25.2 (June 1983) pp. 5–20, p. 5. 'The Bible and Literary Criticism - Part II' in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 25.3 (September 1983) pp. 3–15. The books he lists in Part I are James L. Kugel's *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (1981), Northrop Frye's *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982) and Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981).

scholarship and sewing in his argument a series of admonitions that, by avoiding interpretation, this scholarship has failed to do its critical duty.’¹¹

Kermode’s approach was then also a reproach of the biblical scholars’ reluctance to interpret the Bible as literature, a problem that can still be recognised in Aslan’s reductive reading of the Gospels. The area of studies loosely denoted by ‘The Bible and Literature’ has, however, continued to produce important work. Alter added *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985) as a companion volume to his earlier work, and Kermode and Alter edited *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (1987). Since then Gabriel Josipovici has published *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (1988), and Northrop Frye produced *Words With Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (1990). Recent years have seen the publication of, to name only a few, *The Bible and Literature: A Reader* (1999), *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and English Literature* (2009) and *Literature and the Bible: A Reader* (2014).¹²

What started with Kermode’s reading of the Gospels has proven to be a fruitful engagement with the biblical texts, and has brought about a recognition that the interpretation of the Bible, when its literary aspects are taken seriously, can lead to exciting and fresh ways of reading, misreading and interpretation.¹³

¹¹ Gerald Hammond, ‘The Bible and Literary Criticism - Part I’, p. 7. (Emphasis in original)

¹² David Jasper and Stephen Prickett, eds, *The Bible and Literature: A Reader* (1999); Rebecca Lemon, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts and Christopher Rowland, eds, *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and English Literature* (2009); Jo Caruthers, Mark Knight and Andrew Tate, eds, *Literature and the Bible: A Reader* (2014). A related area of study concerned specifically with the Hebrew Bible and literature is explored in *Midrash and Literature* (1986), eds Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick. Academic Journals that include discussions about the Bible and Literature are *Theology and Literature* (Oxford), *Christianity and Literature* (The Conference on Christianity and Literature), and *Religion and Literature* (Notre Dame).

¹³ Kermode may have been a catalyst for a renewed interest in the Bible from literary critics, but it is not my intention to suggest that there had not been any discussion about the literary character of the Bible before. Arnold Matthew, for example, wrote: ‘The language of the Bible is not scientific, but *literary*’ (emphasis in original) see Matthew Arnold, *God and the Bible* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1897), p. 6. C. S. Lewis was on the whole much more sceptical about the influence of the Bible on English Literature and did not think reading the Bible as literature would help revive an interest in it. C. S. Lewis, ‘The Literary Impact of the Authorised Version’ in *Selected Literary Essays* ed. by Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) pp. 126–145.

Within this broad field there is a sub-division of study that engages with Literature and Jesus, or Jesus in Literature, as can be seen from articles like Alan Paton and Liston Pope's 'The Novelist and Christ' (1954) and Georg Langenhorst's 'The Rediscovery of Jesus as a Literary Figure' (1995), as well as book-length studies from Edward Moseley's *Pseudonyms of Christ in the Modern Novel: Motifs and Methods* (1962), Theodore Ziolkowski's *Fictional Transfigurations of Christ* (1972) to the more recent work by Peggy Rosenthal in *The Poet's Jesus: Representations at the End of a Millennium* (2000), and Jefferson J. A. Gatrall's *The Real and the Sacred: Picturing Jesus in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (2014).

Much of the work that falls within the broader scope of the Bible and Literature, including Kermode and Alter's work, was, however, limited to a literary appreciation of the Bible, and expressed itself in an application of literary critical techniques onto the biblical *text*, and the production of new ways of reading the Bible that were often framed as close-readings of a part of scripture and a subsequent response. This situation was redressed to some extent by Jasper and Prickett in their *The Bible and Literature: A Reader* (1999) which included excerpts from the Bible and Literary Fiction to show how the two interacted, but it was Terry Wright's *The Genesis of Fiction: Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters* (2007) that showed a concerted attempt at looking at the way in which modern authors (mis)read the stories collected in Genesis by incorporating the intertextual techniques gleaned from Midrashic reading Frank Kermode had begun in his treatment of the Gospels. Wright's methodology is indebted both to Kermode and Bloom for the way it sees modern authors creatively respond to the Bible, and, although his work is concerned with Genesis, my argument about the fictional approximations and the way in which they respond to the Gospel narratives has

clear affinities to Wright's reading of modern novelists as biblical interpreters.¹⁴

Georg Langenhorst noted 'an astonishing rediscovery of Jesus as a literary figure' in the two decades prior to 1995, even calling it a '*literary renaissance of Jesus*, especially the "Jesus-novel".¹⁵ (Emphasis in original) Since then representations of Jesus have been and continue to be created across the disciplines of literature, including popular fiction, the visual arts, cinema, cultural theory, theology and history. Much of the critical work concerned with Jesus in literature is, however, often a process of identifying Jesus, or a Christ-figure, in a literary text and comparing this representation to the larger theological and historical debates in the cultural context in which the text has been produced.

The Jesus-novel that Langenhorst described, presented the reader 'neither with the Jesus we are confronted with in the New Testament itself nor the Jesus of Christian theological doctrine.'¹⁶ And although Langenhorst was concerned with those novels that rewrite the life of Jesus in different ways, an aspect which the fictional approximations of Jesus lack, his acknowledgement that these 'novels enable us to look at the Gospels from a new perspective' and to 're-read them with sharpened attentiveness', applies also to the creative mis-readings of the Gospels under scrutiny in this thesis.¹⁷ It is precisely the act of re-reading or misreading the Gospels that is foundational for the fictional approximations of Jesus and, because these texts do not set out to create an explicit portrait of Jesus, they invite a level of unresolved ambiguity. This is not sought to satisfy a fashionable relativism, but an

¹⁴ Terry Wright, *The Genesis of Fiction: Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007) On p. ix Wright starts his 'Preface' with a discussion of Kermode, and Chapter One returns again and again to a discussion of Bloom's work. In his *Theology and Literature* (1988) Wright had already compared Midrash to structuralism (p. 53) but he developed his use of Midrash more completely in *The Genesis of Fiction* where his focus is on the book of Genesis as he sees it reworked in the fiction of Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, Jeannette Winterson, Jenny Diski, Anita Diamant and Thomas Mann.

¹⁵ Georg Langenhorst, 'The Rediscovery of Jesus as a Literary Figure' in *Literature & Theology*, 9.1 (March 1995) pp. 85–98, p. 85.

¹⁶ Langenhorst, p. 97.

¹⁷ Langenhorst, p. 97.

acknowledgement of the intrinsically ambiguous nature of the earliest textual representations of Jesus. The fictional approximation, rather than resolve this level of ambiguity, embraces it to create an openness that allows for a variety of interpretations while simultaneously enabling the reader to re-read the Gospels 'with sharpened attentiveness.'

My thesis' argument is then placed within the broad area of work about the Bible and Literature, but attempts to move away from texts that are explicitly about Jesus to those that are rewriting parts of the Gospel narratives in contemporary literature without including a character who can easily be identified as a Christ-figure. My thesis will not compare representations of Jesus to current theological debates, but show how contemporary authors are rewriting or misreading the Gospel narratives. This will involve close reading the biblical text in parallel with those literary works that, I argue, are misreading the Bible. The conclusion to be drawn from these readings is not to create yet another portrait of Jesus, but to show how the literary fiction, through its engagement with the Gospel narratives, approximates the stories about Jesus and the parables and riddles he created, and how it encourages a return to the biblical text as well as a thoughtful meditation on the themes of love, forgiveness, community, grace and hope.

My argument accepts as foundational that the Gospels are sophisticated literary narratives, and that those literary aspects of the Gospels are not mere flourishes but the deliberate, elaborate and consciously ambiguous means through which the early church communities decided to communicate about Jesus. My argument about the fictional approximations is that, rather than reducing or truncating the Gospel text to fit a particular dogmatic program, they retain the literary character of the Bible and leave the ambiguities and difficulties unresolved. A literary approach to the Gospels then becomes not a question of consolidating a

part of the source narratives around a predetermined idea, but rather an exploration of the text in such a way that it encourages a fresh reading of the Gospels.

I will return to Aslan's methodology below, but it is helpful to show how Harold Bloom has recognized the difficulties inherent in the historians' search for Jesus when he argues that '[q]uests for the historical Jesus tend to become scholarly quest romances, spiritual journeys in which scholars find what they want to find.'¹⁸ He elaborates and problematizes this further when he states:

At this point I think I should observe, with diffidence, that God and the gods are necessarily literary characters. Religious believers, scholarly and otherwise, generally react pugnaciously to such an observation, so I hope to be very clear as to what I am saying. The Jesus of the New Testament is a literary character, just as are Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible and Allah of the Koran.¹⁹

For Bloom then, Jesus is a literary character within a literary narrative, and reducing this literary narrative to historical certainties does not give access to the historical Jesus. It is, however, true that Aslan acknowledges, initially, the internal nature of the quest. The way he has framed his introductory remarks, however, shows a subtle movement away from that first acknowledgement. First he claims that making an 'educated guess may be enough'. That turns into the need to purge the scriptures to 'forge a far more accurate picture' of Jesus, but then slides into the improbable notion that once the scriptures are purged, Jesus's historically accurate 'biography writes itself.' The final result of Aslan's claims is that the Jesus he will find will be the 'only Jesus' accessible by historical means. Northrop Frye had

¹⁸ Harold Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (New York: Warner Books, 2002) p. 133.

¹⁹ Bloom, *Genius*, p. 135. It is worth pointing out here that Bloom, consciously or unconsciously, lists Jesus as a fictional character not alongside the accepted human prophets Moses and Mohammed, but with the divine characters Allah and Yahweh without explaining this peculiar juxtaposition.

already foreseen this problem in *The Double Vision* (1991) where he stated that:

It would be absurd to see the New Testament as only a work of literature: it is all the more important, therefore, to realize that it is written in the language of literature, the language of myth and metaphor. The Gospels give us the life of Jesus in the form of myth: what they say is, "This is what happens when the Messiah comes to the world." One thing that happens when the Messiah comes to the world is that he is despised and rejected, and searching in the nooks and crannies of the Gospel text for a credibly historical Jesus is merely one more excuse for despising and rejecting him. Myth is neither historical nor anti-historical: it is counter-historical. Jesus is not represented as a historical figure, but as a figure who drops into history from another dimension of reality, and thereby shows what the limitations of the historical perspective are.²⁰

In contrast to Aslan's approach, Bloom and Frye emphasize that the Gospel narratives are written in the language of literature, and purging them of the literary flourishes would reduce them to nothing. This in turn can only lead to a rejection of Jesus altogether. Because the Gospels do not represent Jesus as a historical figure, but rather as a literary character in a literary narrative, reading the Gospels as history completely misses the point of the Gospel narratives. Aslan does not only fail to find a new perspective on Jesus; more importantly, he fails to find the true historical Jesus, not because he is not scholarly or rigorous enough, but simply because the Gospels do not yield a historical Jesus.

It is important here to remember the distinction between a "fictional" and a "literary" character. Neither Bloom nor Frye argue that Jesus is a fiction, but rather that the Gospels do not give us access to the historical details of Jesus's life the way present-day historians prefer they would. Frye emphasises that the Gospel narratives 'show the limitations of the historical perspective' specifically through their use of literary language.

My frustration with the quest for an historical Jesus stems from this attempt

²⁰ Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1991) p. 16.

at removing those parts of the text that somehow offend, or disagree with, the historian's stated claims. A literary narrative is not made more plausible by removing the parts that are difficult or problematic. Reading the Gospel texts requires interpretation, thought, re-reading, even misreading, but they do not benefit from reduction or truncation. Aslan's polemical introduction does not set out exactly how he will 'purge' the Gospel text, but a look at some of the ways in which he engages with the Gospels will help clarify further the problems of his process. At the risk of being accused of being highly selective I will only focus on one rather long passage of Aslan's work, but one that I think is representative of much of the work in question and particularly problematic in its treatment of the Gospel text. I have chosen this passage because it deals with the difficulty of defining the Kingdom of God to which I have already alluded, and also to contrast Aslan's approach to the text of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) with Marilynne Robinson's treatment of the same parts of the Gospels.

Aslan argues that the Kingdom of God Jesus talked about would 'be established on earth' and that it would mean that 'the rich will be made poor, the strong will become weak and the powerful will be displaced by the powerless.' He claims that the Kingdom of God is 'not some utopian fantasy wherein God vindicates the poor' but rather a 'chilling new reality in which God's wrath rains down upon the rich, the strong, and the powerful.' (119) He goes on to state that the Kingdom of God is 'a call to revolution, plain and simple.' (120) Aslan then asserts that 'for those who are trying to pry the historical Jesus away from the Christian Christ' there is 'no more important question' than the question of whether Jesus followed 'the zealot doctrine that the land had to be forcibly cleansed of all foreign elements.' (120) This is of course only an important question for the historian who is trying to prove that Jesus was a Zealot, not of

every historian who is trying to uncover a Jesus different from Christianity's Jesus.

But be that as it may, Aslan at this point in the text starts to argue that

The common depiction of Jesus as an inveterate peacemaker who 'loved his enemies' and 'turned the other cheek' has been built mostly on his portrayal as an apolitical preacher with no interest in or, for that matter, knowledge of the politically turbulent world in which he lived. That picture of Jesus has already been shown to be a complete fabrication. [...] After the Jewish revolt [...] the early church tried desperately to distance Jesus from the zealous nationalism that had led to that awful war. As a result, statements such as 'love your enemies' and 'turn the other cheek' were deliberately cleansed of their Jewish context [...] if one wants to uncover what Jesus himself truly believed one must never lose sight of this fundamental fact: *Jesus of Nazareth was first and finally a Jew*. As a Jew, Jesus was concerned exclusively with the fate of his fellow Jews. Israel was all that mattered to Jesus. [...] As he explained to the Syrophenician woman who came to him seeking help for her daughter, "Let the children [by which Jesus means Israel] be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs [by which he means gentiles like her]." [...] The Law of Moses [...] made a clear distinction between relations *among* Jews and relations *between* Jews and foreigners. The oft-repeated commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" was originally given strictly in the context of internal relations within Israel. The verse in question reads: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge *against any of your people*, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). To the Israelites, as well as to Jesus's community in first century Palestine "neighbor" meant one's fellow Jews. [...] There is no reason to consider Jesus's conception of his neighbors and enemies to have been any more or less expansive than that of any Jew of his time. His commandments to "love your enemies" and "turn the other cheek" must be read as being directed exclusively at his fellow Jews and meant as a model of peaceful relations exclusively within the Jewish community. (Emphasis in original 120–22)

Aslan can only achieve this repeated insistence on exclusivity by truncating several verses of the Gospel narratives he alludes to. The story of the Syrophenician woman ends with Jesus healing her daughter, just as Jesus heals the Centurion's servant (Matthew 8. 5–13; Luke 7. 1–10) and delivers the gentile demoniac (Mark 5. 1–20; Matthew 8. 28–34; Luke 8. 26–39).²¹ The allusion to gentiles as 'dogs' is repeated by the Syrophenician woman herself (Matthew 15. 27; Mark 7. 28) and

²¹ Aslan does not explain much about his use of Q although he implies that, apart from Mark, it should be considered the source for Matthew and Luke's Gospels. Since the Centurion's story is available in both Matthew and Luke it should indicate that it was part of Q, but we can only assume that, since Aslan does not refer to it at all, it must be considered a literary or theological flourish.

has been explained by other commentators not as a sign that Jesus performed this Jewish exclusivity but as an ironic statement by Jesus to show his disciples that the assumed exclusivity was erroneous.²² This fact is born out more emphatically by Jesus's pronouncement that it is the woman's faith that has made her daughter well (Matthew 15. 18). Jesus makes the same statement about the Centurion adding that he has:

not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (Matthew 8. 10–12)

Even though Aslan does not offer any explanation of how he makes these decisions, it seems clear that his excision of the centurion's story and truncation of the Syrophenician woman's story indicate the way in which he purges the Gospel text. Clearly, Jesus's pronouncement about the 'many' who 'will come from the east and the west' does not fit in Aslan's portrait of a Jesus who wants forcibly to cleanse Palestine of all foreign elements. This only confirms my earlier suspicion that Aslan is not merely purging the text of their literary and theological flourishes, but of those parts that do not fit in his version of Jesus.

When Aslan refers to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) he mentions only three of the beatitudes and leaves the pronouncements about peacemakers and those who will suffer unjustly (Matthew 5. 9–12) out of his argument. He then moves on to the verse about turning the other cheek, without mentioning the passage 'And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.' (Matthew 5.41) Historians know that the Roman forces were allowed to ask any of their subjected people to carry something for them for one mile, but were not

²² See for example R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Matthew 15. 21–28.

supposed to force them to go further than that.²³ This direct allusion to a Roman custom and Jesus's injunction to comply without resistance, even telling his audience to double the request, comes in the same passage as the turning of the other cheek and seems to indicate precisely the opposite of what Aslan is arguing.

It could be argued that quiet compliance to an oppressor is not identical to loving an enemy, but in the passage in Matthew 5. 38–48 Jesus responds to those parts of the Mosaic Law that allow for an eye-for-an-eye type vengeance and the love for the neighbour. In both cases Jesus goes beyond the familiar interpretation of the law, and by placing the two in sequence there is a sense in which the nature of Jesus's pronouncements act like a crescendo of hyperbole.²⁴ Aslan again does not explain the reason for removing this verse from his passage. Aslan's insistence that the love for an enemy should be restricted to Jews only is, however, even more problematic because the Greek word in the passage that follows is *ethnoi*, indicating that Jesus is comparing the Jews' behaviour with that of people from other ethnic groups.²⁵ But, if Aslan's point is to say that this particular idea must have been a non-Jewish Christian interpolation, his resort to the Hebrew Bible to solidify his point is also glaringly problematic because the chapter in Leviticus that

²³ See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Matthew 5. 41.

²⁴ It is difficult to do justice to this passage in Matthew here, but there is a clear literary structure to these verses. The first 'ye have heard it said' clause is recorded in Matthew 5. 21, this clause is repeated five times and juxtaposed by a 'but I say to you' clause each time. The movement of the passage (Matthew 5. 21–48) starts by internalizing the acts of killing and adultery into anger and lust, and ends by modifying 'an-eye-for-an-eye' into 'going the extra mile' and 'love your neighbour' into 'love your enemy'. The hinge between these two sets is the command not to swear but to let our 'communication be, Yea yea; Nay, nay' which Jesus links to the human inability to effect even the smallest change in their own bodies (changing one hair white or black). The passage moves from the mouth (whosoever shall say) to the eye (whosoever looketh) to the hand (if thy right hand offend thee), back to the mouth (swearing) then to the 'eye-for-an-eye' and again to 'give to him who asks thee' and finally to the love of the enemy which is expressed by the mouth (blessing not cursing) and hands (do good to them). This focus on seeing, saying and doing continues through chapter 6 and 7. There is then clearly a literary aspect to this passage that Aslan might want to denote as a 'flourish', but leaving some parts out of the discussion without explaining this absence, or ignoring the literary complexity without responding to it, is simply bad reading.

²⁵ Matthew 5. 46–47 'For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so.' The KJV doubles the usage of 'publicans' even though the Greek has *ethnoi* in the second instance. In later translations the word is usually translated Gentiles. For examples see the RSV, ASV, NIV and ESV.

he quotes goes on to say:

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19. 32–3)

This inclusive rather than exclusive notion of community is important in my discussion of the fictional approximations, because the texts I have selected deal with the expansion of the boundaries, real or imagined, of who belongs to the community, whether that community is defined along racial, religious or familial lines. However, Aslan's assertion that Jesus cannot have had a viewpoint on this issue that was 'more or less expansive than his fellow Jews' is not born out by the Gospel text, nor by the reference to Leviticus, but can only make sense in Aslan's scheme of creating a Jesus who is a Jewish nationalist who seeks to be the instrument for God's judgement on the rich, the powerful and the foreigner. It is unclear, from Aslan's conclusions, what can be achieved in our current global political climate by claiming that Jesus's Kingdom should be understood as having been motivated by a desire for ethnic cleansing. What is most problematic about this process is that Aslan goes to such great lengths to show that Jesus was a failed, possibly violent, insurgent and then claim that he has become a more 'genuinely committed disciple' of this Jesus.

It would be unkind to suggest that Aslan's attempt at reducing the Gospel text to those parts that can be used as evidence for his own Jesus finds no precedent in the more than two centuries of Christian arguments about the interpretation of scripture. Before the historical quest for Jesus, theological disputes about the true meaning of scripture often caused rifts in churches, created new denominations, and far too often resulted in charges of heresy and even war. The theologian's

quest for the true meaning of scripture more often than not results in him finding exactly what he wants to find as well. My thesis is a critical response to the way in which scripture for historians like Aslan, and other dogmatically motivated exegetes, becomes not a source that challenges their already-held beliefs, but rather a text that can be purged of those elements that do not agree with their predetermined theory.

Rather than succumb to this need to erase and reduce those parts of scripture that are uncomfortable, difficult, ambiguous and challenging, I follow Kermode and Alter's argument that the Bible benefits from being read as literature; I utilise Bloom's idea of influence and misreading to show that the fictional approximations are rewritings of the Gospels; and, I will show that by creating new narratives inspired by the Gospel texts, authors of fictional approximations of Jesus need not impose theological or doctrinal systems on the text, nor do they need to purge the text of historically uncomfortable or inexplicable material. The fictional approximation does not seek to define or delimit a narrow and inflexible interpretation of the Gospels; rather it seeks to open up new ways of reading and imagining the sources. The fictional approximations are responses; some more oblique than others, but always responses to the Gospel texts, and reading them involves both finding the parts of scripture they are responding to and uncovering how their misreading re-informs a fresh reading of the Gospel text. Although I argue that the fictional approximations do not reduce or truncate the Gospel texts, this should not be taken to mean that each fictional approximation responds to a particular Gospel in its entirety. Even though the authors may only respond to a small part of the Gospels, the importance of the approximation is that their engagement with the source material does not lead to a dogmatic conclusion: there remains room for a

different response.

Aslan's work is not, however, the only source of my frustration. It is an enormous task to list all the works that have been written, produced and performed about Jesus, even if one were to focus on just one century, and it is impossible to read or watch everything even if one were to focus only on one's own lifetime. Although there is some legitimacy to the claim that the new millennium saw a so-called turn to religion in Cultural Theory and Philosophy, Alice L. Birney's impressive *The Literary Lives of Jesus: An International Bibliography of Poetry, Drama, Fiction and Criticism* (1989), shows that authors of literary texts have found Jesus to be an on-going and unabated inspiration for the production of new work.²⁶ Because she had to limit her bibliography to literature to make it an even remotely workable project, no mention is made of material that was produced about the quest for the historical Jesus or works of Biblical Studies and Theology. Because of the wealth of material, generalisations are inevitable, and this can only be justified by acknowledging that the sheer volume of work about Jesus is insurmountable. It is, however, important to acknowledge that anyone working in the unwieldy field of Jesus Studies knows how much they do not know. This should at the very least instil into the scholar a sense of caution about making too many bold claims, or arriving at dogmatic conclusions. Dogmatism, however, plagues much of the published work about Jesus, and is, interestingly, not limited to those scholars who write from a particular religious position. As I have already indicated, Aslan is motivated by a desire to reclaim Jesus from Christianity, but almost immediately frames his conclusions within claims about authenticity, historical accuracy, and truth. Dogmatic claims, whether theologically-or

²⁶ Alice L. Birney, *The Literary Lives of Jesus: An International Bibliography of Poetry, Drama, Fiction, and Criticism* (London: Garland Publishing, 1989). Birney lists over 1400 texts that are specifically about Jesus, and even in her incredibly wide-ranging work there are some interesting omissions such as Shusaku Endo's *A Life of Jesus* (1973).

historically inspired, often turn further exploration into counter-claims that are equally dogmatic. It is this dogmatism that I argue can be resisted most effectively through literary engagement with the Gospel texts.

Since the year 2000, works of fiction that have made an attempt at representing Jesus include Anne Rice's trilogy *Christ the Lord* (2006, 2009 and forthcoming), William P. Young's *The Shack* (2008), James Frey's *The Final Testament of the Holy Bible* (2011), John Niven's *The Second Coming* (2011), Naomi Alderman's *The Liar's Gospel* (2012) and, more obliquely, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). The most publicized cinematic representation of Jesus of the last fifteen years is probably Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), but only two years before Adrian Shergold had directed a mini-series for British Television *The Second Coming* (2002). The BBC produced *The Passion* in 2008, while a new DVD series covering the whole Bible produced its version of the Gospels, called *The Bible – Jesus* in the same year. Mark Dornford May produced *Son of Man* (2006) with an all-African cast, which was soon followed by *Color of the Cross* (2007), Jean-Claude Lamarre's film depicting an African-American Jesus. Controversial theatre productions about Jesus included Rodrigo Garcia's *Golgotha Picnic* (2011) and Matthew Hurt's *The Man Jesus* (2013).

Theological and Biblical Studies continued to produce new material on Jesus including Dale C. Allison's *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (2009), and Richard Baukham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (2006), while the so-called third quest for the historical Jesus saw renewed attempts at rethinking Jesus in Maurice Casey's *Jesus of Nazareth: an Independent Historian's Account of His life and Teaching* (2010), Bruce Chilton's *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (2000), and N. T. Wright's *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did and Why He Matters* (2011), as well as the more

surprising addition of Paul Verhoeven's *Jezus Van Nazareth* (2011).²⁷ In Cultural Theory Jesus made his appearance in Frederiek Depoortere's *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy* (2008) and John Milbank and Slavoj Zizek's dialogue in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic* (2009), and in literary criticism Jesus was the subject of Harold Bloom's *Jesus and Yahweh* (2005), *Jesus in Twentieth Century Literature, Art, and Movies* (2007), a collection of articles edited by Paul C. Burns, and Martien E. Brinkman's *Jezus Incognito: De verborgen Christus in de westerse kunst vanaf 1960* (2012). But, to paraphrase Qoheleth, of the making of lists there is no end, and, although I have only listed work produced since the turn of the century and mainly focused on work in English this list also cannot be exhaustive. It does indicate, however, that Jesus, as a subject of study, dialogue and argument, is not confined to one discipline, or to one genre of inquiry, and that, if Langenhorst is right in his observation that a literary renaissance of the Jesus-novel started in the early 1970s, it has certainly not come to an end yet.

But, too often, authors of literary fiction about Jesus also find it necessary to emphasize their work's truth claims. What many of the works I listed have in common, whether they are written in opposition to tradition or simply in line with new archeological evidence, is that there is an attempt at creating an authoritative and definitive portrait of Jesus. Bruce Chilton, for example, claims that his *Rabbi Jesus* is the 'first comprehensive, critical biography of Jesus' and that 'each position [he takes] is a conscious choice among scholarly opinions, each the result of years of discussion with [his] students, and the rich debate [he has] enjoyed with hundreds of scholars, theologians and lay people in different parts of the world

²⁷ N. T. Wright has produced erudite scholarly work about the historical Jesus and the apostle Paul, and his contributions take into account the complexity of the issues and attempt to do justice to the long history of New Testament studies. Wright tends, however, to publish popular versions of his work that suffer from the limitations of the format. *Simply Jesus* is one example of this. For a more robust introduction to his thought see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992); *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996); *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003); *Paul and the Faithfulness of God, 2 vols* (2013).

interested in the fields of New Testament and ancient Judaism.’²⁸ Paul Verhoeven makes a similar claim to authority when he writes that *Jezus van Nazaret* is the end result of ‘twenty years of attending’ the discussions of the Jesus Seminar and, although he was initially planning to create a film out of this material, he decided a book was a better way to give a ‘report’ of ‘the reality he had uncovered’ about the historical Jesus.²⁹ Matthew Hurt, speaking in an interview about his play explains that:

What I hope we are able to do with *The Man Jesus* is take us back to the precise moment in history when he was living and experience his story as I imagine it felt and looked to the characters around him.
This isn't an attempt to dismiss any of the spiritual dimensions of his life. Instead of looking at the Jesus of Christianity, I want to try to grasp the man religion claimed as its own before legend, politics and sectarianism distorted – for good or bad – the image we have of him.³⁰

Although these three voices cannot be shown to be representative of the whole list, they do bear an interesting resemblance to Aslan’s claims. What concerns me most is the resort to assertions about authenticity, historical precision, truth and academic rigor that surround the work. Hurt’s statement about historical precision is immediately followed by recourse to his imagination and feeling, which is, to some extent, similar to Aslan’s ‘educated guess’ that somehow produces a more accurate picture of Jesus. These assertions, however, frame the work in question, but are not necessarily part of it. The debate about Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*’s authenticity or historical accuracy, for example, was performed largely in

²⁸ Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (London: Doubleday, 2000) p. xxi.

²⁹ Paul Verhoeven and Rob van Scheers, *Jezus van Nazaret* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2008) p. 8–9. ‘In die twintig jaar dat ik het Seminar bijwoonde ...’ (In the twenty years that I attended the Seminar...) and ‘Ik voelde de behoefte om een verslag uit te brengen over wat ik had “ontdekt” in mijn studie van Jezus, welke realiteit ik meende blootgelegd te hebben. Een boek leek me meer de weg om daar uiting aan te geven dan een film.’ (I felt the need to publish a report about what I had ‘discovered’ in my study of Jesus, the reality of which I had intended to uncover. A book seemed a better way to express this than a film) All translations are my own.

³⁰ ‘Simon Callow Rehearses Role of His Life as the Man Jesus’ < <http://www.lyrictheatre.co.uk/news/specific/simon-callow-rehearses-role-of-his-life-as-the-man-jesus> > [accessed on 23 January 2015]

interviews before the release of the film, and continued in reviews afterwards.³¹

In a similar way Anne Rice used a long Author's Note at the end of the first book of her trilogy to show an annotated list of scholarly work about Jesus she had consulted in the process of writing.³² The work in question then makes certain claims, and the authors and producers frame the work, offensively or defensively, with statements about authenticity and accuracy, implying, certainly to some degree, that the work's claims should be taken seriously as historical or theological insights. The wealth of material available and the lack of consensus, however, have led me to question, not only the possibility, but also the validity of the theological and historical attempts at delimiting the interpretation of Jesus. The Gospel material, on which all further speculation relies, although certainly historical in places and theologically fecund, does not readily lend itself to a closing down of interpretative paths to meaning: the nature of the texts is to ask for interpretation and re-interpretation. This does not imply that the historical material or the theological meanderings are unhelpful, but, I would argue, there is a mistaken objective about the determination to find a closed, end-stopped, totalizing program that would encapsulate definitively the reconstructed person of Jesus.

The fictional approximations I have identified are literary narratives that struggle with the Gospel texts without the need to reduce them, or even limit them to one particular explanation; they are also texts that do not set out to define Jesus: indeed they do not represent Jesus at all. What I will show in the following

³¹ Since the film was a major world-wide release it was reviewed in many publications and as such there is too much material to list here. For an appreciative review see Peggy Noonan 'It Was as It Was' in *Wall Street Journal*, 17 December 2003 <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB122451994054350485>>. For a more neutral view see Peter Chattaway, 'The Passion of The Christ', *Christianity Today* (February 2004) <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/februaryweb-only/passionofthechrist.html?start=3>>. For a more critical view see Alex von Tunzelman 'The Passion of the Christ: Not the Gospel Truth', *Guardian*, 1 April 2010 <<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/apr/01/passion-of-the-christ-mel-gibson>>. [accessed 9 April 2015]

³² Anne Rice, 'Author's Note' in *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* (London: Arrow Books, 2006) pp. 427–55.

chapters is that the fictional approximations of Jesus resist a closing down of the figure of Jesus precisely by not portraying him. They are, however, fictional narratives that approximate his teaching through rewriting or misreading parts of the Gospels. These approximations never arrive at an historical or theological Jesus the way historians or theologians do; they remain in many ways open to other rewritings of the Gospel narratives. And yet it is through their engagement with the Gospels imaginatively that they can engender a way of rethinking both the source text and their protagonist.

The fictional approximations, on which I focus, also deal with the passages about loving the unlovable, and questions surrounding inclusion and exclusion, but in a very different way from Aslan. Rather than truncate the texts where they seem to be difficult, the fictional approximations imaginatively rewrite the Gospels so as to open them to questions about what they might mean, or even merely to explore what a situation might look like in which textual description becomes embodied in the fictional lives of the characters. In the chapters that follow I will show in much more detail how the fictional approximations rewrite and misread the Gospel narratives, but here, in order to highlight the workings of my critical method, I will give one short example of how Marilynne Robinson has tried to respond to the passages Aslan has purged from the Gospels.

In her novels *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008) Robinson rewrites the parable of the prodigal son, and through the rewriting of this parable is able to include explorations of forgiveness, grace, community, racism and hospitality in her narratives. Early on in *Gilead* she has her narrator reflect 'it is easy to believe [...] that water was made primarily for blessing and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash.'³³ By using the image of water as a recurring symbol

³³ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (London: Virago Press, 2012) pp. 31–2.

for God's blessing she re-imagines Matthew 5. 45 which follows from Jesus's injunction to love one's enemies and states: 'That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.'

By using water as an image of blessing, Robinson is able to create an overarching sense of the inclusiveness of God that resists a narrowing of community, even while the characters in her novels struggle to turn their knowledge of scripture into a lived experience. In this way Robinson does not turn the Gospel's difficult injunction into an anodyne aphorism, nor does she remove it altogether from her narrative. By retaining the link between Jesus's command to extend love beyond ethnic and social boundaries, including to those who may not respond in kind, with his reminder that God Himself does this through nature by sending both sunshine and rain on the 'just and the unjust', she is able to show how difficult following this command really is even between members of a small Christian community who attempt to put it into practice. By showing that her characters are unable to be these perfect 'children' she moves from the emphasis on the command to an emphasis on grace.

When Jesus commands the Jews to love their enemies, he first undermines Jewish ethnic identity by suggesting that they are in fact acting like Gentiles, and then further unravels that distinction by showing that God had already always been blessing those who were not Jews. But the result is not to reduce the Mosaic Law, or abolish it, but to show that the emphasis on ethnic exclusiveness had never been part of the law in the first place. It further demonstrates, by emphasizing the inability of the people to follow this impossible law, that God's grace, symbolized by the sunshine and rain, covers both Jew and Gentile, and that neither can claim ethnic or religious priority over the other. Robinson's choice to use a decidedly

Christian setting for her novels allows her in a similar way to remind her nominally Christian audience that narrowing definitions of community always imply a sense of superiority and lack of the understanding of grace that is foundational to the stories about Jesus as recorded in the Gospels.

By rewriting this Gospel passage, Robinson approximates Jesus through her fictional narrative without portraying him or defining him, nor reducing the Gospel texts in the process. She opens the text to certain interpretations without closing it to others. Her narrative does not become an argument about the 'only' accurate Jesus, nor does she claim academic authority to impose her reading on the Gospel text. The story is important as a story, and needs to be interpreted, just as Jesus's stories and the stories about him need to be examined and scrutinized rather than truncated. By reading the fictional approximations of Jesus in close parallel with the Gospels, I will be able to show that contemporary literary voices can provide us with new ways of reading the biblical text.

In Chapter One I will further elaborate the importance of not representing Jesus as well as the significance of the term approximation. I will argue that one way to retain the ambiguity of the Gospel texts is by allowing literature to explore Jesus without representing him explicitly, and that, through a process of re-writing and misreading the Gospel material, literature can explore the thematic content of the Gospel narratives without arriving at dogmatic conclusions. Through reference to the work of George Steiner and Valentine Cunningham I will show that the fictional approximations of Jesus are heretical in the way they re-read and misread the stories, just as Jesus in his misreading of the Hebrew Bible was accused of being heretical, even blasphemous. In other words, while the voices of theologians and historians tend towards dogmatic conclusions, the fictional approximations are interpretations of the Gospels that have an important role to play in creating an

alternative voice, one not found in explicit renderings of the person Jesus, but one more intrinsically literary, and as such, heretical. As I have already started to show, Frank Kermode's thoughts on Midrash and Harold Bloom's work on misreading will prove to be seminal as ways to place my argument within an established literary critical methodology. To show how I develop their work into a way of reading contemporary texts in parallel with the Bible, I will, in Chapter One, first misread the parable of the sower (Matthew 13. 1-9; Mark 4. 1-9; Luke 8. 4-15) to explain how it resists dogmatic stasis and encourages a way of heretical re-reading, and how English Literature retains this heretical nature. I will elaborate the definition of approximation as always a movement towards but never an arrival at a point of identification. This movement of one narrative towards another narrative without becoming identical is the way in which I will figure the process of misreading, and the sense of similarity and difference between the Gospels and the fictional narratives. I will argue that the fictional approximation is a new category of literary texts about Jesus that falls outside of the categories Theodore Ziolkowski created a little over forty years ago. I will further show that the term approximation is important both as a way to retain an openness to the text of the Gospels, and in the way that it corresponds to my argument about the inconclusive nature of hope, the limitlessness of grace and love, and the need for inclusive rather than exclusive notions of hospitality, and community.

As I have already alluded to, in Chapter Two I will show how Marilynne Robinson responds to the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15. 11-32) in her novels *Gilead* and *Home*. Through reading her novels in parallel with the Gospel stories, I will show how she resists a narrow definition of community or belonging, and how theories of God, forgiveness and love cannot replace the need for interpersonal conflict resolution. I will argue that Robinson explores how heresy

challenges hypocrisy because of hypocrisy's dependence on dogmatic finality, and that she uses the image of water as a way to show how divine blessing is not exclusive but broadly inclusive. Her heretical reading of the parable results not in a comfortable homecoming, but in an uncomfortable acknowledgement that the heretical prodigal cannot find a home to which to return.

In Chapter Three I will argue that Denis Johnson explores the arbitrariness of grace through a rewriting of Jesus's invitation to rest (Matthew 11. 28) in his novel *Angels* (1983), the short story collection *Jesus' Son* (1992) as well as the short story *Starlight on Idaho* (2007). I will show that Johnson makes allusions to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and different parables of Jesus, but never in a reductionist way. Rather, by complicating and problematizing literal readings of the parables, Johnson recaptures the ambiguity of the Gospel material while simultaneously focusing on unmerited grace and the contingent nature of human existence. The narratives of both *Angels* and *Jesus' Son* follow a physical journey across America that end in Phoenix, Arizona, suggestive of a movement towards a redemptive death. It also indicates, however, that *Jesus' Son* is a misreading of *Angels* and that Johnson continued to rethink some of the aspects of his earlier novel.

In *Angels* arrest and incarceration become conflated with Jesus's rest, and new life or new beginnings are preceded by a death, but the invitation to live is never given a guarantee of success: life, for Johnson, always retains an openness to failure. In *Jesus' Son* the overarching theme is unmerited grace, but, by using a short story format, Johnson is able to allude to many different parables and sayings of Jesus. This way he can explore Jesus's pronouncements about judging others, the difficulties surrounding forgiveness, and the beauty of love. As with Robinson, water is also an important symbol for Johnson, but he uses it as an image of

inconspicuous grace that can often only be recognized retrospectively. Johnson further problematizes aspiration as a motivation for change, and I will show how a notion of the universalism of brokenness underlies his understanding of the inclusive nature of grace.

In Chapter Four I move to Australian author Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (1991) to show how he misreads the Gospel of John as a way to reformulate ideas about community, love, reconciliation and forgiveness. Although he does not exclusively respond to John, Winton uses the Johannine images of wind, water and light as ways to indicate the difficulty of defining community or restricting love. While Winton's work contains moments of unexplained transcendental incursions, he is especially concerned with interpersonal reconciliation, and sees forgiveness and acceptance as the truly miraculous. He specifically rewrites the story about the man born blind (John 9) as a way to explore suffering, responsibility and self-righteousness. His rewriting of Jesus's injunction to reconcile with a fellow man before bringing a gift to God (Matthew 5. 24) moves towards a focus on interpersonal relationships rather than religious or miraculous experiences, a theme that is emphasized most strongly at the moment of the dance between two of the main characters. Winton also uses his narrative to show how characters need to come to an understanding of the limitlessness of love by allowing them to discover that arbitrary notions of 'us' and 'them' are often based on ideas of superiority. The littoral setting of the novel emphasizes water as a boundary that becomes conflated with time and eternity.

Finally, in Chapter Five I will argue that J. M. Coetzee engages with the pseudepigraphical *Infancy Gospels* as well as, more obliquely, the canonical Gospels in his latest novel *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013). My argument will show that Coetzee places particular emphasis on Jesus's injunction to be like a child

(Matthew 18. 3) as a way to explore hope through the childlike acceptance of the possibility of the impossible, an anticipatory outlook on life that is not concerned with the past but relishes the unreached destination. Water in Coetzee's novel becomes an image of forgetting, of washing the mind clean, and family is no longer dependent on blood relations but on choice and commitment. Underlying the childlikeness of the main character, David, is also a resistance to rules and regulations, and the final journey of the book necessitates a transgressive act on the part of the adults who are his guardians; a transgression of the law that becomes the catalyst for the beginning of a new life, the creation of a community, the expansion of experience beyond the narrative, and a further emphasis on the necessity for hope.

My thesis does not follow a clear chronological structure. The earliest work I discuss is Johnson's *Angels* in Chapter Three and Winton's work was published almost twenty years before Robinson's novel *Gilead*. Rather, the structure I have chosen to adopt follows my underlying argument about the open-ended, expansive character of heresy. I begin with Robinson's focus on one parable, after which I move through the peripatetic synoptic Gospels with Johnson's wandering characters. Then, with Winton's rewriting of John's Gospel we arrive at the end of the first century and move from the last verse of John 'if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written' (John 21. 25), into the ever-expanding literature about Jesus in the second and third centuries by way of Coetzee's engagement with the pseudepigraphical Gospels in *The Childhood of Jesus*. The structure is then disseminative and expansive, moving from the one to the many; and open-ended, arguing not for a finalizing dogmatic portrait of Jesus, but for an on-going engagement with the biblical text with and through contemporary literature.

Chapter I

Categorically Toward: Fictional Approximation as Disseminative Hermeneutic

The letters of Holy Writ were not meant to kill the spirit.
They were intended as containers ever to be filled with wine of good, new vintage.¹
Rabbi Dr I. Epstein

And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles,
and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new
bottles. (Mark 2. 22)²

The heretic is the discourser without end.³
George Steiner

All three of the synoptic Gospels record the parable of the sower, including Jesus's explanation to his disciples (Matthew 13. 3–23; Mark 4. 3–20; Luke 8. 5–15). I will misread the parable and its explanation here as a way to understand the difference between dogmatic interpretation, and misreading and heresy; and as a way to start thinking about how I read the fictional approximations of Jesus and their use of the Gospel narratives.

The parable concerns a sower who sows seed in a rather haphazard way with the result that only some of the seed falls in fruitful ground, while some is lost to birds, stones and thorns. The seed, we are told, is the word, and the word that falls in good soil in due time brings forth more seed: thirty, sixty, a hundred fold. The birds represent Satan: the thief; the stony ground: lack of depth; the thorns are

¹ Rabbi Dr I. Epstein, 'Foreword' in *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis Volume One*, trans. by Rabbi Dr H. Freedman (London: The Soncino Press, 1983) pp. ix–xxiii, p. xi.

² Since my thesis is concerned with the literary influence of the Gospel narratives on literature in English I will follow the accepted tradition that the King James Version has been, and continues to be, a source of inspiration for literary authors. All scripture quotations in this thesis are from *The English Bible: King James Version: The Old Testament*, ed. by Herbert Marks (London: Norton, 2012) and *The English Bible: King James Version: The New Testament and The Apocrypha*, eds Gerald Hammond and Austin Busch (London: Norton, 2012), unless stated otherwise. The King James version translates ἀσκοῦς as bottles whereas most contemporary translators would translate it as 'wineskins' (see RSV, NIV and ESV).

³ George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010) p. 44. Kindle.

desires that choke. While the birds, stones and thorns cause suffocation, shallowness and misappropriation, the multiplicitous seed brings more seed, more words, and more sowing, covering an ever-larger area. The good soil is the receptive heart and, as Jesus says in another riddle, 'the good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth good things' (Matthew 12. 35). But the seed is also new wine that belongs in new wineskins, another type of receptacle. Uncontainable, the new wine will burst old wineskins. In my reading the word cannot abide in a dried, tight, inflexible skin; it needs a beating heart. The word needs to expand into a treasure of new meanings, a word-ward, a field that allows the seed to grow while simultaneously enlarging the field itself. And so the seed needs to be disseminated, needs to multiply like Abraham's seed, uncountable like stars, immeasurable like grains of sand. But for the word to become words it needs a process of transformation. As Jesus says: 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit' (John 12. 24). The word needs to be digested, interpreted, changed, and only the largest elastic hearts can contain the many meanings.

And the many meanings of words are like the many names of God who is both Eagle and Hen; housewife and shepherd; father and vinedresser; judge and Paraclete. Like Jesus who is both the bread that feeds and the stone that defeats; both lion and lamb, predatory carnivorous and vulnerably herbivorous; not just the alpha and omega but every letter in between, who tells his disciples to be both serpent and dove. The word means many things, and so the word becomes polysemous, heteroglossic; the words come from one word so there is irony, metaphor, simile, synecdoche, and metalepsis.

In my reading the weeds that choke the word trap it, imprison it, keep it from becoming many words; the stones that block deeper meanings cause the word to

shrivel into literalism; the birds that steal the word appropriate it for themselves disallowing further growth; and the ground that yields a harvest of words will also yield the return of the battle: another season of sowing, of appropriation, stultification, incarceration, and multiplication.

Josef's seven withered ears of corn represent the years of famine that depleted the granaries because there was no sowing, just consumption (Genesis 41. 1-36) Hoarding turns to decay; saving turns to deficit; like the rich man in another parable who, when he decides to store his harvest for his own security, will lose his soul (Luke 12. 13-21). The seed must be sown, and face the risk of theft, dehydration, and strangulation, because safety is also fatal. Sowing and harvest: more words, more sowing, more loss. The seed has to be processed, to pass through the stages of death to be reborn into a carrier of difference. The seeds, like words, are translated, transformed, misunderstood, misread, re-read; they are given new meaning in new contexts. But, in spite of the dangers, when the sowing stops the seed ends, it dries up, remains the same, and stops changing. There is then a death that is transformative, and a death that is inert; one death that leads to treasures, storehouses, wine and the growth of new narratives; the other has no depth, no growth, no breath. Paradoxically there is then both a vitalistic death, and a mortifying death.

In my misreading of the parable of the sower it becomes a story about a storyteller whose narrative is appropriated and solidified, truncated and fossilized, trapped and consolidated, but, sometimes, nurtured and translated, transformed into new stories, new parables and narratives that in their turn will face the four potential fates of the original. The birds and stones and thorns can be those who with dogmatic certainty pronounce the meaning to be *this* but not *that*, but the fruitful ground is expansive in the extreme: this and this and this, thirty, sixty, a

hundred fold.

In this misreading the parable is concerned with reading and re-reading, as well as the attempt at solidifying meaning. Only the good soil produces more words, the other transformations reduce the meaning to one. In this chapter I will argue that the fictional approximations misread the Gospels through the creation of new narratives that, rather than solidify meaning, allow for an expansion of meanings. As I have already pointed out in my discussion of Reza Aslan's methodology, reduction can simply be a way of finding what one wants to find. But reduction is often a response to a hermeneutical challenge. Rather than accept the challenges of the text's ambiguity or difficulty, they are simply removed. This happens in more ways than just Aslan's methodology, as I will show below, even at the level of Bible translation. It will be helpful to look at different manifestations of reductive processes and how they relate to dogmatic finality to show how the fictional approximations resist the solidification of meaning precisely through their literary engagement with the Gospel narratives.

The Heresy of Explanation

And his disciples asked him, saying, What might this parable be? And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand.

King James Luke 8. 9-10

The team quiz Jesus later, "That story: d'you forget the moral, or what?" "Please! It's a metaphor!" he tells them. "You lot have the inside story. But for *them*, it's all kept in stories and pictures – to chew over ... if they're hungry! If not, they'll watch but not *see*, they'll listen but not *hear*."

The Word on the Street, Luke 8. 9-10

According to the OED dogma is 'an opinion, a belief; specifically a tenet or doctrine authoritatively laid down, especially by a church or sect. Also: an imperious or

arrogant declaration of opinion.⁴ I am using dogmatic here in its broader sense beyond just the establishing of religious orthodoxy, to include those attempts at creating non/anti-orthodox representations of Jesus. Albert Schweitzer, who was the first to compile a survey of the historian's search for the historical Jesus in 1906, understood that the quest for a historical Jesus was often inspired by a need to oppose orthodox claims. According to him historians 'turned to Jesus as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma.'⁵ By moving Jesus outside of the realm of religious dogma and making claims of authenticity and historical accuracy, however, the historians effectively created a new dogmatic representation: one that they claimed was more reliable than the religious one.

Dogma seeks to clarify, explain and solidify the meaning of the biblical text into a systematic form. As I have already shown, however, the biblical text does not yield very easily to any one kind of system. For contemporary readers of the Bible in English the first question that needs to be answered, however, is *which* translation of the biblical text. The appearance of translations of the Bible in contemporary English has opened up an argument about the literary character of the original text that, according to some scholars, is lost in the more recent translations. In his 'Introduction' to *The Making of the English Bible* (1988), for example, Gerald Hammond compares the *Authorized Version* (1611) to the *New English Bible* (1961–70), and makes this, strong-worded, assertion:

[...] to translate meaning while ignoring the way that meaning has been articulated is not translation at all but merely replacement – murdering the original instead of recreating it. It is partly the matter of the creative inferiority of modern translators: normally they are scholars and exegetes whose instincts are to replace the dangerous ambiguities of poetry with the safer specificities of prose.⁶

⁴ "dogma, n.", *OED Online* (Oxford University Press). [24 January 2015]

⁵ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. by W. Montgomery (New York: Dover Publications, 2005) p. 4.

⁶ Gerald Hammond, *The Making of the English Bible* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1982) p. 2.

And further on:

Not straitening the Holy Ghost was the expression used by the Rheims translators and it applies as well to the whole English tradition culminating in the Authorized Version. Those translators –Tyndale, Coverdale, the Geneva and Rheims translators– cultivated ambiguity and evocative vagueness. Their modern successors invariably move towards one fixed and unreverberative meaning.⁷

Robert Alter echoes Hammond’s sentiments in the introductory article to his own translation of the Pentateuch:

[...] philological clarity in literary texts can quickly turn into too much of a good thing. Literature in general, and the narrative prose of the Hebrew Bible in particular, cultivates certain profound and haunting enigmas, delights in leaving its audiences guessing about motives and connections, and, above all, loves to set ambiguities of word choice and image against one another in an endless interplay that resists neat resolution. In polar contrast, the impulse of the philologist is –here a barbarous term nicely catches the tenor of activity– “to disambiguate” the terms of the text. The general result when applied to translation is to reduce, simplify and denature the Bible.⁸

Alter calls this reduction and simplifying of the biblical text the ‘heresy of explanation’. What I hope is clear from these extracts is that for Hammond and Alter the point is not that the Bible should not be translated, or re-translated, but that the source text is literary, poetic, ambiguous and enigmatic, and that translations should endeavour to retain these literary aspects of the text. It is, however, not only the philologist who seeks clarity: the historian and the theologian are also engaged in a form of explanation; what is the creation of dogma if not a process of simplification and reduction? The fictional approximations,

⁷ Gerald Hammond, *The Making of the English Bible*, p. 7. Hammond returns to this theme only intermittently throughout his book, but he clarifies his position somewhat when he states that an ‘increase of scholarship often goes in tandem with a diminution of poetic perception’ (123), emphasizing that the problem of translation is not one of technical proficiency, but of an understanding of literary tropes.

⁸ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation and Commentary* (London: Norton, 2004) location 277 of 22035. Kindle.

however, when they resist the temptation to explain, can be vehicles for an engagement with the biblical material that retains the ambiguities of the source text. For example, towards the end of *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson, has her narrator ponder:

There were two further points I felt I should have made in our earlier conversation, one of them being that doctrine is not belief, it is only one way of talking about belief, and the other being that the Greek *sozo*, which is usually translated 'saved,' can also mean healed, restored, that sort of thing. So the conventional translation narrows the meaning of the word in a way that can create false expectations. I thought [Jack] should be aware that grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways.⁹

Like Alter and Hammond, Robinson, from within her fiction, also understands that the problem of translation can reduce the meaning of a word that in turn can lead to a poverty of interpretation. She also helpfully juxtaposes, on the one hand, doctrine as a narrowing system and, on the other, grace as a more expansive concept. Hammond's insistence that contemporary translations are 'replacements' that murder 'the original instead of recreating it' is particularly helpful in thinking about the role I argue literature can play in misreading and rewriting (recreating) the biblical text. For both Hammond and Alter then, the new translations of the Bible lack the depth of the original, and like the seeds that fall among the rocks only produce very superficial readings. Both Alter and Hammond oppose disambiguation and propose that it is precisely the literary character of the Bible that makes the text enigmatic, and that it is this enigmatic, ambiguous aspect that resists limitation and solidification, or death, and instead allows for a vitalistically expanding variety of interpretations.

Because I argue that the fictional approximations of Jesus are responding to the text of the Bible, they are essentially also translating, transferring or

⁹ Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 273.

paraphrasing, the Gospel narratives.¹⁰ Those theological, historical or fictional texts that seek to explain away the ambiguities of the Gospel material and replace them with explicit and clearly defined portraits of Jesus, however unorthodox, inevitably lose much of the literary character of the Gospels and result in a dogmatic limiting of interpretation, rather than in an disseminative expansion of meaning. As is clear from Alter's assertion that literature 'cultivates ... enigmas', the heresy of explanation, which can be applied to Reza Aslan's work as well, is precisely the way through which the Bible becomes solidified into one meaning. Both Hammond and Alter emphasise the ambiguities inherent in the Biblical text specifically and literature more generally, but it is Alter's point that 'the narrative prose of the Hebrew Bible in particular [...] delights in leaving its audiences guessing about motives and connections' that is reminiscent of Erich Auerbach's argument in 'Odysseus' Scar', the first chapter of *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953).

Auerbach argues convincingly that there is a clear difference in representational models between the Greek Homeric narrative and the Hebrew Bible, labelling the Greek as 'of the foreground' and the Hebrew style as:

The externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is non-existent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and 'fraught with background.'¹¹

¹⁰ For the different meanings of translate see "translate, v.", *OED Online*. [accessed 25 May 2015]

¹¹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) p. 11-12. Auerbach moves to a discussion of the Gospel of Mark in chapter two of *Mimesis* where he focuses on the story of Peter's denial of Jesus. He does not emphasise the same lack of detail in the Gospel stories but frames his argument by focusing on the difference between Greco-Roman writing which 'look[s] down from above' (46), and the Gospels and 'generally almost the entire body of New Testament writings, [which] is written from within the emergent growths and directly for every man.' (47) He does however mention that 'Saint Mark has no viewpoint which would permit him to present a factual, objective

Even though the New Testament is written in Greek, the Hebrew narrative style can still be recognized in the Gospel narratives.¹² One striking feature of the Gospels is the lack of description: we do not learn anything about what Jesus or the disciples looked like, nor do we receive information about Jesus's likes or dislikes, descriptions of locations beyond place names, nor generally anything that is not pertinent to the narrative. Two short examples will hopefully suffice to show how the Gospels retain the tacit style of the Hebrew Bible.

All four of the Gospels contain the seemingly unimportant detail about the division of Jesus's clothes by the Roman soldiers after he has been crucified. Only in the Gospel of John is this detail given some substance.

Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also *his* coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be: that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted my raiment

portrait of Peter. He is at the core of what goes on; he observes and relates only what matters in relation to Christ's presence and mission; and in the present case it does not even occur to him to tell us how the incident ended, that is, how Peter got away. (47–8) Robert Alter writing in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1980) problematizes Auerbach's generalization when he states '[Auerbach's] key notion of biblical narrative as a purposeful text "fraught with background" is at once resoundingly right and too sweepingly general.' It is important to recognize that this sense of ambiguity is not always maintained in every story recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011) p. 17. Kindle.

¹² Debates about the authorship of the Gospel material continue to remain unresolved for most scholars. The earliest manuscripts extant of the Gospels are written in Greek, but recently Maurice Casey has argued for an Aramaic source for Mark. His argument also implies that, since Mark translated into somewhat unsophisticated Greek, the author was probably not a native Greek speaker. The hypothetical Q source for the common material in Matthew and Luke is assumed to have been in Greek, but since the authorship of the Gospels is not established until well after their transmission, it is difficult to be certain about the ethnicity of the Gospel writers. The thematic emphasis of the Gospel of Matthew is, for many commentators, a good indication that it was probably written to a Jewish audience by a Jewish author. Luke has traditionally been identified as a Gentile but recent debates centring on Luke's use of Semitisms in his texts indicate that Luke may well have been a Jew. If one accepts that John's Gospel was written by the disciple 'whom Jesus loved' (John 21. 20, 24) then the fourth Gospel should also be ascribed to a Jewish author, but since the earliest form of the Gospels are anonymous it remains difficult to be certain about any of these issues. For Casey's argument see Maurice Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of His Life and Teaching* (2010) Most recent commentaries on the individual Gospels will include a fuller discussion of these issues as part of a general introduction. See further R. T. France, *NICNT: The Gospel of Matthew* (1999), William Lane, *NICNT: The Gospel of Mark* (1995), John T. Carroll, *The New Testament Library: Luke: A Commentary* (2012), and J. Michaels, *NICNT: The Gospel of John* (2010).

among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots. These things therefore the soldiers did. (John 19. 23–4)

The synoptic Gospels do not add the explanation of why the soldiers ‘cast lots’ for the coat, but John tells his readers that it was because the coat ‘was without seam’. Following Auerbach’s explanation of the Homeric narrative style, it would be impossible to imagine Homer alluding to this coat without telling his readers where the coat came from, who had made it, even details about colour or material, none of which are included in the Gospels. The sole significance of the coat and the casting of lots is that it refers to Psalm 22. 18: ‘they part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture’. Although the Gospel texts makes it clear that there is a link, none of the Gospel writers offer the precise reference, nor do they feel the need to explain it beyond the rather enigmatic ‘that the scriptures might be fulfilled’.¹³ While Matthew and Mark make a point of telling their readers that John the Baptist ‘was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey’ (Matthew 3. 4; Mark 1. 6), none of the Gospel writers explain anything about Jesus’s clothes until he is crucified.

The second example involves a recurring pattern from the Hebrew Bible that returns in the Gospel of John. What Robert Alter has called the ‘betrothal type-scene’ can be recognized, with slight variations, in the stories of Rebecca (Genesis 24), Jacob and Rachel (Genesis 29), Moses and Zipporah (Exodus 2. 16–22) and the book of Ruth. According to Alter the essential structural elements in this type-scene

must take place with the future bridegroom, or his surrogate, having journeyed to a foreign land. There he encounters a girl [...] or girls at a well. Someone, either the man or the girl, draws water from the well; afterward,

¹³ Although there is no room to explore the inter-textual relationship of the crucifixion narrative and Psalm 22, this early reference to the psalm becomes more important because Jesus quotes the first verse of that psalm: ‘My God, My God why hast Thou forsaken me’ just before he dies.

the girl or girls rush to bring home the news of the stranger's arrival (the verbs "hurry" and "run" are given recurrent emphasis at this junction of the type-scene); finally, a betrothal is concluded between the stranger and the girl, in the majority of instances, only after he has been invited to a meal.¹⁴

Alter's concern in his work is almost exclusively with the Hebrew Bible and he gives this type-scene an extensive and insightful treatment. He emphasizes that, although the betrothal was a recognizable pattern, the slight deviations from the expected structure often act as indications of character or foreshadowing of plot developments, precisely because of the lean Hebrew narrative style Auerbach had recognized.¹⁵

Following Alter's schema I read the same type of betrothal scene in the Gospel of John 4. 4–45. Here Jesus is in Samaria, a foreign place; he sits down at a well and a woman of the town comes to draw water; Jesus asks her for a drink, they have a conversation after which the woman goes back into town to tell people about him, the people from the town come out to see Jesus and invite him to stay, which he does. The difference is of course that the woman is not a maiden and Jesus is not looking for a wife, nor does the story end with a betrothal in the usual sense. However, in John 3. 29, John the Baptist has already compared Jesus to a bridegroom, and this image carries forward into this story of the Samaritan woman, not as a literal bridegroom, but as the promised Messiah. The fact that John ends this story with many of the towns-folk believing, links back to John chapter 3 where Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be born again, to show that Jesus also begets children in this foreign country, just as Moses had.

¹⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 61-2. [Kindle]

¹⁵ In Exodus 2. 15–22, Moses' betrothal scene is told in only 166 words (KJV) but moves from Moses running from Egypt, sitting down at a well in Midian, meeting the daughters of Reuel, fighting with local shepherds, getting invited to a meal, marrying and seeing the birth of his first son, and still, in this quick-fire mini-narrative, the Hebrew author manages to make the change from the girls drawing water to Moses drawing water significant because Moses was drawn from the water as a baby, and will draw the Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea in their final liberation from slavery.

John's Gospel makes use of this recognizable Hebrew pattern of the betrothal type-scene, and makes slight changes to the elements to allow the reader to understand his meaning. The style is, however, clearly borrowed from the Hebrew Bible and depends on a similarly spare narrative that is equally 'fraught with background', most clearly indicated by the lack of description of the woman and the seeming superfluous information about her previous marriages and her present co-habitation. This excess information should indicate that the author is trying to make a particular point, but this is not developed or commented on by the author of the Gospel.¹⁶ While the Gospels clearly retain the Hebrew style of narrative, they also respond to the Hebrew Bible, and are in themselves often an expansion of the received meaning of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷

Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as a storyteller, and also as someone who, by re-interpreting the scriptures through the creation of parables and riddles, often clashed with the religious authorities. His relationship to the orthodoxies of his time shows that his own method of interpretation was not only expansive, but also often problematic, heretical and even considered blasphemous. More importantly, the Gospel writers only explain a few of the parables and riddles. The inclusion of Jesus's proclamations without commentary combined with a repetition of the statements that the parables are a way to hide the truth from

¹⁶ Within the story the knowledge about the woman's past relationships is provided by Jesus and is often glossed as an indication of Jesus's divinity evidenced by his omniscience. Within the structure of the betrothal type-scene, however, it may function as a marker for the idolatrous past of the Israelites often compared to adultery by the Hebrew prophets and contrasted here with Jesus as the true bridegroom. Francis Martin and William M. Wright VI make some allusions to this way of reading but leave it rather underdeveloped, see their *The Gospel of John (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture)* (2015) pp. 80–92. J. Michaels in his commentary on John also makes the links to the betrothal stories from the Hebrew Bible but does not develop the literary aspects of the Gospel beyond a spiritual reading. J. Michaels *NICNT: The Gospel of John* (2010)

¹⁷ Fulfilment in the Gospels concerns evidence from the Hebrew Bible prophets about the messianic claims about Jesus. This evidence in itself often depends on a form of misreading the Hebrew Bible to show the continuity of the Hebrew Scriptures into the New Testament. The quotation from Psalm 22 above is indicative of this particular form of misreading as the psalm in its original context gives no indication of being messianic. Fulfilment as used by the Gospel writers is then also expansive and heretical in its use of the source text.

those who hear but do not understand, indicates that the Gospel writers continued to value the need for interpretation on the part of the hearer/reader more than the need for explanation by the speaker/author, in a way similar to how they have chosen to represent Jesus. It is largely because of this lack of clarity that the Gospels themselves become sources for further exploration and expansion. Like the seed that is sown in good soil, the Gospels encourage the creation of new narratives, but these narratives in turn can become dogmatic about solidifying meaning, succumb to the heresy of explanation, or allow for further discourse without end: thirty, sixty, a hundred fold.

As Alter and Hammond have already shown, following Auerbach, the Biblical text revels in ambiguity and lack of description, and solidifying Jesus through the dependence on easily recognisable tropes, both in cinematic and literary texts, is a form of the 'heresy of explanation' Alter decries in the more recent translations of the Bible. Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy* also celebrates the ambiguity of the Gospels precisely because it is this aspect of the text that he claimed allowed for 'the indefinite multiplication of spiritual readings.'¹⁸

Ambiguity, etymologically linked to going two ways, is here understood not as pulling in two opposing directions, but rather allowing a more subtle diversion of pathways as may be best illustrated by a fork in the road.¹⁹ This is the ambiguity that is present both in the parables Jesus tells and in the way the authors of the Gospels have chosen to present Jesus to their readers. Certainly a dogmatic interpretation of the Gospels would seek clarity rather than unresolved ambiguity, but, as we have seen, the quest for the historical Jesus and the literary or cinematic work directly inspired by its findings also make assertions of authenticity and historical accuracy, and, as both Aslan and Verhoeven claim, truth. The

¹⁸ Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, p. 37.

¹⁹ "ambiguity, n.", *OED Online*. [accessed 27 May 2015]

representational forms then often become conflated with dogmatic claims.

There is, however, a way to resist this dogmatic reduction, while celebrating the multiplicity of representations of Jesus. Jaroslav Pelican's *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (1985) shows how he found a way to embrace the rich history of representations of Jesus without restricting further explorations of the Gospel material. At the beginning of his work, Pelican states that his 'book presents a history of such images of Jesus, as these have appeared from the first century to the twentieth.' But, 'because [...] it has been characteristic of each age of history to depict Jesus in accordance with its own character, it will be an important part of our task to set these images into their historical contexts.'²⁰ Pelican's work is helpful because, rather than attempt to find a single historical Jesus, he set out to show how Jesus had been variously represented in visual arts and literature throughout the twenty centuries since his death. Pelican does not decry the various representations as misappropriations of Jesus, but rather celebrates the multiplicity of the images and makes the point that

The study of the place of Jesus in the history of human culture must begin with the New Testament. This is not simply for the self-evident reason that all representations of him since the first century have been based –or, at any rate, have claimed to be based– on the New Testament, although of course they have. But we shall not understand the history of those subsequent representations unless we begin by considering the nature and literary form of the sources that have come down to us in the four Gospels. For the representation of Jesus in the New Testament is in fact itself a representation: it resembles a set of paintings more closely than it does a photograph.²¹

Pelican recognized that the potential for the various representations lies latent in

²⁰ Jaroslav Pelican, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (London: Yale University Press, 1999) p. 2.

²¹ Pelican, p. 9. This final statement betrays a somewhat naïve view of photography as a way to record the world more truthfully than a painting would, but, granted that caveat, Pelican's point that the Gospels are not complete biographies that give us all the information about the historical Jesus is clearly in line with what I have been arguing this far.

the Gospels themselves and that, like a seed that grows into many seeds, Jesus's representation must diversify. More importantly, and in opposition to Aslan, he emphasises that the representations of Jesus can be fruitfully expansive precisely because of the literary form of the Gospels. However, just as a seed that holds within itself the potential to thrive must find itself in an environment conducive to growth, the diversification of portraits of Jesus can only happen in an environment that allows expansion and exploration. The importance of Pelican's work was that he recognized that each representation of Jesus he found was an interpretation of the Gospel text and that the cumulative effect of the centuries of interpretation should be seen as an expression of discovery and exploration rather than as an attempt at finalizing Jesus's portrait. The long history of representing Jesus in Pelican's work then becomes an expression of the disseminative nature of the seed the sower sows. For him, the inexhaustible nature of the sources can inspire artistic engagement that will move beyond dogma, and reveal different aspects neglected or ignored by the harbingers of orthodoxy.

Pelican's work was retrospective, and as such he was able to contextualize representations in their political or theological climate, finding, in this process, an expression of Jesus that could, according to him, be seen to be a representation of the particular issues that animated society at the time and place that created the portrait. The problem with this hindsight quality is that it becomes difficult to avoid finding a portrait that fits the perceived issues of a particular time and place, rather than explore the full range of portraits available.²² As I have shown in my

²² Pelican is a cautious historian and contextualizes the portraits of Jesus not just in one specific time and place. In Chapter 17 'The Liberator' he sets out the argument that, beginning in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth there was an increased interest in Jesus as a liberator evident in the work of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. Pelican does acknowledge that this was not a 'new' portrait, St. Paul had after all already made the point in his letter to the Galatians, and early church writings had made the link between Moses as liberator of the Israelites and Jesus as well. Notwithstanding the importance of Jesus as liberator for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it remains true that the portrait of Jesus in the last two

Introduction, the diverse portraits produced in the last decade alone would make it difficult to say with certainty how our own epoch is reflected in the variety of representations of Jesus.²³ However, Pelican's insistence on the positive aspect evident in diversity emphasizes his fundamental commitment to embrace visual and literary art as fields that can illuminate areas of the Gospel narratives that fall outside of those doctrinal interpretations that are used to consolidate meaning into dogma.

The Gospels are the sources for study of Jesus, but one of the more persistent problems that historians and theologians have been forced to address is the difficulty of trying to make the different Gospels agree. George Steiner's assertion that 'the Jesus of Mark is not that of Luke' and 'neither conforms, at key points, with the Christ of the Fourth Gospel'²⁴, cannot be ignored, and a seamless joining of the four Gospel accounts remains, if not impossible, certainly dubious.²⁵ An attempt at finding or forcing agreement, however, stems from the notion that the Gospel narratives should conform to standards of historical verifiability imposed on to, rather than inherent in, the texts.

Steiner's thoughts come as part of a discussion, in his essay 'Two Suppers', about the difficulty of trusting the sources for both Jesus and Socrates as authentic and complete. In my introduction I referred to Harold Bloom's contention that Jesus can be more plausibly considered as a literary character in a literary

hundred years has been diversified and that it would be a mistake to see those centuries only in terms of a movement towards liberty for all.

²³ It could be argued that our own epoch cannot be reduced to one representation but that the various representations of Jesus show the fragmentation of meaning, but this would imply, to some extent, that previous epochs were more uniform, a notion with which very few historians would be comfortable.

²⁴ George Steiner, 'Two Suppers' in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978–1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010) loc 6476 of 8389. Kindle.

²⁵ Tatian's *Diatessaron* (170–175 A.D.) is one of the earliest so-called Harmony of the Gospels. Tatian edited the material of the four Gospels in an attempt to create a chronological life of Jesus. Harmonies of the Gospels continue to be created, for more recent examples see George W. Knight, *A Simplified Harmony of the Gospels* (2001), and Rob Lacey, *The Word on the Street* (2003).

narrative, rather than reduce the Gospels into historical documents that reveal a credible historical Jesus. In a similar vein, Steiner writes that 'our "Socrates" is the composite of Plato's, Xenophon's and Aristophanes' often discordant portrayals', and wonders whether Socrates does not become the 'crystallization of the imaginary on the level of presence like that of a Faust or Hamlet'. Socrates also becomes a literary character, but, more importantly, 'composite' is not synonymous with complete, it is rather an acknowledgement of the fragmentary character of each individual author's representation of Socrates, which may be applied to the Gospels and their representations of Jesus as well. What we can conclude from the disparate portraits the quest for the historical Jesus has produced is that in all likelihood, all we can manage is approximate, because even the earliest writings that attest to the existence of Jesus only captured fragments of his life, and it is only these writings that form the basis for all further speculation, rewriting and misreadings.

Steiner has also developed a helpful way of thinking about the difference between the limiting tendency of dogma and the need for more expansive ways of reading. In *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (1989) Steiner contrasts Judaic and Catholic reading of sacred texts, and advances the idea that:

To achieve finalities of meaning one must punctuate (the very term is that of the 'full stop'). One must arrest the cancerous throng of interpretations and re-interpretations. The explicative and legislative decrees promulgated by Rome and by the custodians of orthodoxy in medieval Paris [...] can be understood as a series of attempts at hermeneutic 'end-stopping'. In essence, they proclaim that the primary text can mean *this* and *this*, but not *that*. [...] Thus dogma can be defined as hermeneutical punctuation, as the promulgation of semantic arrest. [...] It follows then that heresy can be defined as 'un-ending re-reading' and revaluation. Heresy refuses exegetic finality. [...] The heretic is the discourser without end. His interpretations and revisions [...] generate an open-ended, disseminative hermeneutic.²⁶

²⁶ Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 44. Steiner does not give a clear indication here why he contrasts

Just as the sower in the parable disseminates, scatters, his seed widely, the heretic re-reads and re-interprets the text. Heresy, for Steiner, is expansive, like the new wine; it resists finality: even as the kernel dies it becomes multiplied. The essential difference between dogma and heresy is precisely the difference between closing and opening. Heresy is a form of interpretation that resists exegetical finality and prefers a disseminative hermeneutics. This incessant and energetic re-reading is vitalistic because it resists semantic arrest, the end of meaning. Instead it seeks to find new and different meanings through the process of re-interpretation. There is, however, also a need for heresy to repeatedly question itself to avoid becoming yet another form of dogmatism.

What is clear is that by claiming historic authenticity and accuracy or truth, the attempts by historians, theologians and some writers of fiction to portray Jesus, fall within the boundaries of dogma: the sources can mean '*this* and *this*, but not *that*.' In contrast to this constriction of reading the fictional approximations, with which this thesis is concerned, perform a misreading of the Gospels that is an instance of the 'un-ending re-reading' that resists 'exegetic finality' in favour of a 'disseminative hermeneutic'.

Valentine Cunningham has taken the argument about heresy closer to literary fiction. Cunningham explains that 'heresy: from the Greek *haeresis*' means 'literally choice, taking a position' but that it 'need not mean bad choosing'.²⁷ He argues that because all reading involves making choices about meaning, 'all reading is *hearesis* neutrally, unpejoratively regarded' and, addressing the

Catholic and Judaic reading practices without reference to Protestant readings, but it seems obvious that within the Protestant tradition a similar 'closing down' of the text has happened and especially when it relates to the study of Jesus certain orthodox tenets remain unassailable.

²⁷ Valentine Cunningham, 'Introduction: The Necessity of Heresy' in *Figures of Heresy: Radical Theology in English and American Writing 1800–2000*, eds Andrew Dix and Jonathan Taylor (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2007) pp. 1–18, p. 1.

difficulty of reading the Bible he argues that:

Scripture is indeed variously appropriable: it offers itself as the text that will go on meaning only as it is reread, reappropriated, reconceived, which is to say redone heretically. [...] If it isn't reread, it ceases to mean, for the now of its particular readers and so ceases to be. And rereading means heresy'.²⁸

As Pelican had seen before him, Cunningham also observes that '[t]he Bible texts don't stay still, they're so motile, so mobile [...] that they are simply difficult to pin down' and further that 'they ask to be read, but tend to resist any satisfying closure of interpretation.'²⁹ The Gospels are not simple documents that fit neatly into one interpretative scheme. Heresy, an alternative reading that resists dogmatic finality, is necessary to keep the text alive. Just as seed that is not sown cannot become fruitful, without heretical re-reading, the text ceases to mean, even to be. What Hammond and Alter have argued about the clarifying tendencies of modern translations of the Bible, that they murder the original, Cunningham also anticipates if the Bible is no longer exposed to new readings. Heresy is then an important, or as Cunningham would have it, necessary part of reinvigorating the biblical text.

Cunningham goes as far as to say 'plainly and extremely' that 'literature in English thrives on heresy, is compelled by heresy, wishes to be heretical, and is so.'³⁰ Literature is heretical, it responds to texts and rereads and rewrites them in a 'cancerous throng of interpretations.'³¹ Rereading and misreading are synonymous, for Cunningham, with heresy, and so the fictional approximations of Jesus are heretical in their misreading of the Gospel narratives. The misreadings of

²⁸ Cunningham, 'Necessity of Heresy', p. 10.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 9–10.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

³¹ Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 44.

the stories about Jesus are always meant to encourage a fresh reading of the Gospels. By denoting the 'open-ended, disseminative hermeneutic' as heretical, however, Steiner problematizes the idea that a heretical reading or re-imagining of a sacred text can open up the text to possibilities that will help clarify an orthodox reading. What Steiner and Cunningham allude to, but have not developed in detail, is the fact that heresy in general, and heretical literature in particular, needs a text to respond to. It may be superfluous to say that without orthodoxy there cannot be a heresy, or that without the Gospels there would be no Jesus-novel, but the fact remains that heresy is always a response or a dissent. There is, however, another tradition of literary response that offers helpful ways of understanding the intertextual nature of the fictional approximations, namely, Midrash.

In *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* Frank Kermode makes the claim that

[a]cts of interpretation are required at every stage in the life of a narrative; its earliest form must itself be an interpretation of some precedent fable. [...] Mark is already an interpretation; Matthew and Luke are in large parts interpretations of Mark. There comes a point where interpretation by the invention of new narrative is halted; in the present instance that point was reached with the establishment of a canon of four Gospels. Interpretation thereafter usually continues in commentary. These interpretative continuities are illuminated by the practice of Midrash. By Midrash the interpreter, either by rewriting the story or explaining it in a more accessible sense, bridges the gap between an original and a modern audience. The word derives from *dārash*, to probe or examine; however the work is done, whether by fictive augmentation and change or by commentary, its object is to penetrate the surface and reveal a secret sense; to show what is concealed in what is proclaimed.³²

The fictional approximations of Jesus belong to the category of 'fictive augmentation' rather than the commentaries of biblical scholars. They are

³² Frank Kermode, *Genesis*, pp. ix-x.

interpretations, exegeses even, and as literary fictions also heresies, alternative ways of understanding the Gospel material. Just as the seed that is sown contains the potential for more seeds, Kermode also claims that Midrash is disseminative when he writes that it functions as ‘narrative interpretation of a narrative, a way of finding in an existing narrative the potential of more narrative.’³³ Kermode’s intimation that the interpretation in narrative form ended at the moment of canonization is further indicative of the narrowing tendencies of institutionalizing committees. It would be wrong to assume that all commentary is stifling, but it is important to remember that canonization was, certainly to a large degree, a way to resist perceived heresies from becoming established.³⁴ The fact that Kermode sees the moment of canonisation as halting the production of new narrative closely resembles Steiner’s perception of dogma as a punctuated, end-stopped, hermeneutics.

This interest in Midrashic technique did not fade, and a few years after the publication of Kermode’s work on the Gospels he contributed to a collection of essays, *Midrash and Literature* (1986), edited by Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick. Their introduction tries to establish how Midrash can be seen as a form of literary criticism. They state that:

What we are concerned with throughout this volume is a variety of “open” modes of interpretation, a life in literature or in scripture that is experienced in the shuttle space between the interpreter and the text. Abiding in the same intermediary space is a whole universe of allusive textuality (the history of writing itself, some say) which lately goes by the name of *intertextuality*. In this spacious scene of writing the interpreter’s

³³ Kermode, p. xi.

³⁴ Lee Martin McDonald shows that the history of the canonization of the Christian Bible is long and complex and it would be a mistake to reduce it to a simple anti-heresy program. He does, however, argue that before an established canon was available the ‘widespread concern for the truth, – that is the correct understanding of the story of Jesus – was significant in the church’s decision about what literature to read in its worship. What did not conform to this tradition was eventually considered heresy and rejected.’ Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission and Authority* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) p. 301.

associative knowledge is invested with remarkably broad powers, including even the hermeneutical privilege of allowing questions to stand as parts of answers.

Both in Midrashic and post-formalist times, the drift of these attitudes could have been, but did not turn out to be, linguistic and literary nihilism. In fact these very attitudes have produced an immense quantity and force of interpretative writing.³⁵ (Emphasis in original)

Midrash for Hartman and Budick, as for Kermode, then also resists a halting or even nihilism, and is rather an expansive narrative mode of exegesis. This open form of interpretation does not seek to explain the source narrative definitively since the hermeneutic allows for the interpretation to be framed in questions rather than as concluding answers. This resemblance of Midrash to Steiner's heresy, combined with Cunningham's insistence that English literature is heretical, underpins my claims about the fictional approximations of Jesus. Both heresy as a disseminative hermeneutics, and Midrash as a form of fictional augmentation, are then helpful modes to frame the way the fictional approximations respond to the Gospel narratives.

Harold Fisch, one of the contributors to *Midrash and Literature*, adds, however, an important word of caution. He states

Any attempt to harmonize the theory of the composition of midrash with the practice of modern writers or with modern literary theory faces a difficulty so formidable that all that has been said so far is called into question. For the truth is that midrashic statements, however free, are also constrained. The Bible itself provides us with the essential models. Noah in his ark, Joseph in the pit, Ezekiel lying on his side for three hundred and ninety days, Jeremiah in prison, Jonah in the belly of the fish—all these are images of hermeneutic constraint. Midrash is open and yet it is also not open [...] There is a prime text to which midrash has constant, indeed obsessive reference. [...] Constraint is not the right word either, for what predominates is the joy of recognition. You give the imagination free rein and then you come triumphantly to the scriptural verse itself, from which all these inexhaustible readings have been derived [...] This constant and

³⁵ Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds, *Midrash and Literature* (London: Yale University Press, 1986) p. xi.

joyful reencounter with the prime text is what gives midrash its excitement.³⁶

Fisch recognises that the source text for midrash does not lose its authority through a midrashic reading, but that the response is also always followed by a return again to the source text. Steiner's heretic also incessantly rereads, and the midrashic exegete is energised by the 'constant joyful reencounter'. As I pointed out before, Langenhorst argues that an important aspect of the Jesus-novel was the fact that it allows a fresh reading of the Gospels, and so in the heretical reading as well as in Midrash, there is also a necessity to return to, to move back towards, the source; to approximate the precursor text.

Kermode alerts his readers to the fact that the Gospels are responding to previous texts, both the Hebrew Scriptures and material, possibly oral, about the life of Jesus that precedes the Gospels. Kermode's own work is, however, itself a reading of the Gospels and can be construed as Cunningham's definition of heresy, i.e. an alternative reading. Kermode's work was a response to the Gospel text and it clarified intertextual links between the Gospels and modern literature. The fictional approximations, however, respond to the text by creating a *new* narrative. My thesis is then comparable to Kermode's, although its focus is an argument about how contemporary authors rewrite, heretically, the Gospel narratives.

It may seem rather contradictory to speak of a disseminative process that is focused on an expansive movement away from the source text to a research project concerned with approximating, or moving towards a precursor text. Approximation as defined by the OED is 'a coming or getting near to identity in quantity, quality, or degree; an approach to a correct estimate or conception of

³⁶ Harold Fisch, 'The Hermeneutic Quest in *Robinson Crusoe*' in *Midrash and Literature*, eds Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, pp. 213–35, pp. 231–2.

anything'³⁷, and approximate is defined as 'very near, in position or in character; closely situated; nearly resembling'.³⁸ Nearness implies not having arrived, or not being identical yet, but also of being in the vicinity or neighbourhood. Approximation and approximating relate then simultaneously to close identities and difference, to sharing something in common and retaining a distinct character. Approximating is an action or process that can only end once two separate identities are no longer distinguishable from each other. The approximation is then also a continuity and a discontinuity; similarity and difference. Although in the definitions of approximation the word 'approach' is used, I have retained approximation because approach can be synonymous with 'method', the use of which might easily obfuscate the primary task of the thesis.

The approximation, although here significant because of its descriptive purpose for the intertextual proximity of the contemporary fictions and the Gospel sources, can also be expanded beyond a merely literary device to include the way in which Jesus's injunction to love the neighbour and the enemy are reimagined by Robinson and Winton. One of the difficulties the characters in these fictions face is the temptation to reduce the otherness of the other before extending love or forgiveness. Both Robinson and Winton emphasize, through their narratives, that this need for sameness is detrimental to the richness of community, and that this narrowing of identity must be resisted by a more inclusive notion of who belongs. Approximation can be nearness, but it cannot be sameness; it allows a gap of difference to remain between the self and the other. Approximation, then, resists homogenization but celebrates heterogeneity: hetero, meaning other or different, i.e. alternative; also in opposition to orthodoxy in hetero-dox, thus heretical.³⁹

³⁷ "approximation, n.", *OED Online*. [accessed 22 May 2015]

³⁸ "approximate, adj. and n.", *OED Online*. [accessed 22 May 2015]

³⁹ "hetero-, comb. form.", *OED Online*. [accessed 22 May 2015] "heterodox, adj. and n.", *OED Online*.

As I stated before, heresy retains a distinct character, but is also always a response, a re-reading, or an attempt at moving beyond an established interpretation. The problem with the spatial language of movement away or towards something is the implication of a physical object in space. Although it is an acceptable practice to employ this spatial language in intellectual terms (e.g. I have moved closer to the left in my political position), when we do so there is no method for quantifying in precise increments how far we have moved. This spatial aspect of the fictional approximation is, however, deliberately ambiguous because there is only one point at which the approximation can be quantified as having moved too far: the point at which the approximation closes the gap between itself and the object being approximated.

It is helpful to think about fictional approximation in the terms the theologian Josef Pieper uses to explore the concept of hope. Hope is one of the concepts some of the fictional approximations try to wrestle with in their response to the Gospel narratives, and will be especially important in my discussion of Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* in Chapter Five. Because hope can only remain hope by not being fulfilled, hope, as a state of being, embodies the movement towards but indefinitely deferred arrival of the approximation. Pieper starts his argument about hope by saying that

to be a “viator” means to be “one on the way” and ‘the *status viatoris* is, then, “the condition or state of being on the way”. Its proper antonym is *status comprehensoris*. One who has comprehended, encompassed, arrived, is no longer a *viator*, but a *comprehensor*.⁴⁰

He elaborates this further when he explains that ‘the state of being on the way is not to be understood in a primary and literal sense as a designation of place. [...] It

[accessed 22 May 2015]

⁴⁰ Josef Pieper, ‘On Hope’ in *Faith Hope Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012) pp. 91–2.

is the inherent “not yet” of the finite being. [...] The *status viatoris* comes to an end at the moment when uncertainty comes to border on certainty.’⁴¹

The heretical re-reading and resistance to semantic arrest is a textual embodiment of the *status viatoris*, while the dogmatic, end-stopped, punctuated hermeneutics is the *status comprehensoris*. For Pieper the *status comprehensoris* becomes both the moment of certainty and, for the human subject, the moment of death. The *status viatoris* is then both the state of being alive and the state of being uncertain.

The poet Scott Cairns offers a poetic exploration of this movement that links these theological thoughts to language and literature as they relate to the inconclusive nature of describing the indescribable. In his poem ‘Parable’ he writes:

Comparisons have long obtained
for those enamored of the word

a measure of requital, have
tendered –just here, for instance– a

momentary take, a likely
likening, not to be unduly

honored as anything, well,
conclusive, but categorically

toward.⁴² (Emphasis in original)

A parable is then a ‘momentary take’, like a photograph that shows a feature, or an instant of a subject, but not the whole. The ‘likely likening’ is an approximation, something that should not be mistaken with anything conclusive. The on-going movement is emphasized by Cairns’ use of enjambment, and while the abrupt

⁴¹ Josef Pieper, ‘On Hope’, pp. 91–94.

⁴² Scott Cairns, ‘Parable’ in *Idiot Psalms: New Poems* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2014) p. 7.

period after '*toward*' may seem initially to end-stop the process, the missing object forces the reader to think beyond the punctuation. A parable, like Midrash, is a narrative that is used to show something, but not everything; it is a simile (likely likening); it is a metaphor, but it can never be the thing itself. The meaning of the stories about Jesus can never be conclusive, but must remain 'categorically/*toward*': like the incessant heretical reading they must always be this, and this, and this.

Steiner's heretical 'discourser without end', as *viator*, is then always on the way towards, but never arrives at, certainty. In the same way, the fictional approximation of Jesus moves *towards* an understanding of the Gospel narratives. It is an heretical reading of scripture that resists the death knell of dogmatic finality and reinvigorates further re-readings of the Gospel material; the heresy is moving, traveling, creating, vitalistic. The approximation is explorative; it can be hopeful, but not final; confident but not certain.

The literary texts that I have chosen to explore do not present a portrait of Jesus, but they do engage with the stories he told, and elements of the narratives about him. There is then a semantic slippage in the word *represent*: the fictional approximations do not make Jesus present (re-present) in their texts nor do they claim to speak for him. The texts are not interested in a dogmatic closing down of who Jesus was. Rather, because Jesus is presented in the Gospels as a storyteller, they explore the ambiguities and difficulties of those stories. By not representing Jesus as a character in their narratives, authors of fictional approximations, while exploring narrative ambiguities and raising questions about Jesus and the stories he told, resist resolution. In addition, the work, because it does not set out to make historical or theological claims, does not need to be framed inside an argument about authenticity or historical accuracy. Not representing Jesus then becomes,

paradoxically, the way to engage both with the stories about Jesus, and the stories he told.

Because the fictional approximations of Jesus are concerned with rewriting the Gospel narratives, their misreading will thematically include elements of the Gospels, specifically those aspects that are difficult to define: the limiting definitions of community; the contingent nature of human existence; explorations of hypocrisy and heresy; the arbitrariness of grace; the limitlessness of love; and the anticipatory nature of hope. These themes are the way through which the approximations of Jesus move toward the Gospels. The novels may not find definitive answers to questions, but they do not leave them unexplored; the fictional approximations of Jesus may not conclude, but perform their subject matter precisely through this inconclusiveness.

The Heresy of Misreading

Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. (Matthew 7. 14)

Criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem.
Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 96.

As I have pointed out before, Midrash has also been recognised in the work of Harold Bloom, whose *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* sets out certain ways in which poets struggle with their predecessors. Terry Wright and Harold Fisch both make reference to Bloom's work as indebted to, or influenced by, midrashic techniques, but it was Susan Handelman in her *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (1982) who made the connection earlier. Handelman argues that rabbinic interpretation, of which Midrash was one form, can be traced in the work of Freud, Lacan, Derrida and

Bloom. For Handelman Midrash is a rabbinic interpretative system where 'there is never any one single interpretation to which all understanding of the text aims, but a continuous production of multiple meaning.'⁴³ She maintains that 'we may now read Jesus, Paul, Freud, and Freud's most recent interpreters, Derrida, Lacan and Bloom as all sharing in a particular mode of Jewish interpretative heresy'.⁴⁴ A little later in the text she states that 'Bloom's description of the poetic process well describes the heretic Jewish hermeneutic [she has] been trying to articulate'.⁴⁵ Handelman equates Bloom's misreading with a Jewish heretical hermeneutic, but helpfully also sees that same hermeneutic at work in the way Jesus and Paul respond to the Hebrew scriptures. She does not elaborate on these claims about Jesus and Paul, who are not pertinent to her own argument. I have already tried to show how the Gospel writers present Jesus's way of responding to the Hebrew scriptures and traditions, but it will be helpful to show how Bloom's theory of influence and Paul's reading of the Hebrew Bible share certain similarities to establish that a return to Bloom is in fact a return to a much older way of reading.

The Midrashic technique of creating a narrative out of a narrative, although not identical, does resonate with the way in which Bloom claims that poems are necessarily always a rewriting, albeit an erroneous one, of a previous poem. Bloom further makes it clear that:

"Influence" is a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships – imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological – all of them ultimately defensive in their nature. What matters most (and it is the central point of this book) is that the anxiety of influence *comes out of* a complex act of

⁴³ Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982) p. 75. Although space does not allow me to engage further with Handelman's work here, her argument for the emergence of rabbinic interpretation in the work of literary theorists coincided clearly with the renewed interest in Midrash in the late seventies and early eighties, and it is striking that only one of the contributors to *Midrash and Literature* mentions her work, namely Harold Fisch.

⁴⁴ Handelman, p. 137.

⁴⁵ Handelman, p. 138.

strong misreading, a creative interpretation that I call “poetic misprision”.
[Emphasis in original] ⁴⁶

The narrative that is built out of a precursor narrative is created in the ‘complex act of strong misreading’: the act of responding and struggling with the text. This concept of struggling with a text, which I have already alluded to, is evident in the way the fictional approximations respond to the Gospels as well as to conventional interpretations of the Gospels. Although it is not my intention to use Bloom’s theory as a map that will set out the method for the creation of the fictional approximations of Jesus, I want to establish how Bloom’s own theory is indebted both to the Midrashic reading of scripture evident in Jesus’s parables and St. Paul’s letters, and how his agonistic misreading is clearly similar to the disseminative hermeneutics Steiner has adumbrated. I have already argued that the fictional approximations of Jesus perform this misreading on the Gospels as a response to the biblical text and will now set out more clearly how Bloom’s theory is an important, and helpful, method for finding the hidden roads between texts.

Kermode asserted that the object of Midrash was to ‘show what is concealed in what is proclaimed.’⁴⁷ By claiming that it is the critic’s task to find the hidden roads between poems, Bloom’s theory follows this mode of interpretation clearly, but it can also be seen as a misreading of Jesus’s injunction to seek the narrow road to life: by finding the hidden road through a process of misprision, of struggling with the text, the critic finds not finality of meaning (death) but a reinterpretation and an expansion of meaning. The heretic re-reader, misreader, re-writer, however, is like the man in the parable who finds the treasure, and then hides it again, leaving the roads hidden, for the critic to uncover. By claiming that

⁴⁶ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. xxiii.

⁴⁷ Kermode, *Genesis*, p. x.

‘an ephebe’s best misinterpretation may well be of poems he has never read’, Bloom forcefully emphasizes his theory that it is the role of the critic to recognize the intertextual relationship even if, in the mind of the author, this relationship does not exist.⁴⁸ The author sees, but, seeing, does not perceive; the critic searches until he finds.

I have already quoted from Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, but it is in *A Map of Misreading* (1975) that Bloom further clarifies that influence does not mean ‘the passing-on of images and ideas from earlier to later poets’ but:

Influence [...] means that there are *no* texts, but only relationships *between* texts. These relationships depend upon a critical act, a misreading or misprision, that one poet performs upon another, and that does not differ in kind from the necessary critical acts performed by every strong reader upon every text he encounters. The influence-relation governs reading as it governs writing, and reading is therefore a miswriting just as writing is a misreading. As literary history lengthens, all poetry necessarily becomes verse-criticism, just as all criticism becomes prose poetry. (Emphasis in original)⁴⁹

Bloom’s theory of poetry is based on an understanding of reading and writing as deliberate rereading, misreading and misinterpretation. He includes in his theory of poetry also novels and plays, and even criticism. The critic is, according to Bloom, always also involved in this process of misreading and mistranslation. Every poem becomes a critical response to a previous poem or poems, or what Bloom calls verse-criticism; and criticism becomes a misreading of the relationships between texts, or prose-poetry. The important feature of the anxiety of influence is, however, the inescapable fact that all writing is miswriting and proceeds from misreading, which means fundamentally that all writing is always a response. Because this response is, as Bloom explains about a trope, ‘*a willing error*, a turn from literal meaning in which a word or phrase is used in an improper

⁴⁸ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 70.

⁴⁹ Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 4.

sense, wandering from its rightful place [...] a falsification' (emphasis in original), it is a deliberate difference, a misprision and a misinterpretation; it is an alternative reading, a heresy.⁵⁰ In other words, every misreading is a new interpretation of the precursor poems; is in effect a critical exploration of them. But, and this is an important point for Bloom, the critic does not '[seek] to "understand" any single poem as an entity in itself', because 'most so-called "accurate" interpretations of poetry are worse than mistakes'.⁵¹ The meaning of a poem for Bloom remains open to other readings, and those new misreadings are expressed in verse-criticism and prose poetry.

Because Bloom argues that the best misinterpretations may well be of a poem the poet has not read, it is important to state that my argument in this thesis is not concerned with authorial intent, but rather with my own misreading of the fictional texts in parallel with the Gospel sources. The misreading I perform of the Gospels and the fictional approximations of Jesus are then not to be confused with a conscious effort on the part of the Gospel writers, or the contemporary authors, but need to be recognized as my own critical, idiosyncratic, engagement with both the ancient sources and the contemporary narratives. At the back of this argument still stands the problem that became the ground for the disagreement between C. S. Lewis and E. M. W. Tillyard in their *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (1939), and the response to it by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley in their article 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946). Lewis and Tillyard's argument concerned the problem of understanding the personality of the poet through his poetry, where Lewis claimed that it is 'quite impossible that the character represented in the poem should be identically the same with that of the poet',⁵² while Tillyard's response

⁵⁰ Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, p. 93.

⁵¹ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 43.

⁵² E. M. W. Tillyard and C. S. Lewis, *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University

insisted that the poet's 'mind-pattern is fully revealed in the poetry'.⁵³ Wimsatt and Beardsley follow on from this argument, but move from the question of personality to questioning the possibility for a critic of deriving the intention of the poet from his poetry, and wonder whether the critic's task is not rather to concern herself with the critical question of allusions. Writing about T. S. Eliot's 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' they state: 'the critical question arises: Is Eliot's line an allusion to Donne's', and later assert 'we submit that this is the true and objective way of criticism, as contrasted to what the very uncertainty of exegesis might tempt a second type of critic to undertake: the way of biographical or genetic inquiry, in which, [...] the critic writes to Eliot and asks him what he meant, or if he had Donne in mind.'⁵⁴

For Wimsatt and Beardsley the critical question should not be what a poet had intended, but, rather, what the critic can fruitfully read in the allusions she finds in her own reading of the poem. Bloom's broad theory of poetry follows from this argument in that for him the critic's task is not concerned with the poet at all, but with the relationship of poems with other poems. The hidden pathways can be allusions, or intertextual relationships between poems the poet has not even read. The critic, in Bloom's theory, becomes then not a reader who reads for the 'one single meaning of a poem' but the one who finds the hidden paths between poems, secret even to the poet himself.

Kermode and Frye, each in their own way, also looked for the hidden, or

Press, 1939) p. 9.

⁵³ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Personal Heresy*, p. 42. The exchange between Lewis and Tillyard, three essays each, shows each critic slowly giving up more ground to the other, but ends eventually in neither conceding the point. Robert D. Hume has given a helpful history of the 'Personal Heresy' from the 17th to the 20th Centuries, but ultimately decides that both Lewis and Tillyard are right some of the time even if neither is right all of the time. Hume does not make the link from the personal heresy to the intentional fallacy, even though Wimsatt and Beardsley make the connection obvious at the start of their article. Robert D. Hume, 'The Personal Heresy in Criticism: A New Consideration' in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 9.4 (October 1969) pp. 387-406.

⁵⁴ W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy' in *The Sewanee Review*, 54.3 (July-September 1946) pp. 468-488, pp. 486-7.

secret, pathways between texts: Frye in the Bible as a 'code' for all Western literature; Kermode in his reading of the Gospels and modern literature. Recently Luke Ferretter has argued for a closer engagement with the author as part of our critical exploration of a text when he writes that 'in Christian literary theory [...] the author should be regarded as the ultimate determining subject of the work.'⁵⁵ I do not wish to suggest that Ferretter would claim that, since we cannot know anything about the authors of the Gospels, we cannot therefore critically engage with the text, but to place such an emphasis on the author of a text does seem to be problematic simply because we may not know anything about the authors of important literary works. My own reading of the contemporary fictions is then not concerned with whether or not the authors were intending to rewrite the Gospels – it is clear that Marilynne Robinson certainly was doing so consciously – but rather to show how I read them as rewriting the Gospels, and how their narratives interpret, re-interpret or mis-interpret the Gospels in such a way that they facilitate a fresh reading of the biblical text. This focus on the relationships between texts is clear also in Bloom's theory of poetry, and I follow him along that narrow, possibly treacherous, path of critical claim-making.

Extending Bloom's notion that 'the meaning of a poem can only be another poem', George Steiner has argued that 'the best readings of art are art'.⁵⁶ In speaking of James Joyce's rewriting of Homer's *Odyssey* as a critical experience, he claims that 'such acts of criticism [...] perform the pre-eminent function of all worthwhile reading. They make the past text a present presence.'⁵⁷ For Steiner Joyce's novel *Ulysses* is a critical exploration of Homer, and rewrites or misreads the earlier text; it certainly does not 'merely imitate' it, and yet, it manages to make

⁵⁵ Luke Ferretter, *Towards a Christian Literary Theory* (New York: Palgrave, 2003) p. 81.

⁵⁶ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 94. Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 16.

⁵⁷ Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 12.

‘the past text a present presence.’ All art then, for better or for worse, is always a response to, a criticism, a misunderstanding or a mistranslation of, a previous work of art.

Bloom implies that the agonistic struggle, in contrast to the generous misapprehension, is a deliberate, active wrestling with the precursor text. Following Bloom and Steiner, I argue that the novelists I have chosen to include, misread and mistranslate the Gospels so as to allow the reader to see the sources from a new perspective. These novels are prose poetry or literary criticism, maybe novelistic commentary, or, as Kermode has it, fictional augmentations; the fictional approximation engages critically with the Gospel narratives and through the misapprehension creates a work in which the Gospel text becomes a ‘present presence.’

In *The Anxiety of Influence* Bloom sets out a six-step process that forms the struggle through which the precursor poem is changed into the new poem: *Clinamen*: a swerve away from the precursor; *Tessera*: re-using terms but meaning them in another sense; *Kenosis*: a movement towards discontinuity; *Daemonization*: a movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime; *Askesis*: a movement of self-purgation; *Apophrades*: the return of the dead.⁵⁸ These movements are not unique to Bloom, but, as Handelman pointed out, can also be seen at work in Jesus’s appropriation of the Hebrew Bible and, more obviously in many ways, in Paul’s interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant. Handelman calls this a ‘heretic hermeneutic’, something that resonates with Steiner and Cunningham’s ideas about literature and misreading, but valuable particularly because it is evident in the Christian Bible.⁵⁹ Because I claim that the fictional

⁵⁸ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 14.

⁵⁹ Susan Handelman begins to define the heretic hermeneutic in Chapter 5 of *The Slayers of Moses*, specifically pp. 137–141, she identifies this later with Bloom’s Kabbalah inspired theory of poetry

approximations of Jesus misread the Gospels, I will show how the first three movements of Bloom's theory of poetry can be found clearly operative in Paul's (Midrashic) rewriting of the Abrahamic covenant. This will emphasize that Bloom's own Rabbinic interpretation stands at the genesis of the history of Christian engagement with the Hebrew Scriptures, and also give an indication of how the misreading of the Bible is performed by contemporary authors. The most obvious place where Bloom's first three stages of 'agonistic misprision' can be observed in the way in which Paul reads the Hebrew scripture occurs in Galatians 4. 22–5. 1.

Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he *who was* of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman *was* by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. [...] Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him *that was born* after the Spirit, even so *it is* now. [...] So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free. Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

Paul uses the three revisionary ratios as follows: *Clinamen*, a 'corrective movement': Paul makes a move away from the original story by aligning Ishmael, a child 'born after the flesh' (Galatians 4. 23), with mount Sinai, the place where the law was given to Moses; *Tessera*, 'reading the parent as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense': 'Which things are an allegory' (Galatians 4.24) or, as Hammond and Busch explain the Greek *allegoroumena*, "mean something other than what they say."⁶⁰ Paul posits the two as opposing stories, the story of Isaac

on p. 204.

⁶⁰ Gerald Hammond and Austin Busch, *The English Bible: King James Version, The New Testament and The Apocrypha*, p. 400 (Footnote).

relates to the freedom from the law, while the story of Ishmael relates to the story of bondage to the law. *Kenosis*, for Bloom, is 'a movement towards discontinuity' and 'discontinuity is freedom'; and for Paul 'So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondswoman, but of the free. Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.' (Galatians 4. 31–5. 1) By re-translating the story of Abraham, Paul has aligned the Jews, the physical descendants of Abraham who follow the law, with Ishmael, the son of the gentile bondswoman, and has aligned the gentile Galatians with Isaac, the patriarch of the Jews, and simultaneously emptied the Mosaic law of its power to guarantee the promise of the blessing of God. Bloom follows Paul most persistently when he claims that discontinuity and freedom are synonymous.

In his Epistle to the churches in Galatia then, Paul rewrites the Abrahamic covenant in such a way that he *reveals* the true meaning of the promise of God to Abraham by showing how the Mosaic law has obscured the purpose of God, which was to include rather than exclude the non-Jews from the family of God. Paul, in a critical act of misreading, finds the hidden pathways between the text of his 'gospel' (Galatians 1. 8) and the story of Abraham and Isaac. The three movements Bloom uses to describe poetic creation are, I argue, operative in Paul's epistles, and clearly expansive: Paul moves from the narrow, Jews only, to the broader community where 'there is neither Jew nor Greek [...] for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.' (Galatians 3. 28)

The misprision that Paul performs is an attempt to uncover, or unveil, the hidden, just as Bloom argues that the work of a critic is to find the hidden paths between texts. By rewriting and avoiding imitation, the poem desires to be free from the precursor text, and subsequently reveals something about the preceding text that could only have been found through the process of rewriting. Just as 'the

meaning of a poem can only be another poem' Paul's interpretation of the 'old covenant' can only be a 'new covenant'.⁶¹ But more paradoxically, Paul claims that the new covenant is actually the older covenant of Abraham that had been obscured by the intermediary covenant, now revealed as the limiting dogmatism of bondage. To discontinue bondage is to be free, unfettered, unlimited, like the disseminative hermeneutics, and like the seed that produces more seed. The expansive view of Paul's misreading can then also be recognised in the expansive view of community in Robinson's *Gilead*, and my own argument about approximation, both as a way to remain open to the meaning of a text and as a way to resist a narrowing of community.

Paul's argument shows that the new covenant is really the old promise, and this can also be seen at work in Steiner's argument that 'meaningful art, music, literature are not new' but rather that:

[o]riginality is antithetical to novelty. The etymology of the word alerts us. It tells of 'inception' and of 'instauration', of a return, in substance and in form, to beginnings. In exact relation to their originality, to their spiritual-formal force of innovation, aesthetic inventions are 'archaic'. They carry in them the pulse of the distant source.⁶²

Steiner's thoughts resonate both with Bloom's theory of influence and with Fisch's assertion that Midrash needs a return to the text. The idea of the 'pulse of the distant source', an echo of Steiner's earlier statement about making the past text a present presence, is particularly helpful when thinking about the fictional approximations and how they relate to the Gospels as sources, but it also helps clarify Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence and poetry's dependence on precursor poems for its life. It is also the argument of Paul: the new is not new; it is the return of something older. And just as the past text becomes a present

⁶¹ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 94.

⁶² George Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 27.

presence in the new narrative, Jesus, while not being represented explicitly, can become a present presence in the fictional approximation.

Bloom's poet is always first a reader who resists the limiting "accurate" interpretations' that 'are worse than mistakes.'⁶³ In the creative process of writing poetry, according to Bloom, 'the strong misreading comes first; there must be a profound act of reading' which is 'likely to be idiosyncratic' and 'ambivalent'.⁶⁴ Bloom's ambivalent (two values, antithetical) reading resonates clearly with my earlier argument against dogmatic limiting and the need for a multiplication of meaning. This multiplication of meaning is only possible by resisting the temptation to reduce a text to one single explanation. Just as Midrash is the creation of more narrative from a single narrative, the act of reading, of rereading heretically, produces a new text, but not a definitive text; just another approximation with ambivalent and ambiguous meaning; not an imitation but a mistranslation; a seed that contains the potential for more seeds.

Bringing together diverse voices from literary criticism can, however, result in the joining of unlikely theories. Cunningham has been quite vehemently outspoken against the interpretative theories of critics such as Harold Bloom and Frank Kermode. He has argued that it is time for a post-theory return to, what he terms, 'tactful' reading in response to a tendency for certain critics to rely on stock-responses from the abundance of neologisms coined by the founders of deconstruction. He states:

Theorists do misread, and on a spectacular scale. Theory-inspired readers go awry with terrible regularity. Theory, quite evidently distorts reading. Theory does violence to the meanings of texts. Theory's reading record is, simply, bad. Theorists provide endless bad examples of textual handling.⁶⁵

⁶³ Bloom, *Anxiety*, p. 43.

⁶⁴ Bloom, *Anxiety*, p. xxiii.

⁶⁵ Valentine Cunningham, *Reading After Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) p. 94.

Cunningham is at times deliberately abrasive, and his argument borders on the purely polemical, but his point, that a certain overuse of theoretical terms has made critical responses to a text descend into a lazy conglomeration of recognisable critical tropes, indicates that he recognises a certain orthodoxy in Critical Theory that can be easily imitated.⁶⁶ Cunningham does not simply claim theory is a nuisance that should be put behind us – there is ‘the good [...] of theory’ – but his argument is rather that critical engagement with texts needs to depend on tactful and close readings not always evident in the way theorists arrive at meaning.⁶⁷ I have, however, attempted to show that Bloom’s theory of poetry and Cunningham’s notion of heresy do fruitfully overlap at a crucial point, namely that the reduction of a literary text to one single meaning should not be the aim of criticism. While Cunningham resists Theory’s misreading when this becomes merely an excuse for doing violence to the text, he also equates heresy with rereading and further conflates heresy with a form of productive engagement with precursor texts, especially the Bible. The fictional approximation combines this heretical response to the Bible, with elements of Bloom’s theory, and by doing so creates new narratives from the Gospel texts.

My thesis, although indebted to them, is then not just a simple utilization of the critical methods of Kermode, Bloom, Steiner and Cunningham, but is an attempt at following in the tradition of reading tactfully and closely, evident in their work as well as in the work of Auerbach and Frye. It is also, I would argue, evident in the narratives created by Marilynne Robinson, Denis Johnson, Tim Winton and J. M. Coetzee. My thesis is concerned with the way in which

⁶⁶ In response to a reading of Thomas Hardy’s ‘The Torn Letter’ by J. Hillis Miller, Cunningham writes ‘It’s the most laughable bit of stock responding within this wholesale headlong plunge of Miller’s along Theory’s supermarket shelves, optimistically filling his trolley with keys to the poem, most of which simply don’t unlock a thing in it. See *Reading After Theory*, p. 118.

⁶⁷ Cunningham, *Reading After Theory*, p. 37.

contemporary texts respond to precursor texts generally, and the rereading of the Gospels by contemporary authors specifically; the way narrative is used to illuminate narrative without creating a single meaning; it is a rereading of misreadings that does not consolidate meaning, but encourages further misreading; it is a disseminative hermeneutics that recognises the expansive growth of narrative out of narrative, but that returns to the source to be surprised by the joyful reencounter.

Before I conclude this chapter it is important to show how the fictional approximations relate to the work of Theodore Ziolkowski. Ziolkowski's *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (1972) is an important work in which he tried to categorise literary fiction about Jesus. The five categories of fictional representations of Jesus Ziolkowski defines are the fictional transfiguration, which is Ziolkowski's own focus, and 'the fictionalising biography; *Jesus redivivus*; the *imitatio Christi*; and "pseudonyms" of Christ.'⁶⁸ Ziolkowski's categories are helpful because he places texts within a clearly defined space, but, after forty years, I would argue that it is necessary to expand these categories by adding the fictional approximations of Jesus, because they do not find a place in Ziolkowski's categories.

For Ziolkowski the fictionalising biography is the fictional work concerned with the historical Jesus and which often focuses on the years of Jesus's childhood–manhood that are missing from the Gospels. This category includes much of the work that has been directly influenced by the quest for the historical Jesus. Recent examples include Anne Rice's trilogy *Christ the Lord* (2006, 2009), Bruce Chilton's *Rabbi Jesus* (2000) and Naomi Alderman's *The Liars' Gospel* (2012). *Jesus redivivus* is the kind of contemporary story in which the historical Jesus miraculously

⁶⁸ Theodore Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) p. 13.

appears. The *Grand Inquisitor* tale told by Ivan Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Karamazov Brothers* (1880) is one example, but more recently films like Abel Ferrara's *The Bad Lieutenant* (1992), and Peter Mullan's *NEDS* (2010) contain examples of this.

The *imitatio Christi* concerns texts that portray protagonists who make a conscious decision to imitate Christ in their everyday life. Ziolkowski mentions *In His Steps*, a book first published in 1896 written by Charles M. Sheldon, and a follow-up *What Would Jesus Do?* by Glen Clark in 1950, but I am not aware of a more contemporary example. The main difference between this category and the others is that the narrative does not concern the historical Jesus, but is only interested in how a person can imitate Jesus in the contemporary world. This does, however, depend on the notion that it is possible to have a clear idea of who Jesus was and how to emulate him in a contemporary setting.

Pseudonyms of Christ is a category Ziolkowski borrows from Edwin Moseley who wrote *Pseudonyms of Christ in the Modern Novel: Motifs and Methods* (1962). Moseley's parameters are somewhat unfocussed, but he looks for a Christ-like figure in the novels of Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Conrad and Lawrence, to name only a few.⁶⁹ Moseley deals with a 'peculiarly Western version of the savior-archetype [sic] in the figure of Christ'.⁷⁰ Moseley's Christ-figure is based on the redemptive role the character plays within the narrative, but the pseudonym of Christ can be applied to any character who displays even the faintest Christ-like attributes or behaviour. In a more recent article, and in an interesting repetition of Harold Bloom's thoughts about the quest for the historical Jesus, Ziolkowski has articulated his reservations about this search for 'something vaguely called "the

⁶⁹ Edwin M. Moseley, *Pseudonyms of Christ in the Modern Novel: Motifs and Methods* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962).

⁷⁰ Moseley, p. 11.

Christ figure” or “pseudonym of Christ”, in which, according to Ziolkowski 'the searcher inevitably found what s/he was looking for, regardless of the authors' intentions.'⁷¹

Before I move on to Ziolkowski's fifth, and for him more significant category, it should be clear that my intention to explore texts that represent Jesus without doing so explicitly should not be confused with the 'pseudonyms of Christ' category. The search for Christ-figures in Faulkner, Conrad and Lawrence could plausibly be extended to include work by contemporary authors such as Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace. Because the fictional approximations are not concerned with identifying a character in the narrative as a Christ-figure, however, they do not fall in the same category as the pseudonyms of Christ.

This brings me to Ziolkowski's fifth category, and the one that might appear to overlap most with my own critical parameters: fictional transfigurations of Jesus. Ziolkowski explains that '[t]he fictional transfiguration can be delimited quite precisely: it is restricted to those works in which, all questions of meaning aside, the events as set down immutably in the Gospels prefigure the action of the plot.'⁷² He then further elaborates on his categories when he concludes:

The fictional transfiguration, in sum, differs from the fictionalising biography and *Jesus redivivus* to the extent that it introduces a modern hero and not the historical Jesus himself. And it is distinguished from the *imitatio Christi* and the “pseudonyms of Christ” to the extent that its action is specifically based on the life of the historical Jesus as depicted in the Gospels, and not loosely inspired by the conception of the kerygmatic Christ as it evolved in Christian faith.⁷³

What distinguishes the fictional transfigurations is that Ziolkowski 'was interested as a literary scholar in exploring ways in which the *formal pattern* of the

⁷¹ Theodore Ziolkowski, 'Forum on Religion and Literature: A Mildly Polemical Position Statement' in *Religion & Literature*, 41.2 (Summer 2009) pp. 197–203, p. 200–1; Harold Bloom, *Genius*, p. 133.

⁷² Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus*, p. 26.

⁷³ Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus*, p. 29.

Gospel story had been adapted by twentieth-century writers, regardless of their particular beliefs or, more often, lack thereof.' (Emphasis in original)⁷⁴ For Ziolkowski the point of focus is formal: how a novel incorporates events from Jesus's life into the contemporary narrative. He is not interested in whether the characters resemble Christ, or whether the novel is representative of the teachings of Jesus. Ziolkowski identifies this formal pattern in twenty novels starting with Elizabeth Lynn Linton's *The True History of Joshua Davidson*, published in 1872, and ending almost a hundred years later with John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy or, The Revised New Syllabus* (1966). The specificity of the formal pattern allows Ziolkowski to limit the texts he accepts as literal transfigurations and clearly defines his scope. It is not necessary to assume that Ziolkowski meant his categories to be entirely rigid and exhaustive, but they are helpful especially as I have felt the need to create my own.

A fictional approximation would then best be understood as a text that responds to a part of the Gospel or incorporates the teaching or sayings of Jesus without burdening one character with the role of redeemer or Christ-figure. This does not automatically exclude a text that is explicitly about Jesus, because both historical and fictional accounts of Jesus may be approximations rather than dogmatic reductions of the Gospels. But as this thesis' focus is on those texts that lack a Christ-figure, it allows for a wider inclusion of texts that deal, for example, more specifically with concepts like grace, love, hope or forgiveness. Novels that ask the question: what does this – forgiveness, love for enemies, going the extra mile, equality, justice – look like in a world of people who do not all think and act the same? I argue that the two Robinson novels already alluded to, as well as the fictional narratives by Denis Johnson, Tim Winton, and J. M. Coetzee are engaged in

⁷⁴Ziolkowski, 'Forum on Religion and Literature: A Mildly Polemical Position Statement', p. 197.

asking, and struggling with, these questions.

The fictional approximation allows the inclusion in the study of Jesus in contemporary literature of those texts that fall outside of Ziolkowski's five categories. Because the emphasis is on exploring texts that are representative of Jesus without depicting him, the selection of texts for the purposes of this thesis will be largely outside of Ziolkowski's categories, but the larger scope of the fictional approximations should overlap with, or include, his categories.

In this chapter I have argued that a conclusive dogmatic reading of the Gospel text will reduce, or even murder, the stories about Jesus, and in the following chapters I will show how contemporary fiction can approximate the Gospel narratives and encourage a reading of the biblical text with new attentiveness.

Chapter II

Misreading the Prodigal Son in Marilynne Robinson's Novels *Gilead* and *Home*

Marilynne Robinson, currently Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, published her first novel *Housekeeping* in 1980. In the twenty-four years between the publication of her first and second novel, *Gilead* (2004), Robinson published two works of non-fiction: *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* (1989), and *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (1998). Among other awards, Robinson won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *Gilead* in 2005, and the Orange Prize for Fiction for *Home* (2008) in 2010. She was subsequently invited to give a series of talks at Yale University in 2010 that was later published as *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (2010), followed by another collection of essays *When I Was A Child I Read Books* in 2012. Her latest novel, *Lila* (2014), returns to the setting of *Gilead* and *Home* and describes the difficult past of Lila, whose life-story had remained largely outside of the two previous novels.

Robinson has received attention from academics who work in the interdisciplinary field of religion and literature, evidenced by the fact that the Conference on Christianity and Literature gave her the 2008 Lifetime Achievement Award, and collected essays on her work for a special issue published in 2010.¹

¹ The Conference on Christianity and Literature Lifetime Achievement Award <http://www.christianityandliterature.com/Lifetime_Achievement_Award> [accessed 02 June 2015]. Articles in the special issue offer mainly theologically inflected readings of Robinson's work, see Michael Vander Weele, 'Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and the Difficult Gift of Human Exchange' in *Christianity and Literature*, 59.2 (Winter 2010) pp. 217–239; June Hadden Hobbs, 'Burial, Baptism and Baseball: Typology and Memorialization in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*' in *Christianity and Literature*, 59.2 (Winter 2010) pp. 241–62; Lisa M. Siefker Bailey, 'Fraught with Fire: Race and Theology in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*' in *Christianity and Literature*, 59.2 (Winter 2010) pp. 265–80. For an illuminating and sustained engagement with Glory's name and meaning see Jennifer L. Holberg, "'The Courage to See It': Toward an Understanding of Glory' in *Christianity and Literature*, 59.2 (Winter 2010) pp. 283–300; For a comparative reading of Robinson and Flannery O'Connor see Susan Petit, 'Finding Flannery O'Connor's "Good Man" in Marilynne

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, also used his plenary address on the occasion of his reception of the same award to present a paper on Robinson's novels.² More recently Andrew Brower-Latz and Anthony Domestico have both written articles published in *Literature and Theology* responding to Robinson's novels *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, while Amy Hungerford engages with Robinson in her *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (2010), and Thomas F. Haddox discusses Robinson's fiction and non-fiction in his *Hard Sayings: the Rhetoric of Christian Orthodoxy in Late Modern Fiction* (2013).³ These are, however, still only a handful of responses that mainly focus on theology, religion and Christian doctrine, while Robinson is clearly an author who is interested in the relationship between literature and the Bible, an aspect that has received remarkably little attention.

In this chapter I will discuss Marilynne Robinson's two novels *Gilead* and *Home* with reference to her essays where these are relevant, paying special attention to the way in which Robinson rewrites and rethinks the parable of the Prodigal Son, the way in which she incorporates elements from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, and the way she questions the limitations imposed on communities by their accepted orthodoxies. The discussion will involve those questions about sameness, strangeness, community and belonging and the indefinable measures of grace and love that are so prominent in

Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*' in *Christianity and Literature*, 59.2 (Winter 2010) pp. 301–18; For a reading much closer to my own see Rebecca M. Painter, 'Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction' in *Christianity and Literature*, 59.2 (Winter 2010) pp. 321–40.

² Rowan Williams, 'Native Speakers: Identity, Grace, and Homecoming' in *Christianity and Literature*, 61.1 (Autumn 2011) pp. 7–18.

³ Andrew Brower Latz, 'Creation in the Fiction of Marilynne Robinson' in *Literature & Theology*, 25.3 (September 2011) pp. 283–296. Anthony Domestico 'Imagine a Carthage sown with salt: Creeds, Memory and Vision in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*' in *Literature and Theology*, 28.1 (March 2014) pp. 92–109. Amy Hungerford, 'The Literary Practice of Belief: Lived Religion, Marilynne Robinson, Left Behind' in *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) Kindle; Thomas F. Haddox, 'The Uses of Orthodoxy: Mary Gordon and Marilynne Robinson' in *Hard Sayings: The Rhetoric of Christian Orthodoxy in Late Modern Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013) pp. 161–203.

Robinson's non-fiction and are also present in the way in which she has decided to explore the inter-textual pathways between the world of imaginative fiction and the narratives recorded in the Gospels. I will argue that both *Gilead* and *Home* are examples of fictional approximations of Jesus by showing how Robinson uses her fiction to question the boundaries of certain orthodoxies through a misreading of parts of the Gospel stories without depending on an explicit Christ-figure.

I further position Steiner's heretical reading in opposition to hypocrisy, arguing that the heretical openness towards the text is an act of humility that becomes conflated with Robinson's 'posture of grace', and an openness to new ways of being, while hypocrisy is dependent on convention and homogenisation that is conflated with Steiner's 'hermeneutic punctuation'. By depending on a misreading of the Gospel story and challenging a conventional reading of the parable of the Prodigal Son, Robinson's fictional approximations of Jesus encourage both an openness to the text of the Gospels, and a re-imagining of the literary figure of Jesus. They further undermine the narrowing of political, social and religious exclusivism, and champion openness and acceptance without the prerequisite of understanding or sameness.

Novelistic Theology or Fictional Augmentation

Andrew Brower Latz has stated that Marilynne Robinson is 'an important theological voice qua novelist' and that her 'novels are a form of sophisticated and subtle theological reflection, even a model for doing theology, precisely qua novels.'⁴ This form of 'doing theology' is distinct from what Brower Latz refers to as 'typical academic debates' because 'Robinson's literary or novelistic theology [...] works differently from any direct engagement' with these debates, instead she

⁴ Andrew Brower Latz, 'Creation in the Fiction of Marilynne Robinson' in *Literature & Theology*, 25.3 (September 2011) pp. 283–296. Quotations are from p. 283 and 294 respectively.

puts 'some flesh on the formal bones' by displaying how theology is 'worked out' or what a doctrine might look 'like in practice.' This, he writes, is 'an extremely important contribution given theology's tendency to slip away from the concrete and towards the abstract.'⁵

It is clear that Brower Latz understands that there is often a divide between the academic debates of theologians and the lived experience of (fictional) characters, and his analysis of Robinson's fiction as vehicles that display a 'lived theology' is particularly helpful and astute. Arguing for a particular theologically inflected reading of Robinson's novels, however, disregards Robinson's uneasy relationship with doctrine and dogma that I have already alluded to in the previous chapter. The theological aspects of Robinson's novels are often overt references to her own non-fiction in which she both self-identifies as a Christian, and deals with the debates between science and religion, the history of the Puritans and John Calvin, and the political impact an understanding of the Christian faith could have.⁶ It is, however, important to reiterate that for Robinson 'doctrine is not belief.'⁷ Writing about Christian Creeds in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* she states:

However, I do not consider it either necessary or meritorious in me or in anyone else to be able to affirm [the Apostolic Creed]. History up to the present moment tells us again and again that a narrow understanding of faith very readily turns to bitterness and coerciveness. There is something about certainty that makes Christianity un-Christian. Instances of this are only too numerous and familiar.⁸

Her fiction is indeed a vehicle for Robinson to explore what the difficulties of living by a rule or moral code are, and how hard it can be to understand others

⁵ Bower Latz, p. 284.

⁶ See 'Darwinism' and 'Puritans and Prigs' in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 1998); 'On Human Nature' and 'The Strange History of Altruism' in *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); 'Open Thy Hand Wide: Moses and the Origins of American Liberalism' and 'The Human Spirit and the Good Society' in *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (London: Virago, 2012). Kindle.

⁷ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 273 (further page numbers in the text).

⁸ Marilynne Robinson, 'Credo' in *The Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 36.2 (Spring 2008) pp. 20–32, p. 20.

even, or especially, when one thinks one knows them, but attempting to forge a theological interpretation out of her fiction seems to me to misunderstand Robinson's own misgivings of precisely this narrowing of meaning. In her more politically inspired writing Robinson has, for example, made a point of arguing against generalisations and against tribalism. In 'Imagination and Community' she questions the notion that 'a homogenous country is more peaceful and stable' because she believes it is founded on the assumption that 'people who differ from oneself are [...] enemies who have either ruined everything or are about to.' She continues:

When this assumption takes hold, the definition of community hardens and contracts and becomes violently exclusive and defensive. [...] When definitions of 'us' and 'them' begin to contract, there seems to be no limit to how narrow these definitions can become. As they shrink and narrow, they are increasingly inflamed, more dangerous and inhumane. They present themselves in movements towards truer and purer community, but [...] they are the destruction of community.⁹

Robinson, as will become more evident in my exploration of her writings throughout this chapter, often employs the word 'narrow' as a decidedly negative term. Both in her meditation on the Christian creeds and the tendency towards homogenisation she uses this word to denote a certainty about meaning and a distinction between 'us' and 'them' that, in both cases, tends towards the negatives of bitterness, coerciveness, violence and the inhumane. In *Gilead* Robinson has her narrator reflect:

don't look for proofs. Don't bother with them at all. They are never sufficient to the question, and they're always a little impertinent, I think, because they claim for God a place within our conceptual grasp. [...] It was Coleridge who said Christianity is a life, not a doctrine, words to that effect. (G 204)

⁹ Robinson, 'Imagination and Community' in *When I Was A Child I Read Books*, pp. 18–33, p. 26. Kindle.

Robinson's concern then clearly seems to be to resist a certainty about doctrine because the explanations of the attributes of God, the consolidation of dogmatic truths from the Bible, and the reduction of faith to creeds always involves a process of narrowing definitions. In 'Credo' she continues: '[t]herefore, because I would be a good Christian, I have cultivated uncertainty, which I consider a form of reverence.'¹⁰ This commitment to uncertainty, and her reluctance to pin down the biblical text in forms of orthodoxy, clearly indicates that her fictional narratives find a comfortable place in my argument about the way in which the fictional approximation responds to the biblical narratives, because Robinson attempts to move 'categorically toward' an understanding of the Bible while resisting an arrival at certainty.

Robinson sees homogenisation as a shrinking of 'imaginative identification' and she opposes a political doctrine that would exclude the other based on difference.¹¹ To resist identification means to embrace approximation; it means to celebrate the gap of non-identification. Also, although the novels position Jack Boughton as the stranger and questioner, both Robert Boughton and John Ames, nearing the end of their lives as expositors of scripture, agree that 'certainty can be dangerous' especially in theological matters.¹² This response comes in relation to a vision about Jesus Ames' grandfather claimed to have had, and it is clear that the certainty with which Ames' grandfather responded to this vision makes Ames uncomfortable still. When, on another occasion, Ames is asked by Jack to explain predestination he answers:

there are certain attributes 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

¹⁰ Robinson, 'Credo' p. 20.

¹¹ Robinson, 'Imagination and Community', p. 31.

¹² Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (London: Virago Press, 2012) p. 213. Further page numbers in the text.

so slight a capacity for grace, that the workings of these great attributes together is a mystery we cannot hope to penetrate. (G 171, H 229)

Ames' initial response calls for an openness towards the mysteries of divine attributes that is really an opening towards humility, or an acceptance of ignorance. The mystery, although not a satisfactory answer, allows for the divine attributes to remain unrestrained by the limits of human comprehension. Robert Boughton, in response to the difficulty of harmonising salvation with predestination answers in a similar vein: 'to conclude is not the nature of the enterprise.' (G 173) Boughton further expresses his thoughts on human limit when he says 'Religion is human behaviour. Grace is the love of God. Two very different things.' (H 230) Robinson uses her two reverend characters to parallel each other's sayings as a way to emphasise her own discomfort with denominational divides, while simultaneously allowing the traditional differences to remain, and revealing the core similarity. Robinson makes her point about openness in theological matters quite clear: certainty is dangerous, doctrine is not belief, religion is human behaviour, grace is a mystery and there is no conclusive closure for human understanding of the divine. These all indicate a desire to resist demotic and dogmatic certainties and substitute them with an ambiguity, not only towards doctrine and the divine, but also towards others, especially strangers. Judgement becomes impossible, but by implication it also becomes harder to define belonging. Further she focuses this openness or ambiguity in the limits of the human experience and the subsequent need for humility.

Robinson describes her own view of the Gospel narratives as follows:

It is a story written down in various forms by writers whose purpose was first of all to render the sense of a man of surpassing holiness, whose passage through the world was understood, only after his death, to have revealed the way of God toward humankind. How remarkable. This is too

great a narrative to be reduced to serving any parochial interest or to be overwritten by any lesser human tale. Reverence should forbid in particular its being subordinated to tribalism, resentment, or fear.¹³

Following from the earlier quotation, reverence, for Robinson, is expressed in uncertainty, and here linked both to the Gospels and to a resistance to tribalism. It is precisely the narrowing of interpretations of Jesus that become conflated with the irreverent. This passage is reminiscent of Jaroslav Pelican's insistence that the 'evolution of doctrine [...] does not even begin to exhaust' the meaning of Jesus, here rewritten as 'too great a narrative to be reduced' to 'any parochial interest'.¹⁴ The reduction of the story of Jesus to accommodate a parochial interest is evident in the way in which Reza Aslan responds to the Gospel texts, and Robinson clearly resists this narrowing of representations of Jesus. The fictional biography of Jesus is, for Robinson, not a viable way to respond to the Gospels because she recognises that any attempt will inevitably lead to reduction. Her own engagement with the parables of Jesus are then not an attempt at producing a definitive representation of Jesus, but a reflection of her own desire to explore the ambiguities of the Gospel narratives without creating a story that depends on conclusive evidence, or produces dogmatic certainty about the meaning of the text.

While in the realm of multicultural politics for Robinson the problem lies in 'the shrinking of imaginative identification', which she sees as the precursor to assuming that 'foreign groups and populations are our irreconcilable enemies', she sees a similar shrinking and narrowing of meaning in attempts at solidifying the story of Jesus in doctrine and orthodoxy.¹⁵ Robinson argues then, in her non-fiction, for an openness towards others and she resists a worldview that sees homogenisation as a way to accept and include. Openness towards others, in other

¹³ Marilynne Robinson, 'Wondrous Love' in *When I Was A Child I Read Books*, pp. 132–40, p. 140.

¹⁴ Jaroslav Pelican, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Robinson, 'Imagination and Community', p. 30.

words, is not dependent on sameness. But this openness is not just a way of securing social heterogeneity or a move towards an ethnically diverse multiculturalism. This openness is, in the novels, linked to grace, love and forgiveness towards the other, and there is a further emphasis placed on the fact that doctrines and systems are not able to contain the limits of grace and love. In her observations on the Gospel stories it becomes imperative that these narratives are not taken hostage to a political, ethnic or religious cause, but that they are also approached with a sense of reverent uncertainty. Grace and love both become conflated with limitlessness; theologically, as well as socially, they indicate openness.

This 'shrinking of imaginative identification' in political and social terms is identical with Steiner's 'punctuated hermeneutics' in textual terms. Steiner's heretic 'refuses exegetic finality' but instead 'his interpretations and revisions [...] generate an open-ended, disseminative hermeneutics.'¹⁶ Robinson's insistence that doctrines and systems cannot contain, or should not be mistaken for, the limits of grace, is precisely Steiner's argument when he says that 'dogma can be defined as [...] the promulgation of semantic arrest.' Just as her non-fiction challenges the narrowing definition of community and the narrowing interpretation, appropriation or a dogmatic closing down of the Gospel narratives, Robinson's fiction can then be read as a challenge to the 'punctuated hermeneutics' of doctrine and ideology.

Robinson asserts that to 'the ideologue' putting the world right would amount to 'ridding it of ambiguity', confirming once more her distrust of any explanation or system that would constrict meaning.¹⁷ In my discussion of her novels I will explore what Robinson calls the 'posture of grace' (H 47), a way

¹⁶ Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say*, p. 44.

¹⁷ Robinson, 'Austerity as Ideology' in *When I Was Child I Read Books*, pp. 35–58, p.50.

towards acceptance of the other that comes before understanding. In other words, grace does not close the gap that would allow one to identify completely with the other; grace allows the gap to remain and this makes the posture of grace, I argue below, one of approximation. These political and theological ideas all work together in her novels. While Robinson's other work also responds to the Bible, I will discuss her two novels, *Gilead* and *Home*, because they offer a more focussed and sustained response to the Gospel narratives. Besides rewriting a single parable she also incorporates elements from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, and she questions the limitations imposed on communities by their accepted orthodoxies. Rather than follow Brower Latz's theological reading of Robinson, my argument will show that Robinson's novels can be more productively read as fictional augmentations of the Gospel narratives; disseminative, heretical and inconclusive movements towards the text, but never an arrival at doctrine; in other words, fictional approximations.

Rewriting the Parable of the Prodigal Son

Marilynne Robinson's novels *Gilead* and *Home* explore, as she has said, 'the terms of the parable in ways that go beyond the fact that the story continues beyond the prodigal's return.'¹⁸ The novels are set in the (fictional) Iowa town of Gilead during the summer of 1956. The two novels, although written four years apart, tell the same story from a different narrative perspective, illuminating different aspects of the character's experiences of the same situations. The narrator of *Gilead* is John Ames, a 76-year-old Congregationalist reverend. The text is presented as a letter to his seven-year-old son, who, he knows, will grow up without his father. Ames

¹⁸ Rebecca M. Painter, 'Further Thoughts on a Prodigal Son Who Cannot Come Home, on Loneliness and Grace: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson' in *Christianity & Literature*, 58.3 (Spring 2009) pp. 485-92, p. 488.

means for this letter to be read by his son when he is a young man, and wanders over family history, spiritual advice, and a more and more detailed exploration of Ames' uncomfortable relationship with his best friend's wayward son Jack.

Ames married his childhood sweetheart as a young man but lost both her and his newborn daughter after a short marriage. He has spent most of his adult life alone serving the Congregationalist community in Gilead, often spending nights in his study reading theological texts by Calvin and Karl Barth. Late in life he has married Lila, a woman half his age, who entered his church on a rainy day nine years previous and whose past is never explained.¹⁹ His closest friend, Presbyterian pastor Robert Boughton, in an attempt at including him into the family and 'compensate for [his] own childlessness', had Ames baptise his son John (Jack) and gave him Ames' name. (G 177) This decision has, inadvertently, become an on-going difficulty because Jack turned out to be naughty and unpredictable as a child, and truant and criminal as a young adolescent. As Jack's crowning shame he eventually impregnated a sixteen-year-old girl and left her and his unacknowledged child to fend for themselves while he went off to college. Boughton and his wife, and the then sixteen year old Glory, Jack's youngest sister, tried to help the girl and the baby, but an infected cut and the absence of penicillin brought an end to the little girl's life when she was three years old. Neither Ames nor Boughton have seen Jack during the twenty years since all this happened,

¹⁹ Robinson's latest novel *Lila* (2014) focuses on Lila's childhood, adolescence and her eventual arrival in Gilead and subsequent marriage to Ames, but these details of her past are never included in *Gilead* and *Home*. In *Lila* Robinson describes the harsh and difficult life Lila experiences as a neglected child who is 'stolen' from her family by a kind protector, Doll, who goes as far as committing murder to ensure Lila does not return to her family. The novel explores the difficulties of poverty, loyalty and the undoubtedly difficult theological notion of salvation Lila struggles with, especially with regards to Doll who never has the chance to repent or be baptized before she passes away. The ethical conundrum that forms part of the narrative, the stealing of the child from abusive family members, is an imaginative exploration of Glory's intention in *Home* to steal Jack's baby away from the poor family. There are then points of contact beyond just the story of Lila, but since *Lila* is not such a sustained response to the Gospel narratives as *Gilead* and *Home* are, *Lila* will not feature in the discussion in this chapter. Marilynne Robinson, *Lila* (London: Virago Press, 2014).

when he suddenly writes to announce his return. It is only at the end of *Gilead* that Ames, and the reader, finds out that Jack has been living together with an African-American woman called Della and that they have a son together, although anti-miscegenation laws have prevented them from getting legally married.²⁰ His return to Gilead is precipitated by the arrival of police on their doorstep and Della's subsequent move back to her father's home in Memphis.

In *Gilead* the reader is introduced to Jack and his past through the, largely suspicious, eyes of Ames, while in *Home* the reader is given the slightly more favourable view of Jack's youngest sister Glory. Because Robinson has chosen to write about the exact same moment in time from two different narrative perspectives the novels repeat certain conversations and moments, but they never become mere repetitions of each other. Robinson has not attempted to create a completely new narrative in *Home* by misreading parts of *Gilead*, but has managed to show how actions in one novel are misread or misunderstood by characters in the other, emphasising that impressions and presuppositions often mar and undermine interpersonal relationships. Both novels deal with the difficulty of forgetting and forgiving, the mystery of grace and, ultimately, the pain of loving the prodigal son. Robinson never sentimentalises these difficulties, neither does she simplify or sanctify her characters. Rather, the characters that emerge from the two novels are not saints, but all flawed and damaged people who come from a long line of flawed and damaged people. While this particular aspect does not set the novels apart thematically or stylistically from much of the fiction produced in the last fifty years, it is important to emphasise here that the fictional approximation of Jesus is a response to the Gospel narratives that does not contain

²⁰ Anti miscegenation laws were not repealed in the US until 1967 see: 'LOVING v. VIRGINIA, 388 U.S. 1 (1967)' < <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=388&invol=1> > [accessed 10 July 2015]

a character who offers redemption or divine intervention. Rather, the characters in the misreading of the Gospels, like *Home* and *Gilead*, suffer because of their flaws without the recourse to the miraculous or supernatural, and Robinson's treatment of the material problematizes the notion of forgiveness between these all too human characters.

The parable of the prodigal son, which Robinson has clearly and deliberately tried to rethink, is recorded in the Gospel of Luke 15. 11–32. Luke has placed three parables together that are concerned with something lost: a sheep, a coin and the prodigal son. The first two parables follow the same structure: a man loses a sheep, finds it and celebrates the find; a woman loses a coin, finds it and celebrates. The parable of the prodigal is, however, slightly more complicated. The prodigal does not get lost, but makes a point of leaving the family home after having asked for his part of the inheritance. He then proceeds to squander the money, and only when he is reduced to the status of a day labourer whose job it is to feed pigs does he decide to return to his father's home. Once he nears the family home his father runs towards him, embraces him and calls for a feast of celebration in honour of his son's return. The older brother is unimpressed and refuses to join in with the celebrations. His father goes out to him and tries to explain that a celebration is appropriate, but the older brother complains that he has never disobeyed a command yet has never been given a goat for a celebration, while when his younger brother, who squandered his father's property with prostitutes, returns, the fattened calf is prepared. Luke does not give an interpretation of the parable, nor does he mention Jesus's audience's reaction to it. He does, however, preface the three parables by stating that 'the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.' (Luke 15. 2)

I indicated in my introduction that many of the parables are not explained

and that they sometimes have ambiguous endings. In this instance Jesus leaves his parable open rather like a riddle, and subsequently various interpretations of the parable exist. For many years the older brother has been identified with the Jews who opposed the inclusion of gentile believers, but the context of the parables about the sheep and the coin, seems to indicate that the theme is the extravagance of the celebration in contrast to the value of the object. This is the same point the older brother makes in his criticism: the younger son does not deserve the feast. Robinson's concept of grace as working beyond the boundaries of what is fair, expected or deserved, finds its expression through her retelling of this parable. Robinson, rather than merely retell the parable by staying close to the structure Jesus uses, swerves away from the parable by focussing the larger part of *Home* on the time after the celebration homecoming meal. She has also chosen not to interpret the parable with an emphasis on the Prodigal's happy reunion with his father. Rather, by changing the setting of the parable, Robinson problematizes the return home and emphasizes the difficulty of forgiving. She incorporates elements of Jesus's story in flashbacks and hints at Jack's time spent in prison, his alcoholism and his life spent in 'the gutter'. (H 217) But, although the act of coming home is a struggle for Jack, his lowest point and attempted suicide happen while he is back with his family. The swerve Robinson makes is to problematize the aftermath of reconciliation. Further, by reading John Ames, at least initially, as the older brother, she has further undermined a wholly negative reading of this character. By incorporating the same questions and difficulties within an altered context, she problematizes the meaning of homecoming or home, and by emptying the parable of any certain comforting ending she focuses on the theme of hypocrisy. She also raises questions about the extravagance or gratuitousness of grace and love. This does not mean there is no hope in her novels, but Robinson has left this possibility

open towards a future point outside the text. While making it clear that certain situations do not resolve no matter how much mutual love exist between characters, the end of *Home* is hopeful as it points towards a future where Jack's mixed-race son might possibly find a place in Gilead. As I have already shown in Chapter one in my discussion of the heresy of explanation, *Gilead* ends with Ames' musings on the difference between doctrine and belief, and the difficulty of translating the Greek word *sozo* into English. He writes:

There were two further points I felt I should have made in our earlier conversation, one of them being that doctrine is not belief, it is only one way of talking about belief, and the other being that the Greek *sozo*, which is usually translated 'saved,' can also mean healed, restored, that sort of thing. So the conventional translation narrows the meaning of the word in a way that can create false expectations. I thought [Jack] should be aware that grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways. (G 273)

Both endings reveal Robinson's openness towards her own text, and her willingness to leave a theological ambiguity, or mystery, unresolved. Her use of the word 'narrow' to describe the English translation of the biblical text also reminds her readers of her opposition to narrowing definitions about 'us and them' and the way that shrinking the meaning of a word is directly related to the shrinking of community. The ambiguity she allows to remain is an antidote to this narrowing of the word's meaning. In the context of the quote above, this narrowing also refers back to Steiner's 'punctuated hermeneutics': the desire to define doctrine, rather than a disseminative hermeneutics which allows for a wider interpretation or an openness towards a further meaning. Her use of grace as something that can present itself in 'any number of ways', is particularly helpful in light of my earlier discussion of the ambiguity (two-ways) that is important for the fictional approximation.

Grace is used by Robinson as the opposite of narrow, recapturing the way grace and gratuitous are cognates.²¹ The way that Steiner's heretic goes beyond the accepted interpretation and Bloom's poet is always re-reading and misreading previous texts, is precisely this same opposition to the narrowing of meaning. Grace in Robinson then also functions as a resistance to closing down meaning, just as it functions as a resistance to restricting communities, and the ambiguity that is necessary for allowing an openness to further interpretations to remain. What she describes in *Home* as 'the posture of grace' is important in her understanding and reading of the Gospels as well as in her articulation of the difference between doctrine and belief.

Robinson's further point about the difficulties of translation, especially the word *sozo*, so important in discussions about belonging in Christian denominations, is particularly significant in this story about someone who fails to belong. Because the fictional approximations of Jesus depend on the way in which the text responds to the Gospels, it is important to recognise how Robinson's novels reread and misread the parable. By allowing the voice of the older brother to dominate, Robinson has moved away from the redemptive aspect of the parable, and instead has attempted to widen the meaning, problematizing even within the parable a clear divide between *us* and *them*.

Since there is a precedent to interpret the older brother as unsympathetic it has become conventional within Christian communities to identify with the prodigal.²² By placing the prodigal in a more contemporary setting and by refusing to let him become a wholly sympathetic character, Robinson has problematized the

²¹ gratuitous, adj. Latin *grātūitus*, free, spontaneous, voluntary (cognate with *grātia* favour, *grātus* pleasing) + -ous suffix., *OED Online*. [accessed 30 September 2013]

²² Joel B. Green, contextualizing the parable with the grumbling Scribes and Pharisees, interprets the older brother as Jesus's invitation to the Pharisees and Scribes to join in the celebration of the inclusion of the tax collectors and sinners in the Kingdom of God. This identification of the elder brother with the Pharisees, however, is often the reason why Christian interpreters tend to identify with the prodigal rather than the elder brother. See Joel B. Green, *NICNT: The Gospel of Luke*.

conventional reading of the parable. She is then not only re-interpreting the parable, but also misreading the way it has been interpreted. Robinson's retelling of the parable does not offer the solution the parable suggest, but by placing the moral tale that Jesus intended as an illustration of divine grace and forgiveness in a contemporary setting, Robinson manages to undermine a literalist reading of the parable and, in doing so, recovers it as a figurative, and therefore ambiguous story. By misreading the parable she opens it up to new possibilities, and by undermining a demotic interpretation she restores the purposes of parable.

Transgressive Openness and the Naming of Love

Rowan Williams has discussed Robinson's two novels in his paper 'Native Speakers: Identity, Grace and Homecoming'. Williams focuses his attention on the 'alienness that Jack carries with him' which he finds in the fact that Jack lacks 'a native tongue.'²³ This leads to the inevitable situation in which 'his father and his father's friend, his own godfather, John Ames, cannot speak with [Jack] without suspecting that he is somehow subverting their own habitual discourse.'²⁴ Williams further develops this notion of Jack's strangeness as 'his own personal "doubleness"', a strangeness that he cannot leave behind and that makes his homecoming both painful and finally unsuccessful. Williams' explanation for the difficulty that Jack experiences in coming home is that 'Jack perceives [...] that homecoming is necessarily a return to sameness, something that challenges both his own acute self-consciousness of being a guilty outsider and his deliberate and costly alliance with otherness by way of marrying into an African-American family'.²⁵ Williams' use of the word 'marrying' here is slightly problematic since, as

²³ Williams, p. 7–8.

²⁴ Williams, p. 7.

²⁵ Williams, p. 10.

I mentioned above, Jack and Della are unable to marry, but I follow Williams' argument that Jack and Della's relationship symbolises Jack's intrinsic otherness. What Williams recognises here is Robinson's critique of the town of Gilead both through Glory's eyes, who sees the town as 'dreaming out its curse of sameness' (H 293) and John Ames' acknowledgement that Gilead 'might as well be standing on the absolute floor of hell for all the truth there is in it.' (G 266)

The important insight Williams offers is his understanding of Jack's 'doubleness'. As I pointed out in Chapter One, ambiguity contains this notion of doubleness, and Jesus's parables, like metaphors and symbols, also have both a surface and a hidden meaning. Jack's strangeness, his otherness, is questioned by Glory when she is still a little girl, but it is also the default reaction to him by the other members of his family, John Ames, and other members of the church community. When he relates the story of going to meet the father of his partner Della, Jack recalls that he preached about wolves in sheep clothing, another direct reference to his own doubleness (G 255). Robinson adds an important detail in the narrative when she has Glory state that 'the real text was Jack' (H 47), and later she describes Jack as 'unreadable' (H 69).

Williams continues his exploration of *Home* and *Gilead* towards an understanding of hospitality towards the stranger that forms an important part of Robinson's indictment of the people of Gilead. Robinson makes the prejudices and casual racism that underpin much of the white culture of Gilead clearly evident in the text. Christopher Douglas has written an insightful critical analysis of the way in which Robinson positions American Christianity and the history of slavery as part of the historical narrative in *Gilead*.²⁶ Although it is not within the remit of this

²⁶ Christopher Douglas, 'Christian Multiculturalism and Unlearned History in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*' in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 44.3 (Fall 2011) pp. 333–53. For other articles that deal with the theme of race and Robinson's fiction see Susan Petit, 'Field of Deferred Dreams: Baseball and

thesis to construct an argument about the history of slavery and Christianity's involvement in its difficult and violent history, the questions Robinson raises about race are an important part of the novels, because they touch directly on Jack's relationship with Della and their son, and because it is this relationship that makes Jack's return to Gilead, and to the family, impossible. But even more importantly, Della and Jack's relationship epitomises the hospitality that is absent both in the white culture of Jack's father and the black culture of Della's father. Della becomes the one who can, and does, invite Jack into her home and her life, and it is significant that they have to break the anti-miscegenation laws to complete their love. Love becomes a transgressive act, transgression marking of course the life of Jack, as if the only love he is capable of is transgressive in some respect.

There is never an explanation for Jack's relationship with the 'freckled white girl' with whom he fathers an unnamed daughter, but it is clear that his family can only look on this episode as an act of inexplicable transgression. However, without justifying the way in which Jack is portrayed as neglecting his responsibilities towards the mother and child, the act of transgression in this case, like his return, also serves as a way to reveal to the town of Gilead its own neglect of the marginalised poor. When Glory and Ames are reminded of this episode in Jack's early manhood they both are left with the question 'how had [he] ever involved himself with that girl?' (H 245, G 178) But their question underscores as much about their incomprehension of Jack as it reveals their blindness towards the marginalised. Their question implies that Jack's transgression has revealed the existence of people they were not aware of, and that the respectable citizens of Gilead can, and do, neglect those on the periphery. Because the girl and the baby

Historical Amnesia in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home* in *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, 37.4 (Winter 2012) pp. 119–137; and Susan Petit, 'Living in Different Universes: Autism and Race in Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*' in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 46.2 (June 2013) pp. 39–54.

are never named, they continue to be part of the unknown masses. The baby is buried in the Boughton family plot where 'the stone says Baby, three years' (G 181), while the young mother 'left school, and all [they] ever knew of her was that she ran off to Chicago.' (G 182)

The opening up of a relationship between the young man Jack and the poor white girl is never explained beyond the negative terms his father, Glory and Ames can use to describe it. Jack seems to regret the whole episode, but no explanation is ever offered except that Jack did not take his responsibility seriously. Agency on the part of the girl is never considered; neither is love, infatuation or any extenuating circumstances. As Ames puts it to his young son: 'there are special and extenuating circumstances. They were fairly special in young Boughton's case and by no means extenuating.'(G 139) This early transgressive union becomes an act that can only be described and remembered as something negative. Since the difference between the Boughtons and the girl's family is only one of class and not of race, however, it is significant that there is a mutual reluctance to open towards each other in the same way that racial difference forms a barrier between Jack and Della's father. Robinson conflates race and class then not as ways to diminish the importance of the difficult relations between Caucasians and African Americans, but to show that a narrowing of community always leads to a shrinking of the definitions of *us* and *them*.

The transgressive love between Della and Jack, however, becomes the space where hospitality is exercised beyond the boundaries of class and race. Although Jack refers to Della as 'an educated woman' (G 262), it is clear that her family does not see him as equal to her. The fact that their relationship is illegal does not figure in the discussion of her parents' reaction to his marriage proposal. Jack recalls that her father 'despised [him] on other grounds as well' but 'religion, first and

foremost' (H 150). He tells Ames that Della's father thinks 'all white men are atheists' (G 251). Robinson, without ignoring the question of race, focuses the obstacle to their relationship on the question of belonging. The narrowing of who can and cannot be thought of as part of the flock becomes the reason why the opening up towards otherness is unimaginable by those around Jack and Della. Robinson moves the issue of ethnicity and legality to the question of belonging and acceptance based on religious and economic grounds. Jack's relationship with Della is problematic because of religious narrowness, while Jack's relationship with the poor girl is unacceptable because of the economic divide. This slide from ethnic to economic and religious concerns undermines the novel's temporal positioning and places the issues Robinson is discussing clearly in the present. Although these considerations fall largely outside of this thesis, it is important to note that Robinson's use of the word 'narrow' is directly related to the way in which she opposes the shrinking of religious communities, and the justification of economic divides as she observes them in America.²⁷

The question of hospitality, of creating a space for openness without a demand for sameness, is what Jack has been looking for his whole life, and which he has found in his relationship with Della. There are hints that Lila understands this, but Jack realises that Gilead, as represented by his father, is not ready for this type of hospitality. It is through watching and listening to his father's reactions to race riots in the south of the US on TV that Jack is able to reach an understanding of the general populace's sentiments on the issue of race, and, by extension, mixed marriage. Gilead has been, since someone tried to set fire to the 'Negro church'

²⁷ Especially in her essays in *When I Was A Child I Read Books* the word 'narrow' is used repeatedly in different contexts. As I have shown in several quotations in the text, she can use the word to describe the loss of meaning through translation, as well as the loss of hospitality in communities. In a similar way 'wide' is often used by Robinson to mean generous, which she takes from Moses' command to 'open your hand wide' to the poor. (Deuteronomy 15. 11)

some years ago, entirely white. Although John Ames remembers of the incident that 'it wasn't a big fire –someone heaped brush against the back wall and put a match to it, and someone else saw the smoke and put the flames out with a shovel' (G 41–42), the constricted memory does not hide the fact that this act of racially motivated vandalism eventually caused the church to close down and the congregation to move out of Gilead. Violence here is read as a warning by the affected community but as simply a nuisance by Ames, the unaffected observer, as if the fire itself could be construed as ambiguous.

It was also the fire that led Ames' grandfather to leave Gilead, because for him the fire symbolised the loss of Gilead's status as a place of refuge for runaway slaves. Gilead, the place where, according to Jeremiah, a balm could be found for healing (Jeremiah 8. 22), had lost the significance of its name and purpose. History, in the form of Ames' grandfather, literally walks away and dies in an empty town. Gilead, without a sense of its history is, as Ames realises, a town that 'might as well be standing on the absolute floor of hell', because the inhabitants have become 'like people without the Law, people who [don't] know their right hand from their left.' (G 267) After Jack tells him he has a family, Ames has to admit to himself that he does not know how old Boughton would take the news that Jack's 'wife is a colored (sic) woman', because 'it is an issue [they] never discussed in all their years of discussing everything.' (G 251) The historical significance of Gilead as a place of refuge for runaway or freed slaves has been completely undermined by the inhabitant's loss of history, and has now become a place where someone can set fire to the African-American church, and the 'issue' of race does not arise over years of 'discussing everything'. This is Robinson's harshest indictment of American insularity yet.

Richard Kearney, writing about hospitality and openness in *Anatheism*

(2010), put it as follows: 'without the recognition of alterity there can be no experience of the stranger and so no opening to what is not ourselves.'²⁸ As soon as the 'curse of sameness' falls over a place it becomes impossible to open oneself to an other, a stranger, and Glory realises that Della and Jack's son, Robert, cannot be welcomed into Gilead yet; that there is no hospitality she can offer that will allow them the space to be themselves. Robinson ends *Home* by having Glory imagine Robert visiting Gilead as a young man and being there to invite him into his father's house and thinking: 'He is young. He cannot know that my whole life has come down to this moment. That he has answered his father's prayers.' (H 339) Glory's childhood accusation against Jack's strangeness has now become her insight. By being able to recognise alterity she is able to open herself to what is not herself, and can now take on the role of the parabolic father. Robinson further implies that a life lived for the purpose of inviting the stranger, the other, into one's life and home is a life well lived.

Jack becomes, in Williams' view, the outsider who reveals the town's hidden, or repressed, racism and hypocrisy. His return, in other words, opens up the hidden, and reveals the unspoken, in the same way that Bloom's misreading reveals the meaning of a poem. Jack, as text, becomes an interpretation of Gilead, but an interpretation that is a heresy and offensive. Jack does not only reveal the town's racism, but also its neglect of its own history as a place of refuge for runaway slaves. Jack's transgressive union with Della embodies the historical hospitality that the town used to extend, but years of slowly eroding the values of the history of the town has caused the people to forget, and to allow the mind-set of segregation to become accepted again. Where homogenisation hides the truth, however, strangeness opens and reveals, because the stranger approximates only.

²⁸ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) p. 175.

It is the gap between difference and being identical that allows the questioning and resists the doctrinal certainty. 'Jack is Jack' strange and outside, but also impenetrable, unreadable, in need of interpretation, and, as the two novels make clear, the meaning of Jack is different for each of the characters who come into contact with him. (H 15)

Jack is, however, no Christ-figure because he does not bring redemption or forgiveness to others, but interpreting Jack's actions and words becomes a puzzle in the same way that Jesus's actions and words have baffled those who listened to him, and the generations of people who have tried to make sense of the Gospel stories. While the prodigal in Jesus's parable is never given the depth of character Robinson gives to Jack, Jack still remains a riddle, and his actions often do not even make sense to himself. Jack is often misunderstood, misjudged and misread, but he is never explained; his character remains inexhaustible, and his story remains open at the end of *Home* and *Gilead*. In this respect his resemblance to Jesus grows through the narrative, but it remains unsolved. What is, however, clear is that Jack is no saviour: the approximation is never completed into an identification, and the effects of grace and forgiveness are never immediate and unproblematic. Each act of forgiveness is constantly, remorselessly, scrutinised for ulterior motives. Intentions and suspicions are not left unremarked, rather, they are allowed to complicate the narrative. Robinson approximates Jesus then not through her characters, but through the story itself.

If Jack is a prodigal son, he is also an unreadable text. He is, however, the one character who can be easily identified with the prodigal of the parable. Both Glory and Ames can be read as the older brother, but this is not as simple an identification to make. Also, Robinson does not imprison Glory and Ames in this role, rather, she allows them both to change and take on a different role by the end

of the narratives. I indicated already that Ames, as the one who stays behind and works hard, does at times sound like the older brother, emphasized especially in his reluctance to accept Jack after he returns, his assumption that he needs to warn his wife and son about Jack, and his complaint that for Boughton Jack was always 'the most beloved' (G 82). Glory seems generally more sympathetic towards Jack, but also wonders about her own lack of reward even though she has lead a good life, and complains, to herself, that 'maybe getting what you deserve is the saddest thing in the world.' (H 288) Both understand the extravagance of Boughton's love for Jack, and both struggle with this extravagance, just as the older brother in the parable cannot accept the feast given in honour of his brother. Glory's attempts at understanding Jack, of (mis)reading him, often have the effect of leading to revelations about herself; before she can find and accept her place in the family drama, she has to come to terms with her similarity to Jack, and so, rather than staying in the role of the 'older brother', she also becomes a prodigal of sorts. It is only after Jack leaves, and she meets Della and Jack's son Robert, that she begins to think of how she can, in the future, be the one to invite young Robert into his father's house.

Ames knows his own role is that of 'the good son [...] the one who never left his father's house', but Robinson allows him to come to accept this role, and to arrive at an understanding that 'there is no justice in love' (G 272). It is only after this realisation that Ames can become a father to Jack, and bless him as he goes away again. For both Glory and Ames then, Jack is the catalyst for self-scrutiny, and both see themselves as fulfilling the father's role as it becomes clear that old Boughton will die soon. Because Jesus has left the parable's ending open, without commenting on the final reaction of the older brother, Robinson's treatment of the parable, by having both accounts narrated from the perspective of the 'older

brother', undermines the conventionally negative reading of this character. Robinson emphasises, through her re-interpretation of the parable, the extravagance of the father in accepting the prodigal, and also forces the reader to re-think the role of the older brother, and the difficulties inherent in the extravagance of love. Just as Ames and Glory need to learn to accept Jack without understanding, the reader of Robinson's fiction is asked to defer judgement on the older brother.

This brings me to the importance of names and naming in Robinson's narratives. John Ames is the 'son of John Ames and Martha Turner Ames, grandson of John Ames and Margaret Todd Ames.' (G 10) Not only is there continuity in the names (even Ames' mother and grandmother have the same initials), but Ames' father and grandfather were also both reverends. Ames has, however, not named his son John, but Robert, after his best friend Robert Boughton, Jack's father. This decision, although only remarked on by Jack, is never explained, but as with his marriage to Lila, and her intimation to Glory that '[they]'ll be leaving sometime' (H 295), there is an indication that Ames understands the need for discontinuity. His loyalty has moved from kin (blood) to friend, as if to indicate also a widening of the boundaries, but more significantly, by marrying Lila, an outsider, he has also opened up his progeny to wider experience of the world. Lila's name can mean 'of the people', and although her ancestry is never remarked upon, it is clear that she is not native to Gilead and does not see a future there. The hospitality that Ames has shown Lila directly results in a widening of community and a future that moves beyond the limits of Gilead.

The significance of Robinson's naming strategies is also reflected in the Boughton family when Glory pointedly says: 'the girls in this family got named for theological abstractions and the boys got named for human beings' (H 85). The

boys' names are Luke, which derives from the Latin for light, Theodore is Greek and means gift from God, Dan, a Hebrew name, derives from judgement, and John, meaning 'the grace of the Lord' or 'Jehovah has been gracious' is the name given to Jack as a child. He has rejected this name in favour of the more ambiguous Jack, which can be derived from Jacob (cheater, supplanter), or as a derivative of John used as a way to distance or separate himself from other Johns, particularly John Ames in this case. The girls Grace, Faith, Hope and Glory represent the great Christian abstractions with the notable absence of Love, which, Boughton explains, Glory was supposed to have represented because he wanted to call her Charity from the Latin *caritas*, a translation of the Greek *agape*. This decision was, however, resisted by his wife, because she thought it 'would make her sound like an orphan' (H 194).²⁹ The result is that this fruitful Christian household has no one to represent Love. It would be simplistic to interpret Robinson's novels as mere allegories, but there is a good reason to pause to reflect on why she has decided not to include a character whose name derives from love, especially since Robinson has drawn attention to this absence in the text. Also, since love for God and love for the neighbour are central to Jesus's teaching, love would be precisely the one abstraction one would expect to find in the fictional approximation of Jesus.

It is obvious Robinson goes to great lengths to show how much the family loves one another, so the significance lies not in the fact that this reflects a lack of love. On the contrary, Robinson implies that, although all the Christian abstractions are unquantifiable, love, especially unconditional love, cannot take on a human

²⁹ In the King James translation the Greek word *ἀγάπη* is translated as charity, most probably because of the Vulgate's Latin rendering of the word as *caritas*. Later English translations use the word love instead of charity, but Robinson here indicates the King James usage as the norm in the Christian churches while also showing that the word outside of church would have a different meaning. This sub textual detail is again an indication of Robinson's own understanding of the limits of language and the narrowing of meaning at the level of the word.

shape but needs to remain unlimited and unrestrained; love is something so encompassing that it cannot be narrowed down to the word charity. Furthermore, the other three girls are only mentioned, only heard of, as if to emphasise that they also should not be allowed to shrink the meaning of their names. For Robinson, if she has to choose between a clumsy translation and retaining the openness of love the choice is clear. By reflecting love through its absence in the names of the girls, Robinson does not so much empty the word love of its meaning, as leave a space for it unfilled; or, more positively, leaves a space for it to be filled without ever reaching its limit. It is precisely through the absence of a character whose name derives from love that love can retain its un-definable character. Just as the fictional approximation does not give a definitive shape to Jesus, Robinson also refuses to contract love into a definable shape. By further moving Grace, Faith, and Hope outside of the narratives, she allows the abstractions to remain abstractions.

The meaning of Della can be bright or noble, and as such she is a companion to Glory, but Robert (Jack's father's name, Ames' sons name and also the name Jack gives to his mixed-race son) also means bright, as if a light, to which he can only be a shadow, always surrounds Jack. Jack's second brother, Dan, is only mentioned once in *Home*, further evidence that Robinson has deliberately left him out of the narrative, as if judgement needs to be left at a distance, or at least out of sight. Ames often reminds himself in his letter to his son that he should not judge, recalling the words of Jesus not to find fault, although this is obviously a struggle for him when it pertains to Jack.

Robinson includes a partial list of characteristics that belong to the characters with these names: 'Hope was serene, Luke was generous, Teddy was brilliant, Jack was Jack, Grace was musical and Glory took everything to heart.' (H 15) The first thing to observe here is that Dan and Faith are missing from this list,

confirming again my earlier argument that Robinson uses these absences as ways to emphasise both what is best left out, judgement, and what can not be given shape, faith. Secondly, both Hope and Grace are given indefinite, shapeless, attributes while Luke, Teddy and Glory are given more clearly observable characteristics. Jack is only defined by himself, as if he can neither be abstract nor concrete.

There is, however, in Robinson's characters also a certain limit to their ability to live up to their names; they can only approximate to their meaning, as if the self cannot be completely identified with the name that has been bestowed on it.³⁰ Each character in the narrative lacks something: old Boughton lacks physical strength and patience, and if one can speak of the twilight of his life it certainly does seem that his light is dimming. Ames lacks, certainly in his initial response to Jack, the grace his name promises, and Glory's life seems less than glorious. Lila arrives in Gilead alone without a past or a family. Jack's substitution of 'Jehovah has been gracious' for 'cheater' reflects the struggle for him to experience the love of his family, but his decision to name his son Robert seems to indicate both his desire to be part of his family, and his hope that the future need not be as dark and difficult as his own life has turned out to be. However, Jack's decision to change his name has made him the only one who has lived up to its meaning, as if this choice is the answer to his own question about predestination. So, although Jack finds it impossible to approximate the name that was given to him and decides to take on a name that conforms to his perception of himself, the others accept that they will

³⁰ I am indebted here to Marshall McLuhan who wrote: 'the name of a man is a numbing blow from which he never recovers'. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (London: Routledge, 2010) p. 35. Robinson's use of names is probably less influenced by McLuhan than it is by her understanding of the importance of naming and the changing of names in the Bible, which indicates how a name intimates something about the person's character or the circumstances of their birth. See for example the birth story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25. 24–26; the naming of the twelve patriarchs in Genesis 29. 6–30. 24; and Jacob's name change in Genesis 32. 22–28.

not be able to do more than approximate only.³¹ Both the named and unnamed become significant for what they represent, as much as how their characters are situated in their relationship to Jack. Just as the unnamed represent those often overlooked, the absent represent those aspects either best left outside of human experience or they represent those qualities that will remain mysterious regardless of any technical explanation.

Resisting the Politicising of Jesus

In *Gilead* Robinson emphasises the mystery of the world through Ames' struggle to put into words the beauty of the ordinary. His observation that it seemed beautiful to him to see two 'decent rascally young fellows' who 'were passing remarks back and forth the way they do and laughing that wicked way they have', slides into a short reflection on the cause and effect of laughter (G 5–6), and writing about Feuerbach reminds him of something he saw years ago:

There was a young couple strolling half a block ahead of me. The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping the water off her hair and her dress as if she were a little disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. I don't know why I thought of that now, except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash. (G 31–32)

The explanation, in both cases, is obviously more contemplative than scientific, and the way Ames experiences the world and tries to make sense of it has very little to do with science or evidence. What he tries to communicate to his son is this sense

³¹ It is significant that the only other person who changed his name is Ames' older brother Edwards, who dropped the final s off his name before going to college as a way to distance himself from the theologian Jonathan Edwards. It is only after he has been educated that he returns as an atheist, but Robinson implies prescience in both Edward and Jack when they choose their names. *Gilead*, p. 98.

of wonder that is not dependent on knowledge, but on taking the time to observe for the pleasure of observing. In his discussion of Feuerbach he makes a point of writing that

Boughton takes a very dim view of [Feuerbach], because he unsettled the faith of many people, but I take issue as much with those people as with Feuerbach. It seems to me some people just go around looking to get their faith unsettled. That has been the fashion for the last hundred years or so. (G 27)

This discussion of the mystery and wonder of the world as well as his 'issue' with people who seem to be actively engaged in disproving what relic of faith they may have, coalesce in Ames' acceptance of the limits of human understanding. It is also indicative of his openness towards the world outside the church and to philosophies that are, possibly, heretical. For Ames the atheist philosophers, like Feuerbach and Ames' brother Edward, are not people to fear, but people to learn from with an openness that does not reduce his faith, but allows it to be questioned and reconsidered in the light of the insights of those who stand outside the orthodox religious institution of which he himself is a part. And, just as the two 'rascally young fellows' are 'not churchgoing' (G 5), but can display beauty, so the atheist philosopher can be 'as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anybody' (G 27).

By having Ames reflect on these moments in time, not in any chronological order nor thematically organised, Robinson is able to rewrite Jesus's insistence to his followers that they should approximate God and His openness towards people. As way of an explanation why Jesus expects his disciples to love their enemies and not just those who love them Jesus says 'that ye may be sons of your Father who is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust.' (Matthew 5. 45) The sons, or children, of God are not

identical to their Father, but are recognised by the degree to which they manage to approximate the character of God. This openness to others, including those who exclude themselves, is understood as part of God's character and can be seen in the Gospel stories both through the passion narrative and, as Jesus makes clear here, also in the Divine working across religious and ethnic boundaries in nature.³² This openness of God towards humanity, and Jesus's justification for his rather hyperbolic command: 'Be ye therefore perfect' (Matthew 5. 48), is dependent on seeing God's acts of grace in the working of nature. It is this part of the Gospels that Robinson rewrites. She approximates Jesus's pronouncement through Ames' retelling of his experience of moments of wonder faced with natural beauty, the luminosity of the water recalling the rain that God sends, and the grace that can be observed in the telling of a joke. She further develops this in the character of Ames' grandfather who, after losing one eye in the civil war, tells his son 'I am confident that I will find great blessing in it.' (G 41) The way in which Robinson combines Ames' thoughts of water as blessing, with Jesus's words of God's gratuitousness in nature and the blessing Ames' grandfather was hoping to receive through suffering show, in Bloom's terms, how the swerving from the source text, Matthew 5. 45, and the use of the same terms with different meanings, can arrive at a rethinking of the text while staying faithful to the idea of openness. By further turning Ames' grandfather's statement into a joke between Ames and his mother precisely at the moment when nature is not benevolent (G 40), Robinson empties it of its seriousness while allowing the mystery of God's working through nature to remain.

³² The King James translators repeat the word 'publicans' in verse 46 and 47, but the Greek in verse 46 is *telonai* which means 'tax gatherers' and in verse 47 is *ethnoi* usually translated 'Gentiles', Jesus's point seems to be that God's openness extends both to the 'sinners' who share the Jewish ethnicity as well as those who are culturally and ethnically remote. See *SBL Greek New Testament* and Gerald Hammond and Austin Busch, footnote on Matthew 5. 47 in *The English Bible: King James Version*.

Ames' grandfather's endeavours to emulate Jesus's words exasperate the family, especially as he 'had no patience for anything but the plainest interpretations of the starkest commandments', particularly Jesus's command: 'to him who asks, give' (G 36).³³ This counterpoint to Ames', and by extension Robinson's, own sense of the text is explained by Ames as his grandfather being 'afire with old certainties', something Ames finds hard to emulate. As I pointed out above, both Boughton and Ames resist certainty and conclusions, especially when salvation and divine judgement are concerned, but Robinson does seem to imply that with the loss of Ames' grandfather's kind of certainty, something else was lost as well.

Ames' grandfather's certainty came from a vision in which Jesus appeared 'holding out His arms to him, which were bound in chains.' (G 56) This vision leads him to get actively involved in the abolitionist movement. The certainty that comes with the vision is what intimidates Ames' father, and when the fighting escalates and Ames' grandfather returns to the church dressed in a 'shot-up, bloody shirt' with a pistol in his belt, Ames' father has a 'thought that was as powerful and clear as any revelation.' Ames' father emphatically states that 'this has *nothing* to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing.' (G 96 emphasis in original) Ames' father publicly rejects his father's position on the day he returns from fighting by refusing to go to his church and choosing to sit with the Quakers instead. By placing the argument between the abolitionist grandfather and the pacifist father in a letter from yet a different father writing to his son in 1956, when desegregation of the schools and buses in the Southern States of America was dramatically unfolding, Robinson brings historical challenges into the present of the novel, but also, since the letter is meant to be read when Robert is a young man, into the seventies. This temporal

³³ The King James Version has 'Give to him that asketh thee' (Matthew 5. 42), Robinson's use here is closer to the Darby Bible Translation.

shifting is not our main concern here, but the fact that Robinson places the questions surrounding the opposing Christian positions during the times of the civil war, desegregation and the Vietnam war, not to forget that her novel was published after 9/11, means that these questions still need answering, especially since those on opposite sides of the argument in her fiction, as well as in history, share, not only a common religion, but even a common cause. There was no personal reconciliation between Ames' father and his grandfather, because the old man died before they could be reunited. This absence of reconciliation between two interpretations of Jesus indicates that for Robinson the certainty of being right was not only Ames' grandfather's fault. Ames, in an attempt at explaining his grandfather's eccentric behaviour, writes: 'I believe the old reverend's errors were mainly the consequence of a sort of strenuousness in ethical matters that was to be admired finally', but he ultimately concedes that 'the old man did indeed have far too narrow an idea of what a vision might be' (G 103).

While Robinson recognises that the blame for the violence that eventually led to the American civil war cannot simply be laid at the feet of the vision Ames' grandfather received, there does seem to be an underlying tension about the lack of involvement Gilead's white Christian community has with the plight of the African-Americans struggling in the South. As I indicated already, Jack's secret cohabitation with an African-American woman remains hidden from his father, but by showing that the loss of Ames' grandfather is the direct result of the fire that was set to the church where the black congregation worshipped, Robinson problematizes a simple just-war/pacifist binary. The lack of certainty about the use of violence does not necessitate a complete abandonment of the involvement in the struggle for equality. Jack's love for Della becomes an alternative to the dogmatic division between Ames' grandfather and Ames' father. The loss of certainty about

doctrine then should not produce a lack of care; rather, it requires a re-reading of the situation, and, by extension, also the biblical text; it requires an alternative, heretical, reading that encourages action and involvement. The slow demise of Gilead's history symbolises the problem of taking dogmatic sides on an issue that ultimately results in the possibility for the return of racism.

It would be easy to simply map these family differences onto Jesus's prediction that he was not to bring peace but a sword and 'to set a man at variance against his father.' (Matthew 10. 34–35) Ames' patriarchal line faithfully follows this pattern of 'variance' with the father. The relationship between his father and his grandfather was, after all, strained explicitly about a point of interpretation regarding Jesus. The relationship between Ames' older brother Edward and his father, however, becomes strained after Edward returns from studying in Germany and proclaims he is an atheist. Edward's leaving and returning indicates a much less successful prodigal narrative, but it is later revealed that Edward had a cottage built for his parents on the Gulf Coast where they retired, leaving Ames to run the church in Gilead and never returning except for Ames' first wife's funeral, and a second time 'to talk [him] into leaving with them' (G 268). Ames tries to be honest with his son about the unresolved issues he has with his father and writes:

I say this with all respect. My father was a man who acted from principle, as he said himself. He acted from faithfulness to the truth as he saw it. But something in the way he went about it made him disappointing from time to time, and not just to me. [...] I know for a fact I disappointed him. It is a remarkable thing to consider. We meant well by each other, too. Well, see and see but do not perceive, hear and hear but do not understand, as the Lord says. I can't claim to understand that saying, as many times as I've heard it, and even preached on it. It simply states a deeply mysterious fact. You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it. A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension. (G 7–8)

Ames recognises the narrowness of his grandfather's vision, and tries to be

generous towards his father's 'truth', but there is a regret and a sadness communicated in the final line when he realises that loyalty and love do not guarantee understanding. It is this aspect that indicates that Robinson's rewriting of Jesus's words is more than a simple revisiting of family feuds. Rather, this misunderstanding between the father and the 'good' son places Ames even more definitively in the role of the older brother of the parable. What Ames indicates by the words he uses is that people, even closely related ones, are like parables, and that, once again, judgement is better deferred, if not best entirely resisted.

The fact remains that there exists a gap between people and that one can only approximate, but never come to a complete understanding of the other. Jesus's statements about judgement and about self-examination are therefore used as a source text in conjunction with the difficulty of understanding the relationship between the father and the older brother of the parable. By using Ames' hindsight to revise both his father's uncompromising reaction to his grandfather's complicity in violent opposition to slavery, and his grandfather's unbending ethical 'strenuousness' without making excuses for either man's failings, Robinson rewrites Jesus's imperative 'judge not, that ye be not judged.' (Matthew 7. 1) By making the argument between his grandfather and his father explicitly about the 'meaning' of Jesus, but without elaborating this point, Robinson also shows her understanding of the difficulty of consolidating Jesus on one side of a political argument.

In 'Wondrous Love' Robinson writes, 'I must assume that those who disagree with my understanding of Christianity are Christians all the same, that we are members of one household. I confess that from time to time I find this difficult.'³⁴ There is no simplistic attempt at homogenisation but, rather, a

³⁴ Robinson, 'Wondrous Love' in *When I Was A Child I Read Books*, pp. 125–141, p. 132.

recognition of the inevitability of difference, as well as an honest attempt at articulating the difficulty of being open towards those who narrow the definition of community. Robinson's own decision to leave Jesus undefined and outside of her fictional narratives, and to leave the question of which political position the different generations of Ameses represent is the correct or more Christian one unanswered, helps to underscore the theme of openness, and my argument that she has created a fictional approximation of Jesus. Robinson's re-shaping and re-thinking of the Biblical material and the way in which this process reveals new questions and problematizes old ones, links her work to Bloom's theory of misreading, Steiner's ideas about the heretic, as well as Cunningham's insistence that heresy is an alternative choice. These theorists encourage an approach to texts that opens up, or reveals, a meaning of a text through the process of rewriting it, and, especially on the issue of violence and pacifism, Robinson indicates that, while violence can be construed as the wrong choice, when pacifism lapses into passivism there is a renewed necessity for another reading. This alternative reading is embodied in the life of Jack who develops throughout the narratives of *Gilead* and *Home* more and more as a heretic, and who becomes, not a saint-like character, but a flawed human being attempting to live out a different, alternative, way of being.

The Posture of Grace, Humility, Heresy and Hypocrisy

I alluded in passing to Robinson's writing as post 9/11, and although it is problematic to assume that everything published after that traumatic event should be seen as a response to, or influenced by it, a critical analysis of Robinson's work could do worse than see in it an attempt at formulating some questions about race, religion, and what it means to be guilty by association. I mentioned above the

critical article in which Christopher Douglas argues that Robinson seems to advocate a 'forgetting of slavery', and his analysis of *Gilead* is important and critically precise, but there is also a way to read the race relations and the religious questions as a reflection on contemporary concerns, rather than a contemplation on the internal political situation in the nineteen-fifties.³⁵ Taken together *Home* and *Gilead* pose questions about racism, forgiveness, loyalty and grace. *Gilead* deals with these themes in the context of trying to understand the present through the difficulties encountered when one simply judges the past. It is not enough, Robinson implies, to observe and point out the mistakes and faults of a previous generation. It is in *Home* where Glory remembers what her father used to say about forgiveness and the difficulty of incomprehension that Ames felt seemed the inevitable condition of intergenerational relationships.

There is a saying that to understand is to forgive, but that is an error, so Papa used to say. You must forgive in order to understand. Until you forgive, you defend yourself against the possibility of understanding. Her father had said this more than once, in sermons, with appropriate texts, but the real text was Jack, and those to whom he spoke were himself and the row of Boughtons in the front pew, which usually did not include Jack [...] If you forgive, he would say, you may indeed still not understand, but you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace. (H 47)

Grace, as Robinson understands it, seeks neither understanding nor judgement. Rather, it gives before it understands, in a way grace fore-gives. Again this approximates not only Jesus's understanding of the Divine blessing of the 'just and the unjust' but also St. Paul's understanding of Jesus's sacrifice when he writes that 'God commendeth his love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.' (Romans 5. 8) Grace is gratuitous, it is never deserved, and Robinson plays this theme through her description of the relationship between Jack and his

³⁵ Christopher Douglas, 'Christian Multiculturalism and Unlearned History in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*', p. 343.

father.

Home is, however, also a rewriting of *Gilead* and its return to a debate about the difficulties of trusting the written account of history, as well as an exploration of the difficulties of openness towards the other. In *Gilead* Robinson allows the history of America to play a large part in the narrative. This national history is missing from *Home*, which is a novel more concerned with family. But, because Ames' narration parallels national history with his family's history, the family in *Home* can also be read as the nation. This re-writing of *Gilead* in *Home* emphasises more clearly the difficulty of belonging because, whilst Ames' narrative deals with intergenerational conflict over political problems such as violence, war and abolitionism, the struggle in *Home* is much more domestic. Jack's transgressions, drunkenness, petty crime, and fornication, cannot be compared with slavery, and yet the core problem, and the solution, remain the same: once a community decides someone (Ames' grandfather, African-Americans, Jack) does not belong, the result is always a narrowing of what community means, and the only antidote to the shrinking of definitions about *us* and *them* is a posture of grace. Writing about openness to the other, the stranger, and the need for expanding imaginative identification, rather than a push towards homogenisation, is neither merely a way to undermine established traditions, nor a celebration of relativism. Robinson moves beyond a criticism that destabilises ontological certainties, and moves towards a reinterpretation of the Gospel texts to explore how they can speak to the issues of acceptance and hospitality in a multicultural community without advocating a movement towards sameness.

Robinson questions assumptions that understanding will automatically erase division and preclude judgement. Robinson's Pauline view that 'all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God' (Romans 3. 23) forms the foundation for her

argument that forgiveness is something everyone is in need of, not just those who can be designated as an outsider, enemy or criminal, and that understanding may be a result of forgiveness, but should not be a prerequisite for it. Further, by allowing the stranger, Jack, to be part of the family, Robinson questions precisely the view that the stranger, or enemy, is someone who is culturally, temporally or geographically remote. She forces her readers to accept that when understanding the other becomes a prerequisite for showing hospitality, offering forgiveness or opening ourselves up to 'other ways of being', incomprehension can easily become an excuse to defer the moment of reconciliation indefinitely.³⁶ Just as doctrinal narrowness can slide into non-involvement, the demand for understanding can become just one more way to resist action. Glory's recollection of her father's sermons, however, allows for Ames' incomprehension to remain while opening up the possibility for grace to work. Grace, in this sense, does not close the gap; understanding may still elude one, but to have opened up a possibility for understanding is to have assumed the posture of grace, a posture that is, I argue, one of approximation.

This point is further developed through Robinson's decision to repeat a section from *Gilead* in *Home*. Robinson reuses the conversation where Jack asks Ames to explain his understanding of predestination with only slight alterations. She has not, in this instance chosen to rewrite or misread her previous novel. For Rowan Williams this is 'the great set-piece conversation about grace and predestination', and it certainly is not my intention to question the importance of this theological discussion for Robinson.³⁷ It is, however, a problematic conversation that refuses to bring closure to Jack's question, and it is important

³⁶ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. 48. In his discussion of hospitality Kearney proposes that the act of hospitality towards strangers is a wager in which the 'self [...] [opens] itself to other possibilities of being'.

³⁷ Williams, p. 8.

that it is John Ames' young wife, Lila, and not Ames or Boughton, who answers Jack's question as to whether there are 'people who are simply born evil, live evil lives, and then go to hell' (H 235). Lila simply states '[a] person can change. Everything can change.' (H 238) This voice from the people, rather than from the religious authorities, also importantly brings the message of openness, and of a chance of difference, in opposition to a deterministic view of God's ways with men. Rather than oppose Ames and Boughton's 'cagey' and inconclusive answers, the answer Lila gives opens up possibilities rather than narrow them down. The posture of grace here is positioned not towards other people, but towards the divine. Robinson implies that faith in God, trust in change, and the acceptance of the lack of understanding, is also a posture of grace, a posture that foregoes understanding and allows the mysteries of divine intervention (or lack thereof) to remain unresolved. This is not to say that Robinson is advocating an anti-intellectualism in her work. In her essay 'Freedom of Thought' she argues that,

[t]here is a tendency, considered highly rational, to reason from a narrow set of interests, say survival and procreation, which are supposed to govern our lives, and then to treat everything that does not fit this model as anomalous clutter, extraneous to what we are and probably best done without. But all we really know about what we are is what we do. There is a tendency to fit a tight and awkward carapace of definition over humankind, and to try to trim living creatures to fit the dead shell. The advice I give my students is [...]– forget definition, forget assumption, watch. We inhabit, we are part of, a reality for which explanation is much too poor and small.³⁸

Again there is an emphasis on resisting a narrowing of the human experience; a resistance to the heresy of explanation applied here to 'reality', a resistance that is also implied in Lila's response to Jack's question. A belief in total depravity or predestination fixes a human into a role from which he cannot escape. A deterministic view of the universe, similarly, reduces the human experience to a

³⁸ Robinson, 'Freedom of Thought' in *When I Was A Child I Read Books*, pp. 3–17, p. 6.

mere inevitability. Salvation (*sozo*), or the possibility of change, undermines these theories precisely because there is an openness to unrealized potential that cannot be reduced to a fixed future. Robinson underscores this by placing her novel in a time of significant change in America (the fifties), and referring back to a founding narrative for the United States, the civil war and the abolitionist movement. The narrowing of definitions, both theological and political, can only be resisted by a posture of grace because it allows one to accept possibilities and potentialities that one does not necessarily understand. This in turn begins to conflate the posture of grace with humility: humility to accept one's own lack of understanding; to accept that definitions are only a poor version, or a small part of the meaning of a word, a person, a culture, or a history; and to accept that one('s) interpretation should not be held dogmatically closed off from further explorations. Humility and grace become then also attitudes of approximation, of leaving something open, of allowing a space for questioning and rethinking to remain.

Rather than the two theologically inflected set-pieces, I argue there is a more important passage that Robinson repeats, this time not verbatim, but rather as a Bloomian misreading. In *Gilead* John Ames reflects that:

In every important way we are such secrets from each other, and I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us, also a separate aesthetics and a separate jurisprudence. Every single one of us is a little civilization built on the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations, but with our own variant notions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable – which, I hasten to add, we generally do not satisfy and by which we struggle to live. We take fortuitous resemblances among us to be actual likeness, because those around us have also fallen heir to the same customs, trade in the same coin, acknowledge, more or less, the same notions of decency and sanity. But all that really just allows us is to coexist with the inviolable, untraversable (*sic*), and utterly vast spaces between us.

Maybe I should have said we are like planets. But then I would have lost some of the point of saying that we are like civilizations. The planets may all have been sloughed from the same star, but still the historical dimension is missing from that simile, and it is true that we all do live in the ruins of the lives of other generations, so there is a seeming continuity which is

important because it deceives us. (G 225)

I quote at length because it is important for the comparable passage in *Home*, where Jack tries to explain to Teddy why it seems so hard to talk to religious people. He says:

“Sometimes it seems as though I'm in one universe and you're in another. All of you.” He shrugged. Then he glanced at Glory, as if he might want to apologize.

Teddy considered him for a moment with gentle objectivity.

“How long have you felt that way?”

“Well, Dr. Boughton, I may always have felt that way. If I can trust the tales of my stormy infancy.”

“Sorry.”

“Don't be. There are things I think it may have helped me with. Helped me understand a little.” He said, “There are separate universes, you know. I happen to have mine to myself. There are others. At least I know that.” (H 278)

Robinson rewrites Ames' observation about the gap that exists between people in Jack's understanding of his own strangeness, but, by using the concept of different universes in opposition to Ames' reluctance to use planets, Jack's sense of difference is exaggerated beyond a mere lack of a shared history. The planets may have come from the same star, but what have separate universes in common? There is then a sense that in both theories a gap of misunderstanding is a given, but Jack's sense is that the gap is unbridgeable, whereas Ames' still believes in the possibility of holding some notions in common, even if this is often a deception. The foundational values that Robinson is addressing here are theological and literary, and deal precisely with the limits of human understanding and the spatial, as well as intellectual, distance that needs to be traversed to arrive at an understanding of another individual.

The fictional approximation of Jesus challenges a demotic approach to reading the Gospels, and tries to establish a way of reading contemporary

literature that takes into account the ambiguity of language, but also, by extension, the difficulty of transparent communication and complete understanding between individuals. Once we have established the difficulty inherent in defining Jesus through historical, sociological and anthropological means, and allow ourselves the space to be humble before a text so that, rather than judge the text, we are open towards it and are able to leave it open towards others as well, the gap between the approximate and the arrived at is precisely the space in which a dialogue can be started. In this way the text of the Gospels, as it is misread and rewritten by Robinson, allows not only for a problematizing of a literalist approach to the parables, but also for a rethinking of the relationships between members of a community.

Ames' acceptance that 'we all do live in the ruins of the lives of other generations' is an extension of the point about the impossibility of separating history along simple 'us' and 'them' lines. While it may be true that the ruins of the past are not of our own making, what we do with our own lives will inevitably move this into the future. Since Ames is writing to his young son, but uses the first person plural in this instance, he implies that his son's generation will, inevitably, live in the ruins of Ames' generation. Robinson does not, I would argue, write this to absolve past generations from wrongdoing, nor to pacify a certain guilt about our own mistakes, but as a continuation of the 'posture of grace'. That past generations have made mistakes is just as obvious as the fact that people still get their priorities wrong, but by extending this 'posture of grace' across temporal lines retrospectively as well as prospectively, Robinson is able to maintain her earlier argument about blame, certainty, and the danger of passivism that may arise from the difficulties of overcoming those past mistakes. Once the fact that each generation lives in the ruins of past generations has been accepted as a

commonplace, there is no excuse for inactivity, but rather an emphasis on re-reading, of finding an alternative way of being so as to rebuild the ruins of the past and minimise the damage for the future.

Steiner's disseminative hermeneutics applies then to Robinson's engagement with doctrine, but also to the way in which she has decided to misread a conventional reading of the parable of the prodigal son. By allowing the parable to be problematized by the unchanged strangeness of Jack, Robinson does not imply that he is not penitent about his former behaviour. It is, however, not because Jack has become like his father that he is repentant of his former deeds. The transgressions of his childhood were often of a childish nature and as inexplicable to himself as to others. He remembers, for example, stealing Ames' old baseball glove and then just returning it some days later. (H 210–11) His later transgressions that involved the unnamed girl and his abandoning her, as well as years of alcoholism and even a time spent in prison, are issues that still cause Jack deep regret. But since his relationship with Della, and the 'ten good years' (H 241) of her good 'influence' (H 122), Jack's transgressions are focussed more precisely on the problems of hypocrisy that he finds at work in the Christian communities his father, Della's father, and John Ames are leaders of. This hypocrisy, which is a theme Jesus and the Gospel writers returned to often as well, starts to be linked to Jack's strangeness: not Jack's hypocrisy, but his observation of it in the people around him.

Glory asks whether he has ever considered lying to his father about the state of his soul, just to ease old Boughton's mind. In response to this question Jack relates the story of how he asked Della's father for her hand in marriage, and how her father had been horrified to think that a man without religion would be husband to his daughter. Jack says:

I wished very much at that time that I could have been, you know, a hypocrite. But I just didn't have it in me. My one scruple. And it has cost me dearly. [...] I don't know why I told you that story, except maybe to let you know I do have one scruple. I'm not sure I should be as confident as I am that there is a difference between hypocrisy and plain old dishonesty. Though I have noticed that thieves are crucified and hypocrites seem not to be. (H 150)

This oblique reference to the thieves on the cross further establishes the links to the Gospel stories, but it is this moment in *Home* that indicates the trouble of Jack's strangeness. Homogenisation, conformity to a doctrine, living within the punctuated hermeneutics and knowing that a text can mean 'this and this but not that' creates the most convenient atmosphere for hypocrisy. As Glory observes 'Appearance and Convention were children of the giant Hypocrisy' (H 16). Hypocrisy, as the OED defines it, is an 'assuming of a false appearance of virtue or goodness, with dissimulation of real character [...] especially in respect of religious life'.³⁹ Hypocrisy becomes easier the more clearly defined rules and conventions are, because, as long as behaviour conforms to well-established patterns and traditions, as long as no one tries to pry open the well-established boundaries of acceptable thought and action, everything hidden remains hidden. Hypocrisy thrives on sameness, on homogenisation, but it cannot abide the approximate or the open. Only a clearly defined and dogmatically observed rule can be the basis for hypocrisy, because there is a simplicity inherent in hypocrisy that depends on the observance of conventions. The conventional and the acceptable allow the hypocrite easy access to community: all she has to do is conform. Hypocrisy is then dependent on the narrowing of definitions rather than the humble or gracious opening towards other forms of meaning, and other ways of being.

When we frame this in the terms of Bloom's misreading we can say that a

³⁹ "hypocrisy, n.", *OED Online*. [30 September 2013]

hypocritical poetry would depend on the well-established value of sameness, and there would be no room for alternative readings or the multiplication of meaning. Interpretations would be solidified while misreading would be heterodox, and therefore unacceptable; the seed would not be allowed to grow into new narratives, but restrained to remain the same. Following Steiner we could argue that the greatest threat to the hypocrite is the heretic because of his need for 'endless re-reading', and the constant opening up of the text rather than the establishment of rules and boundaries. This challenging of boundaries and established rules is obviously at work in the stories about Jesus as well as in the stories Jesus told. Without misreading poems, poetry would ossify and die; without the heretic no new challenges would be brought to the text, no new readings would be allowed. Similarly, without Jack's transgressive behaviour Gilead would never be opened up to its own hypocrisy or to an alternative way of being. Reading Jack as a text and constantly misunderstanding him and his actions, however, leaves everyone exasperated, not least Jack himself, which indicates that Robinson understands that the temptation to succumb to rules and regulations is not merely a form of legalism and certainty, but often simply convenient. Endless re-reading also means endless effort, endless energy, limitless questioning. While I argued before that heresy is vitalistic, it is so only in its resistance to settling and therefore also intensely tiring.

Robinson's misreading of the parable depends then on a swerve away from its original context. The parable of the prodigal son is the last of three parables grouped together by Luke that deal with a lost sheep, a lost coin and the lost son respectively (Luke 15). Luke prefaces this section by indicating that 'the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them."' Jesus told the three parables as a way to explain why he spent time with 'publicans

and sinners' (Luke 15. 1). Robinson, however, never questions Boughton's loyalty to his son despite the things Jack has perpetrated. This question simply does not need to be answered: Robert Boughton loves his son and would invite him back regardless of what he has done. As such Robinson swerves away from the original intention of the parable: *Home* is not about Boughton's willingness to forgive, even though this is an obvious part of the story and Robinson makes sure she incorporates it in her novel.

The swerve away is to accept the invitation to come home, which in the parable seems to be the shocking twist, as a commonplace. Glory has come home, Jack comes home, all the children and grandchildren come home, this is not the shock. Robinson uses the parable's setting and narrative as a beginning, but once she has established the swerve away, the shock or twist is that forgiveness and grace become the cause of misunderstanding and bring a constant reminder of human limits. By emptying (Kenosis) these terms of their utility and simultaneously refilling them with mystery, Robinson is able to question the act of simply saying sorry, or simply forgiving, without recognising and acknowledging the pain which is so real in life in general, and particularly in Boughton's life. Using Boughton's arthritis as an extended metaphor as a combination of Proverbs 13. 12, 'Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when desire cometh, it is a tree of life' and 17. 22, 'a merry heart doeth good like medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones', Robinson draws attention to the realities of sorrow and shame, and links them in the twisted and shrinking body of Jack's father. Painfully aware of the reasons for this 'broken spirit', Jack must face up to the reality that his own pain is also carried by his father, and Jack has no reason to believe his son, Robert, will be spared the consequences of his transgressions. Rather than have old Boughton run towards Jack, as Jesus has the father embarrass himself publicly, Jack finds himself

at home and catches his father in his nightshirt. The dried bones prevent the father from running to embrace the wayward son. Instead the scene is slow and stuttering:

Jack offered his hand and said "Sir," and his father said, "Yes, shaking hands is very good. But I'll put down this cane—There," he said, when he had hooked it on the table's edge. "Now," he said, and he embraced his son. "Here you are!" He put the flat of his hand on Jack's lapel, caressingly. "We have worried so much, so much. And here you are."

Jack put his arms around his father's shoulders carefully, as if he were frightened by the old man's smallness and frailty, or embarrassed by it. (H 33)

This scene is repeated, or misread, again when Jack first meets John Ames:

He came up the steps, hat in hand, smiling as if there was some old joke between us [...] but I was sort of struggling out of the porch swing at the time, which would be no great problem except of course there is nothing steady about a porch swing to grab on to [...] so there was Jack Boughton with that look on his face, lifting me onto my feet by my elbow. And I swear it was as if I had stepped right in a hole, he was so much taller than I than he's ever been before. Of course I knew I'd been losing some height, but this was downright ridiculous' (G 105)

These scenes, so different from the biblical reunion, indicate a further dimension Robinson adds to her narrative: what is done in Gilead can be forgiven, but it cannot be undone; there is a physical aspect to the passing of human time that the parable ignores, but that Robinson emphasises here. This problematizes grace and forgiveness as acts of absolution, and emphasizes the difficulty of finding closure.

This becomes, however, a way to allow or expect openness: forgiveness in Robinson's novels is not a matter of forgiving and forgetting, it is rather a 'posture of grace', a beginning of openness to the other that is a re-imagining of Jesus's hyperbolic reading of the Mosaic law. To love a neighbour as oneself is clearly a difficult task, but Jesus's commandment to love one's enemies is beyond the ability or imagination of most people. Exegetes of these verses often struggle with the

impracticality of following Jesus's exaggerated version. But, if one takes Jesus's command as a misreading of the Mosaic command following the movements of Bloom's theory—swerving away by moving from neighbour to enemy, rethinking the meaning of the words by using hyperbole, and emptying them through this exaggeration—the meaning of the commandment becomes unstable. Instead of emphasising the difficulty of the commandment, Jesus focuses on the fact that his Jewish contemporaries are indistinguishable from their non-Jewish neighbours, including, by the context, the Roman occupiers.⁴⁰ Jesus undermines the distinctiveness of his compatriots by revealing that, what Moses had commanded as a command from God, is practiced universally: it is not exceptional to love loved ones. The passage then turns from a hyperbolic treatment of the Mosaic code into a questioning of otherness and sameness. In conjunction with Jesus's further statement that God himself indeed does 'make the sun rise on the evil and the good', Jesus undermines sameness as a prerequisite for equal treatment, and otherness as an excuse for mistreatment.

Further, the 'love your enemy' is not conditional on the changing of the enemy's status as enemy; the enemy may well remain an enemy even when one loves him: again the 'posture of grace' fore-gives. Robinson makes it clear that Jack, although repentant of his past, has not become like everyone else in Gilead, nor can he conform to the way of life of the white Christian community. Jack's father has attempted to love Jack unconditionally, but is unaware of his own shortcomings where questions of race and gender are concerned. It is Lila, the one who shows an affinity to Jack that is never fully explained, who is more hospitable towards him, and manages to open up a space where his question can be answered.

⁴⁰ Matthew 6. 41 'and whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain' is often interpreted as referring to a Roman law (Angaria) which allowed Roman authorities to demand inhabitants of occupied territories to carry their belongings but could not force him to carry it further than one mile. See R. T. France, *NICNT: The Gospel of Matthew*.

Robinson shows that despite old Boughton's understanding of the 'posture of grace' that he tried to convey to his congregation, his family, and ultimately to himself, he does not recognise his own blind spots in relation to racial difference. He is, as Ames recognises of himself, also one who 'sees and sees but does not perceive'. I do not want to imply that Robinson ultimately shifts some blame back on Boughton and Ames as a way to release Jack from his responsibilities towards his family, but rather that Robinson remains committed to creating a blind spot in all of her characters because Jesus's words about not judging depend on this idea:

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam *is* in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye. (Matthew 7. 1-5)

Robinson's 'posture of grace', conflated with humility, is then a misreading not only of Jesus's command to forgive, but also of his command not to judge. Judgment and blame lead to making excuses, but recognising the 'beam' in ones own eyes leads to action, an action different from, and alternative to, the acts of judging and blaming. Jack does not claim to be without his own blind spots, but he has tried to find an alternative way of being by opening himself to alterity. A heretic unable to reduce himself to sameness, he finds in the end that there is no home for him at home. The heretic reader cannot settle, but must always, and as Steiner says, incessantly, read again.

Robinson ends *Gilead* on the richness of grace and the limitations of doctrinal statements about God. Ames reflects that 'the Lord absolutely transcends any understanding [he has] of Him, which makes loyalty to Him a different thing from

loyalty to whatever customs and doctrines and memories [he happens] to associate with Him.' (G 269) She ends *Home* by reflecting that to be able to prepare a space for the stranger to find a home is something worth investing in, even a lifetime. *Gilead's* ending is a clear example of how approximation works to allow a certain incompleteness to exist, and emphasises the need for humility in the face of unanswerable questions as well as a willingness to accept an open-ended and sometimes ambiguous explanation of human limitation and divine inscrutability. *Home's* ending allows Glory a glimpse of her brother's love for his family, his father, and their home through Della's presence. It is finally, in Jack's absence, that she realises that he has shared his childhood memories with his partner, and that he has told her about Glory, and his other brothers and sisters, and that his strangeness has never been a lack of love, but just a different way of being. It is also at the end of both novels that Robinson allows herself to make a clear reference to Jesus. In *Home*, as Glory watches her brother walk away, she is reminded of Isaiah 53. 3 when she thinks 'Who would bother to be kind to him? A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their face. Ah, Jack.' (H 331)⁴¹ At this moment Jack is compared to Jesus, but again not as a redeemer, but as one who, by his own lack of sameness, cannot but remain on the outside. Jack then, at the end approximates Jesus precisely by his own inability to be like everyone else. In the end both 'older brothers', Ames and Glory, remain, as Jesus says, always with the father, even taking on the role of the father, but the prodigal cannot stay.

Robinson understands that to retain the gap necessary for approximation also means that a distance has to be maintained. Imagining Jesus in 'Imagination

⁴¹ Isaiah 53. 1–7 as a description of the 'suffering servant' became an important way for early Christian interpreters to identify the crucified Jesus with this prophecy. See Herbert Marks *The English Bible* footnote on Isaiah 52. 13–53. 12, and compare Acts 8. 26–35.

and Community' she writes: 'presence is a great mystery, and presence in absence, which Jesus promised and has epitomised, is, at a human scale, a great reality for all of us in the course of ordinary life'⁴² Jack, by leaving, takes on another aspect of what, according to Robinson, epitomises Jesus. This outsider status and his absence combine to consolidate Jack as an unreadable text or riddle, and as an ongoing enigma to his own family. The heretic Jack leaves again, still searching for a place where he is allowed to practice an alternative way of being, but it is clear from *Home's* ending that in every leaving there is also always a possibility of a return.

In *Gilead* it is Ames' thought about the town that leads him to reflect that 'it seems rather Christ-like to be as unadorned as this place is, as little regarded.' (G 281) Gilead, the town at the bottom of hell, a place cursed with sameness, still can approximate Jesus by its lack of extraneous decoration, by its simplicity and endurance. Both accounts could be construed as unorthodox, if not clearly heterodox, but, by resisting the narrowing down of doctrinal certainties and allowing for misunderstanding and incomprehension to remain, Robinson's novels are fictional approximations of Jesus rather than dogmatic or demotic consolidations of conventional interpretations of Jesus's parable.

⁴² Robinson, 'Imagination and Community', p. 20.

Chapter III

Fragments of the Gospels and Glimpses of Grace in Denis Johnson's *Angels and Jesus' Son*.

Moving out of the safe world of *Gilead* into the fictional worlds created by Denis Johnson is imaginatively to follow Jack back in time into his life in the gutter. Johnson's characters are wandering drug addicts, drifting alcoholics and desperate petty-criminals. There are no 'begats' for Johnson's characters; no sense of past or history. Instead they live firmly in the present; between a bad choice and a wrong move they sometimes experience one moment of joy, peace, beauty, love even. But very little lasts; money is spent, drugs are used, alcohol is consumed, relationships are broken, friendships are unravelled, and lives are, often abruptly, terminated.

And yet I argue that Johnson writes fictional approximations of Jesus and that his stories are explorations of the workings of grace in a decidedly broken world; a world where there are no supernatural intrusions, where there are no saviours; where there is mainly pain, and crime, and injustice. But also small glimmers of hope and opportunities to change, and I will argue that Johnson uses the narrative arch of *Angels and Jesus' Son* to reimagine the saying of Jesus that 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit' (John 12. 24). As I have argued in my misreading of the parable of the sower, Johnson also imagines different types of death: one that is the end of life, and one that is the beginning of something new.

Unlike Marilynne Robinson, however, Johnson does not focus mainly on one parable of Jesus, nor has he published essays of criticism that might shed light on his own views on society and religion. Johnson's *Jesus' Son*, for example, misreads the Gospels in such a complicated and often adverse way that it is much harder to

recognise the biblical source. There are obvious markers, but these are often placed within a narrative that lends no support to interpretations that would seek to map Johnson's stories onto the biblical source material. The stories dwell in much more detail on the bleak, dark and unsavoury aspects of society, and his characters tend to be unloveable misfit criminals, drug addicts, prostitutes and unremarkable individuals on the margins of society. This focus on the underbelly of American society contrasts clearly with Robinson's work (there are no reverend narrators in Johnson), but I argue that Johnson's prose is equally a site on which he tries to rethink the Gospel narratives, the parables, and sayings of Jesus, often touching on the same themes of love, forgiveness, and belonging that Robinson's texts struggle with.

It is a common feature of the few academic articles that focus on Denis Johnson's work that they must decry the fact that, as Timothy L. Parish notes, Johnson's 'work remains unknown to academic readers', or again as Asbjørn Grønstad writes that Johnson 'has largely escaped the attention of literary critics.'¹ Johnson's fiction continues to receive very little critical attention, attested by the fact that to date no book length study of his work exists. However, more beneficial for my purpose, Parish claims that 'it is not the specter (sic) of drug use' that makes his fiction unpalatable but, rather, 'the possibility of an unauthorized, alternative form of salvation outside the ingrained secularity of contemporary life.'² My argument, that Denis Johnson writes fictional approximations of Jesus, fits particularly well in this critical lacuna, and although this chapter does not attempt to cover all of Johnson's work, it will hopefully begin to redress the lack of critical

¹ Timothy L. Parish, 'Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*: To Kingdom Come' in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 43.1 (Fall 2001) pp. 17–29, p. 18. Asbjørn Grønstad, 'Denis Johnson's Postmodern Lazarus: Transforming Faith in *Resuscitation of a Hanged Man*' in *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 38.1 (Spring 2006) pp. 66–77, p. 67.

² Parish, p. 19.

interest in his oeuvre.

Denis Johnson has, to date, authored ten novels, four collections of poetry, four plays, a collection of stories, as well as a collection of reportage, and his work has appeared in periodicals as disparate as *The New Yorker* and *Playboy*.³ Johnson was described, in 1983, by William Harmon as 'the most accomplished and most promising' of the "'under-forty" poets', has won several awards, including, most recently, the United States' National Book Award for his 2007 novel *Tree of Smoke*, and Harold Bloom included Johnson's *Angels* (1983), *Fiskadoro* (1985), and *Jesus' Son* (1992) in *The Western Canon*.⁴

Johnson is often compared to Charles Bukowski and William Burroughs for the way his stories and poems deal with substance abuse and the effects of alcohol and drugs on the relationships and decisions of his characters.⁵ Robert McClure Smith even calls him the 'poet laureate of the pathology of addiction.'⁶ Although he started his writing career as a poet, since the publication of his first novel *Angels*, Johnson has focussed on developing his craft as a writer of prose. The sensibilities of his language and religious imagery fundamental to his poems continue to surface in his novels, and it is obvious from reading his texts, and confirmed by statements Johnson has made in interviews, that religious themes are an important aspect of his writing.

In *Angels*, Johnson explores questions of freedom and arrest/rest through the

³ *The New Yorker* published two of Johnson's poems 'The Monk's Insomnia' (18 October 1982) and 'The Skewbald Horse' (23 January 1984)—both poems appeared later in the collection *The Veil* (1987)—as well as four stories that would eventually be published in *Jesus' Son*: 'Two Men' (19 September 1988), 'Work' (14 November 1988), 'Dirty Wedding' (05 November 1990) and 'Emergency' (16 September 1991). Johnson's short fiction *The Starlight On Idaho* appeared in the February 2007 issue of *Playboy Magazine*, and *Nobody Move* (2009) was initially published in four monthly episodes starting in the July 2008 issue of *Playboy Magazine*.

⁴ William Harmon, 'A Poetry Odyssey' in *The Sewanee Review*, 91.3 (Summer 1983) pp. 457–73. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994) p. 565.

⁵ David Amsden, 'Denis Johnson's Second Stage' in *New York Magazine*, 17 June 2002 <<http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/features/6127/>> [accessed 23 June 2015].

⁶ Robert McClure Smith, 'Addiction and Recovery in Denis Johnson's *Jesus Son*' in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 42.2 (Fall 2001) pp. 180–191, p. 180.

parallel stories of Jamie and Bill Houston whose physical journeys from the West Coast to the East, and finally to Phoenix, Arizona, resembles their pursuit of 'transcendence and even grace.'⁷ Although not made explicit in the text, an almost identical physical journey forms the narrative backbone of the non-chronological stories that make up *Jesus' Son*. The spiritual journey in *Jesus' Son* is, however, more concerned with finding something stripped of all pretence, which has obvious links with Jack Boughton's inability to be a hypocrite. However, while Robinson problematizes Jack's homecoming and the hypocrisy of the small town Christians, Johnson's characters in *Angels* and *Jesus' Son* have no sustained interaction with representatives of the church at all. The narrator of *Jesus' Son*, Fuckhead, remains on the outside and resembles Jack Boughton more at the time of Boughton's life in the gutter, and even though at the end of the last story in *Jesus' Son*, Fuckhead is sober and getting better, his rehabilitation does not result in a return to a previous mode of existence. Johnson does deal with the questions of hypocrisy and sameness that Robinson explores, but his fictional approximations also rewrite the Gospel stories in such a way as to force a questioning of how grace, love, and forgiveness can make sense in a world without redemption.

In a short piece for *New York Entertainment*, David Amsden has written that: 'Johnson describes himself as a Christian -- but hardly a conventional one' and proceeds to quote Johnson as saying that "'I'm sure you could find any number of Christians who could assure me that I'm going to hell.'"⁸ This self-positioning of the author as belonging yet being outside is helpful for our exploration of Johnson's writing, because it indicates a certain resistance to institutionalised forms of Christianity, and places him in the role of a heretic. Johnson himself has claimed that he writes about 'the dilemma of living in a fallen world' and specifically

⁷ Parish, p. 17.

⁸ Amsden, 'Denis Johnson's Second Stage'.

struggling with the question: 'Why is it like this if there's supposed to be a God?'⁹ It should then not be a surprise that, like Robinson, Johnson does not incorporate Christ-figures in his stories, but, by populating his fiction with those poor and destitute with which the Gospel writers surround Jesus, he is able to rewrite aspects of the Gospels and question the efficacy of an institutionalised Christianity that has been unable, or unwilling, to prevent the creation of a world in which love and forgiveness can still be portrayed as entirely alien to certain strata of society.

Grønstad defines Johnson's writing helpfully by claiming that 'at the core of Johnson's creative method [...] is an aesthetics of addiction driven by a desire to possess and rearticulate other cultural texts, the shards of which relentlessly crop up in the author's own narratives.'¹⁰ This use of 'shards' is evidenced in the way that Johnson's novels do not, like Robinson's, offer a sustained engagement with a single parable. This in turn necessitates an engagement that is more focussed on moments in the text that can be read as misreadings of biblical material, without the recourse to an overarching or unifying narrative principle.

In Chapter Two, I made the claim that both Robinson's novels *Gilead* and *Home* are narrated by characters who can be read as the older brother from the parable of the Prodigal Son. By incorporating this narrative perspective there is a continuity to the novels as well as an on-going engagement with the same parable, even though Robinson alludes to other parts of the Gospels as well. Johnson's approach is much less concentrated, but this difference in form does not undermine my claim that Johnson writes fictional approximations of Jesus. It does, however, require a more microscopic approach to his texts that inevitably opens

⁹ Quoted in David Amsden, 'Denis Johnson's Second Stage'.

¹⁰ To indicate Johnson's 'transtextual sweep' Grønstad supplies, in a footnote, a list of nine literary references, six allusions to popular music, five to films, two references to philosophers and six to political organisations as well as references to the Bible, Joan of Arc and C. S. Lewis's *Reflections on the Psalms*. Grønstad, p. 71, footnote 14.

this chapter up to the temptation to de-contextualise for the sake of brevity and clarity. To facilitate a close reading of all of Johnson's work within a larger context would necessitate a separate thesis. However, in an attempt at minimising the de-contextualisation of Johnson's oeuvre, I will give a brief overview of his novels and plays to consolidate my foundational argument that Johnson is actively working to incorporate religious, and specifically Christian, themes in his work. It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that all Johnson's novels are a concerted effort to rewrite the Gospels, or to claim that Johnson's work can, or should, only be read through a theologically informed criticism. The heresy of criticism lies obviously in its pluralistic nature, and in this chapter I will show that it is helpful to think of Johnson's texts as responding to, and re-thinking biblical narratives, even when they do not fit comfortably within the category of fictional approximations of Jesus. To demonstrate Johnson's fascination with religious themes I will indicate the ways in which he incorporates these in the texts that will not be part of my discussion, either because the references are too oblique, or the work deserves a larger space than this chapter can offer.

Fiskadoro (1985) is set in an undefined future time and concerns a superstitious community concerned with apocalypse and a warbled idea of the Parousia: 'it strains all belief to think that these are the places the god Quetzalcoatl, the god Bob Marley, the god Jesus Christ, promised to come back to and build their kingdoms.'¹¹ Like the remnants of the previous civilisation left behind by the cataclysmic event that has 'crushed the mountains' from which the characters build their patchwork homes, the religious references are fragmentary and deliberately incoherent, and do not explore the themes of the Gospels more recognisable in a fictional approximation of Jesus.

¹¹ Denis Johnson, *Fiskadoro* (London: Random House, 2003) p. 3.

In *The Stars at Noon* (1986) Johnson describes the civil war in Nicaragua as a hell populated by the transient, and often ghostly, journalists, black-marketeers, and diplomats who are often confused and lost and unable to communicate. At the end of the novel a North American, after having paid in advance for sex with two women, is unable to get an erection. The narrator, who is one of the women, says: 'will you just *observe* how this character is tortured?' (Emphasis in original) She then finishes her narration by making the reference to hell more explicit: 'Holy Jesus, what this guy must have done in his time on Earth . . . To be put here with his dreams, but not himself, made substance . . .'¹² It could be justifiably argued that depicting hell can be a way to explore evil as a contrast to the teachings of Jesus, but the narrative of *The Stars at Noon* lacks the misreading of parts of the Gospels the fictional approximations require.

The title, *Resuscitation of a Hanged Man* (1991), implies an exploration of a life-after-death that I have already indicated is part of the two novels I will discuss in this chapter. In contrast to the characters in *Angels* and *Jesus' Son*, however, this novel is concerned with the private spiritual struggles of the protagonist, Leonard English. English has doubts about his Catholic faith, but cannot resolve these doubts into a clear atheism. While receiving communion he finds himself 'back on his knees in the pews with the body of Our Lord melting in his mouth, not really here again.' He then prays: 'Our Father, although I came here in faith, you gave me a brain where everything fizzes and nothing connects.'¹³ This struggle between reason and faith is never completely resolved, and this gives the novel an open-ended character, but this theme is more fruitfully explored through a theologically inflected literary criticism than by an approach that seeks to argue for a misreading of the Bible.

¹² Denis Johnson, *The Stars at Noon* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 1986) p. 180–81.

¹³ Denis Johnson, *Resuscitation of A Hanged Man* (London: Methuen Publishing, 2004) p. 14.

Already Dead: A Californian Gothic (1997) is a complex of narrative voices and explores the various spiritualities of the so called New Age, but it also alludes to the Gospels in Johnson's idiosyncratically subversive way. While discussing a deal to kill a woman, one character wonders: '[...] each of us had come to the other out of nowhere. Nothing contradictory surrounded us [...]—no familiar context full of obstacles, no deflating local histories. As a prophet gets laughed at in his hometown, so also is the big-time conspirator. But a stranger could be God.'¹⁴ This reference to the Gospels (Matthew 13. 57; Mark 6. 4; Luke 4. 24; John 4. 44) is clearly a misreading of the biblical text, and the novel is concerned with the death-like existence of its characters evident in its title, but the novel's length and the sporadic use of the Gospel themes make it less fruitful as a subject for my thesis.

The first person narrative account in *The Name of the World* (2000) lacks the sustained engagement with the Gospels the fictional approximation requires. One moment in the text is, however, helpful to emphasise Johnson's resistance to dogmatism: the protagonist attends a church meeting, albeit unplanned, in which the host emphasises that they are not 'about doctrine so much'.¹⁵ The noir-ish pulp fiction *Nobody Move* (2009) questions the power of forgiveness and mercy in a violently criminal atmosphere, but it never rises to the sophisticated level of misreading Johnson reaches in some of his other work.

Tree of Smoke (2007), at just over 600 pages Johnson's longest work to date, continues to raise questions about faith, hell and redemption, even contextualising these themes by introducing John Calvin's writings in the text, but, although there are similarities between *Tree of Smoke* and *Angels*, the text does not clearly re-imagine the Gospels in the way this thesis requires. *Seek: Reports from the Edges of America and Beyond* (2001) is a collection of articles from various periodicals that

¹⁴ Denis Johnson, *Already Dead: A Californian Gothic* (London: Picador, 1999) p. 93.

¹⁵ Denis Johnson, *The Name of the World* (London: Methuen Publishing, 2000) p. 84.

commissioned Johnson to report on such diverse events as the civil war in Liberia in 'Civil War in Hell', a Hippie convention ('Hippies'), and alternative expressions of Christianity in 'Bikers for Jesus'. Although mainly observational pieces with none or little actual commentary that might shed some light on his fictional texts, they are important to mention here for the way in which, even in his journalism, Johnson's themes of spirituality and religion are not absent.

Johnson's plays *Hellhound on My Trail* (2000), *Shoppers Carried By Escalators Into the Flames* (2001), and *Soul of A Whore* (2003) all deal with the dysfunctional Cassandra family consisting of three petty-criminal brothers named after three evangelists, John, Luke and Mark, their sister Marigold, their religious father and grandmother, and their incarcerated mother who is serving life in prison for the 'vehicular homicide' of the youngest Cassandra child Amiga (Amy). These plays provide little material for my thesis argument, but Johnson revisits Mark Cassandra in *The Starlight on Idaho* (2007) through a series of letters Mark writes as he is going through alcohol rehabilitation. These letters are close in tone to Fuckhead's reminiscences in *Jesus' Son*, and deal especially with the effects of Antabuse on the rehabilitating Mark and his conviction that the Devil is talking to him. This thematic closeness makes *The Starlight on Idaho* an important companion piece to the novels I will discuss.

Purvis (2006) is Johnson's latest play in which he imagines the relationship between Melvin Purvis and J. Edgar Hoover and, like his novella *Train Dreams* (2011), offers little to engage with within the remit of this thesis. Johnson's latest novel, *The Laughing Monsters* (2015), revisits themes from *The Stars at Noon* and his journalistic pieces about the civil war in Sierra Leone, and continues his interest in the impotence of violence, lost wandering characters, and the lack of clearly definable categories of right and wrong. His last novel lacks the moments of

grace and hope that make *Angels* and *Jesus' Son* suited to my project, but it should be clear that Johnson's interest in rewriting and misreading the Bible is not limited to the two texts I have chosen to engage with here.¹⁶

As indicated briefly above, I will argue that in both *Angels* and *Jesus' Son*, Johnson explores concepts like grace, forgiveness and love, and re-writes Jesus's invitation to find rest by taking up a light burden through opposing the freedom of movement combined with an enslavement to drugs and alcohol, to the spatial limiting of the body combined with a freedom from substance abuse. Johnson's question about the state of the world slides into a question about what freedom is. I argue that he does not create easy dichotomies of class, but rather that he approximates the Jesus of the Gospels through his stories when he equates both drugs and money with forms of enslavement.

Jesus's invitation to rest (Matthew 11. 28–30) is misread in *Angels* through moments of arrest, and the novel also tropes on the image of the Phoenix to indicate that one form of existence must terminate before a new way of being can begin as a rewriting of the way a kernel of wheat must die to begin to bear fruit. Although the allusions to the Gospels in *Jesus' Son* are more disparate and complex, this collection of stories, while describing a similar process of rehabilitation, develops Johnson's ideas about the lack of agency of his protagonist. It also poses questions about rehabilitation and its dependence on aspirational models to provide motivation for change. I will show that, while *Angels* is undoubtedly a misreading of the Gospels, *Jesus' Son* is a misreading of *Angels* that allows Johnson to revisit and develop some of his ideas further.

¹⁶ Johnson's poetry, collected in *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly: Poems Collected and New* (1995), is not represented in this chapter introduction because I thought it unwise to try and summarise the twenty-five years of Johnson's poetic output within the short space this thesis chapter.

Angels: Freedom in Captivity

Johnson's first novel, *Angels*, describes the plight of Jamie, a young mother of two girls who decides to leave her husband after she discovers he is unfaithful to her. On the Greyhound bus to a new beginning she meets Bill Houston, 'ex-sailor and ex-offender', who gives her beer laced with bourbon, and the two decide to stay together once they get to Pittsburgh.¹⁷ There they deplete Bill's resources faster than anticipated and they separate. On her quest to re-unite with Bill, because she 'had realized that she had a few words to say' to him, Jamie finds herself outside a coffee shop at the Greyhound bus terminal in Chicago (A 43). Here a person 'in a cheap and ridiculous red suit' (A 43) who 'wore his blond hair all the same length, brandished in all possible directions from his scalp like an electric flame' (A 45), and who refers to himself as 'Ned Higher-and-Higher' (A 53), proceeds to drug, kidnap, and rape Jamie. Ned Higher-and-Higher clearly evokes the iconic depiction of Satan as a red and fiery angel of destruction, and his description of the bus station as 'Ground Zero' as well as the '*exact* centre of town' (A 48, emphasis in original), further connects Johnson's Chicago with the lowest circle in Dante's hell.¹⁸ When it is reported in the newspaper that Jamie has been raped, Bill realises that she was looking for him and he feels implicated in the crime. Before Jamie finds Bill, however, he also experiences the lonely and destructive character of the space he inhabits. Bill appears to be in a bar in a city of which he does not know the name, but the geographic location is not as important as the fact that Bill neither knows the place, nor the time, nor the way he arrived where he is. It is a rare moment of lucidity when he thinks:

¹⁷ Denis Johnson, *Angels* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) p. 37. Further page numbers in the text.

¹⁸ Dante describes Satan as having '...three faces on his head!|One, which was of fiery red, in front'. See Dante Alighieri, 'Inferno, Canto XXXIV, l. 39' in *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by C. H. Sisson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) When Dante and Virgil have climbed out of Hell down the devil's body they find themselves right side up again, indicating that Satan is at the absolute zero point, lower than which no one can go (Inferno, Canto XXXIV ll. 76–116).

[i]t frightened him in his mind to wake up in unexpected towns with great holes in his recollection, particularly to understand that he'd been doing things, maybe *committing* things: his body mobilizing itself, perhaps changing his life all around, making raw deals he would someday have to pay the ticket for. (A 37, emphasis in original)

In this state, although still drunk, he starts to cry and shouts 'I wanna meet my *responsibilities!*' A shout, seemingly sincere, but drowned out by the mundanity of 'city traffic', which ends up sounding 'like the tiniest thing he'd ever said' (A 38). The moment of resolve reduced to the least significant of all his utterances by the overwhelmingly claustrophobic oppression of the place. Nature is no kinder force either as Bill experiences the wind, which has travelled from the North Pole, 'across the flat of Canada for a thousand miles to slap him in the face' (A 37). The timelessness, his dizziness, the cold and dirt, the 'emptiness that was always falling through him and never hit the ground' all combine into an image of hell. Or if not hell, then at least a road paved with the good intentions of the miserable creatures who have left nothing but their 'innumerable bits of trash' (A 37).

His problems unresolved, Bill walks down the street, looking for an opportunity to divest two women of their purses, but settles for robbing a hardware store, manned by one 'young gentleman'. Bill forces the clerk, after forcing him to hand over the money, to pray out loud as Bill leaves the store. The audio-visual effect of this scene is overwhelming. Bill Houston, 'ex-offender' walks out of the hardware store, where everything is 'gleaming' and 'burning with an inner flame', to the soundtrack of the first line of the Lord's prayer that turns into the screams of the young man shouting 'Jesus Christ, oh, Jesus Christ' (A 40). But, no rescue comes; nothing in this moment is redemptive or redeemable. The feeling of being lost is a power that encloses both Bill and Jamie and overwhelms them: Jamie victimised, Bill victimizer. Or rather, both succumb to the inevitable: the

fallen state of the place. Once in hell there is no salvation, and it will prove difficult to escape. Johnson, however, never turns hell into a supernatural, post-mortal state of eternal punishment; in his novels hell is decidedly man-made and frighteningly probable. More disturbingly, it is hard to imagine a world without it. In *The Starlight on Idaho*, Johnson expresses this idea more explicitly through Mark Cassandra's frustration when he writes:

This is so fucked. So fucked. I'm full-up from my anus to my eyeballs. Excuse me, I have to burn this page and write a letter to God while it's on fire. Question is, God, where are you? What the fuck on earth do you think you're doing, man? We are in HELL down here, HELL down here, HELL. You know? Where is Superman?¹⁹

The overwhelming sense for Johnson's characters is not only that they are powerless to change their predicament, but also that they face their problems alone. The attempts of both Bill and Jamie to escape from this hell can only take the form of lateral movement: first, Jamie's bus ride from California to Pennsylvania crosses the entire United States from West to East; then, after their reunion in Chicago, Bill decides to take Jamie to Phoenix, Arizona, where he has been in touch with 'some bad people' who turn out to be his 'friends and relations' (A 64). But this horizontal movement fails to achieve any change: their second new beginning comes to an end when Bill and his brothers, James and Burris, with the help of their friend, Dwight Snow, try to rob a bank and James is shot by the security guard, Bill shoots and kills the guard for which he ends up on death row, Burris, designated to drive the get-away car, panics and walks away, and Jamie, increasingly dependent on alcohol and drugs, moves towards a physical and mental break-down.

James R. Giles calls the space Jamie and Bill inhabit 'Greyhound space'

¹⁹ Denis Johnson, *The Starlight on Idaho* in *Playboy Magazine* (February 2007) pp. 62–64, 120–129, p. 122.

because 'in the American mythos it is the marginalized and the powerless who travel by bus'.²⁰ He elaborates further:

The world [Jamie] and Bill encounter consists of bus stations, seedy motels, trailer parks, run-down movie theatres, and grimy back streets. With its connotations of transience and constant motion, "Greyhound space" is an appropriate label for this world.²¹

This hell on earth, the space for the marginalised and powerless, is also the world of many of the characters that seek out Jesus in the Gospels, but, by re-creating this world without the presence of a saviour, Bill and Jamie's geographic relocations are impotent exertions unable to prevent their world from slowly suffocating their attempts at change and escape. Johnson's question, '[w]hy is it like this if there's supposed to be a God?', echoed in Mark Cassandra's letter, remains unanswered for Bill and Jamie, as well as for Mark Cassandra, until they are all forced to stop trying to escape. Bill ends up in prison, Jamie in an asylum, Mark Cassandra in rehab, and Fuckhead, the protagonist of *Jesus' Son*, in hospital. This spatial limiting is an important trope for Johnson, especially because the 'Greyhound space' is one of constant, almost incessant, motion.

Arrest means to stop, stand still, to remain, to rest, as well as to catch or capture.²² Matthew's Gospel records Jesus as saying:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest in your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11. 28–30)

Johnson's characters usually overcome restlessness by using drugs and alcohol. Just as Ned Higher-and-Higher gives Jamie two white pills so she'll 'feel wide

²⁰ James R. Giles, *The Spaces of Violence* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006) p. 111.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²² "arrest, v.", *OED Online*. [20 November 2013]

awake' (A 49), and then later hands her two red pills to 'take the edge off' (A 52), Burris, Bill's youngest brother, shoots up with heroin or smokes marijuana to keep himself calm, and Jamie turns to drinking red wine for breakfast to help her through the day. But self-medication, like geographic relocation, does not permanently remove the restlessness from Johnson's characters, neither physically nor mentally. This restless transitory existence is arrested for Bill when he is caught by the police and put into prison, tried, and finally put on death row. Jamie's rest comes after she is admitted into an asylum and goes through withdrawal, therapy, and eventually takes steps to be fully rehabilitated. Fuckhead relates his recovery in 'Steady Hands at Seattle General' in the opening sentence: '[i]nside of two days I was shaving myself',²³ and Mark Cassandra's recovery is communicated through the length of his last letter which captures his ability to concentrate for longer than any of his previous attempts.

Johnson rewrites Jesus's invitation to rest through Bill's arrest, utilising both meanings of the word, when Bill's mother realises the positive effect incarceration has on her son. She notices that

[...] he looked good. Obviously he'd been eating and exercising. It was the same as always. Left to his own devices, he was hopeless and dangerous both, but in custody he flourished. Her oldest son was at home in locked places. (A 161)

But Jesus is not just telling people to slow down, or settle in one place, and Johnson subtly complicates his misreading by introducing a direct quote from the Gospels in Bill's mother's thoughts. As she sits in the courtroom she is dwarfed by the size of the hall and thinks:

²³ Denis Johnson, *Jesus' Son* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2002) p. 108. Further page numbers in the text.

[...] it was only on these occasions when her loved ones fought the law that anybody took any notice of her. Though her kind of people were generally ignored –or at best slightly mourned and slightly pitied– by those who built and staffed these magnificent rooms, everyone was forced to see now that it was really for her kind of people that these places had been built, after all– and now *you* are working for *us*. Now you'll take reckoning of us in your sight. The last shall be first. (A 161, emphasis in original)

The context in which Luke records the saying 'there are last which shall be first, and there are first that shall be last' (Luke 13. 30) is one where Jesus warns the people of certain cities that just because he had taught in their streets did not mean they would be part of his kingdom (Luke 13. 22–30). Jesus's rather harsh pronouncements about the Jewish cities in which he has performed 'mighty works' is also recorded in Matthew, but this time contextually linked to Jesus's invitation to rest.

Matthew Chapter 11 starts with John the Baptist's inquiry about Jesus's identity. Jesus responds to this question by pointing out the miracles that he has performed (11. 1–6), but he then turns to the 'multitudes' and asks them rhetorically who they think John the Baptist was (11. 7–15). In verse 16 Jesus says:

But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children. (Matthew 11. 16–19)

This is then followed by the pronouncing of woes over the Jewish cities (11. 20–24), in turn followed by a prayer in which Jesus gives thanks that God 'hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.' (11. 25) The earlier quotation, inviting his listeners to rest, ends the chapter and emphasises Jesus's identification with the 'meek and lowly'. The link between

these two passages, 'the last will be first' and 'come to me', is then the missing passage about the woes.

The reference to the cities who do not respond to Jesus's miracles is, however, important in Johnson's narrative, because Jesus emphasises that 'if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of Judgment, than for thee.' (Matthew 11. 23-4) Because Johnson's narratives are devoid of any supernatural events, the cityscapes he describes are like those cities that had no miracles performed in them, and his characters lack access to a first-hand experience of the divine. This in turn absolves them from the 'sin' of rejecting Jesus, and opens their situations to the working of a grace available only to the ignorant. Paradoxically, Johnson has recognised that his question, 'why is it like this?', can be answered through acknowledging that it is precisely in the absence of a saviour that grace can work in unexpected ways.

Mrs Houston's 'kind of people' are of course those who populate Greyhound space, and Johnson deliberately describes the room so as to diminish Mrs Houston's size by emphasising the 'distant ceiling and ominous bulking judge's bench'. This moment recalls both the opening sentence of the novel '[i]n the Oakland Greyhound all the people were dwarfs' (A 3), and the moment the Houston brothers walk into the bank they plan to rob and James realises:

he hadn't been prepared, somehow for the largeness of it all, for the insignificance of the people surrounding them, as if this great chamber with its oversized plants and tall, thin fountain of water had been constructed for a race of monsters (A 119).

Johnson misreads these two passages together, turning Jesus's 'children', 'babes' and the 'lowly' into the dwarfs of Greyhound space who live lives far removed from

the bankers, governors, and judges, the 'wise and prudent', who generally ignore Mrs Houston's kind of people. Johnson moves from Jesus's invitation to rest to an implication that those who are invited are precisely people like Bill and Jamie. On another occasion Jesus says: 'They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick' (Luke 5. 31), and in just such a way, it is the restless who need rest.

The rest of arrest is, if interpreted literally, of little consolation to Bill who has to face the death penalty. There is, however, another facet to this problem that Johnson introduces by misreading yet another part of a different Gospel. Bill and Jamie represent a layer of society that can be locked in an imposed determinism. Even though they have access to entertainment, mainly film and television, which introduces them to different ways of being, there do not seem to be bridges between their environment and the ones projected on the screens. No matter how they enter the giant structures that symbolise the world they are on the margin of, their own diminished stature will be an enduring reminder that they do not belong.

It is significant that James Houston is employed to help repossess two cars and two motorcycles from someone who has defaulted on his credit-card repayments (A 78–83). Johnson ends the repossession scene with a sunrise that 'turned the truck's interior an unbelievable gold, the gold of conquistadores, the gold of obsession and enslavement' (A 83). The triple repetition of gold matched by the conquistadores, obsession, and enslavement, like an unholy trinity, encapsulates the economic disparity that Johnson alludes to in his description of the bank and courthouse, but the negative connotations of the terms also undermine an assumption that money will solve all problems: gold, like drugs and alcohol, will also enslave its possessors. Because Bill and his brothers assume that money has the potential to help them improve their situation, they enact this belief

in their attempted bank robbery, but the repossession episode indicates the difficulty of escaping from Greyhound space, and the imposed determinism that is often accepted fatalistically in the minds of Johnson's characters.

This deterministic outlook is particularly clear in the moment after Bill robs the hardware store. He experiences a moment where time stands still and he remembers that:

[a] couple of times in the past he's reached this absolute zero of the truth, and without fear or bitterness he realized now that somewhere inside it there was a move he could make to change his life, to become another person, but he'd never be able to guess what it was. He found a cigarette and struck a match – for a moment there was nothing before him but the flame. When he shook it out and the world came back, it was the same place again where all his decisions had been made a long time ago. (A 42)

Like the traffic that drowned out his voice, the flame burns away the possibility of change, and Bill returns to a determined world. Bill Houston does not have an epiphany. He is on the brink of having one, but the moment is interrupted before it can have an impact. This life is at its core both removed from truth and unchangeable. Just as Marilynne Robinson has written that the problem of intolerance is really a 'shrinking of imaginative identification' and a contraction of 'the definitions of "us" and "them"', Johnson also sees that a narrow, inescapable, view of one's potential is detrimental to the life one is able to live.²⁴ This moment of hung-over contemplation is a point of inter-textual significance, because it is here that Johnson rewrites John 8. 31–34:

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. They answered him, We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free? Jesus answered them, Verily, Verily, I say unto you, whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin.

²⁴ Marilynne Robinson, 'Imagination and Community', p. 26.

The idea of being enslaved to sin, sin as master propelling a person forward, is awfully rendered in Bill's realisation of his powerlessness: all his decisions have already been made. But it also re-emphasises Johnson's point about drug and alcohol abuse, as well as the enslavement of money. Bill somehow knows, and Johnson refuses to tell us why or how, that inside truth lies a possibility to change: the change which John's Gospel describes as a movement from slavery to freedom, and which Johnson makes entirely dependent on his character's ability to imagine. Because Bill cannot 'guess what it was', cannot imagine the other person he might be, he is unable to become him; because Bill cannot imagine his life differently he is unable to access the truth in order to make the change. This is also a reminder of the need for the heretical re-reading that allowed Jack Boughton to attempt an alternative way of being, and Lila's insistence that 'a person can change. Everything can change'.²⁵ This may seem like a circular argument: we need freedom from deterministic thinking to create the space in which the imagination can access the truth it needs to be free from a predetermined life. If it is circular, however, it is centrifugal: the initial step towards the truth –not everything is determined– will allow the possibility of change. Once the possibility of change is accepted the imagination, in its boundlessness, will give rise to more change in ever widening circles: a constant re-reading that leads to ever-increasing alternatives.

Johnson links this determinism to an external source: Jesus talks about sin and Johnson rewrites sin as substance abuse and economic oppression. Johnson does not absolve Bill from his crimes, but, as will become more obvious later, neither does he allow the system that creates the economic divide to remain oblivious. If Bill could present an alternative image of himself to himself, he would have already stepped outside the place 'where all his decisions had been made'.

²⁵ Robison, *Gilead*, p. 174.

The result of Bill Houston's failure to see a way out leads to the fulfilment of his fate. When he has been arrested he realises that 'he'd travelled the last small distance of a journey he'd undertaken to complete a very long time ago' (A 137), and when he is moved to CB-6 he knows he has arrived 'where he'd been heading for a long time' (A 165). This is the enslaved Greyhound space dwarf whose decisions have all been made and set him on course for the inevitable. This godless environment compounded by an unbridgeable class divide seemingly allows for only two options: enslavement to the restless and incessant drug-induced motion, or the equally enslaving power of gold.

Johnson approximates Jesus's teaching about enslavement and freedom by implying that crimes and substance abuse, like a slave-driver, propel a person towards a determined future unless a redemptive act, what Jesus calls the truth, replaces the slave-driver with the imagination it takes to begin to be free. Bill, however, does not access this truth until his final moment, the moment of ultimate rest: death. Jesus's light yoke and easy burden are re-written as a third alternative that promises both rest and change, but one that requires a form of death.

As the gas is poisoning his being and he peacefully surrenders his life, Bill's final thought is that he 'would like to take this opportunity [...] to pray for another human being.' (A 207) At the moment of death, Bill has become selfless. He has, in a way, met his responsibilities. He has forgiven his youngest brother Burriss for walking away from the get-away car and, as Jamie tells Burriss, is 'resentment-free' (A 200). As he is dying he looks at the inscription over the door of the gas-chamber: 'death is the mother of beauty.' Bill Houston does not know the line is from Wallace Stevens' poem 'Sunday Morning', but we are surely asked to make this connection. Stevens repeats the line, and Johnson does not make clear which one he is rewriting in this scene. First, in the fifth stanza, Stevens renders it:

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
 Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
 And our desires.

In the sixth stanza he repeats it as follows:

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
 Within whose burning bosom we devise
 Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.²⁶

Stevens' use of 'fulfilment to' instead of 'of' in the fifth stanza implies that, rather than seeing death as a moment of completion, it is an ending, the closing of a life. Dreams and desires, while we are alive, are never fulfilled, and neither are they completed when we discontinue to breathe, but in death they are stopped, arrested. If Johnson is utilising the first rendering, we may simply say that Bill's life ends, even if it was never complete, and if any beauty comes from Bill's death it is neither to his benefit nor for his enjoyment. This first pronouncement is decisively material, physical in its abruptness, the semi-colon arresting the thought before moving on to the ending.

The second instance is, however, more transcendental, moving beyond the material to the mystical, implying eternity in the word 'sleeplessly', which captures something more alive than sleeplessness. The change from semi-colon to comma allows the thought to flow on rather than stutter, and allows us to breathe, and breathe again as we move from the thought of death and beauty to the verb 'devise', the infinitive, as if death is a place, paradoxically, where we continue to do, even if it is only cerebrally, and where tiredness has ended but imagining continues.

Johnson's use of Stevens' poetry adds another level of ambiguity to his text:

²⁶ Wallace Stevens, 'Sunday Morning' in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, eds, Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, 5th edn (London: Norton, 2005) pp. 1257–60.

neither Bill nor Brian, the death row guard, understand the inscription, why it is there, or that it is from a poem written by one of America's 20th Century poets (A 175). Like Bill's ignorance of the identity of the faces carved in Mt. Rushmore, this could simply be read as yet another way of emphasising his lack of education and interest in history or culture.²⁷ In light of my earlier reading of Johnson's novel as a misreading of Jesus's invitation to take on an easy yoke and light burden, however, this inscription functions as both a misreading of Stevens, and a link to Jesus's yoke: Johnson combines a misreading of Jesus's invitation to 'find rest in your souls', and Jesus's statement about the seed that must die in 'death is the mother of beauty'.

By isolating this line from the rest of Stevens' poem, Johnson focuses on the paradox that death becomes a moment of fruitfulness, and he finalises this through Bill's desire to 'pray for another human being'. The soul is rewritten here not as something nebulous that survives death, but as being human, and when Bill dies he does not pray *for* Jamie, Burris, James or his mother, instead he prays 'for another human being', which does not refer to another person, but to a desire to be different. By linking Jesus's invitation to rest to another one of Jesus's sayings 'for what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' (Matthew 16. 26), and Stevens' death as a new beginning, Johnson undermines the deterministic, or fatalistic, attitudes which have placed Bill and Jamie in the situation they find themselves. When Bill is in the execution chamber, tied in the chair, Johnson writes: 'A truth filled up the chamber: there was nothing left for him now.' (A 206) The truth that can set Bill free is that the Bill whose decisions have all been made needs to die, and a different Bill, another human being, needs to

²⁷ When Jamie wants to go to see the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, Bill responds by belittling it and comparing it to the Washington Monument and Mt. Rushmore. He can, however, neither name the mountain nor the presidents, instead he calls it 'those four big statues of faces carved out of a mountain.' (A 19)

emerge.

Weeks before he is executed, Bill is frustrated by his punishment, because he realizes that he can never repay anyone for taking a man's life. 'It wasn't the punishment that hurt – it was the punishment's failure to be enough' (A 141). We are subtly reminded that Johnson does not place any atoning value on the Old Testament life-for-a-life-type justice Bill Houston receives. Brian, the death row guard who befriends Bill, has a theory that Richard Clay, Bill's fellow inmate, a black man on death row for the murder of several white children, is 'Jesus to Bill (A 187). He believes that at the last minute the state will change Bill's sentence to life imprisonment and execute Richard, Richard taking the sentence of both men upon himself. But Brian has misread the situation, and it is Bill who dies while Richard's sentence is changed to life imprisonment. Bill places no substitutionary or atoning value on his death and Johnson makes it clear he does not intend any of these characters to be Christ-figures. Bill Houston, untouched by the epiphany he missed in life, understands that a different existence can only come through a death. The way in which Bill's life is a fictional approximation of Jesus is precisely through Johnson's misreading of these different sayings of Jesus. As Mrs Houston says: her son is at home in locked places, and Jesus's invitation to be free depends, in Johnson's novel, paradoxically, on being a-rested.

It would, however, be a mistake to assume that physical death is the only form of redemption for Johnson. Death is and remains, I argue, a trope and is purely literary, hence the quote from Stevens. This is further exemplified by Johnson's use of Jamie as a parallel protagonist to Bill. When Jamie, who has also been, in a sense, arrested, goes through withdrawal, she is moved from one wing of the asylum to another, each one more restrictive than the previous one. The visions she has, or her distorted perception of what is happening, take on more and

more apocalyptic imagery. Each wing of the hospital is named after a famous woman: Jamie is first admitted to the Mamie Eisenhower ward, moved to the Madame Curie wing and finally to the Joan of Arc ward. She is warned that she might 'end up in the Mathilda wing' (A 154) which Jamie mis-hears as 'the middle of things'.

The wing named after Joan of Arc, famous for having been burned as a heretic, becomes the place where Jamie imagines being on fire and descends further and further into madness. It is increasingly clear that how she perceives the world and what is being said around her is distorted by her traumatic experience with Ned Higher-and-Higher, so when she is finally sent to 'the Middle of Things' she hears the nurses describe it as 'the center (sic) of the Search of Destruction where the Devil will eat you' and 'this is Ground Zero' (A 159). It is there, 'at the very center of things they killed Jamie' (A 161). Her experience of this stage of rehab is described as an expelling of herself through writing on the walls with her own faeces, which she is then forced to clean. The cleaning materials take on the form of 'the waters of the lake of poison' and she is told the nurses are 'making [her] put fire on the things [she has] smeared on the walls' (A 161). It is 'when they made her hand touch the secret writing formed from the filth of her bowels, she ceased.' This cleansing, or erasing of her inner being is the process through which Jamie feels she has been killed. She is 'washed away off these walls' but realises she is still there (A 162). Once she realises this she asks: 'WHAT AM I DOING WRONG?' (emphasis in original) which is a precursor to the nurses saying 'you are impressing the hell out of me' (A 162).

This process is comparable to my previous argument about what happens to Bill on death row, and at the moment of his execution. Jamie has to be killed, her insides have to be purged, colloquially, the shit (the rape) that has happened to

her, must be dealt with before she can emerge to embark on a new beginning: this time not one that starts with an escape or one more geographic relocation, but one that imagines an alternative Jamie. Jamie begins to make progress when, rather than asking Johnson's question 'why is it like this', she asks what she is doing wrong: a movement from blame to responsibility. There is in this narrative no question that Ned was a victimiser and Jamie a victim, but her own moment of change and hope depends not on fixating on who was to blame for what happened, but on how she can move forward. This is not a moment of simple and easy forgiveness, but rather a decision to shift from one reading of the situation, the story of Jamie as victim, to an alternative narrative in which Jamie 'impresses the hell out of' people around her. Importantly the hell is not impressed *on* the nurses, but *out* of them, indicating that Jamie's progress becomes a moment of shared celebration about the hell being removed. This imaginative rebirth through fire, as well as Bill's death and the line from Stevens are of course all linked in the relocation to Phoenix, Arizona, the symbol of the redemptive death that forms a precursor to a different way of being. Johnson subtly incorporates the image of the Phoenix a second time in the novel when Mrs Houston goes to the airport and 'they found themselves delivered onto an escalator that was drawing them up some seventy or eighty feet towards a giant mosaic Phoenix bird rising out of the ashes, she understood what it would be like to stand before the doors of heaven, and knew how small a thing was an earthly life. (A 168)²⁸

Before Dr Benvenuto gives Jamie an opportunity to join the Drug and Alcohol Rehab program, she is asked 'what do you see yourself doing in ten years from

²⁸ Clement of Rome had already made the link between the Phoenix and Christ in his first epistle to the Corinthians (95–97 CE), see Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, chapter 25 <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/index.html>>. This image of change, and life from ashes, confirms my argument that Johnson is undermining a deterministic view of social class through a misreading of the Gospel stories.

now?' (A 180) She imagines a home for her two girls and says 'that's what I want. A piano, a vase with flowers inside of it. A little economy car. A regular kind of life' (A 180). In response to the invitation to 'live in a half-way house' Jamie says: 'I'll do anything. Where do I sign?' To this Dr Benvenuto replies existentially, 'It doesn't involve signing [...] it involves living. That's a little tougher' (A 181). Benvenuto, which means 'welcome' in Italian, embodies the invitation to live, and another way for Johnson to include Jesus's invitation to rest and to freedom, and significantly emphasises the difference between contractual obligations and life. While Dr Benvenuto does not offer another form of enslavement to a list of rules, he does not offer a guarantee of effortless improvement either. But Jamie's story does not continue in any detail, which is another trope Johnson uses.

Redemption always hovers like a possibility outside of Johnson's texts, as if it cannot be described. There is no sentimentality, no happy ending, just a glimpse of hope. Apart from the moment of hope, Johnson leaves the process of change for the most part unrecorded. The last thing Jamie is described as doing is to visit Burris, who has also been arrested. Jamie becomes the messenger, the angel, who brings the good news of Bill's forgiveness to Burris.²⁹ And when Jamie tells Burris that Bill is 'resentment-free' we also understand that Bill has had to forgive himself. Both Bill and Jamie end up in institutions, incarcerated in different ways, but both places become environments that encourage healing, and are catalysts for change. While Dr Benvenuto welcomes Jamie into a new life, Bill experiences his own healing on death row.

Eight hours before he is to be executed Bill tells Brian and Richard that he counts them as his friends. Brian reciprocates by 'popping' a bottle of champagne

²⁹ The Greek word *ἄγγελος* means 'the one who brings a message' or simply messenger, although in the New Testament it usually denotes a supernatural messenger from God. See Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

and exclaiming 'You're one of my friends, too, Mr. Houston' (A 202). It is a little later, at the precipice of execution, that Brian exclaims: 'I want you to know I don't think you deserve to die. I think you been healed' (A 206). This confused moment, in which one guard extends forgiveness to the killer of another guard, is witnessed in silence by everyone present. 'Nobody knew how to react. They all looked around', as if this emotional outburst, emphasised by Brian's slip into colloquial ellipsis, breaks the power of the impersonal justice system that resides a phone-call away, outside the walls (A 206). Redemption, if it happens in Johnson's work, happens between individuals, face to face, untouched or unlegislated by the powers that allow the existence of a hell that produces the necessity for capital punishment. The silent embarrassment of the others only further consolidates the tension Johnson is creating between those who judge and those who carry out the judgement. Brian is not Jesus, but he is not Pilate either: he does not have the luxury to wash his hands in innocence.

Jamie's acceptance of Dr Benvenuto's challenge to live, and her role in mediating the forgiveness of Bill to Burris, reinforces my earlier assertion that redemption lies outside of Johnson's texts. But these ending moments also oppose a deterministic view of life; within the fallen flawed despair of hell, healing, love, and forgiveness find a way to create a moment of hope and the potential for change. By placing the process of redemption outside of the novel, Johnson allows the ambiguity of a changed life to remain undisclosed. Although a cynical reading may question the possibility of true change, the fictional approximation of Jesus is not a cynical misreading of the Gospels. Johnson's use of the Gospel text as a foundation to question the world's accommodation of Greyhound space depends largely on leaving the space of redemption unfilled, and his use of death as a beginning implies his understanding that true change costs often more than an

individual can bear, or more than a society is willing to spare.

As is clear from the reference to Dante, Johnson sometimes makes his allusions somewhat oblique, but the title *Angels* can hardly be disassociated from John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*. The way Johnson bridges the inter-textual space between his novel and Milton's is by using his narrative to question Satan's insistence that it is better to 'reign in hell than serve in heav'n.'³⁰ Satan claims that 'Here at least| We shall be free' (l.259–60), but it is precisely this notion of the meaning of freedom that Johnson undermines through a misreading of Jesus's pronouncements in the Gospel of John, and the invitation to a restful yoke. Both Jamie and Bill find healing of sorts by losing their freedom, even if only temporarily, and it is by resisting an easy explanation that Johnson allows the paradoxical saying of Jesus to retain its ambiguity. The truth may after all make greater demands on them than any other master. As part of the move from incarceration to *life*, for example, Jamie is asked to give up certain freedoms: she is required to attend regular meetings and group therapy; as well as a certain amount of her privacy in the form of regular urinalysis. The yoke that she has taken on does not allow her the satanic freedom of reigning in hell, but it does allow her the possibility of moving towards, approximating, life. Her imagination has allowed her to re-read the narrative trajectory, and opened the possibility of an alternative way of being.

As Jamie brings Bill's message of forgiveness to Burriss she tries to think of a way 'to give him peace.' (A 200) The last two words Jamie speaks in Johnson's narrative are 'all she could think of to communicate' this peace to Burriss. Jamie, the messenger, single mother, rape victim, recovering alcoholic, unlikely angel, arrested to find freedom, repeats in her own alternative reading Jesus's invitation

³⁰ John Milton, *Poetical Works*, ed. by Douglas Bush (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) pp. 201–459, l.263.

when she simply says 'rest easy.'(A 200)

Jesus' Son: The Graceful Movement of Water

Johnson's much lauded 1992 collection of interrelated stories takes its title, *Jesus' Son*, from the lines of Lou Reed's song *Heroin*: 'When I'm rushing on my run/and feel just like Jesus' son'. (JS 4) The narrator, who we only know by his nickname 'Fuckhead', spends most of his time getting drunk or high, or in the process of getting drugs. Alison Maclean, the director of the film version of *Jesus' Son* (1999), has stated that 'it's this provocative, poetic title that suggests [Fuckhead] is a Christ-like figure', but I maintain that Johnson does not write Christ-figures in his fiction.³¹ Johnson miswrites the Lou Reed lines in *The Starlight on Idaho* in one of Mark Cassandra's letters where he confesses he 'spent a while there thinking convinced believing that with the proper induction of chemicals [he] could be a cross between James Bond and Jesus Christ.'³² Maclean's suggestion, that the presence of Jesus in the title automatically means at least one of the characters should be interpreted as a Christ-figure, is problematic because it is based on a demotic assumption about language, and it does not take into account the tendency of poetry to move into metaphor. Reed's line is clearly a simile, and the reference is not to Jesus, but to Jesus's, unhistorical, son. The title, rather than denoting Fuckhead as a Christ-figure, refers to a drug-induced sense of being someone else, and not to any redemptive act that Fuckhead performs. Johnson's fictional approximation does not represent Fuckhead as a redeemer, but as a recipient of a grace he does nothing to earn.

The title of the first story, 'Car Crash While Hitchhiking', is emblematic of this feature, as we find ourselves immersed once more in the company of drifters,

³¹ Alison Maclean, <http://www.moviemaker.com/magazine/issues/39/maclean.html>.

³² Johnson, *The Starlight on Idaho*, p. 128.

hitchhiking junkies, and petty criminals, whose evanescent existence is reflected in both their need for movement as well as their transitory relationships. This repetition of setting is the main similarity between *Angels* and the stories of *Jesus' Son*. The way in which Johnson incorporates the Gospels is, if possible, also more complex and fragmentary than the novel, and this problematizes a linear approach when interpreting these stories. The disjunctive narrative of the book is reflected in the form of the short, interconnected stories that, like the epistolary form of *The Starlight on Idaho*, lack any sense of chronology. Jack Hotel, for example, dies in the story 'Out on Bail' but reappears in the following story 'Dundun'. This lack of chronology is related to the more important difference between *Angels* and *Jesus' Son*, namely that Johnson uses an omniscient narrator in *Angels*, while *Jesus' Son* is written in a first person narrative voice.

The way in which Fuckhead disregards the chronology of events in the opening moments of 'Car Crash While Hitchhiking', all point to a recollection. First he tells us that 'a family from Marshalltown [...] head-onned and killed forever a man driving west out of Bethany, Missouri', repeats that he 'knew we'd have an accident' some twenty lines later, and then returns to tell the story of the first man who had picked him up. (JS 6) The stories are clearly retrospective, written from a point post-dating all the events, but even more significantly, the existence of these stories depends on the process of change that was absent from the narrative of *Angels*. Even though Johnson does not dwell in great detail on Fuckhead's rehabilitation, by allowing Fuckhead to be the voice of the stories, we surely must take into consideration the process that has allowed him to become the narrator of these internally coherent stories that display literary allusions and poetic sensibility.

The narrative structure is easily observed, but the redemptive process that

has enabled the stories is not elaborated in great detail. It is, however, this framing that connects *Jesus' Son* to the Gospels as much as the internal allusions. Whatever we may think or believe about the veracity of the events that are recorded in the Gospels, there is no other reason for the stories to have been preserved than to accept that something happened to the small group of Jesus's followers that was significant enough for them to decide that subsequent generations needed to know something about Jesus. The disciples and early church all refer to this *something* as the resurrection, and without the change in the disciples as a result of their belief in the resurrection, it is hard to imagine anyone would have written anything about an insignificant bastard son of a small village carpenter crucified by the authority of the Roman empire. It is only after the final act that the importance of the preceding stories becomes evident, and while the Gospel writers do incorporate the final act, Johnson, in his misreading of the Gospels, makes it part of a missing narrative. This missing narrative acts like scaffolding, because as readers we are clearly meant to understand that something has transpired in the life of the narrator, and without this untold story there is no frame to support the plausibility of Fuckhead as narrator.

The Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John focus their narratives on the crucifixion and resurrection through a process of temporal zooming in: the first thirty years of Jesus's life are barely described, the three years of his ministry in some detail, the week leading up to the crucifixion in much more detail, and the last few days including the last supper, arrest and crucifixion almost hour by hour. The form of these three Gospels is clearly designed to emphasise what the compilers felt was important.

The Gospel of Mark, however, does not include the nativity, nor any reference to Jesus's childhood or youth, but opens with the beginning of Jesus's ministry

years and, while this Gospel in its earliest form does include the empty tomb, it does not mention the appearances of Jesus to his disciples.³³ *Jesus' Son* is similar in form to the Gospel of Mark in this respect: we do not discover anything about Fuckhead's childhood or even his parents, neither his first nor last names are mentioned, nor do we know how his story ends, although we can infer some conclusions from the fact that we are presented with the stories.

Another aspect of the Gospel of Mark is its constant movement, something also reflected in the transitory existence of Fuckhead.³⁴ Fuckhead's movements are not always as clear as Jamie and Bill Houston's cross-country bus rides, but from 'Car Crash While Hitchhiking' we understand that he had come from an undisclosed location into Kansas city where he was eventually picked up by the family from Marshalltown, who kill the man from Missouri who is driving west. Like Jamie, Fuckhead is moving east at the start of the collection, and 'Dirty Wedding' probably describes Fuckhead, this time emulating Bill Houston, riding the elevated train in Chicago, Illinois.³⁵ We also know that he will eventually arrive in Seattle (JS 102), which is located on the West Coast of America, and even later in 'Beverly Home', Fuckhead is in Phoenix (JS 117). Fuckhead makes approximately the same journey Jamie makes, and it is significant for reasons elaborated above, that it is at the moment of sobriety when Fuckhead is in Phoenix. *Jesus' Son* is not,

³³ The authenticity of Mark 16. 9–20 is still debated by some, but it is generally accepted that the earliest manuscripts do not include this passage. Almost any commentary on Mark will point this out, but even the *English Standard Version* (2001) makes a note about the disputed passage in the text and separates it from the rest of the Gospel. For detailed engagement with this passage and other supplementary endings to the Gospel of Mark see William L. Lane, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Mark*, gen. eds. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), and the more recent James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark (Pillar New Testament Commentary Series)*, gen. ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

³⁴ One of the textual features of Mark's Gospel is the repetition of *εὐθὺς* (*euthos*) translated *immediately* or *straightaway* in the King James Version. Mark's Gospel has 42 occurrences of *euthos* out of 87 in the whole New Testament. (Eighteen in Matthew, seven in Luke, six in John, ten in Acts and one usage each in Galatians, James, 3 John and Revelation).

³⁵ Bill Houston rides the El after he has robbed the hardware store and makes a point of looking into the windows of the houses the train passes. (A 41) Johnson re-visits this idea clearly in the opening moments of 'Dirty Wedding' (JS 79).

however, merely a rewriting of *Angels*: it is a misreading. Although the narrative spine follows the physical journey of Jamie and Bill, there are significant differences. For example, rather than take the Greyhound, which Jamie and Bill can afford, Fuckhead needs to hitchhike to get from one place to another. These travels, and his dependence on luck and the kindness, or grace, of others, indicate a certain vulnerability. Even though Jamie becomes a victim of a violent crime, she and Bill retain some agency throughout the narrative, especially in deciding where they go. Fuckhead, however, even when he is not hitchhiking and has his own car, is often dependent on others to guide him, whether that is a complete stranger who pretends to be deaf and mute in 'Two Men', or Wayne in 'Work'. This lack of agency is important in *Jesus' Son*, not to absolve Fuckhead from his responsibilities, but to emphasise the arbitrariness of *grace*.

The arbitrary nature of grace as Johnson incorporates it in *Jesus' Son* is not placed in opposition to *Angels*, rather it is a more developed, and therefore much more nuanced, form of grace. By representing Jamie as victim, first of infidelity then abduction and rape, her eventual rehabilitation follows a recognisable arch of justice: Jamie's status as victim allows her to be read as an innocent bystander who is caught up in a course of events beyond her own control and therefore deserving of salvation, or at least a second chance. Bill Houston is clearly a criminal and, even if we question the necessity of capital punishment, it is hard to deny that any justice system would be expected to punish him. By alluding to Dwight Snow's 'slick counsel with pull' (A 142), however, Johnson cleverly undermines a reading of his fiction as a representation of a world where everything is put right, even when as readers we accept that some form of justice has taken place.

The silence, in *Jesus' Son*, about Fuckhead's history, his own uncritical acceptance of his situation, and his seemingly complete lack of aspiration, combine

to problematize positioning him as a victim. His lack of agency, however, indicates also that he can neither take responsibility nor credit for what happens to him. Fuckhead is no better than the other characters, both named and unnamed, in the stories he tells, and when Fuckhead writes that Jack Hotel 'simply went under. He died. I am still alive' (JS 40), it is the non-judgemental, distant way in which this is presented that allows us to understand that Fuckhead is aware of the miracle of his own existence. Grace, unmerited favour, rather than justice, becomes the predominant thread weaved through the stories, and is emphasised particularly through the tragic deaths of many of Fuckhead's friends and acquaintances. But, although the miracle of his survival forms a focal point for the stories, Fuckhead is no Christ-figure who brings salvation to others. On the contrary, and indicated by his nickname, he is often seen to be entirely incapable of saving anyone, or anything, even himself. Grace in these stories depends both on the ignorance of the person performing an act of grace, and the complete impossibility of effecting this act by the person on whom it is bestowed.

While *Angels* portrays the hellish environment from which Jamie and Bill need to be extracted, (arrested), before they can recognise the need for change ((at)rest), the stories in *Jesus' Son* indicate that grace can be manifested in some of the worst situations, can be performed in complete ignorance, and is often unrecognised. I have already shown how Robinson uses water as a recurring metaphor for the inclusiveness of divine blessing, and I will argue in this chapter that Johnson's metaphor for grace in *Jesus' Son* is often water or rain as well, and will show the ways in which this metaphor is precisely the link to the Gospels. Whereas I argued that Robinson's novels explore the universalism of divine favour as a way to resist a doctrinal narrowing of the community of believers, Johnson indicates that the 'lost' are never beyond the reaches of grace.

Similar to the way that Robinson misreads *Gilead* in *Home*, I will argue that *Jesus' Son* is a site for Johnson to re-think *Angels* and re-position himself especially with regards to the agency of his characters and, by extension, the gratuitousness of grace. I argue that *Jesus' Son* is a fictional approximation of Jesus because Johnson misreads the Gospels through the stories Fuckhead narrates, surrounds them with the scaffolding of an unexplained, redemptive process, and preserves the sense of mystery intrinsic to the arbitrary nature of grace by leaving the reasons for Fuckhead's survival undisclosed. In contrast to Jamie's imaginative aspiration in *Angels*, however, the stories in *Jesus' Son* undermine an aspirational model for sustainable rehabilitation. As Parish claimed, Johnson allows for 'an unauthorized, alternative form of salvation outside the ingrained secularity of contemporary life,' and it is this move away from the imagination of his characters as a way towards freedom, that makes the act of redemption more securely arbitrary, gratuitous and mysterious.³⁶ Fuckhead's stories are also framed as a narrative quest for honesty and genuine experience free from pretence. This aspect allows the narrative to raise questions regarding hypocrisy and sameness that I also explored in Robinson's novels.

I will begin by showing that 'Car Crash While Hitchhiking' functions as a map for the other stories, and introduces the metaphor of water for grace. Then I will focus on 'Two Men' to explain how Johnson mixes references to the Gospels in a single story, before turning to the extended metaphor of water as an indication of grace across several stories in the collection. After a discussion of the importance of acts and acting (pretence) I will conclude by comparing Johnson's use of a crowd of marginalised individuals in *Angels* with a misreading of a comparable community in *Jesus' Son*.

³⁶ Parish, p. 19.

The Crash as Roadmap to Rehabilitation

In 'Car Crash While Hitchhiking', before the family who will be in an accident gives him a lift, Fuckhead falls asleep at the side of the road and then wakes up in a puddle. His wet sleeping bag becomes a form of shelter as he waits for a driver to stop. Later in the hospital, after Fuckhead walks away from the crash unharmed, while the driver's 'face was smashed and dark with blood' (JS 9) and his wife is unconscious, Fuckhead 'stands in the corridor with [his] wet sleeping bag bunched against the wall' (JS 13) as a reminder of the providence that has kept him from getting injured. At the end of the story Fuckhead moves forward in time to the moment he is admitted to the Detox at Seattle General Hospital:

A beautiful nurse was touching my skin. "These are vitamins," she said and drove the needle in.

It was raining. Gigantic ferns leaned over us. The forest drifted down a hill. I could hear a creek rushing down among the rocks. And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you. (JS 15)

The rain at the start of the story is linked to the rain at the moment of the beginning of the healing process, and takes on the form of a metaphor for grace. This grace allows Fuckhead to live and survive, and eventually, to be rehabilitated, but it is also immediately made clear that Fuckhead takes no credit for his survival. The direct address to the reader is meant to undermine any attempt to assign agency to Fuckhead, emphasised of course by the 'hitchhiking' of the title.

The first story functions both as an introduction to the rest of the collection, and as a map that prefigures the main acts of Fuckhead's life: his restless drug-fuelled lifestyle is prefigured in the opening sentences that describe the salesman and college student who give Fuckhead drugs and alcohol; the accident on the bridge across a deep chasm, the water with which it is filled 'invisible in the dark',

represents the coming to a halt (arrest) of the wandering Fuckhead, the chasm and accident literally dividing Fuckhead's life into a before-and-after, and the realisation that somehow Fuckhead, to put it in colloquial terms, did not go off the deep end; the hospital prefigures the rehabilitation that will eventually take place.

His nickname, Fuckhead, is not mentioned in this story, but, in 'Dundun', after McInnes dies and is unceremoniously thrown out of the car (JS 44), Fuckhead says: 'I'm glad he's dead [...] He's the one who started everyone calling me Fuckhead.' (JS 46) This is later linked to the moment in 'Emergency' when Georgie asks what has happened to the baby rabbits he has rescued out of the mother rabbit he hit with his car. Fuckhead has to admit that they are dead which prompts Georgie to respond with '[d]oes everything you touch turn to shit?' All Fuckhead can answer to this charge is: 'No wonder they call me Fuckhead' (JS 74). This nickname becomes then a constant reminder of Fuckhead's impotence, and is alluded to in the opening tale when, after the accident has happened, Fuckhead has stopped a truck driver and they sit together.

By his manner he seemed to endorse the idea of not doing anything about this. I was relieved and tearful. I'd thought something was required of me, but I hadn't wanted to find out what it was. (JS 11)

The possibility that his help will only exacerbate the situation creates a paralysing fear that goes beyond merely a reluctance to act: Fuckhead does not even want to know what it might be that he should do. As he put it himself: 'my secret was that in a short while I had gone from being the president of this tragedy to being a faceless onlooker at a gory wreck' (JS 12). His lack of agency combined with his fear of acting has turned Fuckhead from being in control of his life (this tragedy), into an impotent and insecure bystander, looking on as his own life turns into a gory wreck. But, just as the story acts as a map for the rest of the collection, rain as

a metaphor for grace is also introduced here first and implies the hope for rehabilitation. Johnson further uses the emphatic ending of the story to underline that Fuckhead knows that he is not a saviour.

Finding the Problem before Understanding the Solution

Johnson misreads two different parables in the story 'Two Men'. In it, Fuckhead and his friends try to help a non-speaking (but perhaps not mute) man to get to what they believe will be his place of residence, and find themselves in a room with strangers who seem less than enthusiastic to have the silent man in their midst. When they ask what ails him one of the people present explains: 'It doesn't matter what his problem is, until he's fully understood it himself' (JS 25). This cryptic answer presents us with the way Johnson positions his stories and characters, and which also approximates Jesus's way of dealing with people in the Gospels. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10. 25–37) is a helpful example.

Luke frames the story by introducing a character simply denoted as a lawyer whose first question is how he can earn eternal life. Jesus, reluctant to provide a formula, responds by asking the lawyer to summarize the law as he interprets it, and then simply tells the lawyer to live according to his own understanding of the law. It is then that Luke explains a little more about this character. 'But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?' (Luke 10. 29) Jesus again ignores the request for a clear definition, but decides to tell a story instead. Luke has grasped that the reason Jesus is doing this is because he understands that the lawyer does not know what his problem is. The parable is not a way of defining categories, but a story that exposes the real problem in the lawyer's heart: the lack of mercy (Luke 10. 37).

Like the lawyer in Luke, neither Stan, the pretend deaf-and-mute man, nor

Fuckhead, know what their problem is, and therefore, as long as Fuckhead is drunk and on drugs, he is incapable of recognising the solution to his problems. Those who live in an alcoholic mist, or drug-dazed dizziness, cannot recognise the great theological questions that govern their existence. Grace, rather than unmerited salvation from eternal damnation, may just be an instance of joy at being alive. Mercy may be nothing more than one drunk helping another drunk to his drink. Forgiveness may be as simple as saying 'hell [sic] still be my brother', and love may forever be unspoken (A 141). Jesus's stories allow his listeners to find out and understand what is wrong with them rather than deal with the questions of laws, taxes, and traditions. Johnson similarly positions his characters in such a way that they can come to an understanding of their situation, but, as in the Gospels, not everyone is able, or willing, to take notice. The importance of stories, the ones Jesus tells and the ones Johnson writes, is their ability to penetrate and reveal the problem of which the questioner or reader is unaware. Just as Fuckhead can only recognise certain truths, and the significance of certain moments, by looking back and re-interpreting those events, redemption in Johnson is not a single act or conversion experience. It is a process in which many different experiences conspire together to move a person along, and help them to arrive at a place from which they can begin to recognise the lack of their own agency in the fact that they are somehow 'still alive.'

The story about Stan is framed by two events. Before Fuckhead finds Stan asleep in his car, he was attending a dance at which he 'backed a woman up behind the huge air-conditioning unit' and 'kissed her and unbuttoned her pants and put [his] hand down the front of them' (JS 17). Her boyfriend, 'a mean, skinny, intelligent man' comes around the unit and tells her to go to his car. Fuckhead expects a fight, but 'he disappeared just as quickly as she did', and Fuckhead then

spends the remainder of the evening wondering 'if he would come back with some friends and make something painful and degrading happen.' When Fuckhead gets to his own car and finds the mute man there, he is temporarily distracted, but several times while they are driving around he believes he sees the boyfriend's car. One of Fuckhead's friends, Richard, says: 'Maybe he forgives you', to which Fuckhead replies: 'Oh God, if he does, then we're comrades and so on, forever, [...] all I'm asking is just punish me and get it over with' (JS 22). It is not until they have succeeded in leaving Stan behind that Fuckhead is 'back to wondering about and fearing Caplan' (JS 29). Instead of meeting Caplan, however, he sees Thatcher, a man Fuckhead bought 'one of those phony kilos' from (JS 30). After a short chase Fuckhead arrives at an apartment where a 'woman in a white nightgown' opens up who Fuckhead forces to get on the floor, and as she gets down he 'pushed the side of her face into the rug and laid the gun against her temple' (JS 32). Thatcher has absconded and the story ends by Fuckhead saying '[y]ou're going to be sorry'.

I read this part of the story as a misreading of the parable of the unforgiving servant. (Matthew 18. 23–35) In the parable Jesus tells, a servant, whose unlikely large debt has just been cancelled by the king, meets a fellow servant who owes him a small amount of money. He forces him to repay the debt, and when he cannot do so puts him in prison. Witnesses to these events report back to the king and the unforgiving servant is imprisoned. Jesus tells the parable in response to Peter's question as to how many times he should be expected to forgive others. Jesus's initial response is out of character. Rather than ignore the request for a formula Jesus actually responds by giving Peter a number: 'seventy times seven' (Matthew 18. 22).³⁷ But then Jesus employs the parable as a vehicle to move away from

³⁷ Jesus's Jewish audience would have probably picked up the direct reference to Genesis 4. 24 where Lamech claims he will be 'avenged ... seventy and sevenfold', making the significant link between revenge and forgiveness clearer in Jesus's re-appropriation of the Hebrew Bible.

Peter's question, and instead, asks him to consider how many times he has been forgiven himself, rather than focus on how many times he should forgive others. Fuckhead represents the unforgiving servant in 'Two Men'. He is uncomfortable with Caplan's lack of action and does not comprehend that he has been, strangely, forgiven. When he is provided with the possibility to demand compensation from Thatcher, he immediately avails himself of this opportunity and even resorts to violence, even though the two incidents are not related.

Jesus's story is also surprisingly violent. When the servant is initially asked to pay his debt, the king 'commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and his children' (Matthew 18. 25). And when the servant is again returned to the king he is 'delivered [...] to the tormentors' (Matthew 18. 34). While Jesus implies that those who do not extend forgiveness will not be forgiven, the notion that those who cannot accept forgiveness are unable to offer it, is conveyed through Fuckhead's threat: 'you're going to be sorry'. The internal torment that Fuckhead experiences because of the unresolved issue between him and Caplan is the catalyst for his violent behaviour against Thatcher's family, but what is even more significant is that he desires *not* to be forgiven. Forgiveness, as Fuckhead imagines it, would require him to be friends with Caplan, while a violent altercation would allow their relationships to remain unaltered. Johnson's observation that the violent *lex talionis* actually sustains the status quo, and that forgiveness unhinges the stability of the world, shows his insight into the dilemma Jesus created by his teaching.³⁸

Although the stories are clearly different, Johnson approximates Jesus's meaning by showing the difficulty of accepting forgiveness, of showing mercy, and of the internal torment associated with guilt. Johnson's rewriting of this parable also complicates Robinson's 'posture of grace'. For old Robert Boughton forgiving

³⁸ "lex talionis, n.": The law of retaliation, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth', *OED Online*. [accessed August 03, 2015]

Jack was not a problem, it was rather a given, and Robinson's view on forgiveness is that it should be freely extended without the expectation of reciprocity. This non-reciprocal act comes, however, from the father (Boughton) to the prodigal (Jack), and this obviously follows Jesus's parable closely. Johnson complicates this reading by allowing the un-churched Fuckhead to reveal the real tension underlying the moment of forgiveness. Forgiveness would put him immediately in Caplan's debt, who may well expect to be reciprocated. Jack Boughton is able to accept, to a certain degree, his father's forgiveness, because, even though he cannot identify with his father's faith, and despite what he thinks about his own sense of being different, he still has a shared history and knowledge of the Bible. Fuckhead and Caplan probably also share an understanding of sorts, but because this understanding is based on a different set of fundamentals *forgiveness* is not a transparent term that can be easily transplanted from one way of being to another. By rewriting Jesus's parable, which is indubitably about being in debt, Johnson has problematized a unidirectional forgiveness.

Jesus clearly implies that receiving forgiveness from God obligates the receiver to show forgiveness to others, something old Boughton would of course agree with, and something Bill Houston in the moments before his death also seems to have understood. Boughton's posture of grace is emphatically one he applies to himself: his concern is with offering forgiveness, not receiving it from the person on whom he bestows it. Robinson allows this posture of grace to remain unencumbered by the response it engenders. To give without expecting a return is the posture of grace, but Johnson's complicated human relationships reflect the difficult reciprocal aspect of forgiveness in Fuckhead's refusal to accept forgiveness. Fuckhead has understood the debt that receiving forgiveness automatically incurs. By misreading the parable, Johnson approximates Jesus's

message about the need to forgive, and simultaneously highlights the subversive elements in Jesus's advice. To go an extra mile, to offer more than is demanded, to forgive without understanding, and to love without expecting anything in return, turns relationships upside-down, unhinges the status quo, and destabilizes social conventions. Johnson implies, through this misreading of the parable, Jesus's heretical stance towards the Mosaic law which allowed for eye-for-an-eye retaliation. (Compare Matthew 5. 38; Exodus 21. 24) Jesus is the heretic who unsettles the tradition: eye-for-an-eye retaliation is not only reciprocal, but it also incorporates restitution. The balance in a cosmic bank account is somehow returned to zero when one lost eye is compensated for by the loss of another one's eye. Johnson had already pointed to the weakness of the *lex talionis* in *Angels* when Bill Houston voices his concern that 'it was the punishment's failure to be enough.' (A 141) Simply exchanging one life for another's does not undo the crime, and it is significant that Bill's forgiveness of Burriss comes after he understands that the murder he committed is not atoned for by his own death.

As Northrop Frye has observed, however, 'one thing that happens when the Messiah comes to the world is that he is despised and rejected'.³⁹ Extending forgiveness alters relationships, and following Jesus's advice might very well unhinge the whole fabric of society. The need for reciprocity, retaliation, and restitution are all undermined by Jesus's challenge, and the response of tradition is to reject, despise, and ultimately, kill him. Fuckhead fears Caplan's heretical move because of what it may mean for him, and in response seeks to restore his own sense of order by resorting to violence and demanding the repayment of what he perceives is an outstanding debt. That this story is clearly questioning an Old Testament type revenge action is even further emphasised by Fuckhead's

³⁹ Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision*, p. 16.

willingness to exact this revenge on the woman in Thatcher's absence. This (re)action underscores the patriarchal system Fuckhead endorses. Fuckhead treats the woman as Thatcher's property, because his sense of guilt stems from a similar situation: he believes he has done something wrong, not to a woman, but to Caplan. Caplan's decision not to punish Fuckhead has undermined both his relationship to Caplan, and his sense of ownership. Johnson misreads the parable then in such a way as to emphasise the manner in which Jesus undermines traditionally held beliefs about property, the neighbour and revenge.

Water and Other Liquid Graces

Johnson's stories lack the theologically inflected narration of Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*. His narrators observe lost souls or are lost themselves and very rarely do they assume the role of sage. Fuckhead as narrator is not the older brother of the prodigal, and it would even be difficult to place him in the role of prodigal, because we are never told how he became what he is, nor does the narrative proceed towards a return to a previous state of being. In *Gilead* and *Home*, Jack is born into a Christian family and, although he has trouble subscribing to their belief system, is familiar with the Bible and reads theology, has a believing spouse, and generally represents a part of the American population that has some cultural knowledge of Christianity and the Bible. Fuckhead does not display any such religious influence, nor does he seem to draw on biblical knowledge imparted to him through education or cultural artefacts. For example, when Fuckhead, in 'Work', wants to buy Wayne a drink, Wayne refuses and says 'it is [...] my sacrifice.' Fuckhead then reflects: 'Sacrifice? Where had he gotten a word like sacrifice?' (JS 56) This absence of a frame of reference makes it difficult for Fuckhead to engage with the religious people he does meet. The narrative does not contain a

conversation with any representatives of the church, but Fuckhead gets sprinkled with water by Catholic picketers in front of an abortion clinic. He writes:

It was raining outdoors and most of the Catholics were squashed up under the awning next door with their signs held overhead against the weather. They splashed holy water on my cheek and on the back of my neck, and I didn't feel a thing. Not for many years. (JS 82)

The holy water sprinkled on him mixes with the rain and loses its significance in the moment, just as Jamie contemplates that 'baptism seemed just another way of getting yourself wet' (A 7) But the addition of 'not for many years', makes the episode more ambiguous, and since this is a recollection, the temporal interruption of this scene indicates a significance only comprehended much later. Without attaching too much soteriological significance to the water, this unwanted intrusion into Fuckhead's life becomes important as it is being recalled. Johnson's stories resonate with the missed chance, the second chance, the missed epiphany, and the misunderstood sign, but continue as if something, or someone, somewhere will not let lost people be lost. Jesus's actions and parables baffled the crowds as well as his disciples, and even miracles and explanations could not prevent them all from missing the point. In Johnson's stories characters are never burdened with being the messiah, but at significant moments a simple act or word may be remembered that will only become important with hindsight.

By comparing the stories in *Jesus' Son*, it becomes clear that water and other liquid images are an important part of Johnson's signposts for grace. The divine rain that falls on both 'the just and the unjust' (Matthew 5. 45) mixes with the holy water of doctrine in this moment that Fuckhead recalls years later, but the subtle irony is that the church-people supply so-called holy water to sprinkle on the unredeemed while sheltering from the freely available, divine, rain. Grace as rain

covers Fuckhead as he walks away from the clinic, his girlfriend, and the protesting Catholics. Fuckhead decides to ride the elevated train and steps 'into one of the cars just as the doors closed; as though the train had waited just for [him]' (JS 82).

A few stops later this moment is repeated when:

a guy stepped in just as the doors closed. The train had waited for him all this time, not a second longer than his arrival, not even half a second, and then it broke the mysterious crystal of its inertia. (JS 83)

Fuckhead is mesmerised by this character and decides to follow him off the train and eventually into a laundromat, where the man recognises Fuckhead as having been 'on the El'. Fuckhead turns away, but describes the man peculiarly by noting 'his chest was like Christ's. That's probably who he was' (JS 85). 'Dirty Wedding' ends with the story of how Michelle, after leaving Fuckhead, starts a relationship with John Smith. One night she 'took a lot of pills [... and] the next morning [...] Michelle was cold and dead.' John Smith 'confided to people that Michelle was calling him from the other side' and when some weeks later he is also dead, Fuckhead is not surprised (JS 89). In short, like Jack Hotel, they died, but Fuckhead is still alive.

I have chosen to start with 'Dirty Wedding' because it is the only story that brings Fuckhead in direct contact with religious people and where the references to God (El), and Christ, are made more explicit.⁴⁰ Fuckhead is alive at the end of 'Dirty Wedding', but his encounters with the Catholics and the man who reminds him of Christ, do not change or affect Fuckhead's behaviour in any way. He describes Michelle as 'a woman, a traitor and a killer' (JS 89), but his own behaviour towards her in the clinic (JS 81) shows that he is not a sympathetic

⁴⁰ El is the abbreviated form of the elevated train, but in Hebrew אל , is the word meaning God. In the last story, 'Beverly Home', Fuckhead spies on a Mennonite couple, but as they are never aware of his presence there is no person-to-person interaction. I explore the significance of this story in more detail below.

character. Michelle took pills to force John Smith to save her, but Fuckhead also looks for a way to escape by taking drugs. (JS 85–88) 'Dirty Wedding' is then not an attempt at explaining that Fuckhead's survival was due to his difference from Michelle and John Smith, but rather to emphasise the similarities, and, in turn, the importance of recognising unmerited grace in the miracle that he is alive.

The story that employs the extended metaphor of water more consistently is simply called 'Work'. Johnson complicates the metaphor somewhat by introducing a negative image of water, but I argue that he follows Jesus in using the metaphor in these two ways. Fuckhead remembers a specific day as 'the best of all those times.' The day had not started particularly hopeful: after a fight with his girlfriend Fuckhead walks into the Vine, a bar he frequents, planning to sit 'in the corner and nod out.' The only other customer, Wayne, cannot lift his drink because his hands shake too much, so Fuckhead puts his 'hand on Wayne's shoulder, and with [his] right, opiated and steady' brings Wayne's 'shot of bourbon to his lips.' (JS 49) After this act of kindness, one opiated, steady, junky helping the shaking un-opiated one to his breakfast of whiskey, Wayne offers Fuckhead an opportunity to earn some money. Wayne has a bag of tools and Fuckhead has a car.

Drunk, penniless and on drugs the two set out for a collection of abandoned, windowless houses near the river, and proceed to remove the electric wiring out of the walls of one of them. During this process it is revealed that the house belongs to Wayne. When they first arrive at the house Fuckhead notices that 'sometime back a flood had run over the banks, cancelling everything.' (JS 50) This physical flood symbolizes whatever disaster has led to Wayne's blank history. Some unvoiced event lies in the undefined past and cancelled everything: Wayne's home, marriage, job, and money. This ruin of a forgotten time is now unceremoniously ravaged, its wiring turned into twenty-eight dollars each for Fuckhead and Wayne,

who proceed straight back to the Vine, the bar which is described twice in the book. Once 'like a train car that wasn't going anywhere' (JS 34), and here 'like a railroad car that had somehow run itself off the tracks into a swamp of time where it awaited the blows of the wrecking ball.' (JS 58)

Before Wayne and Fuckhead return to the Vine, however, they experience something significant when they take a break and hear a motorboat.

The sound curlicued through the riverside saplings like a bee, and in a minute a flat nosed sports boat cut up through the middle of the river going thirty or forty at least.

This boat was pulling behind itself a tremendous triangular kite on a rope. From the kite, up in the air a hundred feet or so, a woman was suspended, belted in somehow, I would have guessed. She had long red hair. She was delicate and white, and naked except for her beautiful hair. I don't know what she was thinking as she floated past these ruins. (JS 53)

Fuckhead explains this image after they have visited Wayne's wife.

There was no doubt in my mind. She was the woman we'd seen flying over the river. As nearly as I could tell, I'd wandered into some sort of dream that Wayne was having about his wife, and his house. (JS 55)

Among the drug induced surrealism of the collection, this moment's significance is made clear through its detailed description. The precision of the poetic language signifies the change, or redemption, that Fuckhead has undergone since these events took place. The simile of the bee seems incongruous with the urban imagery Fuckhead is used to employing, and the inclusion of 'curlicued' for the movement of sound is similarly out of place in the vocabulary of the drug addicted roamer. But the combination of this language that speaks of Fuckhead's new life as a writer, and the angelic image, is a way for Johnson to break into Fuckhead's narrative, in the same way that the angelic, or divine, breaks into the life of Mary and Joseph, as well as the disciples, in the Gospels. There is another such moment of intrusion

that Fuckhead recalls that is not part of the same day, but which he remembers and compares to the moment after a fight is averted in the Vine.

Then came one of those moments. I remember living through one when I was eighteen and spending the afternoon in bed with my first wife, before we were married. Our naked bodies started to glow, and the air turned such a strange color I thought my life must be leaving me, and with every young fiber and cell I wanted to hold on to it for another breath. A clattering sound was tearing up my head as I staggered upright and opened the door on a vision I will never see again: Where are my women now, with their sweet wet words and ways, and the miraculous balls of hail popping in a green translucence in the yard?
We put our clothes on, she and I, and walked out into a town flooded ankle-deep with white, buoyant stones. Birth should have been like that. (JS 57)

Here the poetic language is again obvious, especially Johnson's use of alliteration, and the suddenness of the vision is comparable to the flying woman described earlier. But more significantly for Fuckhead, 'that moment [...] after the fight was narrowly averted, was like the green silence after the hailstorm.' (JS 58) While the flying woman is angelic, the description of the hailstorm is charged with a religious tone. Like Adam and Eve, Fuckhead and his wife walk out into a world they have never seen before, something Fuckhead compares to birth. The experience of his body glowing and life leaving him, combined with the door opening on a vision of 'miraculous balls', is then used as a simile for the moment that the possibility of violence is prevented. Like the silence after the storm, peace has replaced violence. The complexity of these biblical allusions only grows in Johnson's story; an angelic visitation, the birth of a new world, and the reign of peace, all subtly scattered through the story to make unobtrusive references to the nativity stories in the Gospels.

It is obvious that the imagery throughout this story is liquid: the flood, the river, the glass of whiskey, the swamp, and, when Wayne is talking to his wife, Fuckhead thinks of him as 'the storm that had stranded her here.' (JS 54) Even the

hailstones are curiously described as 'buoyant'. Fuckhead describes yet another important image after the fight has been prevented:

The cards were scattered on the table, face up, face down, and they seemed to foretell that whatever we did to one another would be washed away by liquor or explained by sad songs. (JS 58)

Although Johnson is deliberately using the language of baptism here, this is not a cleansing from sin that frees the sinner of the burden of his past. This is not the redemptive death and the rise from the ashes of the Phoenix. Rather this is the baptism of forgetting, the flood of alcohol that has washed away everything, cancelling memories and families, stranding people in blank spaces, unconnected, lonely, lacking history, or aspiration. And yet, in this space, a small act can seem like a great grace. The bar symbolises the patrons who all seem to have come off the rails, and, trapped in their own swamp, are trying to ignore the wrecking ball that will inevitably break apart their existence. The positive imagery of water as 'cancelling everything' in baptism, is also used negatively in Jesus's parable of the fool who builds his house on sand which is consequently washed away by a flood. (Matthew 7. 26–27) The extended use of liquid in this story conflates the flood that cancelled out Wayne's house with alcohol that is responsible for cancelling out his life. But in this substance-fuelled existence, grace can only be understood in the terms of Fuckhead and Wayne's reality.

On entering the bar they find their 'favorite, [their] very favorite, (sic) person tending bar.' A person whose name Fuckhead cannot remember, he only remembers 'the way she poured.' He recalls 'her grace and her generosity';

She poured doubles like an angel, right up to the lip of a cocktail glass, no measuring. [...] You had to go down to them like a hummingbird over a blossom. (JS 59)

Just as the image of the flying woman was combined with the simile of a bee, here Fuckhead combines an angelic simile with that of a bird. This poetic use of language continues to intrude as signposts of significant moments in Fuckhead's recollection. These are the graces Fuckhead understands, that mean something to him, a moment remembered for its simplicity: money and a full glass; and Johnson creatively misreads Jesus's promise that 'whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold *water* only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward' (Matthew 10. 42).⁴¹ Not, I would argue, for the sake of heterodox controversy, but simply to allow tiny shafts of light to penetrate the shadowy existence of Fuckhead and his acquaintances. Initially Fuckhead only remembers the way the woman poured, that she was not 'going to make her employers rich' and that she was 'revered' among his group of friends, but at the end of the story he writes:

I'll never forget you. Your husband will beat you with an extension cord and the bus will pull away leaving you standing there in tears, but you were my mother. (JS 59)

This strange, violent, and ambiguous ending is a misreading of an episode both Matthew and Mark record. An unnamed woman pours oil over Jesus's head and, when this act is criticised by the disciples, Jesus says: 'wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.' (Matthew 26. 6–13; Mark 14. 3–9)⁴² Johnson connects this Gospel story with Jesus's comment that family is not dependent on

⁴¹ Another, equally plausible possibility is Jesus's parable about the sheep and the goats, in which Jesus says: 'Inasmuch ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me' (Matthew 25. 40), but as a misreading it is certainly not unthinkable that this is a combination of the two.

⁴² John 12. 1–8 also records the same story with slight differences. In John's version the woman is named as Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, she anoints Jesus's feet rather than pour oil on his head, only one disciple, Judas, grumbles, and Jesus does not say her story will be remembered. Here Johnson specifically follows the synoptic tradition.

blood relations but on what one does. (Matthew 12. 48–50; Mark 3. 31–35; Luke 8. 19–21) The young woman's generosity, her grace, in pouring, is a misreading of Jesus's injunction to 'do the will of God', which would make her part of the family ('you were my mother'), and her pouring is a rewriting of the pouring of the ointment on Jesus's head and the consequent memorial she has in Fuckhead's story ('I'll never forget you').

But more than that, her status as victim of abuse, and the fact that she is working in the Vine, includes her also in the group of misfits that surround Fuckhead, and, more tragically, she is left standing in tears, another liquid, while the bus pulls away. Johnson brings these Gospel allusions all together in this short story: the angel, peace and the word sacrifice, baptism and flood, belonging and memorial. And even though Fuckhead is only able to compare those moments of almost religious significance years after they have happened, the glass poured to the rim is clearly the one thing he understood as grace at that time. The ending of the story does, however, indicate that Fuckhead also has realised that his own situation prevented him from doing anything to help the woman, and even though he can memorialise her in his writing he is as unable now, as he was then, to rescue her, emphasising once more that he is no saviour.

Grace as pouring rain, rewritten as the grace of pouring, is finally linked directly to an act of love and forgiveness in an important scene in the final story, 'Beverly Home'. At this point in the sequence of stories Fuckhead has stopped using drugs and, although he 'was a whimpering dog inside', decides to look for work 'because people seemed to believe [he] should look for work'. (JS 113) He finds employment at 'Beverly Home', an 'O-shaped, turquoise-blue hospital for the aged', where he is 'responsible for the facility's newsletter' (JS 115). One day on his way home from work Fuckhead hears a woman singing. He is drawn by her voice,

and realising she is taking a shower decides to 'peek inside her window' (JS 118).⁴³ Fuckhead then makes it a habit to spend, sometimes hours, looking first at her taking a shower, drying and clothing herself, and then moving from window to window to witness the life of a married couple having dinner, spending the evening reading, and then going to bed. Disturbingly, it has become an obsession for Fuckhead 'to watch them fucking.' (JS 125)

One night he hears sounds coming from the bedroom and believes this is his opportunity. He convinces himself he can 'hear the bedsprings [...] and her lovely cries.' (JS 130) But it is soon revealed that he has been mistaken because, instead of making love, the couple have been fighting. As Fuckhead continues to watch at the bedroom window the Mennonite wife suddenly opens the curtains and he finds himself face to face with her. She is crying as she looks into the dark, unable to see Fuckhead, when her husband comes in to the bedroom 'kind of holding his apology in his hands.' Then the husband 'put an end to the argument by getting down before her and washing her feet.' (JS 132)

What Fuckhead observes is not the sex he was hoping to see. Instead he witnesses a conflict resolution for which he has no frame of reference; a way of making amends that, to his eyes, must have been as alien as if he, or they, were from an other planet. But the foot washing is a moment where time slows down and the experience becomes one that is remembered by Fuckhead in intricate detail. The reference to being face to face, and the dark separation of the glass, in which Fuckhead receives a glimpse of another world, while the Mennonite wife is ignorant of the significance of her own situation, links back to Bill Houston's moment of insight at the moment of his death. Just before he is face to face with the Mennonite woman, Fuckhead can feel himself 'trembling [...] from the pit of his

⁴³ Like Jack Boughton, who has wandered away from home for twenty years, Fuckhead is a misreading of Ulysses, here tempted by the sirens singing and giving into his temptation.

stomach out to [his] fingertips.' When he is faced with the foot-washing scene, however, he is no longer self-conscious, but slowly takes in every detail about the way the husband kneels, the towel on his shoulder, the way the wife first 'slipped her tennis shoes from her feet, reached backward to each lifted ankle one after another, and peeled the small white socks off.' (JS 132)

Fuckhead is drawn to the moment of physical love by a carnal desire, and he expects this voyeuristic desire to be satisfied, but instead he catches a glimpse of an expression of love between this man and his wife for which he is entirely unprepared. The scene is clearly cinematic: Fuckhead stands in the dark, while the window functions as a screen when the curtain is drawn away, and the wife, like an actress, cannot see Fuckhead. The way Fuckhead describes the action unfolding further establishes this cinematic quality: the dramatic tension evoked by the long pause before the wife turns around; the zooming in on the details of the shoes and socks; and then the wide-angle shot of the actual foot-washing. These details culminate in a moment that is comparable to a situation where Fuckhead might have decided to pay to watch a pornographic film, where the emphasis would be on physical exposure, and is presented with a scene that exposes something Fuckhead finds hard to describe. After the foot-washing, the narrative moves towards the few moments of rehabilitation Johnson includes in this text, but Fuckhead does not return to the window of the Mennonites.

The foot-washing scene can be compared to similar moments in the Gospel narratives, but the importance of misreading is that the terms are used to mean something different. This moment in the narrative shows that Fuckhead is comparable to the disciples who have decided to follow Jesus because they expect to be part of the ruling government in the new liberated kingdom Jesus will establish. (Matthew 20. 20–1; Mark 10. 36–7; John 6. 14–5) This carnal motivation,

although clearly opposed to Jesus's own intentions, is, however, instrumental in exposing the disciples to their own weaknesses as well as preparing them for the moment of internal change Jesus attempts to effect in their lives. Fuckhead, similarly, does not intend to find the solution to his problem, but is exposed to an expression of love he has previously not had access to. His relationships with various girlfriends attest to his inability to move beyond a physical expression of love and anger. His refusal of forgiveness in the story 'Two Men' is further indicative of Fuckhead's inability to move beyond the strangely safe and secure notions of revenge, punishment and restitution, because forgiveness and reconciliation are threatening options that destabilize Fuckhead's state of being.

The foot washing becomes a moment of penetrating significance that moves Fuckhead from his obsession with physical penetration, towards a different expression of love, but also towards a different sense of self. The moments of angelic intrusion I described before were significant and recollected in detail, but Fuckhead was still too blind to his own problem, too drunk or high, for those moments to effect a change in his life. It is also clear that sobriety has not had an immediately noticeable impact on Fuckhead's perverse, or transgressive behaviour. Fuckhead addresses his voyeurism as follows:

How could I do it, how could a person go that low? And I understand your question, to which I reply, Are you kidding? That's nothing. I'd been much lower than that. And I expect to see myself do worse. (JS 123)

This seems to indicate a self-awareness and an understanding of what is considered normative behaviour, although it is still framed in terms that utilise a difficult sliding scale of transgression. Voyeurism for Fuckhead is less problematic than what he has done, and assumes he will do. The first time he watches the woman shower, however, Fuckhead 'had thoughts of breaking through the glass

and raping her.' This double violent penetration indicates precisely that mere physical rehabilitation is not enough for Fuckhead to move beyond his own transgressive self, and further emphasises Johnson's move away from a narrative of self-propelled aspirational rehabilitation, towards a dependence on unmerited grace. The foot-washing scene once more clarifies Fuckhead's lack of agency, and consolidates his status as undeserving of the healing he has received. By utilising Fuckhead as narrator, Johnson has not only made the stories dependent on the process of rehabilitation, but Fuckhead's voice allows the reader to recognise that Fuckhead does not present himself as a victim who deserves pity, but as a deeply problematic individual who is not able, nor attempts to, justify his own survival in contrast to his friends. By moving from Jamie to Fuckhead, Johnson approximates the Gospel stories about the disciples, and moves towards problematizing the limits of grace and community even further because, while Bill Houston clearly is repentant, and Jamie is clearly a victim, Fuckhead is neither, and yet, he is still alive.

Grace, as rain, has been a part of Fuckhead's life since the beginning of his recollections. It performs its role as quiet protector and guide and is made more and more explicit as an image of something that breaks into Fuckhead's life and over which he has no control. While God lets the rain fall on the just and the unjust, the liquid metaphor also shows the power of destruction in the flood that can 'cancel' everything. Divine grace and judgement can both seem arbitrary, and Johnson does not simplify these notions in his narrative. The final image of water in the foot-washing scene, however, combines the symbols of baptism, or belonging, forgiveness, and love, and is made more significant still by the fact that at this stage in the narrative Fuckhead is living in Phoenix, Arizona, a hot and dry desert climate, denoting that grace can move even where the rain does not fall.

In my discussion of *Angels*, I argued that Jamie begins to rehabilitate from the moment she is asked to imagine a different life for herself, and that it is Bill's inability to imagine himself differently that keeps him captive to his predetermined narrative. I have already indicated that in *Jesus' Son* Johnson has moved away from this aspirational narrative towards a greater dependence on grace. This is further attested when Fuckhead attends an AA meeting where the attendees all sit around 'looking very much like people stuck in a swamp', and he listens to 'a guy named Chris' say:

"I used to walk around in the night [...] all alone, all screwed-up. Did you ever walk around like that past the houses with their curtains in the windows, and you feel like you're dragging a cart of sins behind you, and did you ever think: Behind those windows, behind those curtains, people are leading normal, happy lives?" This was just rhetorical, just part of what he said when it was his turn to say something. (JS 127–8)⁴⁴

Unimpressed Fuckhead walks out of the meeting, and it is clear from his comment about the talk that he does not accept this was a true reflection of the mind-set of Chris at the time of his addiction. The implication is that each of the recovering addicts might relate a similar story when it is their 'turn to say something.' The aspirational model for rehabilitation has become, in this re-reading, something akin to doctrine: the expected response of the repentant addict necessary for the move towards a future of normative behaviour.

Fuckhead's stories are then a heretical move away from these aspirational tales. Fuckhead's daily routine of looking in at the Mennonite couple's window is voyeuristic, not aspirational. His movement from addiction to recovery is not

⁴⁴ There is a similar moment in *Gilead* in a conversation between Lila and Jack. Jack initially says 'When I was young I thought a settled life was what happened to you if you weren't careful.' Lila responds by saying that she 'always knew better than that. It was the one thing I wanted. I used to look in people's windows at night and wonder what it was like.' Jack replies 'That's how I was planning to spend this very evening.' The implication seems to be that there is a normative mode of living to which it is good to aspire. Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 228.

preceded by an honest reflection on his situation, nor on a desire to be a 'normal, happy' person. More importantly, the recovery process has not made him feel better; on the contrary he feels like a 'whimpering dog inside'. (JS 111) But this heretical focus on the internal state of Fuckhead and his sometimes brutal honesty about his thoughts and desires, all move away from the superficial notion of economic progress as a means towards normative behaviour, and approximates Jesus's insistence on moving from the external, conformity to rules and traditions, to the internal in his re-reading of the ten commandments. (Matthew 5. 21–48) By placing Fuckhead in the company of equally 'screwed-up' people who go under, while he impossibly stays afloat, Johnson emphasises again and again, that Fuckhead's healing is neither the result of making the right decision, nor of some moral superiority, but only attributable to an undeserved, and unexplained, arbitrary grace. By moving from external signpost of normative behaviour to the difficult internal workings of Fuckhead's mind, Johnson also moves towards a discussion of hypocrisy, to which I now turn.

Acts and Acting

Jesus understands that small actions derive their meaning from their circumstances, and Johnson allows this point to shine through the alcoholic minds. The acts of the young waitress and of Wayne are memorialised because of their significance for Fuckhead, and no act is too insignificant to be included. As for Fuckhead, he has the grace to look back on his escapades with a benevolent eye. In the story 'Dundun', he even finds kindness in the violent Dundun, who kills McInnes, although he does not mean to do it, almost beats another man to death with a tire iron, and tortures Jack Hotel to get information about a stolen stereo. Fuckhead realizes that Dundun's 'left hand didn't know what his right hand was

doing.' (JS 47) This is further reflected in his name: the double *done* emphasising the unchangeable character of his actions, what is done is done. Dundun is comparable to Bill Houston, whose greatest fear was that he committed things without being aware of them. (A 37) Dundun commits acts, does irrational things, but Fuckhead claims that 'certain important connections had been burned through' and that we all 'might turn into someone like that' if someone 'opened up [our] head[s] and ran a soldering iron around in our brain[s].' (JS 47) However, the direct reference to one of Jesus's sayings is clearly a complete misreading of Jesus's intentions.

Jesus encourages his followers not to let their left hand know what their right hand is doing when they give alms to the poor. (Matthew 6. 3) The context of this saying is Jesus's claim that God, who sees in secret, can reward the secret giver, as opposed to those hypocrites who 'announce [their charity] with trumpets.' (Matthew 6. 2) Fuckhead asks the reader to believe that Dundun had 'kindness in his heart'. By contextualizing this with the possibility that Dundun really was unable, because of physical damage, to control his violence, the meaning of Jesus's message is approximated: if God sees into the heart, and into the secrets of men, then it is possible that God might even find kindness in Dundun. While Jesus asks people to forget the benevolent acts they have performed, Johnson asks his readers to consider what happens to those who cannot remember, or understand, the malevolent acts they commit.⁴⁵

In a rewriting of another part of the Sermon on the Mount, Johnson also invites the reader to consider Jesus's teaching about judgement and self-reflection. Although 'Emergency' is largely concerned with Jesus's hyperbolic advice to pluck

⁴⁵ Certainly the Catholic teaching about the age of reason seems to imply that those who do not have 'the reason requisite for moral discernment' cannot be held responsible for their sin, see 'The Age of Reason' in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01209a.htm>> [accessed 28/11/2013]

out the eye that causes one to sin (Matthew 5. 29), it combines this with a continuation of Jesus's pronouncement about the right and the left hand. Fuckhead has taken a job working night shifts at a hospital. After introducing us to the drug-addled orderly, Georgie, the narrator writes: 'around 3:30 a.m. a guy with a knife in his eye came in' (JS 62). The man, Terence Webb, explains that his wife has punished him for peeping at his neighbour by putting his hunting knife into his good eye. His other eye turns out to be glass.

The doctor who is on duty feels this situation is beyond his capabilities and attempts to organise the 'best eye man [...] a brain surgeon [...] and a really good gas man' before telling Georgie to prep the patient (JS 64). Georgie, who is still high, after cleaning the wound, returns to the ER with the knife in his hand. When asked where the knife comes from he seems oblivious to the fact he is holding it. Terence Webb turns out to be fine, his eye is not damaged, and no one understands how Georgie managed to do this, least of all Georgie himself. Johnson again embeds different aspects of Jesus's teaching in this bizarre situation. Georgie does not claim any expertise, does not take a moral high ground; does not, in Jesus's words, see the speck without noticing the plank. He does what he does without realising it, or decides it is unimportant to explain. Like Dundun, Georgie's left hand does not know what his right hand is doing.

Distancing himself from any form of revenge type action, or self-righteous moralising, Johnson also refuses to let anyone take credit for the final outcome. It is a miracle, but Georgie is no Jesus-figure. When Terence tries to thank Georgie, he has no recollection of who Terence is (JS 76). It is my argument that, rather than pretend that one character can represent Jesus, Johnson's approach is much subtler: there is an uncanny ability for anyone to be, even if only for a moment, a conduit for grace. The act, as remembered, is then not important for the person

who performed it, but it is important to the person who benefits from it. The healing of Terence has no effect on Georgie, but it is obviously significant to Terrence.

The connection to Jesus's mandate seems obvious, but Johnson's misreading is never uncomplicated. Johnson proceeds by rewriting this one part of the Sermon on the Mount by combining it with the warning against trying to pluck a splinter out of another person's eye while being ignorant of the plank in one's own. (Matthew 7. 1-5) By recording this absurd situation by literally enacting Jesus's warning against looking lustfully at a woman, Johnson's misreading exposes the problem of reading the Gospel narratives without understanding hyperbole, which would allow for a narrow literal understanding of Jesus's command. Matthew puts the two statements Jesus makes, one not to look at a woman lustfully, the other not to judge others, in close proximity, and both focus on scrutinising the inner workings of the mind rather than making a judgement based on the externally available data.

While adultery, as an act, is clearly definable and therefore easy to legislate, the internal workings of the mind are available only to the mind itself. The hypocrite is the one who can continue to desire and lust without ever committing the crime of adultery, and therefore assumes he can judge the other who commits the crime. Jesus eliminates this possibility by focussing the problem back on the self, first by blurring the boundary between desiring and acting, and then by removing the justification for judging others. Similarly, by using the oblivious Georgie as a conduit for healing Terence, Johnson retains the importance of the act, but removes any justification for judgment.

Judgment and hypocrisy are further alluded to through a focus on pretence when Fuckhead describes one of the patients in Beverly Home:

There was a guy with something like multiple sclerosis. A perpetual spasm forced him to perch sideways on his wheelchair and peer down along his nose at his knotted fingers [...] it was hard to guess what he told about himself because he really couldn't talk anymore, beyond clamping his lips repeatedly around his protruding tongue while groaning.

No more pretending for him! He was completely and openly a mess. Meanwhile the rest of us go on trying to fool each other. (JS 116)

Being 'completely and openly a mess' is a vulnerable position to which only an affliction can force a human to succumb. The 'rest of us' try to pretend by keeping what is inside inside, and creating a facade that we believe conforms to what others would like us to be. Fuckhead dislikes pretence, clarified early in the narrative in 'Car Crash While Hitchhiking' when he describes the moment when a woman is told that her husband has not survived a car accident:

The doctor took her into a room with a desk at the end of the hall, and from under the closed door a slab of brilliance radiated as if, by some stupendous process, diamonds were being incinerated there. What a pair of lungs! She shrieked as I imagine an eagle would shriek. It felt wonderful to be alive to hear it! I've gone looking for that feeling everywhere. (JS 14)

Like the patient who can no longer pretend, this woman at the moment of grief does not pretend, and Fuckhead realises that that feeling, of complete open vulnerability, is what he is looking for. This is why the Mennonite woman and her husband fascinate him. When he first hears her singing it was as if 'she sang with the unconsciousness, the obliviousness, of a castaway', unaware, and therefore without pretence, she embodies that feeling Fuckhead has been looking for everywhere. (JS 118) The intimacy of the foot washing is equally unpretentious: they do not know someone is watching. Pretence is a form of hypocrisy, and Johnson approximates the Gospels by including these moments of unpretentious, and sometimes unexplainable, acts as a way to establish the importance of allowing the left hand to act without the right hand being aware of it.

Acts have consequences, but in *Jesus' Son* the emphasis is consistently on the miracle of Fuckhead's survival. While Terence Webb's miraculous healing is an instance of unmerited grace, there is a recognition, in retrospect, of the strange ways in which Fuckhead and his friends 'were always being found innocent for ridiculous reasons.' (JS 37) This statement, in the story titled 'Out on Bail', is recorded after Jack Hotel has been acquitted from a charge of armed robbery and has just been given his life back. Fuckhead recalls the dazed feeling he often had when he was in the Vine where 'some of the most terrible things' had happened to him and where 'you might think today was yesterday, and yesterday was tomorrow'. He explains that, even though the Vine was such a horrible place, 'like the others [he] kept coming back.'

This awareness of their purposelessness is an acknowledgement that they understood the truth of their situation. There is no attempt here at sociologically excusing themselves from their responsibilities; no appointing blame to bad parenting, social immobility, or unattainable opportunities. As Richard says in 'Two Men': 'Being a cheerleader, being on the team, it doesn't guarantee anything. Anybody can take a turn for the worse' (JS 29). Fuckhead repeats the point as he sits across from 'Kid Williams, a former boxer' who is 'in his fifties' and has 'wasted his entire life':

Such people were dear to those of us who'd wasted only a few years. With Kid Williams sitting across from you it was nothing to contemplate going on like this for another month or two. (JS 35)

Since Jack Hotel is acquitted, the importance of the title 'Out on Bail' lies in the recognition that it refers to the other customers who frequent the Vine, people who 'all seemed to have escaped from someplace'. (JS 34) Escaped, on bail or acquitted, the sense is that each patron is guilty of something: there are no

innocents in the Vine; they all have committed acts that require a form of restitution.

The temporal confusion inside the Vine is again reflective of the internal state of Fuckhead, Jack Hotel and Kid Williams. While Jack Hotel has escaped from going to prison, and Kid Williams has escaped from Detox, neither of them has escaped *to* anywhere. Jack Hotel's story reflects the determined universe of Bill Houston, where all his decisions have already been made. After being acquitted Jack comes back to the Vine and the story ends with the moment at which he takes an overdose of drugs and dies, while Fuckhead is rescued from a similar fate by his girlfriend and a nameless neighbour. (JS 39–40) This escape from death also links back to the title, as if Fuckhead has managed to postpone his sentence a little longer. He does not pretend that he is, or deserves to be, absolved from his crimes, but he is still alive.

The truly heretical misreading of the Gospels is, however, the Vine, the place where Fuckhead and his acquaintances congregate as an escape from the necessity to escape. Jesus identifies himself as the Vine, in whom he encourages his disciples to abide. (John 15. 5) The Vine, this strange bar, where the broken, alcoholic, drug-addicted and aimless come together to find an angel pouring drinks, and sacrifices are made, and fights are averted; where the acquitted and the out-on-bail try to find a place to nod out, becomes then an image of the body of Christ, the church, as a community of losers and drifters who have not found a solution because they have not understood their problems yet. Johnson develops this notion of the congregation of misfits more fully at the end of both *Angels* and *Jesus' Son* as a misreading of the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14. 12–24), and I will finish my discussion of Johnson's work by bringing these two ending moments together to explore how the later stories misread and develop the ideas Johnson introduces

in his first novel.

The Great Banquet of Outsiders: the progression of Johnson's Universalism of Brokenness in *Angels* and *Jesus' Son*

Fuckhead's feeling of being 'cast out of the fold' is a biblical metaphor, which is incongruous with his seemingly un-churched existence (130). The irony of this phrase is that from the Mennonite's point of view, if they had been aware of Fuckhead's existence, he would never have been part of the flock in the first place. However, in this ignorant reversal we are also reminded that Jesus said it was precisely the people who are on the outside who will be brought in: the great act of hospitality that Jesus explains by way of the great banquet. (Luke 14. 12–24)

Johnson approximates Jesus by writing about, and from the point of view of, characters who are on the outside, people who remind us of those disciples who approach and approximate Jesus as they become conduits for grace and forgiveness, and even catalysts for change, but who remain firmly flawed human beings. In a world in which Jesus does not appear, it is only the flawed and broken who can approximate the perfect divine. Johnson repeats a certain conglomeration of disparate individuals in several of his novels, which I argue, accommodate Johnson's universalism of brokenness. There is, however, also a noticeable progression in Johnson's thought, which is why it is important to compare how he rewrites this haphazard community in these two texts.

Before Johnson describes Bill's death, the narrator moves outside of the prison walls in the dawn before the execution, where a crowd of people is gathering. Fredericks, Bill's lawyer, observes the crowd and wonders:

Where were the young ladies apparelled for tennis, apparelled for golfing? Where were the outraged owners of the establishment? The bankers, the people with tie pins and jeweled letter openers and profoundly lustrous

desks of mahogany, the workers of all this machinery of law and circumstance? The people he couldn't fight—the people who were never there? The truth was, he knew, that they had enough to keep them occupied. They were busy, complete people. They didn't need to be here in the dark night to seek warmth around the fire of murder or draw close to the ceremonies of a semi-public death.

But these people here around him—who'd probably gone to the same school as William Houston, Jr., or been acquainted with one or more of his relatives or had the same parole officer—came here because they sensed that why they themselves had not been executed was inexplicable, a miracle. (A 203)

Johnson first focuses his attention on the absent 'busy, complete people' before turning to the crowd of broken people who realise that their life is a miracle, and who are untainted by the completeness that blinds the busy bankers to their own situation. This encapsulates Jesus's words to the teachers and scribes when they challenge him for associating with sinners and tax collectors, rendered beautifully relevant to this passage from *Angels in the King James*: 'They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.' (Matthew 9. 12) From Bill's initial realisation of waking up with 'holes' in his memory, to the incomplete people who stand outside the prison, and the complete people who are conspicuous by their absence, Johnson has been rewriting Jesus's words.

Fredericks' realisation that he had been 'irretrievably sidetracked right at the start' and that 'he'd probably continue the rest of his life as a criminal lawyer because, in all honesty, there was a part of him that wanted to help murderers go free', is emblematic of the way in which Johnson describes the heresy of leaving the straight road of a successful career for a life spent fighting for the life of the unlovable (A 209). It also forces us to accept that no easy dichotomies exist between the classes of people Johnson describes. Jesus came not only for the poor: tax collectors were, after all, notoriously rich. Johnson creates a crowd of incomplete people who accept their similarity with Bill, and the miracle of their

own lives. The absent affluent bankers' completeness, however, depends on busyness and material objects. The temporal and transient nature of work and property is strengthened by the ironic tone of the adjectival 'complete': the people believe they are complete, but, like the Pharisees who claim to be whole while Jesus claims they are not, their blindness to their own incompleteness blocks them from access to healing. (John 9. 39–41) Even if they are not violent criminals or drug addicts, they are still entranced by the gold of the conquistadores, obsession, and enslavement.

It should be clear that Fuckhead identifies with the crowd who realise the miracle of being alive, and Fuckhead, too, finds himself amongst a crowd of the broken and hurting. It is possible to interpret the image of Fuckhead, surrounded by the aged, senile, and broken, as a more defined allusion to Jesus, but Fuckhead makes it clear that he is one of the hurting as well when he ends his story:

All these weirdos, and me getting a little better every day right in the midst of them. I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us. (JS 136)

Fuckhead becomes one of the crowd of 'weirdos', whereas Fredericks is oddly placed outside of it. Even though Bill Houston is not atoning for the sins of the crowd outside, there is, in Fredericks' thought, a sense that Bill is a substitute: it could have been any of them. Fuckhead's approach to the mentally and physically challenged is one of identification: unlike Fredericks and Bill, Fuckhead is not separate from the crowd, nor substituting himself, he is becoming better by being amongst them. The busy bankers are like the guests who do not attend the banquet in the parable because they are pre-occupied. Fredericks tries to bridge the gap between Greyhound space and the 'race of monsters' that occupy oversized buildings, but he remains on the outside of both as long as he cannot identify

clearly with one group. His realisation that 'he'd probably continue the rest of his life as a criminal lawyer' and that, because, 'most of his clients ended up in Florence', the prison, he would spend a lot more time there as well, still lacks a clear identification. But Fuckhead finds that pretence is lost in the acceptance of being a weirdo, and, no longer trying to fool others, identifies with this group of misfits who have come to 'the place where, between our lives on this earth, we go back to mingle with other souls waiting to be born.' (JS 127) The plural of lives recalls the way in which Johnson represented Bill and Jamie's deaths as new beginnings, and Fuckhead, by finally accepting that he needs the same healing, simultaneously begins to hope that 'there might be a place for people like [him].' (JS 136)

Paul Lyons called the end of *Jesus' Son* a 'fiercely inconclusive in-conclusion' because the process of change still lies outside the narrative, or more specifically, in between the past of the Fuckhead in the stories and the present of Fuckhead the narrator.⁴⁶ Fuckhead understands that he is inexplicably alive, and the stories are reminders, not of others atoning for him, but of his unmerited salvation. Mark Cassandra in his last letter puts it as follows:

I'm lying in jail and that cell is sucking the drugs and the fight and the soul right out of me and giving it to God and God is squeezing it in his fingers, man, every last fiber (sic) of my soul in the almighty grip of the truth. And the truth is that everything I've done, every thought I've thought, every moment I've lived is shit turned to dust and dust blown away. God, I said, fuck it, I'm not even gonna pray. Squeeze my guts till you get tired, that's all I want now, because at least it's true. [...] I think I died in jail. My life itself just left me, and who you see before you now is someone else. [...] Just got out eight days ago and rehab is part of my parole. And nothing to show for 36 years on this earth. Except that God is closer to me than my next breath. And that's all I'll ever need or want. If you think I'm bullshitting, kiss my ass. My story is the amazing truth. [...] That's what it's gonna say on my gravestone—'I should be dead.'⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Paul Lyons, 'Review of Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*' in *Manoa*, 5.2 (Winter 1993) pp. 193–195, p. 195.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *Starlight on Idaho*, p. 129.

The stories Fuckhead tells are 'the truth' as Mark Cassandra puts it, and they are also an attempt at being 'completely and openly a mess'. 'I should be dead' is the same acceptance of the miraculous fact that somehow they are still alive. Just like everything Fuckhead touches 'turns to shit', Mark Cassandra's previous life is also 'shit turned to dust', and both conflate with Jamie's faeces that, once washed off the walls, resemble the ceasing of who she was.⁴⁸ The disturbing stories that often expose the plank in Fuckhead's own eye, also function as a way to resist the temptation to whitewash the past. They continue to problematize a simple idea of recovery as a way to return, but rather explore the possibility of seeing the end of one way of existence as the beginning of an alternative way of being. Johnson's misreading of the Gospels is obvious in both *Angels* and *Jesus' Son*, and these texts are fictional approximations of Jesus because they allow a different reading of the Gospels to illuminate, and problematize, both a literal fundamentalism and established orthodox readings. Johnson's misreadings, like Robinson's, peruse the text of the Gospels for new ways of understanding, and, through a process of subverting and re-imagining the text, give new life to the stories Jesus told.

⁴⁸ Johnson is here probably using St. Paul's admission that he counts his pre-Christian life 'as nothing but dung' (Philippians 3. 8) as a way to write about the recovery from drug and alcohol abuse.

Chapter IV

Rewriting the Gospel of John: Tim Winton's Congregation of Heretics

Tim Winton is an Australian author who published his first novel, *An Open Swimmer* (1982) at the age of twenty-one, and has since written eight other novels, three collections of short stories, several works of non-fiction, as well as a series of books for children. Robert Dixon has argued that Winton's success as an author parallels the post-colonial need for Australia to find an emblem of white (male) Australian identity, and sees the fact that the majority of interest in Winton's writing has come from the non-academic field as further evidence for this.¹ Although Winton's work has been the subject of some academic discussion, predominantly in Australia, and three short books focussing on his work had been produced earlier, it was only in 2006 that a scholarly book-length study was published: Salhia Ben-Messahel's *Mind the Country: Tim Winton's Fiction*, but even this work has been criticized for its inability to develop into a significant critical appreciation of Winton's work.² Dixon states that the three books written about Winton before Ben-Messahel's, 'reflect [Winton's] popularity with the general reader rather than the academic reader, and with the undergraduate and secondary school curricula' because 'the issues and approaches that dominate the three books about Winton are author-centred and thematic, focusing especially on

¹ Robert Dixon, 'Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet* and the Field of Australian Literature' in *Westerly*, 50 (November 2005) pp. 240–260.

² See Stuart Murray, 'Review of *Mind the Country: Tim Winton's Fiction* by Salhia Ben-Messahel' in *Reviews in Australian Studies*, 2.1 (2007) no page numbers given, <<http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/ras/article/view/537/585>> [accessed June 25, 2015], and Nathanael O'Riley, 'Review of *Mind the Country: Tim Winton's Fiction*, by Salhia Ben-Messahel' in *Australian Literary Studies*, 23.3 (April 2008) pp. 359–61. The three earlier works are Michael McGirr, *Tim Winton: The Writer and His Work* (South Yarra, Vic.: Macmillan, 1999); Hilary McPhee, ed., *Tim Winton: A Celebration* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1999); and Richard Rossiter and Lynn Jacobs, eds, *Reading Tim Winton* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993).

biographical and regional issues' rather than being a 'text-centred approach'.³ Dixon indicts Winton directly as an active participant in this national program of identity creation.⁴ He does, however, also concede that '*Cloudstreet* does not have a single and definite meaning', implying that a text-centred approach might be more helpful in beginning to form a critical appreciation of Winton's writing. While Dixon laments the lack of academic interest in Winton's writing it is telling that in his own article he only refers to Andrew Taylor's article, and does not seem to be familiar with journal articles by Michael McGirr, Stuart Murray, Jennifer Rutherford and Anthony Hassal.⁵ There is no question that there is a lack of critical engagement with Winton's body of work, but what is even more surprising is that, although many of the articles acknowledge Winton's indebtedness to the Bible, not one critic has explored the way in which the Bible functions as the foundational text for Winton's writing. Even Lisa Jamieson's 'Surprised by Grace: Mourning and Redemption in Tim Winton's *Dirt Music*' is more concerned with religion and Derrida than with the biblical source, although she does acknowledge that:

Winton's work is steadfastly concerned with a faith that is swept clean of iconic paraphernalia. This aligns him closely with what Bonhoeffer has called a 'religionless Christianity' in that his fiction is infused with 'religious imaginative life' instead of any clear devotional theme.⁶

This religionless Christianity, a faith that is not doctrinally defined, has obvious

³ Dixon, 'Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet* and the Field of Australian Literature'. Both O'Reily and Murray's reviews of Ben-Messahel include these same criticisms about thematic and biographical intrusions in the critical text.

⁴ Dixon, p. 52.

⁵ Andrew Taylor 'What Can Be Read, and What Can Only Be Seen in Tim Winton's Fiction' in *Australian Literary Studies*, 17.4 (October 1996) pp. 323–31; Michael McGirr, 'Go Home Said the Fish: A Study of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*' in *Meanjin*, 56.1 (1997) pp. 56–66; Stuart Murray, 'Tim Winton's New Tribalism: *Cloudstreet* and Community' in *Kunapipi*, 25.1 (2003) pp. 83–91; Jennifer Rutherford, 'The Colonizing Victim: Tim Winton's Irish Conceit', in *Flight from Certainty: The Dilemma of Identity and Exile*, eds. Anne Luyat and Francine Tolron (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2001) pp. 153–164; Anthony Hassall, 'Over there: the dream/nightmare of Europe in Tim Winton's *The Riders* and George Johnston's *Clean straw for Nothing*' in *Overland*, 161 (Summer 2000) pp. 26–30.

⁶ Lisa Jamieson, 'Surprised by Grace: Mourning and Redemption in Tim Winton's *Dirt Music*' in *Zadok Perspectives*, 103 (Winter 2009) pp. 10–13.

affinities with my argument that the fictional approximations of Jesus depend on a resistance to dogmatically defining Jesus. Winton's *Cloudstreet* (1991), I argue, is a narrative that explores how a group of disparate individuals needs to resist a dogmatic adherence to definitions of who belongs to *us* or *them*, before they can become a congregation of heretics.

The majority of Winton's critical readership, including Ben-Messahel, has focused on his involvement with eco-activism and his use of the Australian landscape as a character in his fiction. The Australian landscape and the littoral placement of many of Winton's stories continue to be explored within the parameters of different academic disciplines, and Winton's work has become an important subject in this inter-disciplinary discussion. Digby Hannah's 'Experience of Place in Australian Identity and Theology', one of the few theological articles that reference Winton, is, however, indicative of the lack of text-centred approach that Dixon points out. Hannah does not engage in a close theological reading of Winton's use of landscape, but the reference to *Cloudstreet* is such that familiarity on the part of his readership is assumed. The lack of serious engagement with Winton's text confirms my suspicion that he has become a token reference specifically with regards to the study of the Australian landscape, without being subjected to a more deserved theological reading beyond the question of geography.⁷ While Paul Mitchell can state that 'numerous critics have noted Winton's Christian spirituality and the role it plays in his writing' it is equally true that remarkably few critics have done more than 'note' it. There have been attempts at reading Winton theologically, such as Lisa Jacobson's, but an intertextual study of the Bible and Winton's work remains largely under-explored by the academic community.

⁷ Digby Hannah, 'Experience of Place in Australian Identity and Theology' in *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies*, 17.3 (October 2004) pp. 297–310.

Winton has consciously written religious themes into his narratives, and, especially in his earlier work, this religious aspect has been decidedly Christian. In an interview Winton has explained that he is ‘a Christian [...] and [his] books are coloured by the way [he] see[s] the world, but that’s not likely to be shared by all Christians, let alone all people’.⁸ Like Denis Johnson then, Winton is also committed to self-identify as a Christian and equally quick to resist being representative of a particular kind of Christianity. His concession, that his work is coloured by his Christian worldview, is helpful in providing at least a broad theological framework for his novels, but it is important to recognize that Winton resists a narrow denominational reading of his work. More importantly for the fictional approximation of Jesus, Winton has also stated that ‘the Bible was everything in the fundamentalist, evangelical tradition’ in which he was brought up.⁹ This early formative exposure to the biblical text allows Winton to misread, re-read, and re-write it through the narratives he has created. His own familiarity with the Bible is evident in most of his longer novels, even though it is not always as explicit in the shorter stories, but there is often, for Winton, more pliable material in the Hebrew Bible than in the New Testament which means that, while his work is consistently theologically interesting and biblically informed, not all his novels can be interpreted to be fictional approximations of Jesus.

Even though Winton himself expected *That Eye, the Sky* (1986) to be ‘kicked to death’ by the ‘virulently anti-religious’ academics and publishers, and continues to acknowledge in interviews his own religiosity, this has not prevented him from becoming a well-known and respected, and eventually financially successful, author.¹⁰ This should at least allow us to question the generalized sense of an anti-

⁸ Jennifer Sinclair, ‘Interview with Tim Winton’ in *Zadok Perspectives*, 74 (Autumn 2002) pp. 8–10.

⁹ Sinclair, p. 9.

¹⁰ Sinclair, p. 8.

religious intellectual elite that would choose to ignore any literary work that explores religious themes or whose author professes a particular belief system. It is, however, telling that, even though Ben-Messahel acknowledges the religious aspect of Winton's writing, and cannot ignore the biblical allusions that make up such a large part of his work, when she lists the major themes of Winton's fiction – family, love, solitude in an empty world, and nostalgia– religion or Christianity, or even simply concepts like grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation, are not part of her list. This is particularly problematic considering that Winton's *That Eye, the Sky*, and his short story collection *The Turning* (2004) depend on stories of conversion (turning), and ignoring the obvious theological themes that permeate Winton's oeuvre is doing a significant disservice to his attempts at critically rethinking what it means to catch a glimpse of a transcendent power beyond the natural, and his way of using biblical material.

The description of the Australian landscape in Winton's fiction is an important feature and there is much that can be fruitfully explored through engaging with this particular aspect of his work, but my thesis will largely focus on the way in which Winton incorporates the text of the Bible, especially the Gospels, and how he rewrites and misreads them. I will show that Winton uses the narrative of *Cloudstreet* to question simplistic notions of conversion and change, and the difficulty of defining the mystery of the divine within the boundaries of a doctrine or a stated belief. I will argue that Winton explores the mystery of God and grace through this narrative, and that he resists a closing down of theological and dogmatic assumptions. I will show that, rather than the synoptic Gospels, it is the Gospel of John that Winton uses as a foundation for *Cloudstreet*, and specifically, but not exclusively, uses the narrative to rethink Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus, as recorded in John 3. 1–21, and the story of the healing of a man

born blind in John 9. 11–41. I will argue that, rather than nostalgia for an old way of life, Winton uses the device of returning as a way to explore reconciliation, and although I agree with Murray, Dixon, and Ben-Messahel that Winton's narrative is concerned with community creation, I will show that it is never a closed community, and that the important turning moment in the novel is the dance between Dolly Pickles and Oriel Lamb at the wedding of Quick and Rose, rather than the birth of their child. I will also show that Fish is not a Christ-figure, but rather an embodiment of a spiritually attuned child-like character whose presence functions as a foil to the structured lives of the other characters, and that he becomes the focus of the family's love, but ultimately cannot stay in the flesh-and-blood world of the pragmatic grown-ups.

Like Robinson and Johnson, Winton is also reluctant to allow one character to play a redeeming role. Winton, however, does not re-write the parables of Jesus like Robinson, neither does he follow a clear quest-like narrative to signify the journey towards redemption as I argued for in Johnson's work. Winton's use of the Bible in his fiction is, similar to Johnson's, more subdued, more oblique than Robinson's, but he does use explicitly Christian characters as protagonists in his narratives. For example, in *That Eye, the Sky*, a story narrated by the twelve-year old Morton Flack, Henry Warburton is a drifter who tries to help Morton's family when Sam, the narrator's father, ends up in a coma following a car accident. Warburton calls himself an 'evangelist', tells the Flacks stories from the Bible and baptizes both Morton and his mother, Alice. Warburton is, however, portrayed as a deeply flawed and problematic character who sleeps with and, eventually, elopes with Morton's sixteen-year-old sister. But, somehow, the miracle of Sam's awakening and a sense of conversion do take place.

The narrative of *That Eye, the Sky* also includes two moments when Morton

and Alice decide to go to church, first to a premillennial dispensationalist meeting in the back of a shop and later to ‘the big one. The Catholic one.’¹¹ Both moments are portrayed as negative experiences by Morton, and it is this aspect of the church as a congregation of like-minded believers that Winton questions and which, I argue, he develops even further in *Cloudstreet*. Although *That Eye, the Sky* is an exploration of conversion and the way in which flawed characters can bring a spark of the transcendent into the lives of others, it is not Winton’s most sophisticated attempt at misreading the biblical text, and for that reason, and in the light of the availability of his other work, I will not explore it in detail in this chapter. What is clear from *That Eye, the Sky*, however, is that Winton does not turn Warburton into a substitute for Jesus, and that an understanding of the Divine presence, or the salvific nature of faith, and the working of grace, does not need to occur within the confines of a doctrine, whether that is a home-grown dispensationalist system or a more traditionally institutionalized dogma. Winton continues to develop these two ideas in his subsequent novels, and I will argue that the two fictional families that people *Cloudstreet* become a congregation of heretics, outside of any established or dogmatically constrained theology, but by submitting to the inscrutable nature of the transcendent, through pursuing interpersonal reconciliation, and the acceptance of difference. Winton’s use of the Gospel of John is especially obvious in the way he conflates life with love, and death with hate, and the use of the recurring symbolism of light, water and wind.

Cloudstreet does not dwell on the drug-addled and alcoholic petty criminals of Johnson’s narratives, but it is clear that in Winton’s narrative no one is perfectly good: all Winton’s characters are flawed human beings. But Winton allows forgiveness and love to happen between these imperfect individuals while

¹¹ Tim Winton, *That Eye, the Sky* (London: Picador, 2003) p. 124–126, and 145 respectively. Kindle.

allowing the mystery of life to remain unexplained. While Johnson's narratives explore the arbitrariness of grace in a man-made hell where nature is often unnoticed, Winton's fiction is filled with poetic descriptions of the Australian natural world, a place of beauty and of transcendence. The natural world is, however, not the space where most of the narrative unfolds. Nature is a large background space that allows individuals to find solitude and beauty, but it is in the man-made suburbs and cities, the spaces filled with the structures of government and church, that the characters of *Cloudstreet* struggle to create a sense of community. I will show how the wide spaces of Australia function, in *Cloudstreet* and in Winton's other fictional work, as an escape from human contact and an abdication of responsibility, and that it is only by a return to the community and an active seeking of reconciliation that communities can be sustained.

Like Johnson's narratives, Winton's fictional work also questions the possibility of understanding and systematizing the working of grace in the world into a simple formula. Winton's novel is a fictional approximation of Jesus, because the Bible is foundational to the text, and he places the working of divine grace clearly outside of the realm of doctrine. *Cloudstreet* is a narrative that resists dogmatizing the divine expression in institutionalized religion, but rather focuses on the importance of love, reconciliation, and acceptance, most importantly the acceptance of the uncontrollable nature of life. I will show that it is ultimately only through reconciliation and the acceptance of difference that a true congregation of heretics can continue to co-exist.

In *Cloudstreet* Tim Winton explores the difficulty of understanding the arbitrary nature of life, and grace, through the exploits of two families, the Pickles and the Lambs, who share the same house. Sam Pickles loses his hand in a work-

related accident, but believes he can feel the 'shifting shadow of luck', and continually tries his luck at the horse races or other gambling activities. When his cousin suffers a heart attack and dies, Sam inherits a house in Perth, on Cloud Street, but with the provision that he cannot sell it for at least twenty years. Sam and Dolly have two sons, Ted and Chub, and one daughter, Rose. Sam's injury makes finding work difficult, and, since he cannot sell the house, he decides to rent half of it out.

Lester and Oriel Lamb are 'Godfearing people' who have three sons Mason, Samson, and Lon, and three daughters, Hattie, Elaine, and Red.¹² Mason is called Quick 'because he is as unquick as his father', and Samson is called 'Samsonfish, or just plain Fish, for his wit and alertness.' (24-5) On a prawn-fishing trip Fish loses his footing and is, for a moment, trapped underwater and tangled in the net. Because it is dark, Lester and Quick struggle to help him, and when they finally manage to pull him onto the beach they know 'he is dead, but [Oriel] beats the water out of him anyway.' While she is setting 'her fists to him' she is also 'shouting at the Lord Jesus' to 'raise him up!' (28) Fish comes back, miraculously, or so the family initially believes, but their excitement and jubilation at the miracle turns into embarrassment when they realize Fish has suffered brain damage incurred through the lack of oxygen. They decide to leave the town since 'you can't stay in a town when everything blows up in your face – especially the only miracle that ever happened to you.' (44)

The Lambs rent half of the Pickles' house and Oriel starts to work out her own successes in life through hard work, dedication, and stubbornness. The loss of the bright and mischievous Fish and the disappointing result of the miracle have made her angry with God, and she is unable to accept that she cannot control or

¹² Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet* (London: Picador, 1992) p. 2. Further page numbers in the text.

foresee every aspect of her life. Lester is portrayed as a well-meaning, but slightly slow-thinking man, who is made uncomfortable by direct confrontation, but also harbours a form of wisdom that allows him to understand why Oriel is the way she is and why she decides to live in a tent in the garden. The narrative follows the twenty years that the two families live side by side on Cloud Street, and becomes an exploration of the way in which people respond to, and try to make sense of, the contingent nature of life.

The epigraph to the novel is taken from an old hymn, 'Shall We Gather at the River?', ascribed to Robert Lowry, who wrote the lyrics in 1864, during a severe epidemic in Brooklyn and is generally understood to be a celebration of the post-mortem gathering of believers at the heavenly river as recorded in Revelation 22. 1–2.¹³ In the previous two chapters I have argued that Robinson uses water as an image of blessing, and Johnson uses water as a metaphor for grace, but Winton uses the image of water, and in *Cloudstreet* specifically the river, in a more complex manner. The river is the place where, in a misprisioned image of baptism, Fish loses his old self and returns damaged to the family. It is also the place to which he longs to return. Simultaneously, Winton shows the river as a nurturing presence from which the Lambs can receive sustenance, and around which the family can gather to find rest. The river becomes entwined with time in an image of eternal flow, and as a witness to history. The river in Winton's narrative is not just an image of an aspect –blessing, grace– of the divine, but takes on the role of the ever-present divine; both giving and taking (Job 1. 21); an always moving source of life and blessing, but never tame, or predictable.

Within this narrative Fish's accident represents a critique of a simplistic view of Christian soteriology that assumes a predictable outcome and a

¹³ John Julian, 'Lowry, Robert' in *A Dictionary of Hymnology: Setting Forth the Origin and History of Christian Hymns of All Ages and Nations* (London: John Murray, 1907) pp. 699–700.

recognisably progressive trajectory. By allowing Fish to suffer brain damage, by slowing him down, and by making Fish's life's focus a return to the river, the moment of physical death, Winton's narrative could be read as a critical stance towards those denominations whose eschatology forces them to neglect an interest in life on earth. But Fish's life is not portrayed as merely negative, and although the moment of baptism is a life-changing event that forces Fish effectively outside of society, out of the world of work and utility, I will argue that Winton uses the change in Fish's life to explore notions of responsibility and love. Winton problematizes a simplistic notion of instantaneous change, both through the Lamb's expectations of the supernatural miracle, and the scientific system of Sam's gambling. In *Cloudstreet* neither mathematics nor theology are systems that prepare Winton's characters for life.

It would, however, be too easy to assert that Winton is here trying to dismiss the transcendent altogether. On the contrary, Winton's heretical rethinking of the miraculous, of faith, and the necessity of grounding the transcendent in life, turns *Cloudstreet* into a novel that attempts to explore the mysterious nature of the divine, grace and blessing, from within the experience of disappointment and pain, and the ordinariness of routine human existence. Winton shares Robinson's notion that blessing can be found in both small moments of human interaction as well as in the grand spaces of nature, but he also creates a fictional world in which man-made structures, architecture, as well as history and theology, become obstacles to accepting or recognizing the mystery of the divine working: it is Oriel's inflexible, narrow, understanding of what a miracle should be that results in her loss of faith (45); it is the old woman's narrow understanding of what civilised means that causes the tragic suicide of the aboriginal girl (33-4); it is 'orderly calm suburbia' that is 'merely a list of things missing', specifically the

disorderly 'tidal sounds of people stirring'. (343)

Both Sam, the gambler who believes he can feel the 'hairy hand of God' move, for good or for bad, and Oriel are trying to work out an understanding of life. Both think they can create, or depend on, some system of gambling or theology that will be predictable, controllable and, in many ways, safe. By describing the lives of the Pickles and the Lambs side by side, Winton conflates the gambling of Sam with the attempts Oriel makes at trying to understand why her life did not work out the way it should have. Through the interaction of the two families Winton is able to explore the problem of trying to understand the 'shifty shadow', or God's lack of intervention. Winton's exploration of these complex philosophical questions does not lead to definitive answers, but moves towards a recognition of the inexplicable nature of many life-events. There are no systems, either of theology or of gambling, that are guaranteed to lead to knowledge, understanding, or success. Narrow understandings are like the heresy of explanation, but an openness towards each other, and different ways of being, becomes more and more pronounced as a way, not to answer the questions, but to leave them unresolved and just *be* together, accentuated by the final, communal, picnic at the side of the river that frames the narrative.

The story of Fish and his desire to return to the river relates to the ever ongoing character of the eternal questions, and the water represents the difficulty of containing all the answers into a rigid system: there is something fluid about existence, something arbitrary, something gratuitous, something unexplainable. Winton approximates Jesus most in Jesus's refusal to explain philosophical questions about evil and suffering, emphasized in the story of the man born blind, and Jesus's focus on dealing with each situation individually, as well as the constant reminder that what matters is not how life can be systematized (law), but

how to treat other people. Dixon may well be right that Winton's work has been co-opted in a desire to define what it means to be Australian, but Winton resists a narrow understanding of nation and emphasises, instead, a movement towards an inclusive community that allows for different ways of being to co-exist.

Winton's characters are neither denominationally defined in the way Robinson's characters are, nor are they entirely un-churched as is the case with Johnson's characters. The site for the interaction between the non-conformist Lambs and the secular Pickles is the house on Cloud Street, and it is important that this material space is both a location of tension between the past and the present, and the on-going conflict between the different ways of being of the two families. The house is initially a space where the narrowness of dogmatism is performed by the way it is divided, and both families clearly resist the influence of the other. When Rose realizes, for example, that Oriel has come into her bedroom to clean, she feels this as an affront to her and her family's way of life, even though she herself finds it difficult to accept her mother's passive and destructive habits (125).

This resistance to an alternative way of being causes continual tension between the two families. It is only after many years of living in close proximity that the true influence can be recognized. Rather than seeking an instantaneous moment of change or conversion, Winton emphasizes the need for openness to the neighbour, and a willingness to accept difference rather than a mission to achieve sameness. Herein lies the significance of the communal meal at the river that frames the narrative. This scene of the two families, differences un-erased, congregating at the river on a spontaneous holiday to enjoy each other's company and the communion of food, points to a future of togetherness, outside of the narrative, in which the tension will not necessarily be dispelled and questions may remain unanswered, but the dividing fence will be removed (431). At this

communal meal the Lambs and Pickles come together, in what will be once more a moment of loss, Fish's leaving, but what is also the culmination of a series of reconciliatory moments that are ultimately embodied in the life of the infant Wax Harry. Although it is in Quick and Rose's son that the Lamb and Pickle lines combine, I will show that the significant turning point, from which the two families begin to move towards each other, is when Oriel asks Dolly to dance.

The approximation of Jesus in *Cloudstreet* is again an exploration of what it means to be human and the inevitable messiness of existence in a man-made world. The strength of Winton's fiction lies in the refusal to create easy dichotomies of good and bad between the Lambs and the Pickles: Sam and Dolly are both clearly crippled by their addictions, but Oriel is equally hampered by her own dogmatism. While late in the novel Dolly's past trauma is explained as the result of an incestuous family relationship, Oriel suffers from survivor guilt.¹⁴ The narrative makes it clear that, although Oriel has no physical disabilities, she carries the memory of the traumatic loss of her family like an irremediable lack similar to Sam's missing limb. Lester is represented as generally good-natured but he eventually succumbs to his sexual frustration and his obvious attraction to Dolly when he has sex with her (250). Even Beryl Lee, who is initially portrayed as angelic and saint-like, must eventually confess that she is hurt by Lester's indiscretion with Dolly, not because of the sinfulness of adultery, but by the fact that he slept with Dolly rather than with her (267). In this respect Winton creates characters who exist on a level plane; there is neither social nor spiritual hierarchy; even though the characters at times voice their own feelings of superiority, it is clear from the narrative that these are influenced by the

¹⁴ Oriel's backstory is told only in part to her children (p. 70), but the guilt feelings she carries, as well as her disappointment in love, are kept internal (p. 95–6). Dolly's past is revealed by herself in a confession-type moment to Rose (p. 361), but I will deal with that passage in more detail below.

character's inability to see their own blind spots.

Winton is, however, not merely creating a social-realist portrait of humanity that functions as a moral mirror. Dixon has written that in *Cloudstreet* Winton 'flirts with magic realism', a genre 'most often associated with [...] Gabriel Garcia Marquez', because of the inclusion of unexplained transcendental or supernatural phenomena.¹⁵ The features of magic realism are 'the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre, skilful time shifts [...] miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories [...] the horrific and the inexplicable.'¹⁶ It is obvious that *Cloudstreet* contains some of these features, the 'Pentecostal pig' (130) and Quick's glowing body (222) being only two examples of these strange instances. This is, however, never more than a glimpse of something beyond the natural, and Winton never explains these phenomena; they remain mysterious and ambiguous.

This is, I argue, deliberate and crucial for the narrative: just as Oriel cannot explain why God would allow Fish to suffer a life of stunted mental growth, just as Sam cannot predict what the 'hairy hand of God' will touch, or guarantee the outcome of his gambling activities, there are parts of the narrative that remain unresolved, unexplainable and, to a certain extent, superfluous. This creates a tension for the reader that is comparable to Oriel's struggle. The 'Pentecostal pig', the glowing body of Quick, the half-miracle of Fish's resurrection, and the recurring visitation of the Indigenous hitchhiker, are intrusions on the realism of the narrative; intrusive, disturbing, and perplexingly unhelpful, except for one main focal point which is to bring the two families together at the side of the river. Before I show how the Lambs and Pickles become a congregation of heretics,

¹⁵ Dixon, p. 57.

¹⁶ J. A. Cuddon, ed., 'Magic Realism' in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) pp. 487-8.

however, I will first clarify how Winton has used the Gospel of John as a source for the recurring imagery in *Cloudstreet*

The Gospel of John in *Cloudstreet*

The Gospel of John stands apart from the synoptic Gospels both because of its structure and its themes. John does not, for example, record any parables, although he does show, through the disciples' exclamations, that Jesus speaks in language that is difficult to grasp (John 16. 29–30). When Jesus speaks in John's Gospel he is repeatedly misunderstood and consequently asked to produce a sign to prove his authority. The Gospel does, however, not lack miraculous events. On the contrary, John adds miracles not recorded in the synoptic Gospels, like the well-known story of the wedding at Cana. What the Gospel of John indicates is that miracles, or signs, do not convince especially those who try to fit their experience into a tradition based on laws. John, through emphatic repetition, focuses on believing without seeing, most prominently explicated in the final moments of the narrative in Jesus's interaction with Thomas: 'because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed *are* they that have not seen, and *yet* have believed.' (John 20. 29)¹⁷ I argue that Winton uses the main themes from John as an underlying current in his exploration of the community he builds in *Cloudstreet*, and that he misreads this theme of the unexplained miracles in an attempt at moving the focus away from the transcendental, to the importance of relationship and community.

There are several metaphors John presents for the community of believers and all are equally fluid and nebulous. The well-known prologue contrasts light

¹⁷ Traditionally taken to be the latest book in the New Testament canon, it has been argued that the reason for this emphasis on belief without seeing in John is simply added to the Gospel because the group of eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus was becoming increasingly smaller. The condemnatory tone in Jesus's pronouncements against those who 'demand a sign' is, however, already present in the Gospel of Mark 8. 12, and seems to suggest that this emphasis on belief apart from supernatural intervention was important to the community that produced the Gospels from an early date.

and darkness (1. 4–9); in Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus he speaks of being ‘born of water’ (3. 5), and of the spirit as being comparable to wind that can be heard but of which ‘Thou [...] canst not tell whence it cometh, and wither it goeth’ (3. 8). Early in the Gospel John writes: ‘[f]or the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.’ (John 1. 17) Later, Jesus is recorded as speaking to a Samaritan woman and telling her that ‘true worshippers will worship [...] in spirit and truth’ rather than ‘in this mountain, nor yet in Jerusalem.’ (4. 21–24) Grace and truth are, however, never defined beyond rather riddling pronouncements clearly misunderstood by Jesus’s audience; grace and truth become synonymous with spirit, water, and wind; fluid, mobile, unrestricted and importantly, if not opposed to law, certainly moving beyond it, as John indicates by Jesus’s insistence on making ‘a man every whit whole on the Sabbath’ (John 7. 23)

The opposition to Jesus in John’s Gospel is largely performed by ‘the Jews’ and is concerned with the breaking of the Mosaic Law and interpretations of scriptures.¹⁸ John clearly intends to move from a rigid system of laws towards a more fluid understanding of grace and truth and, by extension, to community, and, while eventually the disciples do believe, it is initially the Samaritan woman and her community (John 4. 7–42) who are more receptive to Jesus’s words. It is my intention to show how Winton uses the Gospel of John, although not exclusively, as a way to understand this flexible aspect of community, but also how he misreads

¹⁸ Harold Bloom, *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine* (London: Penguin Books, 2005) p. 41–2. Bloom is not the first one to indicate that the use of ‘the Jews’ as the opposition to Jesus makes John’s Gospel the most anti-Semitic. It is not my purpose here to negate the obvious facts of historical anti-Semitism, but Bloom’s rather reductive reading of John is surprising, because it neglects to reflect on John’s own Jewishness and forgets that he was writing to a, still, largely Jewish community of Christians. It is clear with hindsight that John’s use of ‘the Jews’ as shorthand for a small group of people who opposed Jesus, has enabled the historically difficult relationship between Christians and Jews, but it is clearly a misunderstanding of John to see his text as fundamentally anti-Semitic. Bloom’s reductive reading is the more surprising because it is precisely this reading by Christians that supported Christian anti-Semitism.

the Gospel to form his community of heretics, a community that depends ultimately on flesh and blood, rather than on water.

The community of heretics, of Lambs and Pickles, is decidedly flesh and blood, resulting eventually in the birth of a child, Wax Harry, who is placed at the centre of the community. The transcendental is never far away from these flesh and blood people, and it touches them and intrudes into their lives at different points in the narrative, but Winton clearly understands that a belief in the transcendental cannot be substituted for the necessity of living life in the world; and life cannot be reduced to simplistic systems and beliefs, nor can it be lived in the realm where flesh and blood are unable to exist. Winton often emphasizes the very physicality of his character's experiences. The sexual passion of Sam and Dolly as remembered by Sam is described in a series of verb phrases: 'pull each other down', 'lick the salt away', 'peel cotton from each other', and the action verbs 'vising', 'rising', 'bunted' 'bucking', 'clamped', and 'hit'. The physical sensations are amplified by the description of their surroundings: they can feel the 'hard sand' and the 'heat of the day', taste the salt, hear the 'drumbeating of cicadas', while 'the shellhollow smell' rises. (40) Winton's narrative is a complex combination of visceral being and metaphysical ambiguity with an overriding sense that, while it does not negate the transcendental, the indefinable nature of the transcendental must be accepted as manifesting itself in the contingency and unpredictability of life. It is in the middle of this being that human life needs to be lived, blind to the larger workings of a moving spirit, variedly denoted by the shifty shadow, the hairy hand of God, lady luck, the spinning knife or the river, but touched by it and manifested in moments of grace.

One passage from the Gospel of John, besides Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus (John 3. 1–21) that is important for Winton is the story of the man born

blind (John 9. 1–41). When the disciples see the man they ask Jesus to explain whether his blindness was the result of his own or his parent’s sin (John 9. 2). This question hides the implication that people’s misfortunes can easily be traced back to a cause; some event or action that has resulted in the plight of the affected person. There is, however, inherent in this question also an element of casting blame and an absolving of responsibility. If a person’s misfortune is simply their own fault, or the result of ancestral sin, it absolves the community from any responsibility towards that person’s suffering. Jesus reacts to the question by saying that ‘Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.’ (John 9. 3) He then proceeds to spit on the ground, make some mud, and heal the man. Later, when the man is questioned by the Pharisees and is adamant that Jesus must be a prophet because he was able to perform a miracle, the Pharisees respond by saying ‘Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us?’ (John 9. 34) While the Pharisees cannot deny the miracle, they cannot accept the working of God because Jesus made mud on the Sabbath. More importantly, however, the implication of the disciples’ question returns in the accusation of the Pharisees. Later, when Jesus talks to the Pharisees they ask ‘Are we blind also?’ to which he responds ‘If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.’ (John 9. 40–41) The story illustrates that Jesus does not seek to explain the reasons for the physical pain and suffering that is obvious in the world around him, but to take an action to alleviate that suffering. He moves away from appointing blame or explaining guilt, and towards care and response.

The Pharisees’ blindness is the result of their punctilious adherence to the law of Moses resulting in their self-righteous belief that they need not be responsible for the alleviation of the suffering that is part of their community. They

have turned the law, which included the mandate to take care of the poor, the orphan, and the widow, into a vehicle for refusing that responsibility. (Exodus 22. 21–2) While the disciples and the Pharisees focus on the cause of the problem, Jesus deals with the problem. The implication of ‘but that the work of God should be made manifest’ is that when a problem presents itself, the people who are aware of it become responsible for trying to respond to it. By justifying themselves according to the law, effectively turning a blind eye, the Pharisees make themselves blind to their responsibility. The miracle, although not effective in convincing the Pharisees, is indubitably important for the man born blind, and it is precisely his blindness that enables the miracle: and so the blind see, while the seeing remain blind.

Winton rewrites this blindness in the characters of Lester and Oriel. They are first introduced as ‘Godfearing people’ (23), but after Fish’s accident, what they first thought was a miracle turns them into disillusioned people who can no longer see their way as clear as they once did. In the moment when Fish is caught in the net, significantly, Lester’s lamp goes out and it is later on, when they have realized their mistake about the miracle and have moved into the house on Cloud Street, that Oriel admits that she supposes ‘the Lord understands’ to which Lester replies ‘Hope He does. Cause I don’t. I’m damned if I do. And neither do you, so let’s not be hypocrites and thank God.’ (52) This moment encapsulates their own descent into a darkness where they no longer can explain the things of which they were previously so sure. This blindness is, for Lester and Oriel, however, different from the Pharisees, because once they accept the incomprehensibility of life, they are able to open up to the endless possibilities that contingency brings. The twenty-year span of the narrative allows Winton to write a process that is slow and often

difficult, but ultimately shows a healing taking place that moves Lester and Oriel towards a different expression of grace.

The initial certainty about what is right and wrong, and how things should be done betrays a rigidity that blinds Oriel to the possibility of difference. In a conversation with Quick Oriel asks

Have I been a crook mother?
 [...]
 Do I lie?
 No
 Do I cheat?
 No.
 Steal?
 No.
 Fornicate? (273)

It should be clear Oriel is listing a number of the Ten Commandments here which emphasizes her own dependence on following Mosaic rules. Quick is uncomfortable with the questions, but ultimately the commandments as Oriel follows them are not helpful in securing a positive answer to her initial question about motherhood. This characteristic of Oriel is slow to leave her and it never completely fades away, but there is a softening that starts in a conversation she has with Lester about blame:

Quick's lookin blue, said Lester
 Well, Oriel murmured, that's natural enough.
 Blames himself, thinks we blame him.
 Don't we?
 [...] I don't know. I know it's not his fault. Why would it be? It's just happened.
 But do you blame him?
 Lester said nothing.
 We blame him, she said. And I blame you. And God.
 It scares me, he said, hearin you talk like that.
 Me too, she said. I can't help it. I'm a sinner, Lest.
 [...]
 I'm the one hard as nails.
 Lester coughed out a laugh.
 We can't help it, Oriel said vaguely, none of us can.

You always said people can help anythin and everythin.
That was once. (62-3)

I read this conversation as a misreading of the story of the blind man. The desire to blame someone for Fish's misfortune is a way through which a person might try to find understanding. The *why* of the situation can simply be turned into judgment, since once blame can be apportioned, the question is answered. It is, however, also clear that knowing why it happened, or whose fault it was, does nothing to change the situation. Like the disciples' question, the ability to appoint a culprit does not transform Fish back to his previous self. Oriel's own survivor's guilt, interestingly, helps her identify with Quick's feelings ('that's natural enough'), but does not help prevent her from blaming him. The understanding that Oriel does gain from her struggle through this accident is first that she considers herself a sinner, and second that she has changed her mind about the possibility of effecting change in herself. Lester's understanding of the moment when Fish went under water is then further developed from 'it just happened' to:

he knew that being alive was being alive and you couldn't tamper with that, you couldn't underestimate it. Life was something you didn't argue with, because when it came down to it, whether you barracked for God or nothing at all, life was all there was. And death. (63)

Life is contingent, it is not something you argue with, and belief in God does not simplify human existence. Lester and Oriel have found themselves wrestling in the dark since Fish's accident and cannot find an explanation or someone to blame. Instead, they have to accept the situation and take responsibility for what they are faced with in their life in the present. A constant turning backwards to explain the past or its effect on the present does not help them to look towards the future.¹⁹

¹⁹ This has obvious implications for a post-colonial nation-building project as well, and although I do not attempt to address the post-colonial question in this thesis, it is clear that reading

Oriel will need time to deal with her anger towards Lester, Quick, and God, but it is in this early conversation that the change begins, and it is important to note that in her much later conversation with Quick she has come to an understanding that:

The strong are here to look after the weak, son, and the weak are here to teach the strong.
 What are we here to teach you, Mum?
 Too early to say. (274)

Although Quick does not know this, Oriel believes there is ‘something wrong with men’, and that loving men means ‘making up’ for them, ‘compensating.’ (95) She ‘knew that loving a man was a very silly activity; it was giving to the weak and greedy and making trouble for yourself.’ (96) Quick includes himself in the group of these weak men, but even after all this time, Oriel is unwilling to say what she can learn. In her internal monologue, however, the answer is implied: to love the weak is silly, but this is precisely what Oriel has had to learn in her relationship with Fish.

While I made the point earlier that Marilynne Robinson’s concept of ‘the posture of grace’ was, in her narratives, mainly concerned with forgiveness, it inherently contains the need to forego understanding. This posture of grace is important for Winton as well, and is a condensed version of the story of the man born blind. Understanding may come, but does nothing to change a problematic situation like Fish’s accident. The emphasis for Winton is on how characters react to a given situation without having been given understanding. The disciples ask an explanation of the blindness, the Pharisees seek an understanding of the miracle, and neither group receives a clear answer. Blaming Quick, or God, does nothing for Lester and Oriel to change Fish’s situation; what needs to happen is the long

process of caring and loving which Oriel decides to do when she says ‘we’ll give him the gentlest life we can, we’ll make it the best for him we know how.’ (63) And although Lester initially still agonizes ‘How do we know what’s best?’, he needs to conclude that knowing, in this situation, is never going to be the most important, and he has to forego understanding to accept that he cannot argue with life.

By loving Fish, giving him the best life possible and knowing full well she will not be reciprocated, Oriel has also started to move towards the ability to love the unresponsive and the undeserving. Love, if it is unconditional, is silly; to love the weak, the poor, the enemy, is ‘making trouble for yourself’, because of the insatiable demands that love will place on you. But Winton does not force his characters to deal with the weight of the world. The responsibility of caring for Fish, extending love to the neighbor, compensating for the weaknesses of family-members, this may seem parochial, but Winton understands that love must begin at home, and home in *Cloudstreet* can, initially, be one side of the house, ‘this great continent of a house’ (39).

As I have argued already, Winton makes a point of not explaining the transcendental intrusions in the narrative that form an arch of mystery across the twenty-year span of the novel. And while there is a change that happens slowly, an acceptance of responsibility towards Fish, and the growth of community between the two families, these early questions are never resolved. Quick, who does blame himself, even ‘hates himself’ (59), needs to come to his own point of acceptance. In a moment of providential intertextuality, Quick repeats Fuckhead’s ‘He died. I am still alive’²⁰ as ‘he is alive, he is lucky, he is still healthy, and his brother is not.’ (59) As I argued for in Chapter Three, this arbitrary nature of grace is rewritten here in Quick’s uncomprehending ‘he is lucky’. Sam, in an earlier conversation with Rose

²⁰ Johnson, *Jesus Son*, p. 40.

has already explained that ‘luck don’t change, love. It moves.’ (18) The movement of the wind as Jesus explained it to Nicodemus as a metaphor for the spirit, is re-written in Winton’s narrative as luck. This luck, which can be bad and good, has also kept Quick from being trapped in the net, and although Quick refers to himself as ‘Quick Lamb the Survivor’, it is clear that he did nothing to be that survivor. Nothing in the recounting of Fish’s accident suggests that Quick was in danger of slipping or falling and, like Fuckhead, he can take neither credit for avoiding death or accident, nor can he blame himself for Fish’s misfortune.

Guilt, like blame, helps neither Quick nor Oriel. Fuckhead’s realization ‘I am still alive’ is not an explanation, it is a fact, and although Quick has the same realization, it does not give him an understanding of grace, or luck. Quick remains closed to the working of grace, and as long as he cannot recognize his own blindness it cannot be healed. In Winton’s narrative this journey of self-discovery includes detours and digressions, but it should be clear that the stories of individual struggle repeat the story of the man born blind, and represent the different stages of questioning and doubting, as well as resistance and healing. There is, however, the one miracle that never gets rectified which needs some critical attention.

The Problem With Fish

A discussion about Fish and Christianity cannot ignore the long tradition of fish as a symbol for Christ.²¹ Several of the disciples were fishermen before they joined Jesus’s band of followers and when Jesus calls them he states he will make them ‘fishers of men’ (Mark 1. 17). The synoptic tradition includes stories of miraculous

²¹ The Greek word for fish ΙΧΘΥΣ (Ichthys) was used in early Christian communities as an acronym for Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ (Jesus Christ God’s Son Saviour). See Merrill C. Tenney, gen. ed., *Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

netting of fish (Luke 5. 7), which Winton also includes in *Cloudstreet* (219), and John places the final miraculous catch at the end of his Gospel after the resurrection, when, in a symbolic return to their old way of being, the disciples have gone out all night to fish (John 21. 6). It is my contention that Winton places these markers in the text as quite literal red herrings that distract from the way in which he uses the biblical text more subtly. For Harold Bloom there is an important distinction between finding sources, merely annotating a text with obvious references to other texts, and influence, which needs to include some sort of misprision.²² Noting the similarities between the miraculous catch of fish in the Gospels and Quick's miraculous fishing trip, or the 'wild wheeling mob of prawns' (275) is evidence of a very superficial engagement with the text, one that misses the subtleties of Winton's misprision.

The move from Samson, via Samsonfish to Fish is, however important. Samson was one of the redeemer figures in the book of Judges who was able, when he was 'filled with the spirit' to perform great feats of strength and violence, with the additional quality of mesmerizing women. (Judges 13–16) The pre-drowning Fish is described as quick-witted and mischievous, but Winton adds that 'Everyone loves Fish. Just by dunking a girl's braids in an inkwell he can make her love him. (25) These aspects of Fish's character do not, however, survive his accident. Tertullian in his treatise *On Baptism* puns on the Greek word for fish as follows:

But we, little fishes, after the example of our ΙΧΘΥΣ Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water.²³

²² Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 31. Bloom frames his disdain for 'source-hunting and allusion-counting' in a rhetorical question, but it is clearly opposed to what he calls 'Poetic Influence'.

²³ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, trans. by S. Thelwall <<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ter tullian21.html>> [Accessed 7 July 2015] (Chapter I).

As Jesus tells Nicodemus that ‘except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God’, Fish in *Cloudstreet* becomes the one ‘born of water’, and his desire to return to the water follows Tertullian’s metaphor for salvation. But Winton does not merely repeat Tertullian or John. Fish has to live his life on earth for twenty years after being born from the water (born here has the double meaning of birth and being carried) and his difficulty in fitting in is precisely related to his being like a fish out of water. Safety for Fish lies in the return to the river. But the truncation of his name from Samsonfish to Fish also indicates a loss: he is no longer the quick witted, smarter, and most easily loved child he used to be. Winton has problematized Tertullian’s concept of baptism by turning the biblical metaphor of dying and resurrection as symbolized in baptism into a literal death, but he has also very simply written a difference between the violent spirit of Samson the judge, and the quiet sensitive spirit Fish becomes. This difference encapsulate a move from the violent war-like redeemer image to the more peaceful image of Jesus who comes not to ‘condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.’ (John 3. 17)

I want to argue, however, that Winton does not create Fish as a Christ-figure who brings salvation to those around him. The character of Fish needs to be read in a more nuanced way, as an approximation to, rather than an identification with, Jesus. The move from the Hebrew Bible judge towards a New Testament concept of spirit is an important leitmotif in the Gospel of John. As I pointed out in the excerpt about the man born blind, the opposition between Jesus and the Pharisees hinges on an interpretation of the law. Nicodemus is introduced in the text as ‘a man of the Pharisees [...] a ruler of the Jews’ (John 3. 1) and would have played a role in judging cases according to the law. The woman caught in adultery in John 8. 1–11, is equally judged, and condemned to death, by the ‘scribes and

Pharisees' but not condemned by Jesus. (John 8. 11) The prologue of John also juxtaposes Moses and Jesus (John 1. 17), and it is this movement from law towards grace that Winton describes in the narrative of *Cloudstreet*, specifically through Sam and Oriel, of which Fish's name change is an early indicator.

It would be possible to read the character of Fish as an expression of a form of Christianity that Winton wants to criticize. Fish undergoes a transformative change when he drowns; one that leaves him stagnated at a point in childhood that predates his accident. Physically he continues to grow, but mentally he has regressed to a state that is permanently childlike. This childlikeness, which never truly slides into childishness, can be read as a way for Winton to characterize a type of religious behavior that never engages with the world as it is, but projects everything beyond this life into a future state. This retreat from the world would then be symbolized by Fish's regression, his desire to return to the river, and by his inability to recognize his mother, who is for Fish linked to the earth, his physical existence, and to the practical work ethic that she espouses (64–5).

In this reading Fish becomes a symbol of a kind of religious worldview that continues to experience existentially the mundane, but that mentally lives in a different space. His drowning would then be a baptism that literally kills the old Fish and replaces him with a miraculously resurrected but ultimately lesser-abled person. The focus for Fish becomes on the otherworldly to the extent that he can no longer function within this world. Winton's negative representation of different churches in *That Eye the Sky*, specifically the over-determined eschatology of the church in the back of the shop, may lend some credibility to this interpretation of Fish, but it leaves too many aspects of Fish's role in the family unresolved, and

ultimately depends on an assumption about Winton's personal relationship with Christianity that need not concern us here.²⁴

It is true that in Oriel's practical, utilitarian world, Fish is not useful. There is a hint of this already in the description of him before the accident when he was known for his quick-witted but mischievous behavior. After the accident, his inability to tie his own shoe-laces or wash himself, indicates that he is no longer just a prankster but that he can also no longer be utilized by the family to help with the business: in the world of work he becomes permanently useless. But Fish is also the one who is more attuned to the transcendental: he can talk to the 'Pentecostal pig' (130), and experiences the pain of the past in the play of the shadowy figures in the walls. Winton connects him, more directly, to the world of the spirit when he writes that:

[Fish] likes the way things move in the wind. Wind excites him. When he feels breeze on his face he smiles and says, Yes. Winter days now, he stands out in the westerly that blows down the tracks from the sea and it closes his eyes with its force.
Hello, wind! (68)

The breeze, which earlier on prevents the scene of Sam and Rose in the hospital from turning into a painting (14), and as I have already shown is used as a metaphor for spirit in John, is a moving force that prevents stasis, it is not a law that can be followed, but it is a force that can be felt. Fish's excitement about the wind, the uncontrolled movement, is juxtaposed to the ordered and controlled life of the people around him. Unlike his siblings, Fish does not go to school nor helps in the shop, he contributes nothing except his own being, and, while Quick needs

²⁴ It is, however, important to recognize that Winton uses the representation of disability neither to discuss disability nor to explore the difficulties families face that have disabled or special needs children. The important questions that arise about the validity of the use of the representation of disability in Winton's literature falls outside the remit of this thesis, but, similar to the questions about race in Robinson's narratives, one hopes they will not remain unexplored.

visual reminders in the form of newspaper clippings of the pain and suffering in the world to access his own helplessness (59), Fish is able to intuit and access this pain without recourse to those visual cues. Fish is present to his family, and it is through the constant reminder of his needs that Oriel and Lester are forced to respond to Fish, but also need to deal with the temptation to blame Quick.

Fish receives a glimpse of the eternal in the moment of drowning: 'he drinks in river' (27), and finds himself 'hurrying toward a big friendly wound in the gloom'. When he is forced back into life by his mother's fists, he does not experience this as a release, but as an end:

He comes to a stop. Worse, he's slipping back, and that gash in the grey receded and darkness returns and pain and the most awful sickfeeling is in him like his flesh has turned to pus and his heart to shit.
Shame.
Horror.
Fish begins to scream.

The great gout of river hit Oriel Lamb in the face [...] and they were all shouting enough to hide the awful, the sad, the hurt moan that Fish let out when the air got to his lungs. Never, never, was there a sadder, more disappointed noise. (28-9)

The loss of the river inside him, the return to flesh, and the need for air to live are described as a great disappointment. The 'darkness returns', and Fish returns to the 'mostly dark' that smells of 'mud and rottenness.' (28) The 'friendly wound' is clearly indicative of the movement through the birth canal towards life, and there is in this scene clearly a juxtaposition of the eternal and the temporal. Fish realizes in that moment of physical death that life can continue beyond the physical, and that the spiritual is unencumbered by pain, darkness, and rot. The moment when he finally returns to the river is imagined as 'a flicker, then a burst of consciousness on his shooting way, and he'll savour that healing all the rest of his journey' (2) and again

down he slopes into the long spiral, drinking, drinking his way into the tumble past the dim panic of muscle and nerve into a queer and bursting fullness. [...] [He bursts] into the moon, sun and stars of who [he really is]. Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everyplace. Me. (430)

Fish is waiting to return to a sense of wholeness, and the water for Fish is comparable to the living water Jesus offers the Samaritan woman, the kind of water that will remove the need to drink again (John 4. 14). Fish, having had the water expelled from him, is thirsty for the river, but there is a sense in which the twenty years is a time of waiting that is beneficial for the others, even if it is a struggle for Fish. It is Fish who appears to Quick when he is wounded and alone in the wheat fields (202); and Fish who intuitively understands the feelings of people past and present. Fish is sensitive to an experience of the transcendental unavailable to other members of his community.

Fish is not a preacher, he does not shout or force his way of life on anyone else; instead he slowly grows up to become the focal point of the family's love. This move from a literalist, logo-centric, to an experiential form of Christianity is encapsulated emphatically in the narrative's lack of reading characters. Even though we are told Oriel has a Bible in her tent, we never see her open it; at one point we are even told that she put a candle on top (375), changing the word that gives light (Psalm 119. 105) into a table for a more practical lamp. Rose is the only one who reads regularly, but her negative experience with the intellectuals and her ultimately unmet desire for acceptance in their circle further strengthens my argument that Winton tries to move away from the text and towards experience: a rewriting of St. Paul's assertion that 'the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.' (II Corinthians 3. 6), again rewritten in John in the juxtaposition of law and grace. Fish is clearly not at home in the world of flesh and blood, but blunders through life

with eternity as his sole aim. He still finds a place in the community of heretics, however, and is even helpful to it, through his ability to focus on the spiritual and by being unencumbered by the worries and stresses of the physical necessities of life. This is an important development as it becomes clear that Winton's disparate group of characters have to learn to accept and love one another before they can finally become the congregation of heretics, each one individually flawed and accepted for who they are and what they embody.

It is important here to stress that the release from this life into the life beyond is not identical with a wish for death. Even Fish's apparent suicide cannot be read literally; it must be seen as a passing from one state of existence into another form. Fish's thoughts at the moment of his departure are on 'leaving', but it is also clear from the scope of the novel that Winton writes a narrative in which the past and present are not temporally separated, and, just as the past experience of the occupants of the house seeps into the present of the Lambs and Pickles, Fish will be present 'Perfectly. Always. Everyplace.' (430)

Winton's transcendental intrusions on his characters are never explained, but neither are they questioned by the other characters. When Quick starts to glow while he is living with his uncle Earl, he is taken home, but there is no doubt about the veracity of the glowing, nor an explanation demanded, or offered. The hard business-like character of Earl is here reminiscent of the town's people mentioned in the story of the Gadarenes who, after witnessing a miracle, ask Jesus to leave rather than invite him in (Mark 4. 17), restated in John as 'That was the true Light [...] he came unto his own, and his own received him not.' (John 1. 9-11) The short and undeveloped story of Quick and his uncle is a reminder that Winton also recognizes that the transcendental can, and will be rejected by those who fear it will interfere with their economic development. But it is not only the unexplained

that can interfere with business: it is clear that the uncle will also sacrifice family and community to ensure he is able to achieve his own success. The uncle becomes then a type for what Oriel could have been, or might become, if she loses the ability to see herself as part of a community.

Fish is not the only disabled person in the narrative. Sam, whose accident is also not miraculously reversed, utilizes his scarred hand as an antenna for the shifty shadow in a similar fashion to how his father used a divining rod to find water. Sam tries to turn his handicap into a tool for his own benefit, even though this is not always successful and often at the expense of his family. His early thoughts of suicide are averted by Rose's interruption and her refusal to have pity for him. (168–70) It is this moment that clarifies the difference between Sam and Fish. Sam has retained his mental capacity, and it is this capacity for reason that leads him towards suicidal thoughts. Fish, however, has no self-pity. His childlike experience of existence does not allow him to feel sorry for himself, rather, he desires to experience life in a fuller sense the way he remembers it from his (near) death experience. This difference is telling because Sam's suicidal thoughts are comparable to Bill Houston's inability to imagine a different self in *Angels*; there are no options for Sam to imagine an alternative narrative for his life, and so for Sam there is no sense in which death could be the 'mother of beauty', as Bill Huston eventually experiences it. Sam's decision to die is based on a purely financial constraint; he is unable to take care of his family, and is therefore incapable of following the expected trajectory of fulfilled and aspirational existence.²⁵ He is imprisoned by his dependence on a narrow narrative of what it means to be a man, husband, father, and, in a national context, a citizen.

²⁵ For an exploration of the way in which Sam's accident removes him from 'the working-class realm of the masculine', see Stuart Murray, 'Tim Winton's "New Tribalism": *Cloudstreet* and Community', p. 88.

Fish's lack of these constraints allow him to live within a space of his own making, a space that does not conform to any predetermined role for him by his family or community. It is important to note that while guilt feelings about Fish's accident continue to plague both his parents and Quick, they have no place in Fish's relationship towards his brother. It would be easy to dismiss this as just one more way for Winton to ascribe a lack of mental capabilities to Fish that would allow anyone else to cast blame where Fish does not. I have, however, already pointed out above that Fish can intuit Quick's feelings and, when Quick decides to stay in bed for several days, it is Fish who is mostly affected by this. (92)

Fish empathizes, and although there is no formal description of a detailed admission of guilt followed by an accepted apology and a statement of forgiveness, it is clear that the relationship between Fish and Quick needs to be restored, and is repaired by the end of the narrative. It is only when everyone is happy together at the river that 'one of them is leaving', further emphasizing the point that Fish understands the dynamics of forgiveness and acceptance, and that his desire to leave cannot be acted upon until that point where the others have made their peace. Fish never develops beyond a very naive child, but his shaping of his own role, his openness towards the transcendent, his ability to empathize, and the fact that he is never constrained by societal or culturally defined roles indicate his status as a heretic: a re-reader and interpreter of roles. His desire for life beyond life further shows that for Fish, as opposed to Sam, (physical) death truly is the mother of beauty and a birth into a wholeness unavailable to flesh and blood.

Another dimension to this reading is the childlikeness of Fish. Jesus asks his disciples to 'be converted and become like little children' (Matthew 18. 3), and Winton has made it clear that 'it's safe to say that children are, for a period, open to experience in ways that are lost to them as they're put through the mangle of

adolescence and the orderly pegged lines of adulthood.’²⁶ Fish, as a life-long child, retains this childlike wonder, and it will become clearer in my later argument about Oriel, Quick, and Rose, that it is precisely this ordered aspect of life that they need to surrender before they can experience life and love. Fish likes the wind and the water, the images of spirit that John’s Gospel uses as antithetical to the rules and regulations of the Mosaic law, and so Fish also embodies the childlike openness to experiences somehow lost in growing up.

In Chapter Five I will explore Jesus’s injunction to be like a child in more detail alongside J. M. Coetzee’s *The Childhood of Jesus*, but Winton clearly incorporates the childlikeness of Fish as an embodiment of a life that is lived in the present, unencumbered by the rules of society and utility, and open to the liquid movements of the spiritual. Winton ends the interview with Sinclair by saying of children: ‘a rational being not cowed by “common sense”, surely that’s a model for a spiritual way of being in the world.’ Fish is spiritual; he embodies an alternative way of being in the world, but Fish needs to return to the water to become fully himself.

What is clear from Winton’s statements in interview is that for most people the difficulty will always hover around the inability to retain a childlike wonder and combine this with the expectations of the adult world. The trajectory of the novel points clearly towards the fact that as people live in the world there is no escape from the flesh and blood reality of life. The difficulty of intertwining the spiritual and the natural into one being is one of the many challenges Winton tries to describe in *Cloudstreet*. As Murray puts it;

Fish may be a ‘seer’ conceived of in terms of the possibility of rebirth, but he is also an object of filial love and the catalyst for the definition of family

²⁶ Sinclair, ‘Interview with Tim Winton’, p. 10.

responsibility. [...] If Winton's fiction approaches transcendence, it does so with roots firmly established in the detail of lived experience.²⁷

Winton ultimately returns to the birth of a flesh and blood child, Harry, not one born of water, who will need to grow and live on earth. And while Murray is right that Fish is an object of love, it is also clear that he is out of reach of his closest family members on many other levels. The misreading of John is evident in the move away from the transcendental intrusions, and towards the 'lived experience' of flesh and blood, not without the need for openness, but with a clear understanding that childhood is a moment that needs to be followed by the move into adulthood.

The tension between the spiritual and the physical will remain for those who need to grow old, to procreate, to work and to play. The wind may take them where they never imagined to go, but they will be able to experience it, and while they may not understand the transcendental intrusions, they may help the community to be reminded that this world may not be all there is. There is in the leaving, however, also a sense of sadness. Like Jack Boughton, the heretic, who cannot stay in a town cursed with sameness, Fish, the spiritual being, can find no sense of fulfillment in the world of flesh and blood, and Winton seems to suggest that the loss of Fish is really a loss of the ability to be fully human in the 'orderly pegged lines of adulthood.'

The community Winton envisions can only be a community of flesh and blood people who accept each other's differences, and are able to create a space where reconciliation can occur. This need for reconciliation is important for Winton: both reconciliation to the natural i.e. the impossibility of escape from the flesh, and reconciliation to each other.

²⁷ Murray, p. 90.

Before I move on to a more detailed discussion of how Winton envisions reconciliation, however, it is important to address the recurring appearance of the black hitchhiker. Both Dixon and Murray assume this is an angel, and the moment when Quick says he has seen 'a black angel' (222), seems to support this reading, but I read this figure rather more heretically.²⁸

At the moment Quick first picks up the 'blackfella', he has miraculously managed to get ahead of his car after Quick has passed him (210). The man then offers him bread and wine of which he seems to have an 'inexhaustible' supply (211). Before Quick can realize it the black stranger has lead him to Cloud Street, at which point Quick decides to let him out of the car and runs off again (212). The second time Quick meets the man he sees him walking on water (219), and then 'when he got to shore, the blackfella was waiting for him', but 'Quick pushed past him and didn't look back.' (220) The man keeps appearing, and Quick keeps avoiding him. Finally, after Harry is born, the man appears outside the house and has a conversation with Sam. When Sam tells him he is planning to sell the house the black man says 'you shouldn't break a place. Places are strong, important.' (412)

In the Gospel of John, Jesus promises to send a comforter to his disciples after he has left: 'the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said to you.' (John 14. 26) My reading of the hitchhiker is that rather than an angel he is the promised Paraclete, the third person of the trinity. No angel in the Bible walks on water or brings bread and wine, but Jesus says the comforter will remind his disciples of him. Also Jesus identifies the comforter as a 'guide' (John 16. 13), and the hitchhiker is clearly

²⁸ Murray, p. 85: 'the man [...] is an angelic figure'; Dixon, p. 57: 'Aboriginal angel'.

trying to guide Quick home. Further, it is the black man who convinces Sam not to sell the house, because it will not only break up the building, but also the community.

The importance of reading the black man as Paraclete rather than as angel is not merely to make a point about the biblical representations of angels, but to show that the audacity of Winton's writing moves his readers to contemplate the possibility of representing the divine presence by a 'blackfella'. Quick's mistaken belief that he has seen an angel is an extension of the casual racism evidenced in Sam and Quick's thoughts about the man. Just as Jesus was not recognized as messiah because he was from Nazareth (John 1. 46, 7. 52), the spirit guide is not recognized because he is an Aboriginal. Winton has made it clear in interviews that he is uncomfortable with the idea that 'God was absent' in Australia before the arrival of Europeans.²⁹ By creating an Aboriginal spirit who guides and prompts the Pickles and Lambs to become a community, Winton is providing a thoughtful way to rethink narrow prejudices, while widening the possibilities of the divine working mysteriously within the natural realm and outside of cultural, temporal and religious boundaries. The creation of the community is similarly dependent on breaking down barriers and of widening both the material space and the mental spaces of the Lambs and Pickles. These are not easily effected changes, and I will now show how Winton's narrative explores the truly miraculous nature of interpersonal reconciliation.

It's not a miracle, it's the greatest miracle: the importance of reconciliation

In my exploration of the man born blind I alluded already to the fact that Quick's feelings of guilt cause him to hate himself. Quick's subsequent attempts at finding

²⁹ David Batstone, 'Spinning Stories and Visions: An interview with Tim Winton' in *Sojourners* (October 1992) pp. 20–21, quoted in Murray, 'Tim Winton's New Tribalism: *Cloudstreet* and Community', p. 87.

redemption by removing himself from the proximity of Fish, the constant physical reminder of his guilt, result only in difficult and dangerous, sometimes life threatening, situations. The narrative points out that Quick is a prodigal of sorts (151, 245). Winton's obvious inter-textual positioning is, however, usually critically suspect. Quick runs away, but he does not squander his life, or his father's savings, and, although he eventually becomes a farmhand working with pigs, this is, as I have noted above, a misreading of Jesus's interaction with the people of the Gadarenes. The reason for running away is guilt, not adventure, and the return is not voluntarily conciliatory, but forced and beyond Quick's own control. While it is possible to think of the time in the out-back as instrumental in helping Quick process his guilt, his insistent refusal to return home seems to indicate that Quick is attempting to escape rather than to reconcile.

The episode is clearly meant to represent Quick's entry into manhood, both through a mastery of hunting and killing, as well as his initiation into a sexual relationship (204). His accident involving the kangaroo and his subsequent sunburn, however, suggest that Quick is not at home in the Australian wild, and his relationship with Lucy is purely physical. She likes him because he has 'a huge whanger', and he 'never thinks about her much, though he doesn't object to wrestling her round the cab.' (206) Quick's sojourn indicates that, rather than becoming more in tune with nature, dealing with his guilt, and becoming a more complete person, his time spent killing and hunting and having sex are making him more alien to the landscape, and more physical than cerebral or spiritual.

Running away is, however, not a productive option for Winton. Neither Sam's suicidal thoughts, nor Quick's escape, nor Dolly's thoughts of leaving, nor even Rose's attempts at climbing the social ladder ever materialize into a successful conclusion. Ted Pickles does leave, but his story becomes a part of the

background and only returns to the foreground when Sam and Dolly receive the news he has died in an accident, further emphasizing that for Winton the inability to return ends in a death of sorts, quite literally in Ted's case. (341) Reading these moments as Winton's anti-intellectualism or nostalgia for the past may seem valid interpretations, but it is my contention that this is superficial and rather reductive. Winton understands that reconciliation, forgiveness, and the removal of guilt, happens only between individuals. Escape is not possible because guilt-feelings, however misconstrued or without base in reality, haunt the people wherever they go. This is an important aspect of Winton's writing and deserves a short digression.

Quick and Rose's decision to stay in the old house on Cloud Street rather than move into the new developed suburban homes they have registered for has been interpreted as Winton's nostalgia for a bygone era.³⁰ It is, however, a fundamental misunderstanding of the importance of interpersonal reconciliation that is a major theme in Winton's oeuvre. Henry Warburton, Winton's early guilt-ridden character in *That Eye, the Sky*, is haunted by a past that he carries with him: his guilt is internalized. In much of Winton's other writing, however, guilt manifests itself in material objects or physical presences: old girlfriends in the short story 'Small Mercies' (2004), and Winton's latest novel *Eyrie* (2014); the skeleton in 'Aquifer'; an old photograph and a poem in 'Damaged Goods'; musical instruments, tapes and Luke's sister-in-law's jeans in *Dirt Music* (2001); the mother in 'The water was dark and it went forever down'; The sunken boat in *An Open Swimmer* (1982); and the old house in *In the Winter Dark* (1988).³¹ It is also emphasized in the theme of 'A Minimum of Two' (1987), a story in which the protagonist does not seek

³⁰ For an exploration of Winton's nostalgia see Dixon, and McGirr.

³¹ Tim Winton, 'Small Mercies', 'Aquifer' and 'Damaged Goods' are short stories from the collection *The Turning* (London: Picador, 2011) Kindle; 'A Minimum of Two' and 'The water was dark and it went forever down' were published in the short story collection *A Minimum of Two* (London: Picador, 2011) Kindle; *An Open Swimmer* (London: Picador, 2011) Kindle; *In the Winter Dark* (London: Picador, 2011) kindle; *Dirt Music* (London: Picador, 2012); *Eyrie* (London: Picador, 2014).

reconciliation but revenge on his wife's rapist. Winton ends the story on the thoughts of the protagonist after he has killed the rapist: 'in that moment I knew that I had lost my life. I was a dead man.'³²

In Winton's writing redemption cannot be found in escape or running away. In *Dirt Music*, Luke's problems, represented by Georgia Jutland and Jim Buckridge, literally come looking for him in the bush.³³ The past has a way of coming back to characters in Winton's stories, and the only act that might make a start at a form of redemption is to return to a place where reconciliation between people becomes a possibility. The landscape as a character in Winton's narratives becomes then not a space in which people find redemption, or an open environment for change; rather the characters who traverse these open spaces remain trapped by their past as long as they refuse to return. Winton is careful not to end all his stories on a happy-ever-after reconciliation, but the theme of guilt and redemption hinges often on the ability for people to return to a hometown or a home, and start dealing with the relationships that were harmed in the past.

This theme of reconciliation, which runs clearly through many of Winton's narratives, is an imaginative rewriting of Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount:

Therefore, if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come offer thy gift. (Matthew 5. 23-24)

The self-sacrificial nature or the ascetic rejection of comfort represented by Quick's life in the bush and, to a certain extent also in Rose's anorexia, cannot be a successful process of dealing with guilt. The sacrificial gift, which importantly was

³² Tim Winton, *Minimum of Two*, location 826 of 2108. Kindle.

³³ Tim Winton, *Dirt Music*, pp. 391-461.

part of the Jewish law, is shown by Jesus to be less important than the state of the interpersonal relationships the gift bearer has. Jesus does not make the reconciliation between God and man less important than the reconciliation between man and man; rather, he makes the reconciliation between persons the only prerequisite for Divine reconciliation. The sacrifice, in other words, is nullified if it is not preceded by interpersonal reconciliation. Winton's characters are haunted by their pasts, and can never escape no matter how far they physically remove themselves from their difficulties. Redemption, although never simple or instantaneous, begins in the moment of reconciliation. When that moment is ignored or actively rejected, as in 'A Minimum of Two', the character experiences death and loss.

Both Robinson and Johnson also show that, although forgiveness and redemption occur in their narratives, there is never a simplistic or formulaic approach to this notion of reconciliation. Just as Jack Boughton cannot make things right between himself and the girl he impregnated, and Bill Houston cannot undo his killing of the guard, Winton also recognizes that missed chances are inevitable, but the effect is unmistakably dire. As Winton puts it at the end of *In the Winter Dark*:

My dreams are not symbols, they are history. Even the ones I don't understand, the ones I don't even know the characters in, they are full of the most terrible truths. They settle on me, the guilty running silhouette. Yes, call me Legion for we are many.

I pay my bills. [...]

I can't redeem myself. That's why I confess to you, Darkness.

You don't listen, you don't care, though sometimes I suspect you are more than you seem.³⁴

The memories of crimes and unresolved situations are here likened to demons and the inclusion of the, seemingly unconnected, 'I pay my bills', further underlines the

³⁴ Tim Winton, *In the Winter Dark*, p. 110.

disconnect between following rules and redemption. Winton re-writes the inescapable silhouette in the shadows that are trapped in the house on Cloud Street, and it is all the more surprising that this theme of reconciliation has been neglected in the writings on Winton because of its clear connection to the colonial past of Australia. Even if one does not recognize the biblical allusions, the importance for Winton of the theme of reconciliation can hardly be ignored.

'I can't redeem myself' is in effect a prayer for an other, and the impersonal Darkness is not enough. As I explained in my exploration of Johnson's story 'Two Men', the person who cannot accept or extend forgiveness becomes a tortured soul, in Winton's narrative synonymous with the demon possessed man who lived alone in a cave. (Mark 5. 1-20) Redemption in Robinson, Johnson, and Winton then always must include at least a second person, and as I showed in Jesus's pronouncement on sacrifice above, that person needs first and foremost to be human. No sacrifice, ascetic life-style, philanthropy, or affirmative action can ever replace the person-to-person need for redemption through reconciliation.

Both Murray and Dixon agree that *Cloudstreet* is thematically concerned with the creation of community. Dixon reads the novel as an attempt at the creation of national identity, while Murray is more cautious in making assertions when he writes that '*Cloudstreet* edges towards an idea of community that is full, if not secure.' It is, however, important to read the novel in parallel with the biblical text which is so obviously important to Winton himself, in order to nuance the reading of the novel rather than reductively pare it down to just community creation.

Cloudstreet is a novel in which organized religion is all but absent, and it is significant that although the Lambs are considered 'churchy' by Dolly, there is no record of them actually attending a church service, except for the wedding of Quick and Rose. While in *That Eye the Sky* Winton includes the negative experience of

attending church, in *Cloudstreet* this aspect is left outside of the narrative. The emphasis is on the formation of a community free from doctrinal limitations or dogmatic systems. This is necessary for the simple fact that Winton desires to keep the community open towards all. An institutionalized form of religion by definition of its theology will automatically exclude: it will always be 'this this but not that'. The heretical community, however, is unrestricted by virtue of its own lack of definition. This aspect of the novel does not necessarily undermine Dixon's claims about Winton's attempt at creating an Australian identity, but if it is a national identity the text seeks to prescribe it is certainly a more inclusive one than Dixon seems to imply. Murray claims that the moment of Harry's birth is 'momentous as a marker of a new community' and this is a valid and straightforward interpretation, but it lacks the engagement with the biblical aspects of the novel. The catalytic event in the text that Winton uses to emphasize reconciliation and the coming together of difference, precedes the birth of Harry.

Winton utilizes the relationship of Dolly Pickles and Oriel Lamb as a way to explore the difficulties of living in close proximity of a different way of being. Soon after the Lambs have moved in and have started the shop Dolly wonders why

she should loathe the Lambs so much; they'd been polite and friendly, but they were pushy and bee-like, the lot of them, and that little woman spoke to you with her blunt fingers nearly pecking at your tits. She couldn't help telling you how you should be doing things, what was a better way, a quicker way, the right this, the proper that. Not that she ever got personal, she was always talking general things, but Dolly felt it all get specific somewhere between the lines, as though the little magpie was letting you know what you could do to fix your life up. Oriel Lamb mouthed off a lot about work and stickability until you felt like sticking a bloody bility right up her drawers. That woman didn't believe in bad luck the way Dolly did. (55)

Dolly's dislike of Oriel stems from something Dolly cannot define beyond a vague recognition that Oriel's way of life offends her. It is Oriel's insistence on doing

things a certain way that seems forceful to Dolly and she takes general advice personally, interpreting Oriel's generalizations as personal attacks. The crucial movement here is, however, the final phrase about bad luck. Dolly sees her own life not as something she has control over, but as a series of events ultimately controlled by (bad) luck. Her response to (bad) luck is not to try and change things but to allow things to happen to her. Oriel, on the other hand believes in hard work and stickability, two characteristics that cause her to run the shop and the family like an army officer. She has had her own traumatic losses: her mother and siblings died in a fire, and her half brother died in the war and she has lost Fish to the moment in the river; but rather than accept defeat she attempts a form of control over her life that she believes will allow her to make her own luck.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Winton is merely juxtaposing Dolly as passive victim of her past or personality, and Oriel as an active victor, or at least maker of her own luck. Oriel's life proves much more that Dolly might be right to believe in bad luck rather than her own insistence on hard work: neither hard work, religious belief, or stickability have prevented any of the difficult things that have happened to Oriel. Neither has Dolly's lack of action and enterprise caused her much to worry about. After all, the house was a gift and was bought with money won at a horserace, not earned with hard work. Like Dolly's resistance to Oriel's insistence that there is a right and proper way to do things, the narrative resists a simple right/wrong dichotomy.

As I pointed out before, Robinson's Jack Boughton, for all his difference, still shares a common history with his father, even an understanding of his father's theological stance, but Dolly and Oriel do not begin their relationship believing they have anything in common. Their differences are revealed through the narrative to be in reality not as great as they themselves perceive them to be, but it

is perception that colours much of their incapacity to open up to each other. Winton at times uses an omniscient narrative voice to reveal internal monologues and reminiscences that are left unspoken to other characters in the text to allow the reader a further insight into the difficulties of interpersonal misunderstanding. This technique neither relieves characters of their personal flaws, nor does it attempt to explain behaviour, but it does emphasize the power of what is left unsaid or unexplained. This collection of unspoken histories affect conversations and misunderstandings, but, because they can never be accessed by the interlocutors, there is an inevitable necessity to read between the lines and interpret situations and assertions without a complete and definable set of parameters. The exploration of life within a single family relationship, in this case Dolly and her daughter Rose, and between neighbours, Dolly and Oriel, allows Winton to show how ignorance and interpretation work together to create misunderstanding. However, rather than solve these difficulties by creating an artificial moment of exposure in which all is made known and understood, Winton resists a confessional moment while still allowing a form of reconciliation to take place. The significant turning point in the novel is the moment at the end of the wedding of Quick and Rose:

At the very end, Quick and Rose lounge together, tired, jubilant with their clobber askew and their hair losing ground, while a very strange thing happens. Oriel Lamb hoists herself wearily from the chair she's occupied all evening at her end of the bridal table, crosses the floor to where Dolly Pickles sits frightening a group of young men with the kind of jokes she knows, and asks her to dance. There's no one else on the floor. The band sits around lighting fags and chatting up girls until Oriel catches the drummer's eye. Quick sees his mother's face: something massive has been summoned. Rose feels his grip on her tighten as her mother sits there losing resistance by the moment. The music strikes up quietly. Dolly puts out her cigarette. The lairs look horrified. Oriel Lamb takes her by the hand and waist and they move out onto the floor in a slow rhythm that sobers the entire place. The short, boxy woman slips around gracefully, holding the old beauty up, and turn by turn something grows.

They look so bloody dignified, says Rose. So proud.
 As they wheel by like a miracle, there are spectators weeping.
 Outside in the Chev, Fish Lamb is sleeping. (325)

This moment of matriarchal embrace in a slow dance becomes the moment around which all other characters revolve. No one joins in, but all realize the significance of the act. In this dance the two do not so much as speak to each other, (again the same emphasis on the non-verbal that I pointed out in my exposition of Johnson's moment of foot-washing) and there is no immediate noticeable change in their relationship, but the 'churchy' Oriel relinquishes her pride and her insistence on being practical, and Dolly, alcoholic adulteress, whose resentment and disappointments go further back than anyone seems to be able to imagine, accepts the offer. There is again a clear move away from the logo-centricity of much of religious ritual: no confession, no apology, just a hand, an embrace, and a dance.

Like Johnson, Winton makes the turning point a simple act rather than a set-piece theological conversation. Unlike Fish's miraculously tragic instantaneous transformation, the characters of Dolly and of Oriel do not undergo a radical change: Dolly is 'shickered altogether on beerglasses of sweet sherry' and is telling, what one assumes are, dirty jokes, when Oriel approaches her. Dolly and Oriel, however, simply make a concession that allows change to happen. This is the true miracle, the 'something massive' and the 'something [that] grows'. Like Robinson's 'posture of grace', Winton also creates a moment in which the emphasis is not on understanding but on acceptance. Dolly could have refused; Oriel was under no obligation or external duress to dance with Dolly, no one suggested this move; it is purely a moment in which one decision works as a catalyst for further developments. A decision significantly wordless, unexplained, to some extent ambiguous as to its meaning, and certainly unpredictable in its outcome.

The phrase, 'turn by turn something grows' indicates also that the nature of this miracle is neither immediate, nor paranormal. While Fish's resurrection is violent, painful, and instantaneous, here the process is slow, rhythmic, revolving, and dependent on growth. Dolly loses 'resistance by the moment' not in an instant, and the effect is sobering; not humiliating but humbling. The poignancy of 'slips around gracefully', a phrase in which the dance is both beautiful and uncontrolled, underlines this moment as one in which Oriel is not completely in control: instead of stepping she slips gracefully. And while it is Oriel who supports Dolly, there is in the phrase an element of danger and risk, a gamble even. Oriel has had to relinquish those aspects of her self, her strength, her control, her pragmatism, that have sustained her in the face of her own tragedies. It is at this point, when she has ceded her self-imposed rigidity and allows herself to step on the slippery surface of an unlikely relationship, that something 'massive' can begin to be cultivated. Winton brings all the elements of his community of heretics and his resistance to systematic and dogmatic Christianity together in this moment, but retains the element of risk and danger inherent in the contingency of openness. Like Jesus's humbling act of washing his disciple's feet (John 13. 1-11), Oriel and Dolly's dance becomes a turning moment from which healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, and restoration can begin to be enacted. Winton is clear here: there is an element of risk in the moment of vulnerability. Oriel's humbling act could have turned into a public humiliation, and the moments in which Dolly loses her resistance are nervous for the observers. But it is only in tightly-regulated, pre-planned, and predictably safe situations where the element of risk is eliminated. The heretical openness cannot exist without the risk of a slip, but when the risk is taken that slip can become graceful.

The dance of acceptance is the moment from which the differences begin to be resolved or ignored. Winton shapes this last part of the narrative as a succession of barrier removals. Not, however, without digression and even resistance. The first difficult reconciliation happens between Rose and Dolly. Rose has had a miscarriage that has left her 'getting thinner all the time, looking darkeyed and ghostly' (342). Quick cooks for her but she does not eat. She picks 'listlessly' at Quick's clothes, and when she stops working she is 'too weak and spiritless to get through the day' and moves 'aimlessly' through their home (343). She does not read anymore because 'there was no order in books' (349). When Dolly has disappeared, Rose refuses to come and help Sam look for her, but when she has been found Dolly asks for Rose. Rose's initial response to this request is to say that 'she can go to hell', but she stays and a difficult series of conversations begins between mother and daughter. When Dolly asks Rose 'don't hate me', Rose unrelentingly says 'too late for that' (356), an echo of an earlier moment in the narrative when Rose exclaims 'hating you is the best part of being alive.' (176) But it is Lester who asks Rose to come back:

Why?

I dunno. I can't stand the hate. It'll kill you. You're one of us now [...] go on with your life, love. It's all there is. (358)

In an initial reading of the phrase 'go on with your life, love', love denotes Rose, but it is possible to read it as an imperative: that Lester is telling Rose to love rather than hate. Life and love turn into synonyms because that is all there is, just as hate will lead to death, the end of everything. Rose does return, and during one conversation Dolly explains that she struggled with her responsibilities as a mother because she has always hated women:

It's sisters I hate most, you should be happy you never had any.
 I don't get it, Mum.
 My mother was my grandmother. My father was my grandfather.
 What?
 The second oldest sister, the one who made me feel like rubbish all my life,
 that one was my mother. (361)

Hate has destroyed Dolly's life and she cannot go back to reconcile her past. Her difficult childhood has been a secret that has resulted in her alcoholism, her promiscuity, her difficulty relating to her own daughter, and the destruction of her own body. Rose realizes she is also destroying her own body from grief over her miscarriage, but as she starts to have regular time with Dolly she is:

[G]lad of those talks with her mother. She found soft parts still left in herself, and soft parts in Dolly as well, and in a way she figured it saved her from herself. It was love really, finding some love left. It was like tonic. (362)

But Winton complicates this process when he writes:

Rose still went to see her mother every day or two and usually came back furious. The old girl sat out on her backstep feeding chunks of topside beef to magpies. She was often sober, always abusive, and after a time her cursing became almost soothing in its steadiness. [...] the old woman would be abominable, feign deafness and raise a hedge of irritability between them, and Rose would go home. (362)

The tonic of love, however, works. Rose goes back to swimming and:

goes home ravenous and kept her food down. With summer coming on, she woke in the mornings thinking of all the things she could do instead of listing things she refused to do or was incapable of. Sometimes she felt all the blood rising in her skin, feeding her, overriding her will. She was alive despite herself. (362-3)

As her hate for Dolly is replaced with love, her body comes alive, and although Dolly's change happens at a different rate and with a different result, Rose's reconciliation with her mother has a physical effect on her wellbeing. Lester's

imperative, to love, has made her 'alive despite herself'. Because of her blindness to her mother's past Rose initially refused to help her when Dolly needed it most, even assigning her to hell. When she decides, against her own will, to stay and, before understanding, moves towards her mother, she begins the slow and difficult process of reconciliation, with the effect that she finds 'soft spots still left in herself'. Through the process Rose begins to understand more about her mother, in effect becomes aware, sees, her mother, and, although there is no absolving of Dolly's responsibility for her own lack of love and understanding, the result of Rose's insight is better for herself. The Gospel material about the unforgiving tortured soul, the demons of history, and the blind man receiving healing, are all wrapped up in these stories of difficult childhoods, and destructive behaviour that, inevitably, leave a mark on the people involved.

While Robinson's 'posture of grace' does not ask for understanding before extending forgiveness, Winton shows that this is an ideal that is not always achievable: Rose can only begin to forgive her mother once she comprehends parts of Dolly's difficult past. But in the telling of the secret Dolly experiences a release that is as important for herself, as it is for Rose to respond with forgiveness. Dolly's confession is followed by a sobbing described as the sound 'like a window being torn from its hinges.' (361) This simile of breaking and tearing as the pain is exposed, and the image of the window again bring together those aspects of blindness and blame in this moment of violent healing. The removal of the window is a wounding, but makes the hole permanently open to allow both light and wind to come in. Reconciliation and confession are not represented as effortless or painless, but they are deliberate acts that allow for an opening towards the other.

Quick and Rose first decide to move out of the house on Cloud Street to start out on their own, but it does not take long before both they and the rest of the

family realize this is not a good decision. The community needs to stay together to grow, and it is while pregnant, but before she gives birth, that Rose agrees to move back into the house on Cloud Street. 'Quick opens the wall with a saw' and then 'prizes boards away, knocks a cut beam aside and a square of sunlight breaks into the room with a shudder'. (379) Then, when Rose comes upstairs she cannot 'recall so much light on the landing', but now 'it pours out of the old library instead of feebly trying to get in.' Rose and Quick settle in 'the middle, in the old room they called No Man's Land.' (381) Light replaces darkness and the room that belonged to no one becomes, by the act of taking possession, part of the home. The family is now no longer divided along the center of the house, but by virtue of Quick and Rose's marriage, and their taking their place in the center, the family home gains a heart through which sunlight enters the whole house. The home is never expanded through building extensions, rather it is changed from the inside, and it is some time later still, after Rose and Quick have decided to stay indefinitely that Rose says:

I like the crowds and the noise [...] I'm right in the middle. It's like a village, I don't know. I have these feelings. [...] It's two families. It's a bloody tribe, a new tribe. [...] When I want to be independent I retire. I go skinny and puke. You've seen me like that. I just begin to disappear. But I want to live, I want to be with people, Quick, I want to battle it out.' (425)

The move back into the 'new tribe' has also had a healing effect on Rose, but Winton is careful not to succumb to sentimentality by including the last line, 'I want to battle it out'. This indicates that communal life will be demanding and probably uncomfortable. But this is intrinsic to the community of heretics. As barriers disappear and rooms are opened, and light moves in and through the house, it also means a lack of privacy, a loss of being able to hide or pretend. As the

community grows and the space they occupy stays the same, tension created by difference does not magically dissolve, but healing can take place.

Reconciliation is an important part of the process of becoming a community, but Winton does not want to give the impression that reconciliation is only interpersonal. As I explained before, there is a need for people to be reconciled to their own humanity, and it is for this purpose that Winton includes in the narrative of *Cloudstreet* the story of a serial rapist and killer, dubbed the Nedlands Monster. The fear in which the whole city lives, becomes a palpable influence on the lives of the Lambs and Pickles. When the man is caught, arrested, and tried, he is given a death sentence. Quick announces the news and adds 'thank God for that' to which Rose replies 'good riddance'. Oriel, however, feels that this reaction is wrong: 'Killin is men's business, she said, not God's. If you think it's something to celebrate leave God out of it.' (400) Quick and Rose are confused about this sensitivity since they have assumed belief in God left the Lambs with the realization that Fish had not been successfully resuscitated (45). Only days later Quick recovers the body of a drowned young boy from a river, and is later informed it is one of the 'Monster's' sons. The similarity between the boy and himself and Fish, and the realization that his father, while waiting to be hanged, will receive the news of the death of his son, engenders a change in Quick's thinking. He tells Rose:

I did a lot of feeling sorry for myself [...] I could've turned out angry and cold like *him*. I can see how that evil little bugger might've just . . . turned, like a pot of milk. [...] But it's not us and them anymore. It's us and us and us. It's always us. [...] there's no monsters, only people like us. Funny, but it hurts. (408, emphasis in original)

Quick's discovery of the potential for evil in himself has already occurred much earlier on in the narrative for Oriel: 'She thought: people murder each other. Yes, it's possible that you could just take up that meatskewer there and ram it into his

lungs.' (111) Mother and son have arrived at the same conclusion: they have had to reconcile themselves to the uncomfortable truth that they share a common humanity with the Monster, including the ability to kill. Arbitrary distinctions between 'us and them' can only be destabilized through this leveling of humanity.

This inclusive concept of 'us and us and us' is clearly similar to Robinson's resistance of an ever-shrinking definition of *us* as opposed to *them*, as well as a rewriting of Johnson's universal brokenness. The slippery dance of grace between Oriel and Dolly is still growing 'turn by turn'. Quick's insight resists an us and us but not them, and creates the, painful, realization that it is 'always us.' Quick has had to re-read himself and, like Jack Boughton, who is a misunderstood text, has found hidden and problematic areas in himself that are painful to accept but ultimately open him towards the possibility of a shared humanity with the monster. Jesus says:

The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great *is* that darkness! (Matthew 6. 22–23)

The moment of breaking the house open allows light into the dark rooms, but while this light itself is good and pleasant, it is by that light that cracks and dirt and dust are revealed. The importance of the restoration of the blind man's sight lies in the effect: so that his eyes can bring light into the body to reveal himself to himself. Quick and Oriel's revelatory self-discovery has not consolidated their own superiority, rather it has narrowed the gap between them and the serial killer. The light reveals the uncomfortable and painful, the hidden, and this brings me back again to the hypocrisy that I discussed in my chapter on Robinson.

The Pharisees remain blind, closed off to themselves because they justify their action by their rigid adherence to the Law of Moses. Their orthodoxy is the punctuated hermeneutics: this this but not that. Orthodoxy is safe and predictable and necessary for the hypocrisy to allow itself to justify itself. Heresy, this and this and this, the hermeneutics of dissemination, us and us and us, is dangerous and unpredictable like the wind; it is risky because it exposes uncomfortable truths, not only about others, as in *Gilead*, but also about ourselves. Allowing the light to enter reveals not the good in Quick, but evil potential, and he has to be reconciled to his own humanity before he can move towards the community that is 'always us'.

Winton's resistance to a punctuated hermeneutics is clearly indicated in the 'us and us and us', and with its starting point in the graceful slippery dance, he attempts to represent the intertwining and often paradoxically opposing aspects of individual human beings. The punctuated hermeneutics of dogma, represented in the story of the man born blind by the Pharisees who depend on the law – 'we are disciples of Moses' – is not re-written in Winton's narrative in just one individual. Rather, it is an aspect Winton allows to be part of each of the characters, and each one has to come to the realization of their own blind spot before they can truly become part of the community of heretics: a community based on openness rather than simplistic, and often arbitrary, categories of us and them.

The hurt Quick experiences when he realizes his own potential for evil is comparable to Dolly's cry after her confession, and commences Quick and Rose's return home: Rose suggests Quick needs 'a break' and it is during the holiday that they decide to return indefinitely to Cloud Street. The holiday becomes an opportunity for Quick to develop an openness to a different way of being when in the planning stages Rose challenges his holiday orthodoxy.

This time it'll be a holiday without fishing.
 Quick lay there, suddenly without reference. Well, what would you like to do?
 Rose turned into his chest and lay her hands flat on him. Let's just fill the car
 up and drive.
 And drive?
 And drive.
 That's . . .
 Not the Lamb way, I know. It's not practical, it's probably not even safe, but
 for once we can just go. We'll make it up as we go along. We'll just . . . *go*.
 (410, emphasis in original)

This open-ended risk taking is difficult for Quick's responsible pragmatic character. Just before they depart they make a final unplanned decision: Fish joins and the quartet of Lambs leave the city, 'out to where they are homeless, where they have never belonged.' (421) The trip becomes a synopsis of the way in which Winton envisions life: it must be made up as you go along. The places they visit and the spaces where they do not belong are re-imaginings of the detours both Quick and Rose have made in their lives. The holiday, which includes a certain amount of disappointing stops and unpleasant interruptions, involves, however, also a moment of transcendental intrusion. (426) Life can be planned, but it cannot be controlled, and it often remains inexplicable. Returning to an us and us and us, Quick and Rose know that there is a risk involved in staying in the community; that they will have to battle at times. The choice is between a narrowing us and them, which in Rose's case will mean a slow process of getting skinny (narrow) and eventual disappearing, and the risk of a community, uncontrollable, but a place they can live. Winton re-writes Jesus's assertion that he has come so 'that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly' (John 10. 10), a life that is lived in the unplanned presence of the spirit wind that moves and turns, but can never be captured or limited; a life that is not safe or structured by law or tradition, but porous like love, and mobile like wind and water.

Both Lester and Quick are policemen, law-enforcers, but neither has the hard-edged ability to enforce much. Oriel, however, is the one who lives by rules. Her work ethic is inflexible, but when Quick jokes about the Bible, she uncharacteristically starts to lose control over her emotions and leaves the room. Lester tries to explain to Quick and Rose what Oriel is struggling with:

You don't know what she works at, do you?
 Obviously not, said Quick with a smirk
 Then Lester pulled a little book out of his shirt pocket the size of a harmonica. He found a page and read: *Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* (401, emphasis in original)

Winton does not often quote at length from the Bible, but this quotation from the Gospel of Matthew is significant because he changes the text, which in the Bible reads: 'this is the first and great commandment.' (Matthew 22. 38) By excluding 'the great', Winton emphasizes the equal status he ascribes to these two laws. What I argued before about Winton's use of the passage about reconciliation and leaving the gift at the altar, becomes emphatic in this mis-writing of Matthew's Gospel: by loving the neighbour we love God, by failing to love the neighbour all we do for God is nullified. John's Gospel says it explicitly:

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.' (John 13. 34-35)

The one great truth for Winton as he writes his approximation of Jesus is that only love for the other can be evidence of love for God. Not access to transcendence; not economic success; not hard work; not asceticism; not dogmatic truth, only love. And just as the disciples fail, each character in Winton's narrative fails to live up to

this commandment: Dolly fails to love Rose; Rose hates her mother; Oriel starts a price war with a competing supermarket; Lester commits adultery; Quick tries to escape from himself and his family; and Sam fails in his role as father and husband.

Lester understands that Oriel is 'working at' something by living in the tent. She has come to realize that she is a sinner (62, 173), but she has not realized yet that she cannot 'work at' comprehending God or life. Her physical work in the house and the shop slides into her cerebral working towards an understanding. Oriel is unable to access the signs that show her the importance of rest. When she decides, uncharacteristically, on a whim to go prawn fishing with Quick, she is exposed to a miracle in the abundance of prawns that simply swim into her lap (275). She understands that the prawns are a gift (278), but misses the more important point that it is at the moment of spontaneous relaxation, that the miracle happens. Working at, or working out, in mathematics is to solve a problem, and Oriel's work in the tent is comparable to Sam's insistence that he is 'more of a scientist', even though he thinks this in contrast to the hard work of the Lambs (75). Divining the shifty shadow, the hairy hand, or Oriel's figuring of how she can be a better person, all become conflated in the word work. The prawn catch, or Sam's realization that luck is 'like a light shining down on you' (99), move towards the more unpredictable aspect of luck or grace. Sam and Lester win at the horse races significantly on a 'non-market day' (95), and it is in the final moments of the narrative, after the spontaneous picnic at the river, a moment of rest, that Oriel stops her working at understanding. Rest, accepting the uncontrollable nature of life, of luck, of grace and divine intervention, is also a letting go. And Fish's leaving is the moment from which Oriel has to accept that she cannot make sense of it all; the moment that opens her up to the possibility of a future that depends not on understanding but on putting into practice the command to love the other, the

neighbour. Working out the why, as the disciples try to do, is a barrier to fulfilling the simple act of love, and while Oriel has made a start at letting go at the moment of the dance, she must complete it by moving out of her tent, ceasing the 'working at', and living her life of love.

This is why I have argued that the turning point from which the two families can begin to become a community is not the birth of Wax Harry, but the moment when Oriel and Dolly dance. The birth of Harry is not the beginning but the result of the creation of the new community. In biblical terms one might say Harry is the fruit of the union, the unity, of the Lambs and the Pickles. And while the dance is the beginning, Winton uses the final moments in the novel, after Fish has left, to describe the culmination of which the dance was a precursor:

Beneath the ancient mulberry tree whose blood stained the soil around her, a square little woman unpegged and unfolded a tent, taking it corner to corner, minding its brittle, rimed fabric, smacking the dust from it. Another woman stepped forward, tottering a little. She crossed the long gash in the ground where yesterday there'd been a fence, and she took a corner of the tent herself.

The little boxy woman and the big blowsy woman folded end to end until the tent was a parcel that they hefted to their shoulders across the greensmelling grass, and then they went inside the big old house whose door stood open, pressed back by the breeze they made in passing. (431)

The fence that separates the Lamb's garden from the Pickle's has disappeared and the final barrier is the tent that has kept Oriel from living in the house. In a rewriting of the dance it is again a wordless movement in which Dolly joins Oriel in her task of removing the tent from the garden, and, while Oriel's characteristic fastidiousness has not disappeared, the women work in silence and walk together into the house, which is now the home for both. From the wordless dance, to this silent moment of cooperation, a series of barriers, both physical and psychological have had to be removed, and Winton's insistence on showing the time that needs

to lapse before this, the real miracle, can take place, is important to compare to the miracle of Fish's resurrection. Winton uses this juxtaposition as a way to question the focus on divine intervention at the expense of the creation of understanding and the growth of communities. Although Fish remains a part of the community he is also apart, a community of one, happy in himself. Winton does not shy away from showing the difficulties that need to be overcome to create a community out of disparate people, but ultimately puts forward an argument that proposes a move away from instantaneous transformation, to a process of learning and growing, of moving *towards*. It is also in this final passage that Winton turns the families into 'a small congregation amassed in the light' (431). The two families, the tribe, now have become, when the final act of reconciliation has taken place, a congregation of heretics, together in the light.

The final line in the novel brings back the breeze that initially prevented Sam and Rose from stagnating, that brought a smile to Fish's face, that now presses back the door as Oriel and Dolly walk together into an unpredictable future. The spirit, wind, and water, emblems of uncontrollable and unpredictable life, become the basis of the congregation of heretics as they battle together, not to make sense, but to be open, and to live. Love becomes the only means through which the community of flesh and blood can experience grace in the mundane. The approximation of Jesus ends once again in the community of the broken, the 'Weirdos [...] flaming whackos' (272), the unspiritual, the confused, and humbled. As Johnson's Fuckhead realizes, it is in the community of the broken, through love and acceptance of the us and us and us, that the Lambs and Pickles can also become 'a little better every day right in the midst of them'.³⁵

³⁵ Johnson, *Jesus' Son*, p. 136.

Chapter V

J. M. Coetzee's Heresy of Hope: Opening Towards the Possibility of the Impossible

Unlike some of the previous authors I have engaged with, Nobel Prize winner J. M. Coetzee has been the subject of academic study and critical scrutiny for several decades. One book-length study of his novels, Teresa Dovey's *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*, appeared as early as 1988 and Coetzee's work remains an important subject for postcolonial, ethical, political, linguistic, gender and animal studies.¹ Explorations of Coetzee's use and misreading of the Bible are, however, still few, even though Coetzee's novels contain obvious religious themes and symbols. His work is never simply allegorical and, as is probably most clearly evidenced in the varying controversial interpretations of *Disgrace*, is rich enough to support multiple critical approaches.²

Another important difference between Coetzee and the authors examined in the preceding chapters is that he has stated, in *Doubling the Point* (1992), that he is 'not a Christian or not yet.'³ The ambivalent modifying 'not yet' indicates Coetzee's own reluctance to be both limited by and excluded from Christianity; it offers an openness towards a potential becoming, rather than a more unambiguous

¹ For these different approaches see Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison* (2003); Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (2005); David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993); Carrol Clarkson, *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (2009); Lucy Valerie Graham, *State of Peril: Race and Rape in South African Literature* (2012); and Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (2008).

² I am referring here to the controversy between the opposing readings of *Disgrace* by the ANC and R. W. Johnson. The ANC, in their 'Submission to the Human Rights Commission Hearings on Racism in the Media' on 5th of April 2000, charged that Coetzee was perpetuating racist stereotypes of Black South Africans while R. W. Johnson saw *Disgrace* as a novel which espouses the, according to Johnson, mistaken, 'doctrine of collective guilt' of 'whites in Africa'. The ANC submission can be found at <<http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2674>> [accessed 28 April 2014]. R. W. Johnson, 'Die Treurzang van Afrika' <<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/praaag/conversations/topics/10329?var=1>> [accessed 08 July 2015].

³ J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (London: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 250.

rejection of Christian teaching. This ambivalent posture can be read as an instance of Steiner's hermeneutics of dissemination, even though Coetzee does not resist an ecclesiastic dogmatism, but rather a secular one. The heretical reader's openness must also resist a dogmatic rejection of religion, and the 'not yet' in Coetzee's answer allows that openness to remain. Coetzee, it seems, is willing to be a secular heretic, allowing himself to question both Christian concepts and secular ones, but refusing to be defined by any absolute statements on either side of the dividing line. This heretical openness is an important starting point for my engagement with Coetzee's latest novel *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013).

Religious themes are not new to Coetzee's work: in *Age of Iron* (1990) Coetzee combines thoughts about salvation and unconditional love through the inner monologue of the narrator: 'I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. [...] I must love, first of all, the unloveable.'⁴ In *Disgrace* (1999) he incorporated themes of sacrifice and forgiveness, emphasising that true forgiveness can only be significant when it takes place between the affected individuals and contains some form of sacrifice. *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) contains thoughts on the afterlife, direct reference to the Gospels in the chapter title 'On the Birds of the Air', and a reflection on Jesus: 'I believe that the greatest of all contributions to political ethics was made by Jesus when he urged the injured and offended among us to turn the other cheek, thereby breaking the cycle of revenge and reprisal.'⁵

The themes of loving the unlovable and the rejection of vengeance are clearly resonant with the themes I have explored in the previous chapters, and Coetzee shows his interest in, and his familiarity with the Gospels by referring

⁴ J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (London: Penguin, 2010) p. 138.

⁵ J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Vintage, 2008) 'On the Afterlife' pp. 153–4; 'On the Birds of the Air', pp. 207–9; p. 224.

directly to Jesus. This on-going interest in religious themes has not been entirely ignored by the academic engagement with his work, but, partly because rich readings in other fields of criticism have been so important, and partly because of Coetzee's work's resistance to simple theological appropriation, it has to date received a very marginal place in Coetzee criticism.⁶

One recent addition to this under-explored field is Martien E. Brinkman's *Jezus Incognito: De verborgen Christus in de westerse kunst vanaf 1960* (2012).⁷ Brinkman tries to argue that the characters of both Lucy and David can be seen as hidden Christ figures in *Disgrace*, but has to concede in the end that *Disgrace* is 'een tot dusver door de theologie sterk onderschatte literaire vorm van een weldoordachte theologie van het offer and van de biecht.' (*Disgrace* is a seriously thought through theology of sacrifice and confession in literary form, that has been, until now, significantly underestimated by theology.)⁸ Although Brinkman starts his interpretation of *Disgrace* by confidently asserting that the text should be seen as 'een allegorie [...] van het werk van de Waarheids- en Verzoeningscommissie' (an allegory [...] of the work of the Truth- and Reconciliation Commission), his attempt at finding a clear, though hidden, Christ-figure in Lucy and David never materialises and leads to a much more abstract interpretation of the novel as theological treatise.⁹ This concession emphasises the difficulty of reading Coetzee's texts as simply allegorical. Even though I would argue that looking for hidden Christ-figures in Coetzee's novels is unlikely to be

⁶The amount of criticism available on Coetzee is becoming more and more difficult for one person to digest, but a few examples of theological readings of Coetzee, or engagement with his religious themes are: Alyda Faber, 'The Post-secular poetics and ethics of exposure in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*' in *Literature & Theology*, 23.3 (September 1999) pp. 303–16; Chris Danta, "'Like a Dog... like a Lamb': Becoming Sacrificial Animal in Kafka and Coetzee' in *New Literary History*, 38.4 (Autumn 2007) pp. 721–37.

⁷ Martien E. Brinkman, *Jezus Incognito: The Hidden Christ in Western Art since 1960* (2012). Further translations in the text, all translations are my own.

⁸ Brinkman, p. 142.

⁹ Brinkman, p. 136.

entirely fruitful, what makes Brinkman's reading of *Disgrace* important is the fact that he has tried to interpret Coetzee's well-known novel through some of Coetzee's own non-fictional writing collected in *Doubling the Point*, and has made an attempt at reading *Disgrace* as a work of theological significance.¹⁰ The move from looking for Christ figures to accepting Coetzee's novel as a site for the exploration of the nature of sacrifice and confession, however, places *Disgrace* much closer to a fictional approximation of Jesus than to a novel that can be contained in one of Ziolkowski's categories of fictional works about Jesus. The focus of my own investigation of Coetzee's work will be on his latest novel *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), but Brinkman's interpretation of *Disgrace* is important both for its failure to find a Christ-figure and the resulting shift to a thematic overlap between Coetzee's work and Christian theology. I would expand Brinkman's assertion that *Disgrace* has been 'underestimated' by theologians to include all of Coetzee's work.

Coetzee's own heretical mis-reading of texts is evidenced in his inclusion of clear allusions to other works of literature, and his works' openness to multiple readings places it comfortably within the remit of my thesis' argument about the heresy of re-reading. Although Coetzee made an obvious reference to Jesus in *Diary of a Bad Year*, he has not, in his earlier work, misread the story of Jesus, or reinterpreted one of his parables. Somewhat more problematically for my thesis, the title of his latest novel *The Childhood of Jesus*, seems to indicate a concerted effort to write about a character who represents Jesus, a novel, in other words, that would fit more comfortably in one of Ziolkowski's categories than in mine. I will argue, however, that *The Childhood of Jesus* can be read as a fictional

¹⁰ What seems to me the more problematic aspect of Brinkman's argument is his failure to see that the hidden Christ-figure, if there is one, is the unborn baby Lucy carries, since it is the baby, born from disgrace, without an identifiable father, from the line of David (Lurie), who will represent the mix of black and white, and therefore a possible hope for the country.

approximation of Jesus, because it incorporates and rethinks material from the canonical Gospels, focuses on an alternative understanding of life and living, problematizes unquestioned submission to rules and systems, and lacks a Christ-figure. Also, by focussing on the childhood of Jesus, the time of Jesus's life that is conspicuously missing from the canonical Gospels, Coetzee invites a comparison to the pseudepigraphical accounts of the childhood of Jesus known as *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, *The Proto-Gospel of James*, and *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*.¹¹ This incorporation of extra-biblical material moves Coetzee's text into the realm of *haeresis*, an alternative view to the orthodoxy of the canonical Gospels. By changing and misreading these non-orthodox texts, and combining a misreading of them with misreadings of the canonical Gospels, Coetzee undermines canonisation itself. Coetzee's heresy, in line with Steiner's disseminating hermeneutics, is expansionist, and like the seed in the parable of the sower moves the boundaries of canonisation by the inclusion of the pseudepigraphical material.

I will argue that Coetzee's heretical reading of the Infancy Gospels and the canonical Gospels allows him to approximate Jesus's teaching about otherness, openness and a subtle undermining of a purely rational approach to life. Rather than having produced a fictional biography of Jesus's childhood, Coetzee's latest novel approximates Jesus's teaching about the necessity of becoming like a child (Matthew 18. 2; Mark 10. 15; Luke 18. 17). This childlike questioning represents an openness to possibilities unavailable to systems of rational thought, something I will show is Coetzee's exploration of the concept of hope.

I will argue that the novel puts constant pressure on any constraining system, whether it is numbers or cultural customs, by allowing David, the child protagonist

¹¹ For a full text of these different Infancy Gospels see, Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše eds and trans., *The Apocryphal Gospels: Text and Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Kindle.

of the novel, to question assumptions about learning and education, the limits of language and the seemingly arbitrary nature of rules. The heresy, or alternative choice, which David consistently seeks to bring in to play, is resisted both by the authorities, represented by the teacher señor Leon and the school psychologist señora Otxoa, and also by his guardian, Simón. The openness that Coetzee is arguing for is evidenced by his choice of sources, the protagonist's constant questioning of the limitations placed on him, as well as the arch of the story line. Rather than begin the narrative with a journey and end with an arrival, Coetzee has chosen to begin the narrative with an arrival and end with a departure. This narrative feature is important for the themes of openness and hope, because it resists the desire for closure or symmetry. Coetzee's a-symmetrical work resembles the world of David's imagination that is fuelled by his reading of an abridged version of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, a decidedly unhinged character, and which often becomes the catalyst for his questioning of established customs, including the laws of nature.

The Childhood of Jesus recounts the efforts of Simón, a middle aged man, to find the lost mother of David, a six-year-old boy, who is not related to him. They have met on a boat, traveling from an undefined place, where David lost his mother and a letter with information that was tied around his neck. What information was contained in the letter remains hidden, although Simón speculates it would have been helpful in finding the boy's mother. The narrative opens on their arrival at the Centro de Reubicación Novilla (the resettlement centre of Novilla) where they are registered and given papers so they can live in temporary quarters and Simón can find employment. It is later revealed they have spent six weeks in a refugee camp where they were taught Spanish, the language of their host country, and where they also received food and clothing. Simón easily finds work on the docks as a

stevedore, and finds that living expenses are low, but also that there is little available on which to spend money. Once they have been given a permanent residence in an apartment building Simón starts to put more energy into finding David's mother, someone he has never met but, he is convinced, he will recognise the moment he sees her. A chance meeting with a young woman on a trip into the countryside leads Simón to give up his apartment and David to the care of Inés, an unmarried woman neither of them knows. Simón is convinced that as time progresses this arrangement will be beneficial for David, but the boy struggles to fit in at school and Inés' lack of experience with children and living in the town puts stress on her, and affects her ability to cope.

David is precocious and stubborn, and, although he displays a childlike inquisitiveness, his questions often exasperate Simón because David seems to be unable, or unwilling, to accept the linearity of numbers or the arbitrariness of language. His troubles at school eventually lead to David's forced move to a boarding school for special children. Inés' unwillingness to be separated from David, and her conviction that she knows what is best for him pre-empts the decision to go to a new city. On the way David is injured and they travel to Nueva Esperanza (New Hope) to find a doctor. David becomes more obstinate and emphatic that he does not want parents but only brothers, and when they pick up a hitchhiker called Juan, David claims he has no name and that he is on the way to a new life. The novel's final moments describe the beginning of their journey towards Estrellita Dell Norte (Star of the North), and ends on Simón's response to David's question on what they will do once they get there: '*Looking for somewhere to stay, to start our new life.*' (Emphasis in original)¹²

¹² J. M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (Harvill Secker: London, 2013) p. 277. Further page numbers in the text.

Challenging The System

One of the laws of nature David finds hard to accept is death. David's struggle to understand death and his unsuccessful attempt at bringing his favourite horse back to life are emblematic of Coetzee's refusal to incorporate any form of supernaturally available intervention into the laws of nature. (198–200) In contrast with the pseudepigraphical writings on the infancy of Jesus, which are full of miracles the child Jesus performs, Coetzee has focussed rather on a more problematic aspect of the Infancy Gospels, namely their portrayal of the boy Jesus as a rather awkward and wilful child. For example *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* records the following two incidents about Jesus's interaction with other children:

Now the son of Annas the scribe was standing there with Joseph. He took a willow branch and scattered the water that Jesus had gathered. Jesus was irritated when he saw what happened, and he said to him: "You unrighteous, irreverent idiot! What did the pools of water do to harm you? See, now you also will be withered like a tree, and you shall never bear leaves or root or fruit." Immediately that child was completely withered. [...] Somewhat later he was going through the village, and a child ran up and banged his shoulder. Jesus was aggravated and said to him, "You will go no further on your way." Right away the child fell down and died.

The attempt at educating him is recorded as follows:

Standing off to the side was an instructor named Zachaeus who heard Jesus say these things to his father. He was greatly amazed that he was speaking such things, though just a child. After a few days he approached Joseph and said to him, "You have a bright child with a good mind. Come, hand him over to me that he may learn his letters, and along with the letters I will teach him all knowledge, including how to greet all the elders and to honor them as his ancestors and fathers, and to love children his own age." And he told him all the letters from Alpha to Omega, clearly and with great precision. But Jesus looked at the instructor Zachaeus and said to him, "Since you do not know the true nature of the Alpha, how can you teach anyone the Beta? You hypocrite! If you know it, first teach the Alpha, and then we will believe you about the Beta." Then he began to interrogate the teacher about the first letter, and he was not able to give him answers. [...] When the teacher Zachaeus heard the child setting forth so many such allegorical interpretations of the first letter, he was at a complete loss about this kind of explanation and his teaching, and he said [...] "woe is me! I am wretched

and at a complete loss; I have put myself to shame, taking on this child.¹³

The infancy Gospels were created to satisfy the desire for a more complete life of Jesus, and, as Bart D. Ehrman writes, ‘most scholars believe that such “infancy Gospels” began to circulate during the first half of the second century.’¹⁴ *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and *The Proto-Gospel of James* are particularly interesting because some of the stories from these Gospels can be found in the Qur’an, suggesting that the text was widely circulated.¹⁵ This intertextual use of the pseudepigraphical writings of the early Christian communities, and the freedom apparent in the creation of new narratives, resonates clearly with my own reading of the parable of the sower, but it is also significant that Jesus’s explanation of the first letter of the Greek alphabet echoes the Midrashic notion that ‘every word of the Scripture [has] “seventy aspects”.’¹⁶ The image created of the boy Jesus in these passages is, however, counter-intuitive and disturbing and it is this wilfulness and obstinacy that Coetzee carries over into the narrative about David. When David is sent to school problems arise between him and his teacher, Señor Leon, who invites Inés and Simón for a consultation:

I find David to be an intelligent boy, very intelligent. He has a quick mind; he grasps new ideas at once. However, he is finding it difficult to adjust to the realities of the classroom. He expects to get his own way all the time. [...] He is restless, and he makes the other children restless too. He leaves his seat and roams around. He leaves the room without permission. And no, he does not pay attention to what I say. [...] In reading, David has unhappily made no progress, none at all. [...] There is something about the activity of reading that he seems unable to grasp. The same goes for figures. [...] He can recite

¹³ *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* in *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, eds and trans. by Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) no page numbers given.

¹⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2003) p. 58.

¹⁵ Compare *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 2:1-5 with Qur’an Sura 3:49, also *The Proto-Gospel of James: The Birth of Mary, the Revelation of James* with Qur’an Sura 19. All references to the Qur’an are from *The Qur’an*, trans. by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Rabbi Dr I Epstein, ‘Foreword’ in *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis Volume One*, pp. ix–xxiii, p. xi.

all kinds of numbers, yes, but not in the right order. As for the marks he makes with his pencil, you may call them writing, he may call them writing, but they are not writing as generally understood. Whether they have some private meaning I cannot judge. (203–5)

A conversation with señora Otxoa, the school's psychologist, reveals that señor Leon has reported David as being insubordinate and that he continually 'challenges [señor Leon's] authority as a teacher' and refuses 'to accept direction' (209). David may lack the power to do miracles but he displays the same wilful obstinacy with which the second century writers endowed the boy Jesus. David's unintelligible writing is a rewriting of Zacheus' inability to understand Jesus's explanation of the Alpha, and Coetzee consistently questions assumptions about what constitutes language and knowledge while also undermining an appeal to authority based on seniority or title. It is important to notice Coetzee's use of predatory names for both the teacher, lion, and the psychologist, wolf, and their concerted effort to institutionalise David.¹⁷ The use of these names emphasises Coetzee's own misgivings about what could be called the foundations of homogenisation: the need for children to be, act, and respond in the same way so as to conform to arbitrary standards of educational progress. This oblique introduction of Robinson's 'curse of sameness' that plagues Gilead, can also be found at work in Novilla, the town Simón and David reside in: there is a clear sense that most of the people Simón meets are happy to follow the rules and that there is a resistance to change. Simón's own questioning of the status quo, both in relation to desire in his conversation with Ana (30–33), and to technological progress in his work (113), indicate that he is also a heretic questioner. More importantly for my thesis, it shows Coetzee's own ambivalent attitude towards systems and structures that demand conformity rather than allow for alternative ways of being.

¹⁷ Leon derives from Greek λέων meaning lion, and Otxoa derives from the Basque word for wolf.

Childlike Resistance To Reason

A somewhat peripheral, but important, character is Emilio Daga, who first appears on the dock where Simón works, works a few days as a stevedore but, when payday arrives, is unsatisfied with the amount he receives and decides to take what he wants, steals the paymaster's bicycle and rides away. He appears again later in the narrative when Inés has 'lost' David after Daga had offered to buy the boy an ice cream (181). When she cannot find him she turns to Simón for help and Simón manages to locate Daga's apartment and finds David there watching Mickey Mouse on television (183).

Although Simón has his misgivings about Daga, David is fascinated by him and even Inés herself seems to be unable to resist his advances. Daga's role in the narrative is never clearly developed, but Coetzee has combined aspects of Judas (who steals from the money box John 12. 6) and Satan as tempter, who tempts David with a 'magical pen' (179), ice cream and Mickey Mouse (188).¹⁸ The temptations are physical and visual, and combine the different appetites, tasty food and sex, Simon himself also desires. Daga seems to be able to offer a way out of the bland and passionless existence from which most of the other characters do not feel the need to escape. This introduces into the narrative the notion set forth in James that 'every man is tempted when he is drawn away by his own lust' (James 1. 14) This problematizes Simón's and David's status in Novilla, since, while the other characters have given up their desires and can therefore not be tempted, Simón and David's capacity for passion indicates that their desires can also be a source for a negative choice. The heretic desire for new readings and incessant questioning, although not inherently negative, leaves also an option for wrong choosing.

¹⁸ The way Satan tempts Jesus is by asking him to make bread out of stones, and by showing him 'all the kingdoms of the world' (Matthew 4. 1-10)

Coetzee does not allow the narrative to move further in this direction, but has clearly included the possibility that desire for change, passion, and a better life, might involve a choice to steal and fight. While Simón and David explore ways of being different from the majority of Novilla's population, Daga embodies one choice Simón is not willing to make.

The final time Daga appears in the narrative is when Inés' brothers come to take them to La Residencia for the weekend and the house is unexpectedly full of people: Simón, Inés, her two brothers, David, Daga and his girlfriend. David uses this moment to play the king going around the group pouring everyone a glass of sherry. In this scene Coetzee combines small elements from the Gospel stories about Jesus in his narrative: the last supper where Jesus offers wine to his disciples is an obvious parallel. Jesus, however, never called himself king, but was mocked as a king by the soldiers who guarded him during his trial. (Matthew 27. 27–31; Luke 23. 11) This mocking is replicated in Inés' brother Diego's laughter: 'What ails thee, gentle king [...] canst thou not hold thy liquor?' (193) Coetzee's use of the Gospels and of the pseudepigrapha is, however, not simply a matter of making theological statements work within the space of the narrative. These allusions to the last supper and the rejection of Jesus as a spiritual or political leader are difficult to harmonise with the life of the boy David and must be carefully considered within the imaginative space of the child's experience.

Because Coetzee employs free indirect discourse, the novel never moves entirely into David's imaginative space. The boy's game is interrupted by the adult voices, and it is telling that in the scene described above Simón feels that 'it is time for him, Simón, to step in', and, as David's game continues, he repeats three times that he 'intervenes' (193–5). This triple intervention again links to the Gospel stories where Simon Peter denies knowing Jesus when he is arrested (Matthew 26.

69–75; Mark 14. 66–72; Luke 22. 54–62; John 18. 15–27), and here indicates Simón's role as the voice of reason. His intervention in the game, his introduction of rules of morality, 'a woman doesn't make a baby with her brother', and his final attempt at disrupting the game by appealing to 'the rule', are all a form of, if not betrayal, certainly denying David the opportunity to immerse himself in his own world of play (194–5). Simón, the voice of reason, can only allow David's imagination to take the child along a path that steers clear of transgressing the line of propriety, but he does not seem to understand that that line only makes sense in Simón's world, not David's. The way in which Coetzee uses the canonical Gospels in this narrative is as a child's view of a reality that consistently challenges and is challenged by the adult, or rational, world-view of Simón.

Another passage in the text where this is obvious is the incident when Daga takes the money he believes he deserves and steals the paymaster's bicycle. David has witnessed the whole incident and the following day, when Daga does not appear he asks Simón about the money. David's own solution is that 'the paymaster should have given [Daga] more money'. Simón responds with reason, explaining that if 'the paymaster paid each of [the stevedores] whatever [they] wanted, he would run out of money.' In order to make this clearer Simón tries to explain human nature and the tendency for humans to 'all want more than is due' to them (48). According to Simón, even though people do exactly the same work as others, each person likes to tell themselves,

nevertheless, nevertheless, you are special, you will see! One day, when we are least expecting it, there will be a blast on Álvaro's whistle and we will all be summoned to assemble on the quayside, where a great crowd will be waiting, and a man in a black suit with a tall hat; and the man in the black suit will call on you to step forward, saying, Behold this singular worker, in whom we are well pleased! And he will shake your hand and pin a medal on your chest – For Service Beyond the Call of Duty, the medal will say – and everyone will cheer and clap. (49, italics in original)

The Gospel of Matthew records two moments when a voice from heaven says: 'this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased' (Matthew 3. 17; 17. 5). These are clearly meant to illustrate the Divine pleasure with Jesus. This direct quotation from the Bible is about being singular, unique, and different, and is, in Simón's view, preposterous. Again he uses reason to underline his point: 'If we all got medals then medals would be worth nothing.' As with his earlier thought about money, however, David says he 'would give señor Daga a medal.' (50)

David's childlike acceptance of the possibility of singularity for everyone goes against Simón's logic that if everyone is special no one is. There is, however, a more problematic side to Simón's reasoning. Simón first claims that 'we all want more than we are worth' (48) and later says that Daga 'took what he thought he was worth.'(49) By combining these two statements we can rephrase Simón's theory as follows: if humans take what they think they are worth they will always take more than they are actually worth. Simón's view of human nature is that humans always think they are worth more than they actually are. The problem with this view of humanity is that Simón implies that human value has to be established by something external to ourselves, and that these criteria need to be accepted unquestioningly. What Simón is trying to convey to David implies a system of criteria that determine a person's worth, and that this worth can be expressed through financial remuneration. David is unable to comprehend this reasoning, and when Simón tries to use sarcasm to consolidate his point by telling David 'maybe we should make you paymaster [...] and next week there will be nothing left in the moneybox', David simply responds 'there's always money in the moneybox, [...] that's why it's called a moneybox.' (50)

David's understanding of being special is actually an affirmation of

individuality. While Simón struggles against the homogenising tendencies of the life in Novilla, he is, when speaking to David in the voice of reason, actively involved in perpetuating the same philosophy. David resists the implication that if everyone were special it would merely be another form of sameness. In David's view, difference can be applied to each person individually, and, rather than one more form of homogenisation, this could become a celebration of the other as other. David's child-like thinking is then one of approximation, of always retaining a gap of difference between the self and the other, and that gap should not be allowed to be reduced to the point of sameness.

What this conversation also shows is the difficulty for Simón to reason with a child who experiences language and the world on a completely different level from himself. While this is not a ground-breaking insight into childlikeness, it is an important aspect of what Coetzee tries to achieve in this narrative. David does not detect the sarcasm in Simón's exasperated attempt at getting him to understand the system of wages. But neither do Álvaro, Simón's foreman, and Elena, Simón's lover: 'Álvaro does not trade in irony. Nor does Elena. Elena is an intelligent woman but she does not see any doubleness in the world' (64). The problem with which Simón is faced is that he is the stranger speaking in double meanings, telling jokes, and using ironic or sarcastic language to question the life in Novilla.

David, however, is neither like Simón nor like Elena and Álvaro; he represents a third way of thinking, an alternative way of seeing the world. What Coetzee represents in David is what Jesus asks of his disciples when he says they need to become like children. The context in which both Mark and Luke place Jesus's statement about becoming like a child is, first the refusal of the disciples to allow children to be brought to Jesus, and then the story of the rich young man who

asks what he must do to 'inherit eternal life' (Mark 10. 17).¹⁹ When Jesus tells him to sell all he has and give it to the poor, the young man walks away because 'he had great possessions.' (Mark 10. 22) This encounter is followed by Jesus's famous statement: 'Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle' (Mark 10. 24). The disciples, 'astonished out of measure' ask 'who then can be saved?' to which Jesus replies 'With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible.' (Mark 10. 26–7)²⁰ Just as for a childlike imagination everything is possible, the value of money and objects remains often a mystery to a small child. David's inability to comprehend the economic impracticality of allowing Daga unlimited access to the moneybox, betrays the childlikeness one requires to sell everything and give it away.

A childlike belief in the possibility of all things is synonymous with a refusal to enforce limitations. If everything is possible then nothing is impossible: there can be no end, no punctuated hermeneutics, never 'this and this, but not that' but always this, and this, and this, thirty, sixty a hundred fold. By rewriting these ideas from the Gospel through the interaction between David and Simón, Coetzee is able to question a reliance on systems of thought that depend on setting boundaries and instead allows the childlike and unlimited imagination always to hope. I have argued already that hope is, like an approximation, a movement *towards* but never an arrival *at*, and David's child-like insistence on limitlessness is, as I have shown, comparable to the disseminative hermeneutics as well as the expansionist creation of narrative. The heretical re-reading, the continual re-evaluating of scripture, and

¹⁹ Matthew places the story of the children coming to Jesus also directly before the story of the wealthy young man (Matthew 19. 13–26), however, Jesus's admonition to 'be converted and become as little children' (Matthew 18. 2) comes as a response to the disciples' question about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18. 1).

²⁰ The corresponding passages are Matthew 19. 13–26 and Luke 18. 15–27.

the incessant questioning, are all child-like characteristics, and there is some aspect of the creation of narrative out of narrative that needs a child-like wonder to see the new in the old; to resist, as Winton put it, 'the orderly pegged lines of adulthood' and to be open to a spiritual, mythical, fantastic, imaginative world without limits, which is of course the world of fiction.²¹

Jesus's statement about the camel and the needle's eye is obviously hyperbolic, but a childlike imagination can remain open towards precisely this kind of statement. The disciple's reaction, 'who then can be saved', shows that they also do not see doubleness in their world: it is clearly impossible for a camel to pass through a needle's eye, and their consternation implies that if the wealthy cannot be saved there is no hope for anyone. Simón's ability to understand hyperbole would, however, not help him solve the riddle: it would remain a nonsense statement. It is perhaps ironic that Christian interpretation history shows how difficult it has been for some to accept this statement. Some interpreters have tried to make sense of it by claiming the eye of the needle referred to a small gate in Jerusalem that forced a camel to go on its knees to enable it to pass through, even though there is no historical evidence to support this claim.²² The attempt to explain it in these literal terms is, however, indicative of the way people resist the ambiguity that is part of the Gospel texts. It also further emphasises the doubleness of Jesus's statement: only a (childlike) belief that everything is possible allows one to accept that a camel could really pass through the eye of a needle. David displays just this kind of imagination and belief.

David's belief that everything is possible has, however, also negative

²¹ Jennifer Sinclair, 'Interview with Tim Winton', p. 10.

²² Gerald Hammond and Austin Busch alert the reader to this interpretation in a footnote to Mark 10. 25 in *The English Bible: King James Version*, p. 105. For a more detailed commentary on this statement and the history of its interpretation see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, commentary on Matthew 19. 24.

consequences in Coetzee's narrative. Returning to their temporary lodgings 'their progress is slow' because David 'keeps hesitating and hopping to avoid cracks in the paving.' Simón's irritation at the delay provokes his attempt at making David end the game, to which David responds 'I don't want to fall into a crack.' The dialogue continues:

That's nonsense. How can a big boy like you fall down a little crack like that?
Not that crack. Another crack.
Which crack? Point to the crack.
I don't know! I don't know which crack. Nobody knows.
Nobody knows because nobody can fall through a crack in the paving. Now hurry up.
I can! You can! Anyone can! You don't know! (35)

This belief, that he can fall through a crack, or holes, is repeated several times in the narrative, and becomes a reason why other children find it difficult to relate to David. At school he 'says crazy things', like his claim that 'there are volcanoes everywhere' that only he can see (206). This imagination becomes problematic when the school's psychologist señora Otxoa determines this is a form of escape to a fantasy world that David has created in response to his 'mystifying family situation' (207). Within the fictional narrative Coetzee has created, however, it is important to notice that these incursions of reason are never seen as positive solutions to the perceived problem of David's sense of being a child.

While *The Childhood of Jesus* follows Coetzee's usual style of sparse writing steeped in realism, the main formative events in the narrative are, from a realist point of view, preposterous. Simón's recognition of Inés as David's mother, and Inés' acceptance of David as her child within twenty-four hours of meeting him are of course highly unlikely fictitious developments. Coetzee does not leave this criticism out of his narrative, but allows Elena to be the voice of reason when she criticises Simón for following his intuition:

A conviction, an intuition, a delusion – what is the difference when it can not be questioned? Has it occurred to you that if we all lived by our intuitions the world would fall into chaos? (84)

These carefully chosen words, conviction, intuition, delusion, are often used to undermine as well as to defend religious belief, especially the uncritical acceptance of unexplained phenomena. As I showed in the previous chapter, Winton's transcendental incursions are neither explained nor denied, but Coetzee brings this critical voice of the unexplained into his narrative; brings it into the foreground, precisely, I would argue, to emphasise that reason does not rule all of the decisions people make. Living by reason only, by established rules and regulations, creates a stable, but rather bland way of life. Chaos might be risky, as was Oriel's dance with Dolly; as was Jack's choice to live with Della; as was Jamie's decision to live; but sometimes, Coetzee seems to imply, that risk is worth the danger it invites.

While Simón is often the voice of reason in conversations with David, at the moment he meets Inés he has had to relinquish his rationality and follow his intuition, possibly even his delusion, and believe that Inés 'is [David's] mother' (84, emphasis in original). Similarly, Inés has had to forget what is reasonable and accept the impossible: that David is her son. In other words, Coetzee has made the central narrative event dependent on the unreasonable belief in the impossible; both Simón and Inés, at the decisive moment, have had to become like a child and accept what cannot be explained.

Heresy as an alternative reading or understanding and unceasing questioning is clearly at work in the interaction between David and Simón. Whether Simón is talking about stars, death or *Don Quixote*, David is never just satisfied with the plain meaning of the text. Simón and David are engaged in a reading of their

environment, and David's voice is that of the heretic: questioning and prodding any attempt by Simón to explain definitively the workings of nature, human tradition, language, and ethics. The heresy of David is, however, not confined to questioning, it is also performed as an alternative way of being. David writes his own language, reads in his own way, and sees things no one else sees. The moments in the text that show adults interacting successfully with David usually involve an adoption of David's point of view. As I noted already, the party at which David pretends to be king is only interrupted by Simón, the others are happy to enter the imaginative space of the game; Inés has to enter the imaginary space of David to play, or perform, the role of mother; Señor Leon's inability to accept David's alternate way of writing establishes him as one more character who cannot see doubleness, can only see one way of educating and disciplining a child. The fact that special children are driven fifty kilometres out of the city and placed in a boarding school where they cannot interact with normal children, is indicative of the expulsion of the heretic: the heretic needs to be moved away so that society can return to the complacency of sameness.

Before David is taken away from Inés she criticises Simón for not standing up to the judge. She asks Simón: 'don't you believe in the child?' When Simón tries to explain that they cannot fight the law, she turns the question into an accusation: 'You don't really believe in the child. You don't know what it means to believe.' (232) Again it is Simón who attempts to be rational, but Inés is unreasonable: 'they will never take my child away from me. I will die first.' (232) This is the moment when it becomes clear that Inés has decided that following David in his alternate way of seeing the world is more important to her than following the laws of the country. Simón at this point is still holding on to his old sense of reasonableness. Inés' accusation is, however, not easy to understand, and the narrative does not

explain immediately what it is that Simón does not believe. It is only later, after David has escaped from school, that this is made clear.

Before David runs away, however, there is another important turning point in the novel. Simón's move across the line of transgression is precipitated by an accident. Earlier in the narrative Simón had questioned the efficiency of unloading ships by hand. The consensus had been that unloading quicker and easier was unnecessary since there was neither a food shortage, nor some type of emergency (113–7). One day, however, Álvaro proposes the stevedores borrow a crane from Roadworks to 'see whether, as Simón claims, a crane will change [their] lives.' (233) Eugenio, a young stevedore is taught how to use it, and 'in no time at all he is racing back and forth along the quay and rotating the arm' (234). This rotating arm, this hinge, will change (unhinge) Simón's life: the first fully loaded canvas swings 'bumps the dockside and begins to spin and lurch out of control' and, before Simón can move 'the swinging load strikes him in the midriff and knocks him backwards' (235).

While he is recuperating in the hospital, Simón has time to reflect. When Eugenio brings him a book on philosophy, Simón complains that the kind of philosophy he wants is: 'the kind that shakes one. That changes one's life.' (238) He continues:

I wish someone, some saviour, would descend from the skies and wave a magic wand and say, *Behold read this book and all your questions will be answered. Or, Behold, here is an entirely new life for you.* (239, italics in original)

In a world without a Christ-figure, without a saviour, there is no philosophy that will help Simón to answer all his questions; no book that will 'shake' him. The recurrent topic of the philosophy Eugenio is interested in revolves around 'the

exploration of the table and its close relative the chair' (120). The abstract nature of this questioning does not interest Simón, and his request for a life-changing philosophy is in response to a book that is 'about tables and chairs' (238). But the crane has shaken him, and this painful collision will change his life. The coordinating conjunction 'or' also functions as a hinge in Simón's desire for an all-encompassing answer, and seems to juxtapose the books of philosophy with the possibility of a new life, as if the two are mutually exclusive. While the book of answers does not imply a new life, a new life does not guarantee access to all the answers. The remainder of the narrative clarifies that, for Simón, a new life has become more important than answers to philosophical questions.

On the day he is discharged from hospital Simón takes on the voice of David when he says two plus two equals four is a 'man-made rule', but Eugenio tries to maintain that 'if the rules are true for you and me and for everyone else, how can they not be true for [David]?' (248) This time Simón explains, not by using reason, but by trying to understand how David might see the world:

[David] won't take the steps we take when we count: *one step two step three*. It is as if the numbers were islands floating in a great black sea of nothingness, and he were each time being asked to close his eyes and launch himself across a void. *What if I fall?* – that is what he asks himself. *What if I fall and then keep falling for ever?* Lying in bed in the middle of the night I could sometimes swear that I too was falling – falling under the same spell that grips the boy. *If getting from one to two is so hard*, I asked myself, *how shall I ever get from zero to one?* From nowhere to somewhere: it seemed to demand a miracle every time. (249, italics in original)

A little further on he says:

What if between the one and two there is no bridge at all, only empty space? And what if we, who so confidently take the step, are in fact falling through space, only we don't know it because we insist on keeping a blindfold on? What if this boy is the only one among us with eyes to see? (250)

Although Simón still frames these ideas in the form of unanswered questions, it is clear from his reaction to Eugenio that he is not looking for someone to persuade him David is wrong. This becomes the philosophy that shakes Simón. The hinge of the crane may have shaken him physically, but it precipitates the philosophical change necessary for him to help Inés and David when they most need it: not the philosophy of answered questions, but the need for a new life: the journey from nowhere to somewhere that demands a miracle, not rational thinking, every time.

When David runs away from the school at Punta Arenas the legal situation becomes more complicated. David claims he has walked through barbed wire to escape from the school, but the school's psychologist is emphatic that there is no barbed wire at all. On the contrary, she claims the school 'has an open-door policy'. (253) When she challenges Inés whether she'd rather believe David, a six-year-old boy, or her, a trained psychologist, Inés says 'if the child says there is barbed wire then I believe him, there is barbed wire.' The psychologist then turns to ask Simón the same question and Simón replies 'I believe him too.' (254) This answer signifies Simón's acceptance of the alternative way of seeing the world of the boy in opposition to the law, the educational system, and the reasoning of his fellow workers.

The philosophy of David does not attempt to give answers or explanations, but it should be clear that it depends on asking questions and on taking risks; it is neither the heresy of explanation, nor of narrow definitions, but rather an incessant questioning of boundaries. It asks Simón to take off the blindfold of reason, and consider that his explanations may actually be obfuscations. Elena was right to be concerned that 'if we all lived by our intuitions the world would fall into chaos' (84). At that point in the narrative Simón's response 'what is wrong with a little chaos now and again if good follows from it?' seemed out of character, but

now that he has accepted the heretical philosophy of David, he has opened himself to the possibility of the impossible. The unlimited questioning of rules and regulations contains the risk of opening up the rigidity of the law and turning it into the shapeless risk of chaos. The narrative does not show that Simón's questions are now answered, but it is from this point forwards that the journey towards a new life begins.

Hoping For The Unseen

This brings me finally back to the subject of hope. I have earlier asserted that a childlike imagination that is open to the impossible being possible is also a temperament of hope. By allowing nothing to have a limit David retains an anticipatory way of life. When Simón jokes with David about catching 'a boat to the old life', the boy is adamant 'I don't want an old life I want a new life!' (261) I have discussed Marilynne Robinson's 'posture of grace' as a posture that does not demand understanding before it extends forgiveness, but grace is not a concept with which Coetzee is comfortable; instead, David has a posture of hope.²³ Hope is, however, always for something unseen. As St. Paul said: 'hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?' (Rom. 8. 24) Hope depends in large measure on accepting the possibility of something that has not materialised yet, of anticipating something that is not yet fact. Pieper's *status viatoris*, of being on the way, is helpful here, because the new life requires another journey. Simón's question 'what if [David] is the only one among us with eyes to see?' misses the point about David's posture. David does not see more than Simón, Inés, or Eugenio, but his childlike acceptance of the impossible as a possibility

²³ In Coetzee's exchange with David Attwell about the resolution of *Age of Iron*, Attwell proposed that Coetzee had come close to 'the Dostoyevskian principle of grace' to which Coetzee replied: 'as for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet.' J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, ed. David Attwell, p. 250.

allows him to hope for the unseen.

It is clear how this rethinks St. Paul's statement about hope, but it is also an approximation of Jesus's teaching. The rich young man could not give away all he had because he had 'great possessions'. This clearly alludes to the man's relationship to his wealth, but it is equally plausible that he was unable to imagine the point beyond having given everything away. Taking a risk, like giving everything away, is in large measure dependent on being able to imagine the possibility of a life without possessions. Without hope for something new, without an anticipation of something different, it is impossible to take that risk. The child who imagines also hopes; hope expects and moves forward. Jesus's injunction to 'be converted, and become as little children' asks of his disciples to become childlike enough to expect the impossible, hope for the unseen, and accept that they do not know everything. In many ways, just as Jamie in Denis Johnson's novel *Angels* has to imagine something that is not there yet to begin a new life, Simón has to learn to stop trying to make sense of everything, stop trying to answer all his questions, and resist the temptation to conform to all the rules and, instead, start moving towards a new life.

The city of Novilla has accepted Simón and David without making any unreasonable demands on them. Elena points out that Simón could have been left to starve but that instead he was welcomed, given employment and a home, and that he has no reason to complain about his life (107). Life for his colleagues on the dock seems to be pleasant enough, and when Simón initially proposes the crane Álvaro asks 'why are we so sure we need to be saved, Simón?' (113) The reasonableness of the question puts Simón off from pursuing his conviction, just as the reasonableness of Elena's observations puts an end to his argument. Simón is, however, never satisfied with the life in Novilla. Like the saltless bean paste Ana

offers him on their picnic (26), and the tasteless spaghetti he receives at the learning centre (122), the life he has been given seems to him devoid of spice or passion. When he tries to voice his complaints he is told he needs to forget the past and learn to accept his present. The image Coetzee repeatedly uses is that Simón needs to be washed clean. This image is clearly indicative of baptism, but one that Simón is expected to perform for the sake of accepting the tasteless routine existence Elena, Ana, and Álvaro lead. This is a baptism that washes away the need for desire, taste, spice, excitement, even love, and is replaced by routine, sameness, and goodwill. It is, however, not until Simón is on his way to his new life and has met Dr Garcia, that he can accept that that life can be enough for some.

After David has hurt his eyes on the first night of their journey, Simón finds a doctor in Nueva Esperanza who is willing to treat him. When David claims to be invisible, instead of correcting the boy, Dr Garcia enters into David's game and wins his trust. After his consultation David asks the doctor to come with them 'to the new life'. Dr Garcia declines saying 'the life I have here in Esperanza is happy and fulfilling enough. There is nothing I need to be saved from'. (276) Like Álvaro, the doctor does not see the need to be saved, but Coetzee's treatment of these characters is much more ambivalent and non-judgemental than Denis Johnson's treatment in *Angels of the busy people* who fail to recognise their own enslavement. Simón's earlier interactions with Elena and Álvaro indicate that he does not comprehend how anyone can be satisfied without fulfilling the desires he has, but at this point Simón does not try to persuade Dr Garcia that their journey will be towards a more fulfilling or happier life: Coetzee allows Simón to experience his personal change without turning him immediately into a proselytiser of a new orthodoxy that should be followed by everyone. David himself, although still wilful at times, seems to be happy to extend the invitation to

the new life without insisting that it is accepted; he remains open to the possibility of a positive response while allowing a space for the invitation to be declined.

My argument has established that Coetzee is clearly re-writing both the pseudepigraphical infancy Gospels and the canonical Gospels and that he juxtaposes reason with the need for a childlike acceptance of the seemingly impossible. This possibility of the impossible is both a way to resist the punctuated hermeneutics of established orthodoxy, secular as well as religious, and a way to allow hope to remain. There is something arbitrary about Simón's choosing of Inés, just as his own encounter with David was contingent rather than determined, but there is no sense of the undeserved miracle of life as, for example, experienced by Fuckhead. Simón is not portrayed as a particularly kind, generous or saintly man, but he is not addicted to alcohol or drugs and attempts to be civil and agreeable at most times, and he clearly resists Daga's life of petty crime. The portrayal of David is similarly neither excessively sentimental nor overtly evil. There is no need for forgiveness or reconciliation for Simón, Inés, and David before they can move into a new life, nor is there a redemptive death. Coetzee's characters do, however, need to be open to an imagination that can go beyond the possible and is willing to resist the structures of laws, regulations, and rules. To begin a journey to a new life, Coetzee implies, one needs to be willing to be a heretic, to accept the possibility of an alternative version of reality and existence. The child Jesus asks his disciples to become has that heretical imagination, while the rich young man fails to see the possibility of the impossible and walks 'away sorrowful'.

Coetzee's novel is a fictional approximation of Jesus because it does not attempt to create a fictional biography of Jesus nor does the boy David become a redeemer. Coetzee uses the text to question orthodox assumptions and challenge the structures of reading and writing, and offers a wildly imaginative opening up to

the impossible as an alternative. He questions the status quo and the reductive tendency of homogenisation, and juxtaposes the child-like heretical reading with the demotic need for explanations. Simón has to learn to accept the midrashic hermeneutic that can allow a question to stand for an answer, risk the chaos of breaking the law, start on a journey, and follow the unseen hope, categorically towards a new life.

Concluding Remarks

Say [Prophet], 'If the whole ocean were ink for writing the words of my Lord,
it would run dry before those words were exhausted'
–even if We were to add another ocean to it.
The Qur'an, The Cave, 18. 109

To conclude is not the nature of the enterprise.
Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 173

I would like to take this opportunity [...] to pray for another human being.'
Denis Johnson, *Angels*, p. 207

I want to live, I want to be with people [...] I want to battle it out.'
Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet*, p. 425

'I don't want an old life I want a new life!'
J. M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, p. 261

Memories of Matsuko (2006) is a Japanese film, written and directed by Tetsuya Nakashima, that moves in flashbacks through the life of the tramp, Matsuko, who is found dead in a park at the start of the film.¹ As the narrative progresses it becomes clear that Matsuko's difficulties began when, as a young teacher, she was falsely accused of stealing because she refused to betray one of her students, Ryu, who had taken the money. As a consequence of her resolve to protect Ryu Matsuko loses her job. She leaves her parent's home, drifts in and out of relationships, and eventually becomes a prostitute. After killing a pimp, she is arrested and imprisoned. When she is released she finds that her husband has re-married and she meets, the now grown-up, Ryu, who is part of a criminal gang and confesses he loves her. Ryu is violent and abusive, but Matsuko has decided she will stay with him and love him. When Ryu is arrested and imprisoned he resolves he no longer wants to be a burden to Matsuko, but she refuses to give up and waits

¹ *Memories of Matsuko*, dir. by Tetsuya Nakashima (Third Window Films, 2006) [on DVD]. The Japanese title is 嫌われ松子の一生 (*Kiraware Matsuko no Isshō*), literally 'Life of despised Matsuko'.

for him to be released. Once again in prison Ryu is given a Bible and he becomes agitated when he reads 'God is love.' (I John 4. 16) He asks a priest to explain and he responds by saying: 'God forgives the sinful and loves them unconditionally.' Ryu repeats these words slowly, and realizes that Matsuko has shown him this unconditional love. When he is once again released he tries to find her, but discovers that she has been killed.

It may seem problematic to start my concluding remarks with a description of a Japanese film, but my intention is to finish my thesis by showing how the fictional approximations of Jesus move beyond disciplinary and geographic boundaries; to conclude where I started by showing how the seed the sower scatters is still moving the field of inquiry wider and further.

Memories of Matsuko includes elements of the prodigal son, but Matsuko's father passes away shortly after she leaves, and her brother says she is 'dead' to her family, and tells her she should never return. The setting is similar to Johnson's world of crime and violence, but there is no rehabilitation: after Ryu rejects her all Matsuko does is 'eat and get drunk'. The river reminds Matsuko of home, but, unlike Winton's narrative, there is no community for Matsuko; she lives by herself, lonely and shunned. Matsuko dreams as a child of a happy life, but her imagination does not lead to hope, or a new beginning, and after all her disappointments she seems to have become exhausted and decides that she will 'trust no one, love no one.'

But *Memories of Matsuko* is a fictional approximation of Jesus because at the centre of the narrative lies Ryu's revelatory insight that 'Matsuko was [his] God' because she had been able to forgive him and love him unconditionally. His epiphany has, however, come too late, because Matsuko has died before he has found her, leaving him without any further meaning in the world. Although

Nakashima ends the film on a colourful dream-like sequence in which Matsuko is reunited with her dead sister, the narrative end of the film evinces a much bleaker message: Matsuko is dead, Ryu is alone and neither have had a chance to find redemption. As I already argued in my discussion of Johnson's texts, however, in a world where there is no saviour, in a narrative where there is no Messiah, the only way the divine presence can be manifested is through interpersonal relationships. The fictional approximations of Jesus consistently show that people can be conduits for grace, forgiveness, love, and reconciliation, but that these acts often are submerged by misunderstanding and suspicions, and sometimes can only be recognised retrospectively.

I have explored love, grace, forgiveness, and hope across the different texts and attempted to show how a reading of the Gospels can be illuminated by the fictional approximations of Jesus. I have argued that the drug-addled Georgie can be a conduit for grace; the prodigal Jack can embody an alternative to violence and passivism; Fuckhead can finally recognise the grace that has kept him alive; Dolly and Oriel can dance together; and Simón and Inés can follow David to believe in the impossible. I have shown how the absence of Jesus from these texts undermines simple solutions, and focus the narratives on the exploration of the teachings of Jesus rather than on the historical arguments about his life.

The Gospels do not present us with a representation of Jesus, but they tell his stories and his riddles, and I have argued that by retelling them the fictional approximations encourage a fresh, alternative, or even heretical reading of the biblical text. However, the risk of chaos, the slippery dance of grace, the unpredictable choice to live, and the unfathomable beauty of love, demand also the vulnerability of exposure to alterity, an exposure that may lead to rejection and yet another move towards another place. Towards, always towards, but never

arriving; reading and rereading but never settling; always questioning but never concluding with the certainty of dogma.

I have argued that heresy is both an alternative reading and disseminative, and I have shown that the fictional approximations embody this heretical misreading as they move towards a discussion of alternative ways of responding to difficult situations. While reductive readings of the Gospels can produce a consolidated representation of Jesus, none of the fictional approximations that I have engaged with in this thesis support an unequivocal, definitive reading of the Gospels or of Jesus. They do, however, move towards the Gospel texts, and attempt to explore the hidden pathways between the ambiguous parables, gnomic statements, and hyperbolic aphorisms. Reading these contemporary narratives in conjunction with the biblical text has shown that the one who is certain stops imagining the impossible, loses hope and stagnates; that the word that is given a narrow meaning, like the seed that has no depth, shrivels into literalism; that the narrative that is defined or confined by the heresy of explanation is murdered; and that the community that is defined by sameness shrinks.

Grace, hope, love: nebulous, liquid, indefinable, unquantifiable, and mobile concepts that move and move, or, like wind, move by moving, are celebrated in the fictional approximations for their limitless and expansive character, but the narratives also expose the inescapable fact that an approximation of Jesus's teaching destabilizes tradition and orthodoxy and that this unhinging of societal norms may result in the continued rejection and ostracising of the heretic questioner. Jack Boughton has to leave Gilead; Fish needs to leave to become complete; Bill Houston must face death to become a different human being; and David, Simón, and Inés must journey away from Novilla, a town that, like Gilead, has succumbed to the 'curse of sameness'. Similarly, Matsuko has shown love and

forgiveness in her life, but she has not found the world around her hospitable to her actions. Jesus's heretical teaching still unhinges society, and Matsuko's initial naïve act of protecting her student, destabilizes her whole existence, turns her into an increasingly damaged individual, and ultimately results in her being despised, rejected and killed.

Ryu reads the Bible and interprets the text heretically, and Nakashima repeats and extends this heresy towards the end of the film when he has Matsuko's nephew, Sho, ponder:

Ryu had called Aunt Matsuko his God. This chronically clumsy and unhappy person... a God. I've never thought much about God, but if God exists in this world, he'd be someone like my aunt... giving of himself... encouraging people... loving them. While she grew ever tattered and scarred and out of style. Someone utterly unpolished. That's a God I could believe in. (1:5.47–55.16)

Matsuko embodies the love and forgiveness of God, and Sho realizes that the outward appearance of his aunt did not represent the heart that was capable of unconditional love. Just as Winton could represent the Paraclete as an Aboriginal hitchhiker, Nakashima heretically embodies the divine in the tattered and scarred Matsuko. But Matsuko is no saviour, and although she enables Ryu to recognise the meaning of love, ultimately she cannot bring redemption to him. The 'utterly unpolished' Matsuko approximates Jesus by loving, encouraging, and giving of herself, but her death is neither substitutionary nor atoning, and so the approximation does not move into identification.

The field that yields a new harvest, however, expands, and while the heresy of reading, re-reading and misreading may not be safe, it is vitalistic and transformative. The heretic approximates Jesus by risking transgressive love, taking on the posture of grace, hoping for the unseen, destabilising orthodoxy, and,

in the face of rejection and miscomprehension, continues to move, not towards an explicit portrait, but

[...] a likely
 likening, not to be unduly
 honored as anything, well,
 conclusive, but categorically
toward.²

In this thesis I have tried to argue that there is an important relationship between the Bible and contemporary literature that, if explored, can yield fresh and exciting new readings of both the literary fiction and the biblical text, and I have shown that the Gospels continue to inspire fresh misreadings in the work of contemporary authors. Nakashima's Japanese cinematic heretical misreading of a part of the Christian Bible shows further that the fictional approximation clearly can move beyond the boundaries of literature and need not be Eurocentric, or Anglophone, but, like the fictional texts I have discussed, needs to respond to the Bible, misread and rewrite it, and encourage a fresh reading of the biblical text.

What I hope I have also shown is that there is a storehouse of potential misreadings languishing in the work of critically neglected authors, and that a deeper misreading of the biblical text, and a critical digging for the treasure hidden in the field, can yield a harvest of inter-textual treasure. A harvest of mis-readings that will continue to enlarge the field of literary studies, and yield another harvest, more seed, more narrative, more misreading: thirty, sixty, a hundred fold.

² Scott Cairns, 'Parable' in *Idiot Psalms: New Poems* (Brewster: Paraclete Press Inc., 2014) p. 7.

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