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## Delinquent Palaces

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# Delinquent Palaces

The Imaginative Renegotiation of Domestic Space

in the works of

Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Stoddard, and Marilynne Robinson

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Languages and Literature

of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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“Bâtis ta maison toi-même et brûle-la toi-même.”

—Marcel Schwob (*Le Livre de Monelle*)

## Introduction

“Forgive me if I linger on the first Mystery of the House,” Emily Dickinson writes to a friend in late January of 1875. Her father had just died, leaving Emily, her sister Lavinia, and her elderly mother alone in the familial home. *The first mystery of the house*. One has the sense from Dickinson’s letter that upon the absence of her father, something had changed in the house. The alteration seems not to be overwhelmingly baleful or melancholy in character, but simply peculiar. The angles of the familiar had shifted. Edward Dickinson’s death had introduced a new phase of existence—its conclusion—into a sphere where this truth had not yet been known. In *The Poetics of Space*, an analysis of the phenomenology of intimate places, Gaston Bachelard writes, “For our house is the corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (Bachelard 4). From a position of subjectivity, the universe is composed of the layers of systems that concentrically wrap the individual, each system seeming to grow larger, fuller, and more complicated. Yet, when we consider that our comprehension of this expansion radiates from the center, the smallest point – the human mind, our conception of size changes. All of a sudden it is *we* who are the largest, we, whose capacity for vastness is the most. As the house composes the first layer around the individual, this space gains a certain immensity that is second only to our own. Dickinson’s father’s death changed something in *her*, but since the house is the first extension of our selves, this change was manifested not only psychologically, but also in space. Bachelard writes:

Thus, an immense cosmic house is a potential of every dream of houses. Winds radiate from its center and gulls fly from its windows. A house that is as dynamic as this allows the poet to inhabit the universe. Or, to put it differently, the universe comes to inhabit his house. (50)

The first mystery of the house is the mystery of the familiar. It is the paradox inherent in things and places we come to know very well. This, perhaps, is why Dickinson *lingers*. The house, the most controllable layer of the “non-me” systems that contain “me,” is the most deceptive one for this reason exactly. I look at my dishes, at my furniture, at my linens, and they are things I know so well it is as if they were a part of me. Their ordering is as familiar to me as the ordering of my own body—yet, they are not of my body or of my self. This line of comfortable thinking contains another false assumption: that our selves are something we know. If the individual’s capacity for vastness is the largest of all, the self is infinite and inexhaustibly undiscoverable. We linger in our houses to experience a state without conclusion. To linger suggests the prolonging of presence beyond the primacy of action or purpose. The house is one of the few external spaces where the individual encounters at least some freedom from “doing” things. Outside of our own skin, the house is one of the only places where it is permissible to simply exist. This space draws our attention away from the chatter of everyday obligations and invites us to ask what being is. Who are we when we are being? What does that look like?

For these questions, for the pondering of mystery, Dickinson apologizes. *Forgive me if I linger*. This apology suggests the conflict on which this examination of consciousness and domestic space is centered. While the domestic space is naturally one of the only spaces in which the human being is free to “be” and freed from “doing,” the role of women within these spaces has been culturally defined as an endless litany of externally-imposed action and responsibility. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the arrival of the industrial revolution carved out “separate spheres,” the domestic space became fundamentally gendered as a woman’s space, and she became responsible for its presentation. In *Inexpressible Privacy*, Milette Shamir performs an extensive socio-literary analysis of the gendered and spatial division of the

nineteenth-century American home, from parlors to studies. Shamir writes, “From Emerson to Gaston Bachelard, the study is conceived as a space designed for indulging aspects of one’s being that are beyond the limits of discipline, performance, and the linear narratives of self-fashioning” (48). Yet Shamir emphasizes that the study was typically a man’s domain, and that the solitary freedom that the study afforded had no female equivalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century house. Parlors, the women’s domain, were places of sociability and performance. “As liberal individualism began to define personhood in terms of inviolability and solitariness, the bourgeois woman, defined in opposition to these terms, was thereby deprived of full personhood” (41). If we consider the intimacy offered by houses to be one of their most important qualities, 19<sup>th</sup> century women were essentially homeless, even within the finest houses. Gaston Bachelard writes:

The house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, the memories, the dreams of mankind. [...] Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being’s first world.  
(6-7)

For Bachelard, the house is a retreat, a private extension of the self that facilitates a degree of comfort and solitude that fosters reverie, amplified consciousness, and ideal conditions for written expression. Especially for women who aspire to create, to dream, and to think, the cultural boundaries imposed upon the house and the woman’s capacity within the house do nothing to help her realize the creative environment the home potentially affords. This is the problem Virginia Woolf famously addresses half a century later in *A Room of Her Own*, a treatise on the conditions required to transform domestic space into creative space for the woman author. Reflecting on the tradition of women’s exclusion from private and intellectual refuges, Woolf writes, “I thought of the organ booming in the chapel and of the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought

how it is worse perhaps to be locked in” (24). *Locked in*. If one examines a collection of American women’s writings from the nineteenth century, the expectation of a nearly sacred domestic interiority is overwhelming. Domestic fiction, “women’s fiction”, housekeeping guides for women and girls, moral novels, and sentimental fiction: each of these has at its root the house as a sanctuary, the family as followers, and the wife as a priestess exemplifying the practice of virtue within this interior world.

The essays that compose this project are about Emily Dickinson, the work of Louisa May Alcott and Elizabeth Stoddard, and *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson. Each chapter portrays women authors and their characters working within the parameters of defined spaces in order to subvert structures—both cultural and linguistic. These works challenge our conceptions of what composes livable space, and whether creative spaces can be generated under the most regimented conditions. Where walls are erected and boundaries distinguished, these authors ask us to look to the inward infinitude of language and the possibility that perception grants when actual conditions limit.

Perhaps the strongest and most influential character in this project is the subject of the first chapter, Emily Dickinson. Dickinson’s enigmatic person embodies the complete domestic paradox on which these essays hinge. I begin this exploration with a chapter dedicated to the intensity of the poet’s lifelong relationship with words. Dickinson chose to live in way that was compulsively solitary. She exercised a kind of domestic monasticism that allowed for language to take precedence over all aspects of daily life, while at the same time relying upon the seclusion and constraint of the home as barriers against which she pushed herself into new internal depths. Through Dickinson’s poetry, I examine the possibility of language to transform from inert symbol into vivified images. This chapter begins to investigate the role that language plays in our experiences, and suggests that the internal

immensity made conscious through poetic language is itself as rich an experience as any offered by physical and external events.

Dickinson brings up the idea of language as “play,” and this is where the second chapter begins. In Chapter Two, I relate and juxtapose two 19<sup>th</sup> century novels, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott and *The Morgesons* by Elizabeth Stoddard. This is a chapter on intermediate spaces, both the threshold space of adolescence as a place between girlhood and womanhood, and the role of play as a transitional space necessary to mediate the external and internal worlds of the individual. The concept of play brings up issues of control in domestic settings—how a woman can exercise her own agency within an unmalleable system of rigid expectations. Using *Little Women*, I explore the “role” of the wife and mother as a theatrical construction and address the fantasy of an existence perfectly balanced between control and compliance. *The Morgesons*, conversely offers a wild and strange imbalance that shifts the space of play from the actions of the characters to the language of the author. Where Alcott focuses on using play to construct the role of women within the home to the extent that artificiality becomes an issue, Stoddard uses play as a force of destruction directed at both conventional storytelling and the cultural institution of domesticity. In *The Morgesons*, the internal imaginative act engages with the external world, emphasizing the generative potential of language initially encountered in Dickinson.

The project concludes in the late twentieth century with a novel written by Marilynne Robinson in 1980, *Housekeeping*. In writing *Housekeeping*, Robinson claims to be contributing to a conversation on human consciousness started in the 1850’s by the authors of the American Renaissance. Robinson’s novel returns to an issue that greatly concerned Dickinson, the relationship between events and our perceptions of them. In *Housekeeping*, we are asked to consider our experience of existence in two ways: one in which we are a



fragment of a greater whole that remains veiled to us, and the other in which we are wholes unto ourselves—fragments knit together by an ability to bind our perceptions in language. In embracing this capacity, the individual plays as large a role in writing her history and future—ultimately her identity—as the external events over which she can exert little, if any, control. The setting of *Housekeeping* is a familial home in a small Idaho town in the mid twentieth century. For the women around whom the novel centers, the presence of household flotsam is pervasive. Subjecting ordinary household things to questions of consciousness, memory, and storytelling lends the domestic quotidian a mystical presence that makes it feel as if we were seeing it for the first time.

In the *New York Times Review of Books*, Marilynne Robinson discusses her interest in reviving the concerns of authors like Emerson, Melville, Thoreau, and Dickinson:

Nothing appeals to me more than the rigor with which they fasten on problems of language, or consciousness – bending form to their purposes, ransacking ordinary speech and common experience, [...] always, to borrow a phrase from Wallace Stevens, in the act of finding what will suffice. I think they must have believed everything can be apprehended truly when seen in the light of an esthetic understanding appropriate to itself, whence their passion for making novel orders of disparate things. I believe they wished to declare the intrinsic dignity of all experience and to declare the senses bathed in revelation – true, serious revelation, the kind that terrifies. (“Hum Inside the Skull” 30)

The experiences of Melville out to sea, or Thoreau in the woods seem to invite explorations of consciousness. It is my belief that the home, for its ordinariness and utilitarianism, has been overlooked as an important locus of imaginative potential—especially for women. The house, for all its structure “[takes] into account our need for retreat and expansion, for simplicity and magnificence” (Bachelard 65). The works that compose this project all insist on this with a quiet aggression. Their houses are not only spaces of domestic activity, but spaces of language activated by a need for expression and expansion. These women exercise a capacity to make room for their thoughts where none was given. In creating their own

spaces, they're often required to destroy certain already-established cultural spaces, and this cycle of formation and obliteration reclaims and revitalizes the domestic environment.

As the reader enters into this discussion of the role of language, consciousness and identity within domestic spaces, I would like to suggest that I did not choose this combination of authors as much as they chose each other. Besides their collective womanhood and respective peculiar relationships to the domestic environment, each author brings a specific and necessary piece to this conversation that the others respond to in hints and echoes. The reality of subjectivity is a long-standing question of the freedom, agency, and power of the human mind that has not ceased to be relevant in the twenty-first century. The subject is pressing, and the question perhaps unsolvable, but we engage with it because it persists from an essential human core that "fact" does not assuage and time does not annul.

## Chapter I

### “A Prison Gets to be a Friend”: Emily Dickinson and the Possibility of Structures

Emily Dickinson's person has held as much allure as her work in the American literary tradition. Authoring more than 1700 poems and hundreds of letters, she died with no intention of publishing either body. Undoubtedly, part of the interest in her work stems from a visceral curiosity about the secret genius of the woman behind the closed door. The radical nature of her poetry is extraordinary when one considers the cultural odds against her. As a woman of nineteenth century America, her path was one of clear domestic expectations. Dickinson's father, a legacy of Puritan rigidity, enforced this position within his family intransigently, and discouraged the Dickinson women from participating in all outside activities except those pertaining to education. This strong medicine of submission and seclusion without question made an impact on the young poet— who would later act out both themes to pathological extremes in her life and in various configurations throughout her poems.

However, to insist that Dickinson's seclusion removed her entirely from her time as a disembodied poetic voice untouched by the America into which she was born, would be to overlook the evidence that places her firmly within the American canon. In truth, Dickinson lived within one of the most fanatic, electric, physically destructive, and creatively invigorating eras in American history. Born into the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening into a family with stringent Puritanical ideas of gender roles and familial structure, from childhood on, Dickinson was constantly under the scrutiny and pressure of a deeply religious community. Her life witnessed the mounting acts of political tension and violence that would eventually culminate in the unspeakably horrific Civil War. Some of her

countrymen and women went west with an uncurbed desire for the opportunity which unclaimed untamed space provided, and less than 100 miles away Concord's intellectuals were circulating a doctrine of transcendentalism that would philosophically come to define the intellectual climate of the period. Damming the flow of this energy would have been impossible, and when we look at Dickinson's work in comparison to literary contemporaries like Hawthorne, Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, and Whitman—a motley conglomeration of genius that would later be heralded as representing the “American Renaissance”—it is eminently clear that the energy of the times joins these writers in ways they could not have anticipated. The question remains: with such an excess of activity occurring in the world outside, how did Dickinson—who might seem doubly unpromising as both a woman and a recluse—gain access to the reserves of philosophical and aesthetic radicalism that definitively announces her inestimable, and often confounding, contribution to American poetics?

The answer is both a contradiction and the logical alternative. Whether it is a result of her limitations or her own compulsion to exist internally, it is the interior world that possesses Dickinson. Shrouded in the mystery of her self-enforced exile, Dickinson's work abounds with the paradoxes of a woman trying to break the boundaries imposed by her society not through exodus, but by retreating deep within it. To read Dickinson's work is to trace the subversive threads that tie together confinement and freedom, dependency and self-reliance, nearness and distance, and desire and affirmation. Attempting to point to Dickinson's poetry as an exemplification of any one locus along the spectrum is entirely useless, so intricate are the verbal, psychological, and philosophical weavings of her poetry. And yet, for an author whose work embodies so many complexities, Dickinson's poems are deceptively unassuming in size and aesthetic.

However, for their comparatively modest circumference, the poems spiral with infinite depth to an unknown, unplumbable center. Gaston Bachelard, author of *The Poetics of Space*, writes “If we want to determine man’s being, we are never sure of being closer to ourselves if we ‘withdraw’ into ourselves, if we move toward the center of the spiral; for often it is in the heart of being that being is errancy” (Bachelard 215). The closer we approach the heart of a Dickinson poem, the vaster it becomes—and only through the reader’s sense of an increasingly uncharitable amplitude do we come to intuit Dickinson’s meaning. But if the heart of the poem is unreachable, and the circumference is modest, where can we begin to understand poetry intentionally constructed to elude understanding? The evasiveness of the poet is far from malicious, at times it is even playful—but once embarked on the insular sea of a Dickinson poem, one cannot help but feel that the poet intentionally side-stepping understanding at every turn of the spiral. Without a true beginning from which to start, and with no linear path to follow, even the softest treading of “simple” examination has a way of breaking through the surface into unanticipated vastness. We will encounter this first hand as we use Dickinson’s relationship to words as a point of entry. By looking at her complex relationship to language, the tensions of her themes, and the imaginative spaces she explores and creates, this essay attempts to place the disparate voices of Dickinson in conversation with one another and with the reader, finding creative power within the paradox.

Words—the smallest common denominator, the atoms of language, and the bricks of the literary house—ought to be simple. A fully constructed house is impossible to lift, but the single brick can be held and examined with ease. This is not always the case with words. Can we still look to the smallness of their unit, or the manageability of their size when we consider that for Dickinson, words were everything? How much more unwieldy they seem

to become with the realization that she chose to conduct her entire life through this medium. From her bedroom, she wrote to family, friends, acquaintances, and for herself. Her poetic missives were the form in which she chose to visit, to touch, and to share. When others went calling, Dickinson corresponded, and these epistolary ropes are what anchored her to her community socially. Likewise, the hundreds of fascicles that she bound and kept for herself acted as the “Glass/ Across my mouth – it blurs it – / Physician’s – proof of Breath” (470, 6-8) an affirmation of her own existence. It is in words that Dickinson lived, and through her that words became enlivened.

However, this relationship was an obsessive and contradictory one. For Dickinson, words were capable of everything and nothing. Words have a strange power: through them one can create and be created, but to achieve everything, one runs the risk of ending up with nothing: destruction, reduction, and deadness. In spite of this, the space between vivification and coagulation is where possibility lies, and from this central vantage point Dickinson has full view of the spectrum of possibility. The line one walks between realizing the delirious desirability of words’ full potential and experiencing the hollowness of their limitations is the polarized existence that engages Dickinson, and the place that she occupies both thematically and structurally in her poems.

“I dwell in Possibility,” begins one of her poems. For Dickinson, nothing is more appealing than to view the alternatives—to see the open doors, and to have them: to keep them all in a row and in sight. It is connected to her vitality. We are never more alive than when we desire something. For most, desire ebbs and flows; it comes in cycles of wanting and having and wanting again. Desire mounts and rises slowly up an incline toward the moment of satisfaction at which point one possesses the object of desire and the movement upwards—the progress, the drive, the vitality—temporarily disappears. The French, in

reference to the sexual nature of this cycle call the orgasm, the moment of dropping-off, *le petit mort*, or “the little death” and it is a good phrase to keep in mind for Dickinson because death represents the total loss that Dickinson fears in attainment. How much more alive we are when there is something left to want.

Who never wanted – maddest Joy  
 Remains to him unknown –  
 The Banquet of Abstemiousness  
 Defaces that of Wine –

Within its reach, though yet ungrasped  
 Desire’s perfect Goal –  
 No nearer – lest the Actual –  
 Should disenthral thy soul – (1430)

In this poem, “maddest joy” is a banquet laid before Dickinson within easy reach. To partake would entail enjoying all the pleasures of experience, but eventually ends with satiation, the process of becoming full and never again recovering that original hunger that points so overwhelmingly to the one object. By refraining, she never has to know the lull of satiation, and the original longing remains sharp, clear, and vital. We can also consider the way in which Dickinson describes desire and abstemiousness in regards to her relationship with language.

In “Literature and the Right to Death,” Maurice Blanchot discusses the power and necessity of language to negate and re-birth the “real things” they represent. Blanchot writes:

What is the author capable of? Everything—first of all, everything: he is fettered, he is enslaved, but as long as he can find a few moments of freedom in which to write, he is *free* to create a world without slaves, a world in which the slaves become the masters and formulate a new law; thus, by writing, the chained man immediately obtains freedom for himself and for the world; he denies everything he is in order to become everything he is not. In this sense, his work is a prodigious act, the greatest and more important there is. But let us examine this more closely. Insofar as he *immediately* gives himself the freedom he does not have, he is neglecting the actual conditions for his emancipation, he is neglecting to do the real thing that must be done so that the abstract idea of freedom can be realized. (315)

We can connect Dickinson's propensity for desire over satisfaction to Blanchot's distinction between writing and actual conditions. When we desire something, everything is possible—it is only in the reaching for it that we may be hindered. Likewise, Blanchot goes on to say that when the author writes “he makes *all* of reality available to us,” but “he possesses only the infinite; he lacks the finite, limit escapes him” (316). The author always chooses the banquet of abstemiousness, because it is the only feast that is infinitely sustainable. Blanchot, like Dickinson, addresses the paradox that through writing we can have everything our hearts desire—as long as we know that we can never *really* have it. But is “living in possibility” an inherently creative act, in which the real world is substituted for a world made of language? Or is it an inherently destructive one, in which something real is negated for its deadened representation?

In many Dickinson poems, the emphasis is on the creation. Dickinson may turn away from the world, but the focus remains on what she turns to in its place.

The Missing All – prevented Me  
 From missing minor Things.  
 If nothing larger than a World's  
 Departure from a Hinge –  
 Or Sun's extinction, be observed –  
 'Twas not so large that I  
 Could lift my Forehead from my work  
 For Curiosity. (985)

This poem illustrates Dickinson's abstemiousness, as she turns from the All— Blanchot's “world of actual conditions”—to face her writing. The poem expresses that the missing everything in total prevents Dickinson from the distraction of the ordinary cares and losses of life that keep one anchored in actual reality. For Blanchot, this total renunciation amounts to an annihilation of the world that is necessary for the author to generate her own world.

Blanchot writes:



The realm of the imaginary is not a strange region situated beyond the world, it is the world itself, but the world as entire, manifold, the world as a whole. That is why it is not in the world, because it is the world, grasped and realized in its entirety by the global negation of all the individual realities contained in it, by their disqualification, their absence, by the realization of that absence itself, which is how literary creation begins, for when literary creation goes back over each thing and each being, it cherishes the illusion that is creating them, because now it is seeing and naming them from the starting point of everything, from the starting point of the absence of everything, that is, from nothing. (316)

The “minor Things” that compose the “All” are Blanchot’s individual realities, the uncatalogued, ungraspable number of components that make up the world before it is destroyed and recreated through language. Refuge from the infinite multiplicity of the realities of the world seems to be partially the appeal of writing for Dickinson. The scale of the All is so huge that it is impossible to hold it. Language, in its ability to unify the world through individual perception, makes the world accessible.

However, this is not to say that language reduces or simplifies what it recreates. When Dickinson is submerged in her language outside the world, nothing short of cataclysm could induce her to return to actual conditions. Though she is creator, the sense of wonder present in the actual world of uncontrollable conditions is not absent from the world of language. Language maintains its mystery and its magic, even though the process of creation implies control.

One of the most important aspects of this magic is the way in which words progress from signifiers of images to vivified images. A fully constructed house, while still composed of basic elements, becomes more than itself. It exists not only as many small bricks stacked together, but a place to be lived in and understood as more than the sum of its parts. With language, we do this as well; we use verbal materials to create images that become more than the materials. The words expand to become embellished images of recreated life.

Make me a picture of the sun –  
 So I can hang it in my room –  
 And make believe I'm getting warm  
 When others call it "Day"!

Draw me a Robin – on a stem –  
 So I am hearing him, I'll dream,  
 And when the Orchards stop their tune –  
 Put my pretense – away –

Say if it's really – warm at noon –  
 Whether it's Buttercups – that "skim" –  
 Or Butterflies – that "bloom"?  
 Then – skip – the frost – upon the lea –  
 And skip the Russet – on the tree –  
 Let's play those – never come! (188)

Make believe, dream, pretense, play: these are the powerful forces of the imagination that Dickinson puts into action when she writes. In this poem, the poet creates the world inside her room; sometimes her creations imitate the actuality of the world outside, and other times there is pleasure in knowing that through "play"—and though language—those unfavorable elements like the chill of the frost, or the ominous redness of leaves that predict winter, can be thwarted and postponed indefinitely. We see her take liberties in the world of her creation where buttercups skim and butterflies bloom. This poem has a particular playfulness about it that Dickinson emphasizes through the use of words like "make-believe" and "pretense" which suggest something childish or whimsical about this game she plays with words. But despite the mild self-deprecation, it is not really a game at all. For in choosing the picture of the sun over the actual sun, Dickinson affirms the reality of the representation of the thing over the thing itself— denying the sovereignty of the actual world in favor of her own. The room in which one can hang images to cover the bareness of the wall, images that one can almost feel and hear, is a room of possibility, in which anything wanted can be had (as long as one never desires to *truly* feel the sun, or hear the robin), and where the undesirable can be

excluded. For Dickinson, to dwell in possibility is to dwell *in* words, and to experience the unlimited generative potential that language makes possible.

The nearly supernatural potential of words that she explores with modesty in “Make me a picture of the sun,” Dickinson revels in within “I think I was enchanted”:

I think I was enchanted  
When first a somber Girl –  
I read that Foreign Lady  
The Dark – felt beautiful –

And whether it was noon at night –  
Or only Heaven – at Noon –  
For very Lunacy of Light  
I had not power to tell – (593, 1-8)

Dickinson begins the poem with reference to the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whom she credits for first enchanting her with words. This poet introduces her to “the dark,” or the side of possibility, for the first time. In the dark, in the total absence of images, all images are possible. The light of the sun, which evokes the intransient forms of the actual, has not yet solidified any images into being or non-being. Nothing is determined or fixed in this dark realm of the imaginary; it is beautiful in its potential. This sun, which Dickinson calls noon, consummates expectation by fulfilling desire, and consequently causes the world to lose the enchantment of potential.

The concept of “noon at night,” a recurring theme not unrelated to the parallel image-reality in “Make me a picture of the sun,” suggests that through words we create images that are just as powerful as the things they represent. The phrase “Lunacy of Light” also suggests the moon—the fraternal twin of the defining sun, who, like Dickinson’s sun-image, both is and, in comparison with the bright light of day, is not a source of light.

The Bees – became as Butterflies –  
The Butterflies – as Swans –  
Approached – and spurned the narrow Grass –  
And just the meanest Tunes

That Nature murmured to herself  
 To keep herself in Cheer –  
 I took for Giants – practising  
 Titanic Opera – (593, 9-16)

One of the powers of imaginative potential is the way in which it allows for expansion. In this stanza, what is winged and miniscule grows unchecked until insect lavishly becomes waterfowl. Likewise, “the meanest tunes that nature murmured to herself” through the lens of language can be reconceptualized until they not only grow from “mean” to “Titanic,” but have been organized and recognized as “Opera”—or an aesthetic form. Through language, we can process the otherwise objective occurrences of the actual world to give them subjective value—or meaning. The next stanza continues, “The Days – to Mighty Metres stept – / The Homeliest – adorned” (593, 17-18). Through verbal recreation, words lose any sense of smallness and begin to measure the days. Words become the medium through which life is experienced, and this experience imbued with meaning makes for a richer life. Even the homeliest day is capable of aesthetic transformation.

Once this transformation occurs, the verbal element seems to disappear; words become lost within the greater image they have created.

I could not have defined the change –  
 Conversion of the Mind  
 Like Sanctifying in the Soul –  
 Is witnessed – not explained (593, 21-24)

The “change” from the objective actual to the subjective meaningful, which has been accomplished solely through the use of language, now resists the very element of which it is composed. Because life within the poem can now be *seen* imaginatively, it defies definition—a movement back in the direction of the verbal. This property, illustrated clearly in “I think I was enchanted” is most crucial to Dickinson. Images both precede and proceed from

language. Prior to language exists the objective thing which language will negate— it is the ungraspable All, impossible to experience because experience necessitates language. Blanchot writes, “Language derives its value and its pride from the fact that it is the achievement of this negation; but in the beginning, what was lost? The torment of language is what it lacks of the necessity that it be the lack of precisely this. It cannot even name it” (327).

In “Make me a picture of the sun,” before the sun is rendered into an image of the sun, it cannot be touched or truly experienced from a human perspective because of its objective immensity. Through words we can create an image of the sun with which one can have meaningful experiences. This is what Blanchot refers to when he speaks of the illusion of creation. When Dickinson denies the superiority of the actual to the image, she starts from a point of artificial blankness that allows for creation to occur. The image of the sun all at once becomes Dickinson’s sun, created by her, of a certain color, with a certain purpose, that retains certain relations to the poet and the rest of the poem—her world. Having begun, the progression from the thing, to language, to the subjective meaningful image, can only move forward; it cannot move backward to a pre-subjective state. In this system where the journey started cannot be returned from, we see how Dickinson’s linguistic game becomes more than “play.” The action of writing sets a very real and unrestrained change in motion. While the unified imaginative whole may seem to require the shrinking of the actual to make immensity comprehensible, it infinitely expands the poet’s capacity to be a part of the world.

And yet, despite the exuberance of creation expressed in poems like “I think I was enchanted,” much of Dickinson’s work conveys the unrelenting anxiety that the writing process incurs, and the intrinsic distrust of words. At times, Dickinson seems to fully believe that writing poetry unshackles the mind, and in doing so expands our perceptions of the world—but this end goal is never certain. In a letter to the editor Thomas Wentworth

Higginson she asks, “Mr. Higginson, Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?” (*Selected Letters* 171). Dickinson, teetering on a line of paradox again, fears that though the living word may represent all possibility, the inadequate word is only capable of reduction; instead of expanding from nothing into image, it lingers inert in the wake of its destruction, powerless to generate meaning where creation was intended.

In “A Charm invests a face,” Dickinson hesitates on the threshold of language as she describes the fear of losing the mysterious beauty of a face through its unveiling.

A Charm invests a face  
Imperfectly beheld –  
The Lady dare not lift her Veil  
For fear it be dispelled –  
  
But peers beyond her mesh –  
And wishes – and denies –  
Lest Interview – annul a want  
That Image – satisfies – (421, 1-8)

This poem reminds us of the combative relationship the poet shares with desire and attainment. Even words, it seems, can come too close to the thing desired, and might be better left unsaid, or unwritten. Dickinson, like a painter, seeks to express the quality of what she represents—not capture it with photographic stillness. “A Charm invests a face/ Imperfectly beheld –” speaks to the ungraspableness of the world before language, and the certain appeal this evasion holds. What retains mystery retains possibility; it should come as no surprise that the state before language, the lost beginning which Blanchot argues cannot be known or named, appeals to Dickinson. Our wildest hopes for what lies beneath the veil must necessarily be more beautiful than anything it obscures. Words, at their worst, are capable of lifting the veil of possibility only to replace the unmitigated sweetness of possibility with the dullness of what cannot be questioned or changed. What lived unseen

dies under the scrutiny that allows for no mystery. Blanchot elaborates on this aspect of language:

For me to be able to say, “This woman,” I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. [...] Of course my language does not kill anyone. And yet, when I say, “This woman,” real death has been announced and is present in my language; my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and presence, and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence of presence; my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction; it is a constant, bold allusion to such an event. (322-3)

Dickinson connects this unveiling with language, as well. The lady denies her unveiling “Lest Interview – annul a want –/ That image – satisfies –”. The process of making subjective, graspable images becomes a dilemma. The careful verbal examination of the thing rendered can place us in too close a proximity; instead of instilling the world of actual conditions with a magical playfulness, words have the power to strip the world of its mystery. Words, far from liberating, confine the thing in question.

This confinement is so deplorable that a fickle Dickinson even seems at times to loathe the verbal tools through which she mediates her life. In “You’ll know it – as you know ’tis Noon –” she illustrates this paradox.

You’ll know it – as you know ’tis Noon –  
By Glory –  
As you do the Sun –  
By Glory –  
As you will in Heaven –  
Know God the Father – and the Son.

By intuition, Mightiest Things  
Assert themselves – and not by terms –  
“I’m Midnight” – need the Midnight say –  
“I’m Sunrise” – Need the Majesty? (420, 1-10)

Now, all the joy of verbal creation seems but a paltry mimicking act. Midnight – the noon we create after the annihilation of the day, and the made-image of the sun are viciously disposed

of because they can never achieve the glory of what was negated for their sakes. So inadequate can words be, that this stanza suggests a type of surrender. God the Father and the Son cannot be known until death— Exodus 33:20, “And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live,” likewise Mightiest Things will never be known in “terms” or language. Writing amounts to nothing more than a blaspheming of the perfection of inexpressible things.

Omnipotence – had not a Tongue –  
 His lisp – is Lightning – and the Sun –  
 His Conversation – with the Sea –  
 “How shall you know”?  
 Consult your Eye! (420, 11-15)

In this stanza, Dickinson implicitly compares her power as a creator to God’s. The mediation through words that Dickinson’s creation act requires makes it the inferior of the two. God, for Dickinson, requires no mediation: he works directly with images and light. Creation and comprehension occur in one pure motion, rather than relying upon the derivative process that language necessitates. Before, we explored this derivative process as an expansive movement—language creates images, which can be verbalized and imagined again. Now, this process only moves us away from the original in all of its perfection. This final stanza is beautifully illuminated through a biblical parallel that Blanchot draws in “Literature and the Right to death.” Blanchot writes:

God had created living things, but man had to annihilate them. Not until then did they take on meaning for him, and he in turn created them out of the death into which they had disappeared; only instead of beings (*êtres*) and, as we say, existants (*existants*), there remained only being (*l’être*), and man was condemned not to be able to approach anything or experience anything except through the meaning he had to create. (323)

Dickinson explores precisely this idea in a later poem, “Perception of an object costs.”

Perception of an object costs  
 Precise the Object’s loss –



Perception in itself a Gain  
 Replying to its Price –

The Object Absolute – is nought –  
 Perception sets it fair  
 And then upbraids a Perfectness  
 That situates so far – (1071, 1-8)

Dickinson’s “object’s loss” is the same process of annihilation to which Blanchot attributes the birth of meaning. However, unlike in “You’ll know it – as you know ‘tis Noon –”, Dickinson acknowledges the intangibility of the Object Absolute for the purposes of human comprehension; the quest to understand something without subjecting it to the process of understanding is an absurd one. And yet, though Dickinson clearly understands the tragic truth that we live in the midst of a desirable world that is *impossible* to experience except as it is mediated by human consciousness, she remains unsatisfied. “How shall you know?” asks contrarian Dickinson: through your eyes. Nothing short of God’s immaculate understanding will suffice. A power—God, in this poem and the quotation from Blanchot—created a world of actual conditions that lives, and to experience any part of this world necessitates that it undergoes the destructive processes of our consciousness, to emerge as a changed version of itself. Where once Dickinson celebrated the power of subjectivity—the idea that this changed version can be colored and improved upon and played with, she now mourns the death of objectivity, the inadequacies of her own power, and the way in which words destroy and confine, rather than create and liberate what they represent.

And yet, though the paradox between the expansive and confining capabilities of words is a very real one, we make a mistake in calling these two alternatives opposites, or referring to them as mutually exclusive possibilities. We simplify Dickinson’s relationship to words (and to the limitations of structure in general) if we cannot maintain a nuanced understanding of a crucial point: it is only *through* confinement by structure that she can

access the infinite. For a moment, let us broaden our gaze to encompass not only Dickinson's words, but also her peculiar authorial figure and her relationship to space.

In his defining 1958 text, *The Poetics of Space*, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard expounds on the phenomenology of houses and the relationship between imagination and intimate space. He writes, "[If] I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard 6). No one better illustrates this principle in both a figurative and literal way than Dickinson, who secluded herself within structures to foster her creative endeavors.<sup>1</sup> Through an examination of language as structure and the role structure plays within Dickinson's poems, we begin to understand Dickinson's particular, peculiar, and counterintuitive transcendence.

"Before I got my eye put out," picks up where we left off: exploring the impossibility of existing in a world unmediated by language.

Before I got my eye put out  
I liked as well to see –  
As other Creatures, that have Eyes  
And know no other way –

But were it told to me – Today  
That I might have the sky  
For mine – I tell you that my Heart  
Would split, for size of me –

The meadows – mine –  
The Mountains – mine –  
All Forests – Stintless Stars –  
As much of Noon as I could take

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<sup>1</sup> Biographer of Dickinson, Alfred Habegger, records a telling incident about the imaginative potential of "Aunt Emily's" house as it affected her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson and her nephew Gilbert. "Once, when little Gilbert was in kindergarten and boasted about a beautiful white calf that proved to be imaginary, his teacher reprimanded him for the sin of lying and made him cry. Sue tried to convince the benighted woman of the validity of the imagination, but Aunt Emily, as her niece recalled, was too indignant for reasoning and 'besought them one and all to come to *her*, she would show them! The white calf was grazing up in her attic at that very moment!" (Habegger 548).

Between my finite eyes –

The Motions of the Dipping Birds –  
 The Morning's Amber Road –  
 For mine – to look at when I liked –  
 The News would strike me dead –

So safer – guess – with just my soul  
 Upon the Window pane –  
 Where other Creatures put their eyes –  
 Incautious—of the Sun – (327, 1-21)

Aside from the position taken by Blanchot, that a life without structures is an impossible dream—this poem (unlike “You’ll know it as you know ‘tis Noon”) illustrates the *undesirability* of the condition of being in possession of the infinitely multitudinous objective world. If such a thing were even possible to experience, the kind of immensity that comes with Noon is dizzying and vast; though at first it may seem liberating, it would be simply too much for mortal experience. Recall, none see God and live. “My heart would split/[...] The News would strike me dead.” But this does not necessitate that immensity and its joys are forfeit all together. Instead, Dickinson can experience them against the window—or through the glass of language. Sensory perception (simply another form of mediation) may be enough for some, but Dickinson, who sees the limitations of this mode, has found another way.

Bachelard writes, “Through the poet’s window the house converses about immensity with the world” (68), and though he refers specifically to spatial structures, we’ll see that this idea is intrinsically connected to verbal structures. This quotation from Bachelard only mirrors Dickinson’s final point: language, for its elusive quality to both exist and to eradicate existence, can be a mediator between what is fixed and rigid and what is fluid and ungraspable. It is the window between structure and immensity: it is the pane against which we place our soul when we write poetry. Like the paradox of confinement and

expansiveness, the paradox of the destructive and creative capabilities of language are similarly resolved by Blanchot:

In this way, [literature] is already uniting two contradictory movements. It is negation, because it drives back the inhuman, indeterminate side of things back into nothingness; it defines them, makes them finite, and this is the sense in which literature is really the work of death in the world. But at the same time, after having denied things in their existence, it preserves them in their being; it causes things to have a meaning, and the negation which is death at work is also the advent of meaning, the activity of comprehension.  
(338)

Yet, while literature unites negation and being—a dead actuality killed by language and the living subjective image that follows from it—words are in the fascinating position of not only conversing with structure, but also existing inherently *as* a structure: a structure that transcends itself.

They called me to the Window, for  
“ ‘Twas Sunset” – Some one said –  
I only saw a Sapphire Farm –  
And just a Single Herd –

Of Opal Cattle – feeding far  
Upon so vain a Hill –  
As even while I looked – dissolved –  
Nor Cattle were – nor Soil –

But in their stead – a Sea – displayed –  
And Ships – of such a size  
As Crew of Mountains – could afford –  
And Decks – to seat the skies –

This – too – the Showman rubbed away –  
And when I looked again –  
Nor Farm – nor Opal Herd – was there –  
Nor Mediterranean – (628, 1-16)

Upon first reading, this poem seems simply to be about Dickinson’s reaction to the fading light of dusk and changing image of what she sees before her, but for our purposes, the poem here does something more. We begin in a familiar place—with Dickinson at the window (at the risk of taking semantic coincidence for granted, we can even think of it as

Bachelard's mediating pane), looking at the sun. From the second line, someone has verbalized the thing in question, the sunset. After the condition is named, the images begin to flow and shift with the receding light. The sapphire farm, the opal cattle, the sea, the ships, the mountains: all of these are contained within the one word, "sunset." Furthermore, none of these are fixedly contained within the word, as evidenced by the absence of everything in the final stanza. The word, like the sky, is dark. Nothing is predetermined in the verbal realm of possibility.

This, for Dickinson, is the beauty of structure. A single word contains the possibility of multitudes. We see this in the compact nature of her poems. Bachelard, in writing about the adverse affects of tedious and minute description pays tribute to the power of the single, artistically chosen word.

Here the nuance bespeaks the color. A poet's word, because it strikes true, moves the very depths of our being. Over picturesqueness in a house can conceal its intimacy. [...] The first, the oneirically definitive house, must retain its shadows. [...] Then I may hope that my page will possess a sonority that will ring true – a voice so remote within me, that it will be the voice we all hear when we listen as far back as memory reaches, on the very limits of memory, beyond memory perhaps, in the field of the immemorial. All we communicate to others is an *orientation* towards what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively. (Bachelard 13)

Fitting that the Italian *stanza* should translate as "room." Composed of stanzas, Dickinson poems are little house entities unto themselves, seemingly small and concrete but with a vast potential for the creation of dream space, pockets in which images are born. Consider the dashes and seemingly arbitrary capitalizations that freckle her poems. Are these not attempts to create space within the poem? The dash seems to pull the word out farther from itself without ever specifying the extension; the capital magnifies the word in importance or emphasis so that its capacity to hold images expands. If Dickinson's poems

are houses, they are anthills. Through the single opening above ground—the single word—one can descend down into myriad passages and infinite chambers.

But this is more than a verbal capability. Dickinson exemplifies this tendency—expansion through confinement—with her entire being. I've used the word “transcend” to describe the movement from words to images that takes place within her poems. Considering the forceful intellectual energy of Dickinson's contemporary moment, transcendence is a loaded term associated primarily with the philosophies and writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller and Alcott. Dickinson was aware of the transcendentalist school of thought, and though she never self-identified with transcendentalist ideals, there are ways in which her work and her practices have been drastically under-appreciated as both a fascinating component of and a gendered counterpart to transcendentalist philosophy.

Dickinson was an admirer of both Emerson and Thoreau<sup>2</sup>, but it is especially interesting to investigate her strange, symmetrical, yet nearly inverted sympathy with the latter. Biographer Alfred Habegger recounts, “When a new acquaintance happened to quote Thoreau, she ‘hastened to press her visitor's hand as she said, ‘From this time we are acquainted’” (518). Dickinson's attraction to Thoreau's work should not surprise, for these two seemingly opposite figures are far more alike than history has allowed for recognition. Both were truly radical thinkers attempting to live on the margin of a society to which they were not reconciled—however, each went about the enactment of these ideas in a way nearly opposite from the other.

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<sup>2</sup> “Success,” one of the few Dickinson poems anonymously published in *The Literary World* at the request of others was mistakenly attributed to Emerson in 1878. Additionally, Biographer, Alfred Habegger suggests that the opening line of Dickinson's “'Twas fighting for his Life he was –” may be a reference to H.D.T. (500)

The importance of the creative expansion that Dickinson was experiencing in the act of writing can really be emphasized if we draw a parallel to Thoreau's well-regarded essay, "Walking." Thoreau writes:

Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. Thither no business leads me. It is hard for me to believe that I shall find fair landscapes or sufficient wildness and freedom behind the eastern horizon. I am not excited by the prospect of a walk thither; but I believe that the forest which I see in the western horizon stretches uninterruptedly toward the setting sun, and there are no towns nor cities in it of enough consequence to disturb me. Let me live where I will, on this side is the city, on that the wilderness, and ever I am leaving the city more and more, and withdrawing into the wilderness.  
(668)

Several paragraphs later he concludes, "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World" (672). The idea that human beings need unexplored, uninhabited space, and that possibility exists in what has not yet been known or defined is precisely the idea that we've been exploring through Dickinson's words—yet Thoreau's version of this quest, seeking expansion through external movement westward, is the masculine and more instinctive model of this very American desire, and has become a dominant narrative voice where Dickinson's has not been fully acknowledged.

Dickinson, in expressing a similar desire for possibility, moves not outward but inward. Hers is the photographic negative of the Thoreau narrative, and because she is a woman and because the setting of this inverted movement toward immensity is a domestic one, Dickinson's own narrative of expansion is an important "feminine" counterpoint to the traditionally masculine narrative of exploration. Thoreau finds the external movement outward essential. Dickinson, without ever leaving her room can go just as far, if not farther, inward. Bachelard writes of intimate immensity:

Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone.

As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man. (184)

The image of a spiral is especially apt for Dickinson. Though the circumference of her circumspect life and poems is measured on the outside—a woman, a spinster, a stanza, a rhyme—she travels profound distances within her mind and finds this form of voyaging to be truer. In “Experience is the angled road,” she makes an argument for the Dickinsonian model.

Experience is the Angled Road  
Preferred against the Mind  
By – Paradox – the Mind itself –  
Presuming it to lead

Quite Opposite – How Complicate  
The Discipline of Man –  
Compelling Him to Choose Himself  
His Preappointed Pain – (910)

By most human standards, experience, the physical doing, going, and having, is preferred against the mental conceptualization of the same distance. Dickinson calls attention to the false dichotomy between mind and body—that any experience owned by the body could be somehow separate from the mediating perception of the mind. Experience is preferred against the mind, though paradoxically, the mind itself is responsible for all experience. In privileging the body over the mind, man only undermines the sublimity of his own faculties. Thoreau may have the vastness of fields to traverse, but even the unsettled wilderness of America is finite. Dickinson has the vastness of an infinite and inexhaustible mind for a playground and a muse. “The Outer – from the Inner” is a response to any who would question the validity of a life consciously explored from within rather than from without.

The Outer – from the Inner  
Derives its Magnitude –  
‘Tis Duke, or Dwarf, according  
As is the central mood –



The fine – unvarying Axis  
 That regulates the Wheel –  
 Though Spokes – spin – more conspicuous  
 And fling the dust – the while.

The Inner – paints the Outer –  
 The Brush without the Hand –  
 Its Picture publishes – precise –  
 As is the inner Brand –

On fine – Arterial Canvases –  
 A Cheek – perchance a Brow –  
 The Star’s whole Secret – in the Lake –  
 Eyes were not meant to know. (451)

The magnitude and magnification that we experienced in “I think I was enchanted,” is the same magnitude that exists within the single word. Here, it is finally attributed to “the Inner.” Everything consumed from the external world that we understand in a particular, subjective way is colored by the mind. An object, or action, or condition may exist objectively, but we will never know it as such; the mind enlarges it and calls it a Duke, or diminishes it and calls it Dwarf. If there is any constant to be found, it is the endless presence of an ever-adjusting, ever-creating perceptive mind that acts as the central axis for the way we exist in the world. From this innermost point, the spokes spin, the body moves outward, and external motion becomes the conspicuous mode of experience, but all is directed from the center. “The Inner paints the outer,” adorning humble days not with a hand, but with the mind. Our minds are the reflection of the star in the lake. The image itself is perfect, the reflection of light comes from nowhere but the thing itself, and yet within the water, it appears differently. The reflection shimmers and ripples, and taken separately from what it represents, becomes something entirely new. In its newness it moves away from the original, and the secret of the original is lost. Only the shimmer, what Bachelard might call the orientation toward the secret, remains.

However, in a post-Freudian culture, the inner perception of external events is more often associated with unconsciousness than consciousness. One of the extraordinary aspects of Dickinson's exploration of internal immensity is the amount of agency she displays in the act of consciously traveling inward. The comparison of Emily Dickinson to Thoreau is fitting because if ever a poet chose to live—and write—deliberately, it was Dickinson. The images of Dickinson's poetry are not supernatural forces washing over the-poet-as-medium. Her brain is her muse, and every verbal construction she makes contains all the agency of a footstep traversing solid land.

The Brain – is wider than the Sky –  
 For – put them side by side –  
 The one the other will contain  
 With ease – and You – beside –

The Brain is deeper than the sea –  
 For – hold them – Blue to Blue –  
 The one the other will absorb –  
 As Sponges – Buckets – do –

The Brain is just the weight of God –  
 For – Heft them – Pound for Pound –  
 And they will differ – if they do –  
 As Syllable from Sound – (632)

This poem exemplifies the power-inversion that Dickinson had mastered. From a position that from the outside seems subservient—that of a spinster daughter, an unmarried woman confined in her familial home—she morphs into a dominant force, the master of the domain of her mind. People look outside to contemplate the vastness of the sky, without ever realizing that much vaster than the thing itself is the ability to perceive it. Perception, like a great bowl, holds the world in its entirety, though the bodies of those who perceive may seem inferior. In this poem, Dickinson extols the absolute sovereignty of individual perception. The extent to which she suggests that there is nothing outside of ourselves because everything is understood from within, even leads her to conclude that our minds are

as powerful as God, that they are nearly the same entities. If there is an aspect of Dickinson that seems empowering and exemplary it is this: we are not merely in the world, we each create the world.

And yet, the poems are like optical illusions, sometimes portraying the princess and other times revealing the witch. Each time Dickinson makes a bold statement, the statement unfolds itself within another poem. It is difficult to reconcile the Dickinson who believes in the sublimity of her mind with the Dickinson who writes a poem that begins, “I’m nobody!” How well we read Dickinson is a matter of how completely we are willing to accept the paradoxes of a poet who writes all moments, even those that contradict each other, with equal intensity. Perhaps it is due to the ephemeral nature of her truths that her work maintains its freshness. As her poems hinge so strongly on the provisional, nothing is left for history to “undo” that Dickinson has not undone herself.

While Dickinson’s words, and her philosophy of words may seem appealing, they are by no means intended to be prescriptive. She offers no religion and no solution. Her poems are the problems themselves. She may restate the question, or reverse the mathematics, but answers were never of any final interest to Dickinson. Like the poet, the reader becomes accustomed to finding value in the discord. “I pondered how the bliss would look –/And would it feel as big –/When I could take it in my hand –/As hovering – seen – through fog” (271, 9-12). Just as she refuses to hold the object of desire in her hand for fear that once held, it becomes small and loses the magic she had invested it with before it became tangible, Dickinson offers us nothing to hold onto. What she offers in the stead of cold, round, marble-sized truths is possibility—and not the kind of possibility that resembles blithe optimism. Dickinson’s possibility looks more like hope: “a strange invention/ A Patent of the Heart –” (1392, 1-2) that through “its unique momentum/ Embellish all we own –” (7-

8). This hope-like possibility is something chastened by an awareness of its own limitations that nevertheless strives always to expand the circumference of these limitations to encompass a space where something new can be created, and where something might be gained. Dickinson gives us the dark and gives us desire. She turns rooms into worlds, pictures into things, words into images, minds into gods, and before we find ourselves comfortable, she has turned them back again just in time to preserve the wonder of the creative experience. By giving us nothing definitively, she lavishes us with everything provisionally.

## Chapter II

### Destructive Urges: Alcott, Stoddard, and the Novel as Play Space

“It is easy to work when the soul is at play,” writes Dickinson. As examined briefly in the previous chapter, play provides a vehicle in which structural confinement, both physical and verbal, can be expanded to encompass imaginative depths. To play is to engage in games, to pretend, to delight in the imaginary, and to indulge the whimsical. The realm of play belongs to childhood, and yet, through the figure of someone like Dickinson we begin to understand play not only as a fanciful aspect of juvenile life, but as an action with consequence, an act of the imagination that is more than a dream—that almost undetectably bleeds into actual life and colors our perceptions. When considering the role of imagination in the alteration and expansion of spaces—particularly domestic space—the importance of play is central. This chapter intends to examine the space of play, both thematically and linguistically, as it appears in two mid-nineteenth century novels: the beloved classic, *Little Women* written by Louisa May Alcott, and the comparatively strange and obscure *Morgesons* by Elizabeth Stoddard. Both novels explore an intrinsic relationship between adolescence and the role of play in negotiating the intermediate space between childhood and womanhood.

In order to do this, however, it is of primary importance to distinguish the indistinguishable: to define what play consists of, and what happens to individuals when they engage in play. Play is indefinable because it is defined by the actuality that it is not. In D.W. Winnicott’s *Playing and Reality*, a treatise on play and the role it holds in individual and social life, he theorizes play—similar to girlhood—as a transitional space. Play comes from a need

established in the infantile state to distinguish and make compromises between the world of “me” and the world of “not-me.” Winnicott describes play as the space of interaction between the infant (representing the inner reality of the individual) and the mother (representing external reality, or the world that is outside the control the individual).

Winnicott writes:

The third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated. (3)

Play is the space in which the individual learns how to mediate a subjective world in which the individual controls all the elements perceptively, and an objective world, a pre-established system with pre-established conditions entirely outside of individual control. Playing becomes a kind of compromise, in which the individual learns to see herself in relation with the world outside her control and with other individuals, and at the same time is able to manipulate elements of that world in a third space that is neither entirely internal nor entirely external. “In playing, the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling” (69). A certain mixing occurs in this third space. Through play, the child can symbolically control and master what is external (and troubling for this reason), while at the same time accepting those conditions which are uncontrollable, simultaneously investing them with meaning that comes from the interior.

The exchange that occurs in the play space is of primary importance to human experience precisely because it is a *creative* exchange. “It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self” (73). Winnicott suggests that the

healthy human being is one with a proportionate sense of balance between the external and the internal, and that this balance is fundamentally linked to the individual's capacity to practice creative agency.

It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance, the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation. Compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living. (Winnicott 87)

Dickinson's work shares a similar relationship to the aspects of creativity and confinement associated with structure. A structure is an external system located outside the psychic control of the individual, yet because Dickinson is able to imbue her structures with created perceptive meaning—she turns words into images—the structures, instead of forcing her into a position of compliance, serve as a tool to access creative experience. In addition, just as Dickinson's relationship to words and structure is a paradox of creation and destruction—words both do and undo, Winnicott presents play as a similar paradox of space that is neither entirely internal nor entirely external.

I make my idea of play concrete by claiming that *playing has a place* and a time. It is not *inside* by any use of the word [...], Nor is it *outside*, that is to say, it is not a part of the repudiated world, the not-me, that which the individual has decided to recognize (with whatever difficulty and even pain) as truly external, which is outside magical control. To control what is outside one has to *do* things, not simply to think or to wish, and *doing things takes time*. Playing is doing. (55)

The space of play and the capacity of language suddenly become concerned with the same question. Can the embodiment of the imaginative, creative act cross from the world of the fantasy into the world of things that are real? According to Winnicott, as far as this question is relevant to play it is also relevant to the self, and the formation of identity. The formation of “feminine” identity is an especially present theme in both *Little Women* and *The Morgesons*.

Both novels adequately meet the qualifications for consideration as examples of nineteenth century *Bildungsromane*—though ample criticism illuminates the way in which Stoddard’s novel resists this categorization<sup>3</sup>—yet, at a most basic level, the novels center around the lives of sisters and daughters as they transition from childhood into adulthood.

As play itself is something of a threshold space, it becomes important to consider the liminality of female adolescence as a space between childhood and womanhood. Especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Bildungsroman*, the developmental model prevailed as a means of “charting” individual growth; in theory, the journey from childhood to adulthood was regulated and precisely delineated. Girlhood transitioned into adolescence, which in turn transitioned into womanhood, all stages both clearly demarcated and final upon completion. Emily Dickinson’s cutting poem, “She rose to his requirements” reflects this mindset of a life segmented into detachable parts.

She rose to His Requirement – dropt  
The Playthings of Her Life  
To take the honorable Work  
Of Woman, and of Wife –

If ought She missed in Her new Day,  
Of Amplitude, or Awe –  
Or first Prospective – Or the Gold  
In using, wear away,

It lay unmentioned – as the Sea  
Develop Pearl, and Weed,  
But only to Himself – be known  
The Fathoms they abide – (732)

Wifhood severs a woman from the “playthings” of her girlhood with the suddenness and finality of a guillotine: this from a woman who made a literary lifetime experiment of remaining a girl in her father’s house. And yet for a woman who seems to have remained

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<sup>3</sup> See Alaimo, Stacy. “Elizabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*: A Feminist Dialogue of Bildung and Descent.”



chastely tucked away from the realities of “adult” life, Dickinson’s choice to stay in the realm of girlhood—a stage understood to be only temporary—takes on an aspect of the perverse. For girlhood, especially as it progresses through adolescence, has qualities about it that are uncomfortable in their indefiniteness. Though this intermediate stage has potential for rich experiential development, the “mystery” of the pre-woman state seems to be tolerated without question in this developmental model on the basis of its temporariness—soon what is temperamental and indefinable will pass into a stable and defined womanhood. By adamantly refusing to leave a realm of girlhood that might seem to no longer fit, and with equal willfulness refusing to enter a state of conventional womanhood, Dickinson breaks the rule of temporariness that makes the inscrutability of female adolescence acceptable. There is something both strange and unacceptable about someone who refuses to “progress.”

In Gillian’s Brown’s essay “Child’s Play” she explores the narratives of progress inherent in play by presenting a historical overview of gendered play and childhood in the nineteenth century. Using popular literature to compare such characters as Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn to the March sisters in *Little Women*, Brown illustrates the vast difference between the means and purposes of “boys’ play” and “girls’ play.” Brown argues that both boys’ play and girls’ play “serve a narrative of progress” (92), yet boys’ play, full of mischief, aggression, and savagery, starts from a primal past and emerges into a civil present as boys become men, where girls’ play is always future tending—anticipating and practicing in the present moment for the womanhood, and more specifically the wifedom, which is to come.

Brown uses Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* extensively to support her argument that “as girls play their versions of adult female roles, acting as little women, they prefigure the continuation of those roles” (91). Brown contrasts this play of future consequences to the play of boys, who “emerge miraculously unscathed from their activities. The primary

feature of the ‘mischeif, frolic, and general deucedness’ of boys is that it is just fun—it has no consequences” (89). Though this contrast is used to distinguish between the past-tending narrative of boys’ play and the future-tending narrative of girls’, it runs the risk of making an over-simplified claim about the quality of these two different kinds of play. Brown clearly illuminates that girls’ play is oriented toward an established system of domestic order, while boys’ play is off the societal grid, but this does not necessitate that boys’ play ought to be privileged as more imaginative than girls’ play—and this point, though not expressly articulated by Brown, is illustrated vividly by Brown’s main literary focus for girls’ play—*Little Women*.

*Little Women* is a difficult text to use to illustrate any point concretely, especially the role of play. It’s a chameleon in its politics, its attitude toward patriarchy, and in its treatment of gender. The novel’s continuous popularity can be attributed in part to its singular determination to fall neither here nor there. Volleyed back and forth, praised and scorned alternately as progressively feminist or stiflingly conservative, *Little Women* has not ceased to be relevant or controversial in its portrayal of womanhood. Ann B. Murphy asks the question directly:

Is *Little Women* adolescent, sentimental, repressive, an instrument for teaching girls how to become ‘little,’ domesticated, and silent? Is the novel, subversive, matriarchal, and implicitly revolutionary, fostering discontent with the very model of female domesticity it purports to admire? (Murphy 564)

These conflicting questions are deeply tied to the portraits of the four “little” women as they cross the threshold into womanhood. A close examination of the complex and nuanced function of play during this time of development helps to make sense of these polarized opinions of the novel.

Winnicott’s theory of play as an intermediate space between total individual control and an uncontrollable external system is especially applicable to *Little Women*. Within the

novel, the four March sisters are constantly in a state of modifying their behavior to sync with the values of dominant systems: Christianity, familial structures, American patriotism, and womanly social standards. The importance of “work” and “duty” is presented as a means to improve “faults”—often associated with individualist tendencies that pose threats to these communitarian systems, such as vanity, shyness, and rampant independence. When their Father, who has dutifully signed up for military service to fight for the Union Army, writes home:

‘A year seems a very long time to wait before I see them, but remind them that while we wait, we may all work, so that these hard days need not be wasted. I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women.’ (17)

In the opening pages of the novel we see the battle against the self begin, as the girls decide to give up their Christmas presents to acknowledge those who are less fortunate than themselves. “We ought not to spend money for pleasure, when our men are suffering so in the army,” (7) says Meg, who, as the oldest and closest to womanhood, must begin to exercise womanly attributes with expediency. Interestingly, the relinquished gifts that the other three sisters would have chosen for themselves are all related to creative endeavors. Jo March the self-styled author would have bought a novel, sensitive Beth March would have bought sheet-music, and Amy March the artist would have bought a new box of drawing pencils. This one preliminary scene establishes a tension between personal creativity and duty that expands and contracts through the entirety of the novel. Though the girls constantly reckon with their “bosom enemies,” and Marmee is frequently portrayed as giving advice such as “Watch and pray, dear; never get tired of trying; and never think it impossible to conquer your fault” (89), the moments when duty entirely trumps creativity and personal desire are few and far between. In Alcott’s novel, duty to a system and the creativity of the

individual are joined in a relationship that causes each to inform the other. Gillian Brown describes the way girls' play becomes subjugated to fit a system of domesticity through “dolls and other domestic objects such as sewing kits and stoves [...] in order that girls from an early age might become absorbed with housekeeping” (91), but what makes *Little Women* a fascinating study of play is that quite often the opposite occurs: creativity colors and infuses a previously un-malleable system.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes:

But how can housework be made into a creative activity? The minute we apply a glimmer of consciousness to a mechanical gesture, or practice phenomenology while polishing a piece of old furniture, we sense new impressions come into being beneath this familiar domestic duty. For consciousness rejuvenates everything, giving a quality of beginning to the most everyday actions. It even dominates memory. How wonderful it is to really become once more the inventor of a mechanical action! (67)

Bachelard refers in a different way to the same phenomena of agency that Winnicott delineates as central to play, by reinventing the task—reinvigorating the external world through conscious endowment of meaning—the task transitions from a prescribed activity to a creative one. The girls in *Little Women* spend the first half of the novel engaging in games, imaginative play, role-playing, and experiments that while domestically oriented, succeed in showcasing the way domesticity is creatively reappropriated and the quotidian is transcended, even in quite simple instances.

It was uninteresting sewing, but to-night no one grumbled. They adopted Jo's plan of dividing the long seams into four parts, and calling the quarters Europe, Asia, Africa and America, and in that way got on capitally, especially when they talked about the different countries as they stitched their way through them. (18)

By simply imagining the sheet in a grander context, both the sheet itself and the capacity for the task to be more than menial are expanded, not only in importance and interest—but also in a way that verges on spatial. Bachelard writes, “[By] changing space, by leaving the space

of one's usual sensibilities, one enters into communication with a space that is psychically innovating" (206).

Other games have an extended focus throughout the novel. "Playing Pilgrim," the imaginative dramatic reenactment of Paul Bunyan's Christian allegorical novel *Pilgrim's Progress*, is a constant and recurring imaginative exercise that the girls fall in and out of. Encouraged by their mother to think of their own strife as the "burden" that Pilgrim carries, the girls begin to align the landmarks in their own lives with those in *Pilgrims Progress*.

Marmee says:

"We are never too old for this, my dear, because it is a play we are playing all the time in one way or another. Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City. Now, my little pilgrims, suppose you begin again, not in play, but in earnest, and see how far on you can get before father comes home." (18)

Games like "playing Pilgrim" introduce and privilege a value system that the external world would have the individual adopt. By approaching these values in a space of play, the lessons are not oppressively foisted upon the girls, but rather discovered by them, and authentically chosen. For a girl like the energetic and tom-boyish Jo, who "[hates] to think I've got to grow up grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China-aster" (9), real and active experience is the only way she can willingly adopt a domestic value system that often runs contrary to her boyish inclinations. "It's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boys' games, and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment at not being a boy, and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit like a poky old woman" (9). For this reason, Jo requires the kind of imaginative play that completely engages her faculties. Dolls and kitchen sets hardly provide a fraction of the freedom that less constrained forms of play do. Another similar example can be found in the girls' "Busy-Bee Society."

Well, we have tried not to waste our holiday, but each has had a task, and worked at it with a will. The vacation is nearly over, the stints are all done, and we are ever so glad that we didn't dawdle. [...] Mother likes to have us out of doors as much as possible; so we bring our work here, and have nice times. For the fun of it we bring things in these bags, wear the old hats, use poles to climb the hill, and play pilgrims, as we used to do years ago. We call this hill the 'Delectable Mountain,' for we can look far away and see the country where we hope to live some time. (152)

Under the tree where the society convenes, the girls impart mystical importance to the tedium of everyday chores that would otherwise have to be performed unembellished.

Adventure, excitement, and consequence seep into the commonplace and the ordinary takes on a quality of sacredness. These tasks are no longer outside the girls, but become linked to a greater sense of self. Nor does the play always positively embody the value of the external system. When Marmee allows the girls to try their "idleness experiment" in which the girls—tired of working—decide to do no work for a week, the play required by the experiment is precisely the opposite of the beneficial lesson. After a week of sloth, carelessness, boredom, petty bickering, and disorderliness, the girls adopt Marmee's advice to "Have regular hours for work and play; make each day both useful and pleasant, and prove that you understand the worth of time by employing it well" (129), however, this didactic grain was not embedded into the play—the girls had to actively reject their experiment of idleness in order to find the value of work.

Other forms of play as well—such as the attic theater and the household circulated *Pickwick Paper* also join the imaginative with tasks and skills that would otherwise seem proscribed for girls learning to be women. Here is Alcott's description of the slip-shod yet magical theater.

Being still too young to go often to the theatre, and not rich enough to afford any great outlay for private performances, the girls put their wits to work, and necessity being the mother of invention, made whatever they needed. Very clever were some of their productions; paste-board guitars, antique lamps made of old-fashioned butter-boats, covered with silver paper,

gorgeous robes of old cotton, glittering with tin spangles from a pickle factory, and armor covered with the same useful diamond-shaped bits, left in sheets when the lids of tin preserve-pots were cut out. The furniture was used to being topsy-turvy, and the big chamber was the scene of many innocent revels. (24)

This imaginative, creative passage where pickle-tins and old cotton transform into the richest material, is immediately joined to a justifying description of what makes the theatrical experience edifying. “It was an excellent drill for their memories, a harmless amusement, and employed many hours which otherwise would have been idle, lonely, or spent in less profitable society” (25). The contrast between these two passages, the one with a certain intimate insularity and the other calling upon externally mandated skills and standards, illustrates the complexity of the play space as Winnicott has recognized it.

By the end of the novel, all of the girls (with the exception of Beth, whose death of scarlet fever seems to be required as a final condition of curbing Jo’s willfulness) have “overcome” themselves, embracing the individuality of their natures only as they can contribute to the version of womanhood they have aspired to since girlhood. Meg gives up ideas of finery to embrace the virtues of being “a poor man’s wife,” Amy uses her artistic talent—prudently realizing that she is not gifted with genius—to create the illusion of finery with limited means, and Jo takes her love of books and her love for boyish antics and opens a school. All of them get married—and all are presented as being happy and satisfied with the choices they have made. With regard to Winnicott, *Little Women* seems to serve as an example of play space functioning in the most ideal manner. The girls learn to mediate between their own individual realities and the reality of the external world that they need to function within. Their games bring them into positions of agency that carry into womanhood, while teaching them the “realities” that accompany this position. And yet, though this model of play would seem to be empowering, certainly more so than dolls and

kitchen sets, the final utterly content note of the novel rings with a hollowness that is not easy to pinpoint. What is it about *Little Women* that “remains something of a tarbaby, a sticky, sentimental, entrapping experience?” (Murphy 564).

This question goes beyond the reasonably progressive content of the novel and invites us to take a closer look at the form. The form of *Little Women* is not usually on the forefront of discussion on matters relating to the novel, it often seems to slip by unnoticed. While the implications of the content are debated fiercely, critics seem less inclined to consider the writing itself with equal importance: an unfortunate oversight as it is the tone and structure of the novel that contains the key to its undoing. Ann Murphy writes that “Alcott attempts to move beyond such futile polarities by depicting a dream of reconciliation between autonomy and community” (575)—a similar description to Winnicott’s definition of play. Alcott, attempting to portray an engaging and challenging portrait of womanhood while working under intense cultural constraints, has created “a dream” of compromised womanhood, partially conservative and partially radical, that is constructed through language in the form of a novel that is uncannily even-handed. The womanhood Alcott portrays is a womanhood that does not exist, and I would suggest that part of the evasive dissatisfaction with a novel that does represent so many instances of female empowerment, is the lurking suspicion on the part of the reader that she is watching scenes from a play, and not scenes from real life. Despite being incredibly engaging, the depiction is not entirely convincing.

The suspicion of theatrically performed womanhood is confirmed during one of the most interesting scenes in the novel in which the even-handedness falters, and a brief moment of “real conditions” is made visible to the reader. This is the scene when Jo confesses her struggle with anger to her mother. “You don’t know; you can’t guess how bad



it is! [...] I get so savage, I could hurt any one, and enjoy it. Oh, mother! Help me, do help me!” Jo beseeches. Marmee replies:

You think your temper is the worst in the world; but mine used to be just like it. [...] I’ve been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded in controlling it. I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo; but I have learned not to show it; and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so. [...] Your father [helped me], Jo. He helped and comforted me, and showed me that I must try to practise all the virtues I would have my little girls possess, for I was their example. [...] The love, respect and confidence of my children was the sweetest reward I could receive for my efforts to be the woman I would have them copy. (89-90)

The strong, intelligent, empowered Mother figure who has thus far driven the developmental progress of the girls has just admitted to being other than she seems. Not only does her heart stray from the image of “true womanhood” that she embodies, but must, on a daily basis act contrary to her true inclinations and emotions. With this disturbing flash of insight we realize that “discovering the real self of the woman playing the little woman is an impossible task, in part because the essence of the role is that it appears to be the ‘real’ self” (Murphy 573).

This “dream” of womanhood becomes more pronounced when we examine certain suggestive metafictional devices that Alcott employs in her seemingly straightforward novel. In the chapter entitled “Burdens”, Marmee sits the girls down to tell a bedtime story. Jo requests, “another story, mother, one with a moral to it. I like to think about them afterwards, if they are real, and not too preachy.” And then Mrs. March proceeds to tell the girls the story of themselves, arguably the basic plot arch of the novel, having “told stories to this little audience for many years, [she] knew how to please them” (52). The story begins by introducing four girls with different flaws who learn to become happy, good, and fulfilled women by overcoming their respective burdens. Fascinatingly, the bedtime story works on precisely the same principles that make the novel successful.

It presents a version of successfully “achieved” womanhood that has not yet come to pass. The future tending perspective of girls who aspire to reach a certain goal is a clever way of obscuring the possibility that not only does this goal not exist beyond the theatrical—but it may be impossible for it to exist otherwise. It creates a model, an arguably attractive one, without ensuring that this model has a real place in a society that is not tailored to consider the non-theatrical happiness and satisfaction of women. There is an entire chapter dedicated to the girls discussing their Bunyan-esque “Castles in the Air”—“selfish” dreams they have for the future of wealth, fame, and beauty. What the reader perhaps uncomfortably senses, is that the “real” future they aspire to is an equally unlikely fantasy. This accounts for that tempering note of hollowness when, by the end of the novel, everything *has* seemed to work out. The reader is torn between the pleasure of sunny closure and the negation of reality brought on by the weirdly unchallenged success of the resolution.

The question of pleasure produces the final dilemma. *Little Women*, though progressive in content, ultimately works on a pleasure principle that belongs to the sentimental. Just as Marmee tells a story that she knows will “please” her audience, Alcott is writing a piece of popular fiction for girls, intended to please her audience and the variety of political leanings they might have. Alcott wrote a novel—and a version of womanhood—that has something for the transcendentalist, traditionalist, and moralist alike. She wrote a deeply nuanced and hybrid version of 19<sup>th</sup> century American womanhood that has remarkably sustained criticism and entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all despite having never existed in the first place. Gillian Brown argues that, “ostensibly celebrating and promoting sentiment and sympathy for the sufferings of children, women and slaves, nineteenth century American popular fiction actually ‘provided the inevitable rationalization of the economic order’ in which slavery, female subordination, and child labor operated” (78). When we are content

with Alcott's "dream" of womanhood, and the happy ending it ensures for her characters, we passively accept the imaginary model, and neglect that it is not a real representation of life. For a novel that does in many ways seem to engage with political questions of women's status, it does not offer a real solution for a real problem. In this way, the canonical and deceptively simple *Little Women* leaves us with more questions than answers. Can fiction ever be more than a stage? Can fictional characters ever present non-fictional answers to non-fictional problems? Does play ever amount to more than fiction? Can the concept of play truly contribute to the reclamation of status and space in the way that Dickinson asserted that it could? Contrary to their polarized literary reputations, what questions the didactic *Little Women* only deepens, the strange and tumultuous *Morgesons* by Elizabeth Stoddard will help us answer.

*The Morgesons*, Stoddard's 1862 novel, defies any attempt at categorization. Stoddard scholar Sandra A. Zagarell writes, "we have tried to shoehorn the novel into categories which we habitually apply to American fiction of the era": domestic, or 'woman's,' fiction, various kinds of gothic, the 'literature of misery,' the *Bildungsroman*" yet *The Morgesons* refuses any one label, and is often considered to be some of the first "modernist" prose of its era, due to the complexity of the artistry. "Understatement, ellipses, and other formal elements which command readers' attention—extended dialogues without exposition; offbeat pacing and rhythm; unexpected shifts in tone and focus" (Zagarell 286) are just a few of the elements that make *The Morgesons* stylistically challenging. Just as importantly, verbal conventions are not the only standards that Stoddard dismisses. Working hand-in-hand with her unusual language-use, Stoddard calls into question the reality of and permanence of social standards and cultural institutions such as the family and religion.

The novel opens: “That child,’ said my aunt Mercy, looking at me with indigo-colored eyes, ‘is possessed” (5). From this simple four-word sentence broken by non-dialogic recounting, personal perspective, and sensory detail, it becomes clear that not only will Stoddard deny the reader a cohesive experience of storytelling, but that language is also going to play both a formative and interrupting role in this process. If reading Alcott gives the reader a pleasure that stems from a narrative that “demarcates, encloses, establishes limits, [and] orders” (Brooks 5), any pleasure derived from Stoddard comes not from the organizing solidifying principles of plot, but from the tantalizing malleability and aleatory nature of language. Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* writes:

The *brio* of the text (without which, after all, there is no text) is its *will to bliss*: Just where it exceeds demand, transcends prattle, and whereby it attempts to overflow, to break through the constraint of adjectives—which are those doors of language through which the ideological and imaginary come flowing in. (Barthes 13)

Stoddard’s language is wildly unbound by the constraints of conventional narration.

Conversely, bound like a stage and working within the limits imposed by the theatrical elements, *Little Women* creates a system that feels safely fenced by both the reader’s and the author’s expectation of meaning. Peter Brooks suggests of plot:

What animates us as readers of narrative is *la passion du sens*, which I would want to translate as both the passion *for* meaning and the passion *of* meaning: the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle. (19)

Brooks speaks of the desire for the novel to contain a message, logically revealed and contained. The emphasis on plot—what occurs between the beginning and the end, is analogous to the way we conceive of adolescence. We want to see girls grow from children into women, and for that change to follow a linear (and in Alcott’s case) positive slope of development that is as clear as possible. These are not the standards to which we can hold

Stoddard. Jessica Feldman, author of “A Talent for the Disagreeable: Elizabeth Stoddard

Writes *The Morgesons*,” writes:

Reading the novel as if it presented a transparent window through which we see the illusion of actual people going about their lives will take us only so far in understanding and appreciating it. [Stoddard’s] novel also announces its quality of being an autonomous addition to the world rather than being merely a representation of the world. In her drive for power, Stoddard, like Gustave Flaubert, another creative contemporary, imagines a novel in which the godlike artist creates a world with its own rules and style, its own rhetoric. (220)

Unlike the knit-boundedness of *Little Women* in which words, actions, and character development share an interlinked relation to one another, the Morgesons seems to operate both verbally and thematically on a rhetoric of adjacency, where words find themselves in suggestive proximity to other words without precluding significance. Language itself can be viewed in the same way in which Cassandra, the main character, views the Morgeson family. When Mary Morgeson’s death puts Cassandra in a position of needing to create the Alcott-esque illusion of familial unity, Cassandra realizes just how artificial it is.

The unthought-of result of mother’s death—disorganization, began to show itself. The individuality which had kept the weakness and faults of our family life in abeyance must have been powerful; and I had never recognized it! I attempted to analyze this influence, so strong, yet so invisibly produced. [...] Would endowment of character explain it—that faculty which we could not change, give, or take? Character was a mysterious and indestructible fact, and a fact that I had little respect for. Upon what a false basis I had gone—a basis of extremes. I had seen men as trees walking; that was my experience. (216)

Though Cassandra’s mother, described as mild, dreamy, and indifferent is anything but the assertive and energetic mother from *Little Women*, she does seem to have the same power to create the theatrical illusion of unity. When the mother, the binding narrative of the family so to speak, disappears—the significance of being a Morgeson also disappears. Family members are simply born into and continue to live in proximity, with no greater meaning than that which binds a grove of trees. The resemblance that family members do or do not

share suggest things of one another, but nothing that ultimately proposes truths. “I pondered over what father had said; he had perceived something in me which I was not aware of. I resolved to think seriously over it; in the morning I found I had not thought of it at all” (54). It is suggested that Locke Morgeson has picked up on some key of greater import to Cassandra’s character, but no definitive importance is ever granted this unspoken perception. Likewise, Cassandra seems to constantly ask herself of her relatives, “What had they in common with me?” (31). Relations may hint connection, but do not cause nor stem from it.

The opacity of Stoddard’s language leans on the same principles. Stoddard’s dialogue seems especially to be more suggestive of association than causation. In a conversation between Alice and Cassandra, Alice says:

“Do I hurt you Cass?”

“No, do I ever hurt you, Alice?” And I divided the long bands over my eyes, and looked up at her.

“Were any of your family ever cracked? I have long suspected you of a disposition that way.”

“The child is choking itself with that handkerchief.” (100)

The scene takes place while Alice, the wife of Charles Locke, with whom Cassandra shares an unconsummated romantic and erotic tension, combs Cassandra’s hair in the presence of Alice’s infant son. The dialogue evokes instinctual feelings of apprehension between the women, but it is difficult to say precisely why. Stoddard uses language in a painterly way, allowing for words such as “hurt”, “divided”, “over my eyes”, “cracked”, and “choking” to color and inform meanings of each other without ever enforcing one interpretation. The words seem to drift into relationships, no one combination sustaining a bond any stronger than any other, and hardly a page goes by without encountering one of these semi-lucid, semi-opaque passages.

Though one might suggest that this indeterminable nexus limits the capacity for meaning and thereby the satisfaction of the reader, *Little Women* helps illustrate how Stoddard's ambiguity actually produces a multiplicity of meanings, which is both more complex and finally more satisfying than the subjugation of literary elements to "the message." The insistence of *Little Women* on the version of womanhood that it illustrates is theatrical in and of itself. The author-chosen meaning for a reader to take away from a selection of depicted events posed as naturally-occurring, substantiates the presence of a unified vision of the lives of individuals that can only be a construction. The March women's intimate and complete understanding of one another both interpersonally and in the context of what the novel proposes about womanhood can only exist as a theatrical situation under an authorial pen. *Little Women* is so tidy in its construction that by the end of the novel, the device is fairly transparent. Because Stoddard never insists on the boundaries of *The Morgesons*, the absence of a unifying logic for the characters to work within illustrates an imperfect sympathy that resembles real relationships and interactions. When Stoddard leaves it to the reader to "order" the fragments that compose a life, the reader responds to Stoddard in the way that actual, non-fictional, existence requires.

One way of thinking about the complexity of literary space that *The Morgesons* occupies is to think of it in terms of regions. In a chapter from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* entitled "Regions and Region Behavior," Erving Goffman uses a theatrical metaphor to describe the roles of "front regions" and "back regions" as they relate to the organization and demonstration of the self to others. Front regions "refer to the place where the performance is given" (107) and pertain to manners, standards, and the way we present ourselves to "an audience." Back regions function as the backstage, where the illusion of the

reality of the performance is prepared. Goffman's description of the performance is an especially apt way of viewing the theatricality of *Little Women*.

When a performance is given it is usually given in a highly bounded region [...]. The impression and understanding fostered by the performance will tend to saturate the region and time span, so that any individual located in this space-time manifold will be in a position to observe the performance and be guided by the definition of the situation which the performance fosters. (106)

Using this metaphor, *Little Women* takes place almost entirely in a front region—with the exception of brief moments such as Marmee's confession to Jo. Even portrayals of instances that might seem to belong to the back-regions—like when Jo confesses at any point throughout the novel her dissatisfaction with the model of womanhood she's supposed to adopt—actually suggest more of a stage within a stage, where the back regions we think we're seeing are still contrived and occurring in the front. Here Goffman describes the back regions to which Alcott refuses the reader access:

A back region or backstage may be defined as a place relative to the given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. [...] It is here that the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. [...] Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character. (112)

While *Little Women* operates with a clear intuitive understanding of the duality of front and back regions, the “performance” of *The Morgesons* seems particularly “unguided” because not only does Stoddard seem ill-content to portray only the front regions, she refuses to allow for the partitioning of regions at all. Stoddard, through Cassandra's narration, is unwilling to differentiate between the moments of “back” and “front.” This lends the novel the disorienting double-effect of seeming simultaneously impenetrable and psychologically revealing. The back regions of the novel are not contained to Cassandra's own personal back regions; it's as if she has none. The realities of the back region drift



through the front regions of the novel undistinguished from the performative conventions that we would expect to find there. Though the moments of internal reflection where Cassandra might synthesize her experience for the reader are few, the inappropriate, tense non-sequiturs that pervade the dialogue and descriptions show us more of the internal life of the characters than access to their thoughts ever could. Take for example what should be a simple evening greeting between the Morgeson parents:

“Did you have a cold ride, Locke?” asked mother, gazing into the fire with that expression of satisfaction we have when somebody beside ourselves has been exposed to hardships. It is the same principle entertained by those who depend upon and enjoy seeing criminals hung. (156)

The connection between the banal and the morbid is not Mary’s own, it is Cassandra’s observation and extrapolation, unverifiable yet uncanny in its insight. However, even these revealing moments are unexplained. Stoddard leaves it to the reader to connect what it could “mean” that Mary’s comment is connected to the image of a hanging in Cassandra’s mind.

Stoddard’s use of the third space of the novel as a region that refuses to be divided between public performance and private rehearsal easily aligns itself with Winnicott’s description of the third space of play. As mentioned earlier, Winnicott defines this space as an intermediate area that is both internal and external, and keeps these realities connected yet differentiated (3). Winnicott writes:

It is assumed that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience, which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the child who is ‘lost’ in play. (18)

Where Alcott, through content, depicts young girls reconciling their individuality with their society through play, Stoddard is actively engaging in an adult version of the play-act, which Winnicott suggests is not something relegated to childhood, but is necessary throughout the

life-span. *The Morgesons* represents a third space where the primacy of the play space is not play's depiction in the content, but the language that composes the novel itself.

Though both novels are using play spaces to mediate issues of agency, conformity, confinement and expansion, the differences between Alcott's depiction of play and Stoddard's use of verbal play could not be more significant. If we consider again Gillian Brown's historical differentiation between the purposes and characteristics of boys' play and girls' play, we will find that the language of *The Morgesons* radically unhinges the binary, as it more closely embodies the distinguishing features of boys' play "noted for its heedlessness and vitality, as a state of savagery" (Brown 90). Take for example another unsettling scene of dialogue that takes place between Cassandra and her sister, Veronica.

"See," she said softly. "I have something from heaven." She lifted her white apron, and I saw under it, pinned to her dress, a splendid black butterfly, spotted with red and gold.

"It is mine," she said, "you shall not touch it. God blew it in through the window; but it has not breathed yet."

"Pooh; I have three mice in the kitchen."

"Where is their mother?"

"In the hayrick, I suppose, I left it there."

"I hate you," she said, in an enraged voice. "I would strike you if it wasn't for this holy butterfly." (20)

At the end of the scene, Cassandra takes the butterfly and crushes it in the presence of Veronica. Jessica Feldman comments of the "savage civility" of scenes such as these. She writes:

This is a world where everyone is in deep conflict. [...] In fact, the harshness of the novel as a whole appears mysteriously *de trop*, whether it appears in the brutality of Cassandra's playmates, the violence of the family life in the Morgeson household, or the bitter cold that Veronica chooses to experience through the lattice of her wintry bedroom. (205)

But it is not simply the actions of the characters that are abrupt, un-empathetic, and even violent: the language and the construction of the novel exhibit these tendencies. Whereas Alcott's unifying narration would fill in the gap that occurs between Veronica's

inquisitiveness and her rage, the stacking of Stoddard's unmediated dialogue has the affect of slamming the incongruous together as an experimentation for effect. It often results in jarring, unintuitive verbal combinations. Finessing descriptions the reader would ordinarily seek—the narration of a change in facial expression, the reliance on a prior sense of a character's volatility—are missing. In order to continue reading, the reader must reassess how a scene—from its logical comprehension to its aesthetic—is being processed. Roland Barthes writes, “The text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts [...], unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language” (Barthes 14). The crisis that requires this reevaluation is invigorating, not merely within the logic of the novel, but in a way that transcends the page. Where the March sisters, locked within the narrative of *Little Women*, bring new consciousness to their play-turned-reality, it is the reader outside of *The Morgesons* who brings new consciousness to Stoddard's verbal play.

Though all writing can be said to operate as a third, play space, and Alcott's novel, though written from within a lulling dream of narrative unity compared to Stoddard's wild disjunction, is no exception—there is something about Stoddard's verbal play space that seems ultimately more empowering as a means for enlarging personal agency. This difference is fundamentally linked to the difference between the kind of writing that suggests that one should read as a spectator and the kind that invites and requires reading as a creator. Ironically, though the sisters of *Little Women* find agency and fulfillment, while Cassandra and Veronica are doomed to be swept into an unavoidable maelstrom of domestic subjugation, it is *Little Women* that relies upon a traditional mode of story telling and *The Morgesons* that engages with radically deviant techniques. In spite of the presence of progressive politics—the narration of *Little Women*, dominant yet imperceptible (we shouldn't feel as if we're being

“told” something, it should simply and unquestionably appear to *be*), acts with a suspiciously effective rhetorical acuteness. Conversely, Stoddard’s unorthodoxy is anything but subliminal. Her language—strange, raw, new, and disrupting, serves to expose not just the tropes of the “domestic novel” but also the domestic system.

In *The Morgesons* the conventions of language and the conventions of culture are not separate. Embedded within the often quiet chaos seems to lie the hope that the derailment of one predicts the derailment of the other. Dawn Henwood writes, “In Cassandra’s reality, social conversation consists of nothing but pretty lies” (56). Though Stoddard’s novel doesn’t contribute to a “narrative” of progress, her refusal to participate in the construction of an untruth for the purpose of pleasure *is* progressive in a deeply substantial way. Zagarell suggests that this inseparable vision of language and culture can be accounted for by examining Stoddard’s own conception of her life, her work, and her identity as an author. An inversion of the narrative of Jo, Beth, Meg and Amy who give up their artistic aspirations to enter into roles of womanhood, Zagarell argues that unlike many of her contemporaries who “told readers what to think and feel,” Elizabeth Stoddard saw herself not as a guardian of any particular institution, but as an artist. “She saw [her novels] in aesthetic and philosophical terms. She was determined to inscribe ‘truth’ in them without explanation [...] leaving to readers the work of ascertaining just what ‘truths’ her art suggested” (284). Just as there is no single “truth,” Cassandra travels between households, from Surrey to Barmouth and Belem eliminating the possibility of a single house or home from which to center a doctrine. Meaning, for Stoddard, is a subjective space, one in which the consciousness of the individual prevails over moral prescriptions and rigid institutions. *The Morgesons* wants nothing to do with reinforcing an ideology or creating castles in the air that ultimately cannot be lived within. Though Stoddard may tear down the house of verbal and cultural

construction with her untamed and verging-on-nihilistic tendencies, we may be left in the rubble, but with a plentitude of open space and the raw materials for building something new.

### Chapter III

#### The Presence of Absence: Naming the Loss in *Housekeeping*

*“The Path of things is silent. Will they suffer a speaker to go with them?”*  
 – Ralph Waldo Emerson (*The Poet*)

*“The household, its slippery incipience, meant that one was obliged to invent.”*  
 – Ann Lauterbach (*The Night Sky*)

“Where do we find ourselves?” Emerson asks. He asks after the condition of our present moment. We find ourselves here. We find ourselves now. Yet “here” and “now” are merely deictic referents—essentially meaningless until we can name what is not here, and what is not now. Emerson’s question is a question of history. We cannot find ourselves here, unless we can locate ourselves in the progression of where we have been with anticipation of where we are going. “We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight” (471). *Here* is a problem. History is not as simple as a backward glance at stairs climbed and boxes checked: history *seems*. It is an approximation—a dream of prior steps that cannot be climbed twice. A unidirectional ascent, each tread disappears with a foot’s lifting. What does this mean for “we” in the middle, “we” the seekers of a present moment the location of which can only be approximate?

Marilynne Robinson’s 1980 novel *Housekeeping* is about finding the location of our present experience after loss has rendered us lost. The novel opens with a salute to Herman Melville’s Ishmael. “My name is Ruth.” And like the both the Ishmael of the Old Testament and the Ishmael of *Moby Dick*, the narrator of *Housekeeping* is cast out from the comforts of a stable and ordered world in order to float adrift on “bright and sliding surfaces” (Robinson 131) searching for the keys that might make her present comprehensible. Abandoned by an

absent father and the suicide of her mother, the death of her grandmother and the desertion of two great-aunts, Ruth and her sister Lucille's understanding of loss has frequently been read as the heart of the novel. Though they grow up in a house built by their grandfather, where their mother and aunts were raised, they cannot escape the feeling of disorientation that supersedes the familiarity of a familial home. "We had spent all our lives watching and listening with the constant sharp attentions of children lost in the dark. It seemed that we were bewilderingly lost in a landscape that, with any light at all, would be wholly familiar" (130). In *Housekeeping*, the home—a supposedly safe, ordered, and grounding place—contains the wild uncertainties of unanchored existence. Using the house as a setting, the novel asks us to consider to what extent the individual is a universe unto herself and to what extent she is a piece—a continuation, even a repetition—of what has come before. It especially engages with the problem of internalizing through narrative a history that might seem, as all the past does, irreparably lost.

To grapple with these questions, *Housekeeping* engages with a dialogue of fragments and wholes directly traceable to the American authors that Robinson considers her "old aunts and uncles" (Hedrick 1), Dickinson, Thoreau, Melville and Emerson. In as much as Robinson claims to be continuing a conversation with the authors of the American Renaissance, much has been said about isolation, loneliness and loss as it echoes and engages with Thoreau, Dickinson and Melville—yet we stop short of the full complexity of Robinson's portrayal if Ruth is nothing but a contemporary portrait of antiquated grief—or if we represent Robinson's authorial predecessors as such. Not to be overlooked in the cold, dark and quiet of *Housekeeping* slumbers the second half of the conversation, a silent joy, humming in the minuteness of the details, suggesting that all we have lost is only known as such for its capacity to be found again. Here we continue the conversation of despair with

reference to a capacity for completion: an Emersonian faith in roundness that posits distance as an illusion, and suggests that everything stems from and moves towards comprehension, wholeness, and truth.

But what does it mean to be “whole?” In *Housekeeping*, Ruth struggles to reconcile two visions of reality: the first, in which she is a mere fragment of the world she lives in, destined never to achieve the distance or magnitude necessary to comprehend the totality of its shape or the connection of its pieces. The second is a vision in which the world we see exists only because it is seen through the eyes of an individual who acts as a unifying principle—a meaning maker. The first vision concerns itself with the truth of events, actions, and being. The second concerns itself with perception—memory and dream—and the adequateness of the human consciousness to arrest, recreate, and express the instantaneous and constantly shifting reality of the first. How simple this novel might be, if Robinson had chosen to set these two ways of viewing the world in opposition to one another, making her main character choose and enact one way of existence, but the human experience will not be categorized or contained, and the braiding of these threads lends *Housekeeping* the subtleties which make the portrayal rich.

I have found there is a desire among critics of *Housekeeping* to work primarily in oppositions, and understandably so. The novel *does* seem to work in dichotomies that make central the differences the community and the individual, of light and darkness—warmth and chill. Critics have read the novel as a feminist reclamation of a masculine literary canon, or as a way to clearly distinguish between the “constructed” and the “natural” world. However, in interviews Robinson herself has said, “When I write in general I try not to create oppositions. What I’ve tried to do whenever there are conflicts is to make both sides as equal as possible” (Hedrick 4). It is not that polarized readings of Robinson neglect to



yield important insights of specific moments within the novel, but rather that they leave half the novel untouched. To focus on the land, we forfeit the understanding of the realities beneath the surface of the lake and to dwell only in the mystery of the waters understates the importance of the tangible, terrestrial quotidian. By exploring the tension—for this word emphasizes the equality of the elements that Robinson poses against one another—between the fragmentary and the whole, and the arbitrary and the significant, I would like to suggest that there is another way to understand Ruth’s experience of an identity wavering between lost and found. The idea of the natural and the constructed is especially important to my understanding of *Housekeeping*, yet instead of juxtaposing the “natural” moments occurring in time against human perceptions of events, I refer to a passage from Emerson’s “The Poet”, which seems more authentic to Robinson’s vision. Though Emerson also attributes to nature a quality of ultimate truth, he writes, “. . .all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression” (*The Poet*, 448). The lost immediacy of the actual and the omnipresence of the perceptive are two sides of one coin.

In *Housekeeping*, Ruth centers her life around two “lost” catastrophic events. The first is the suicide of her mother, who drove a borrowed car off a cliff and into the Lake, and the second occurred before her birth, when her grandfather’s train shifted from the track of the bridge and careened into the same body of water. These two submerged incidents are the points to which Ruth returns again and again to try to make sense of all that has progressed since these moments. Yet, as often as Ruth speculates to the reader what this moment looked like, or how it felt—the very multiplicity of retellings evidences the inability to return with exactitude to a “true” moment. “The disaster had fallen out of sight, like the train itself”

(15). Ruth's replays the unrepeatable with the compulsivity of one who knows that what is past is gone, but believes this unreachable moment to be a key to the present. The futility of reaching these events is the same futility the divers face immediately after the derailling as they attempt to search for the train in the rapidly freezing waters.

After a while some of the younger boys came out on the bridge and began to jump off, at first cautiously and then almost exuberantly, with whoops of fear. [...] Fragments of transparent ice wobbled on the waves they made and, when the water was calm again, knitted themselves up like bits of a reflection. One of the boys swam out forty feet from the bridge and then down to the old lake, feeling his way down the wall, down the blind, breathless stone, headfirst, and then pushing out from the foot. [...] He reached down and put his hand on a perfectly smooth surface, parallel to the bottom, but, he thought, seven or eight feet above it. A window. [...] He could not reach it a second time. The water bore him up. [...] By the time he had swum back to the bridge and was pulled up and had told the men there where he had been, the water was becoming dull and opaque, like cooling wax. [...] By evening the lake there had sealed itself over. (7-8)

There is no window of time through which the event can be experienced after it has come to pass. Time only moves forward, affording a second-showing to no one. The water that obscures the wreck, like the elapse of time that obscures a past moment, is the barrier we all encounter in trying to make sense of prior actions and events that cannot be substantiated with the certitude of physicality. The transitory nature of this phenomenon can leave one with the painful doubt that anything occurred at all. In describing the situation of Edmund's three daughters after the accident, Robinson writes, "[If] the calm that followed it was not greater than the calm that came before it, it had seemed so. And the dear ordinary had healed as seamlessly as an image on the water" (15). There is a cruelty in the ephemeral nature of moments that impact life, or a family, so dramatically. To be gone is nearly to have never been.

Consider as well that the loss of an important piece of one's identity is not necessarily something that is experienced concretely, or even in one's lifetime. Ruth

experiences the death of her mother as a child, however, the death of her grandfather—perhaps a psychological factor that contributes to the actions of her mother—seems to hover just as darkly over Ruth’s narrative, and this is a loss that was inherited rather than experienced. Emily Dickinson writes:

A loss of something ever felt I –  
The first that I could recollect  
Bereft I was – of what I knew not  
Too young that any should suspect

A Mourner walked among the children  
I notwithstanding went about  
As one bemoaning a Dominion  
Itself the only Prince cast out – (959, 1-8)

If loss can be inherited, we can be born less than whole. In addition, if we rely on the synthesis and coherence of past moments to make us whole, we are *all* born less than whole. No one comes into the world without a history to precede him, and none of us have access to our histories with any immediacy. Referencing the biblical fall, Robinson writes on the universality of being cast away from a moment of foundation, “The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be reconciliation and return” (192). Ruth and Dickinson lament the same loss: a loss of origin and of placement that ultimately negates identity.

And yet, though the moment itself may be lost, the essence of moments can be redeemed through the resurrecting power of expression. In *The Space of Literature*, Maurice Blanchot uses the figure of Orpheus to illustrate the nature of loss and its relationship to expression. After the death of his wife, Eurydice, a deeply grieved Orpheus is granted one opportunity to lead her back from the underworld on the condition that he not turn back to look at her until they reach the living world again. Forgetting for an instant the condition of

this favor, Orpheus turns to face her moments before reaching the light and loses her again, this time forever. Blanchot emphasizes, however, the importance that this experience should be granted to Orpheus, the archetypal musician and artist. Blanchot writes:

Orpheus's error seems then to lie in the desire which moves him to see and possess Eurydice, he whose destiny is only to sing of her. He is Orpheus only in the song; he cannot have any relation to Eurydice except within the hymn. (172)

What is lost cannot be brought back whole from the past— it can only be recreated in the expressions of the individual. The individual in turn, is found in the expression. Orpheus' being is realized through his action; he is himself because of what he creates. An echo of Emerson—we are half ourselves, and half our expression. Expression however, it not something limited to music, poetry or intentional “art.” *Housekeeping* emphasizes the importance of memory and dream as storytelling in the absence of actualities. Even when we do not set out consciously to write or tell a story, our psyche drifts into realms of narrative. In the wake of events that cannot be found, Ruth is fixated on the psychological retellings of what cannot be re-experienced. Robinson writes:

There is so little to remember of anyone—an anecdote, a conversation at table. But every memory is turned over and over again, every word, however chance, written in the heart in hope that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh, and that the wanderers will find a way home, and the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door finally and stroke our hair with dreaming, habitual fondness, not having meant to keep us waiting long. (196)

Just as Orpheus is left with his song, through the power of memory, what is lost has the potential to return. In the psychological reliving of moments in memory or dream, the individual writes her story and recreates lost presence. Yet, as much as Ruth seems to understand the power her memories have to create, she cannot curb an inherent dread that the process of recreating events only thrusts the truth of those events further beneath the surface. Like the water, whose still surface reflects the sky above it and not the secrets it

entombs, memory can show us only a reflection of ourselves in a present moment, and not the event we seek to remember. Ruth says, “Sometime [Lucille and I] would try to remember our mother but more and more we disagreed and even quarreled about what she had been like” (109). The longer the girls are in the care of Sylvie, their mother’s sister, the image of their present situation siphons away the authenticity of the past.

As I watched Sylvie, she reminded me of my mother more and more. There was such similarity, in fact, in the structure of cheek and chin, and the texture of hair, that Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to displace it. Soon it was Sylvie who would look up startled, regarding me from a vantage of memory in which she had no place. (53)

The dilemma for Ruth is that she can have the past, as long as she is willing to construct it for herself and accept the uncertainties of what she cannot know. For this reason, though *Housekeeping* is flooded with memory, there is a grief associated with it, a desire *not* to remember if it can save the integrity of a moment. However, this renunciation is nearly impossible, and the connection between the present and the past, what remains and what has perished, cannot be broken. Sylvie becomes Ruth’s mother in the present in the same way that Ruth’s mother becomes Sylvie in the memory and in the dream. These moments merge in a consciousness that desires to hold all instants.

The power of a condition to suggest its opposite allows for the rebirth that memory can offer. This is not a choice that is always consciously made, but rather a characteristic of the minds of sentient creatures. Loss is not an isolated experience. There are two crucial movements in the story of Orpheus—the descent and the return. The descent, the movement toward the loss than cannot be attained, tends to overshadow the return to the land of the living, but the ascent is no less important. Blanchot writes:

From day’s perspective, the descent into the Underworld, the movement down into vain depths, is in itself excessive. It is inevitable that Orpheus transgresses the law which forbids him to ‘turn back,’ for he had already violated it with his first steps toward the shades. This remark implies that

Orpheus has in fact never ceased to be turned toward Eurydice: he saw her invisible, he touched her intact, in her shadowy absence, in that veiled presence which did not hide her absence, which was the presence of her infinite absence. (172)

An inversion occurs over the process of Orpheus' journey. Eurydice's "intact," lost form no longer has the presence that the living being would possess, and her absence in realm of "day" takes on new reality. Though Orpheus returns without the embodied Eurydice, he does not return empty handed. For those of us to whom the underworld is only a metaphor, impossible to physically traverse, the transition from the presence of presence to the no less real presence of absence is especially important. Ruth says:

For need can blossom into all the compensation it requires. To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savors of ripeness and earth, and when do our senses know anything so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing—the world will be made whole. For to wish for a hand on one's hair is all but to feel it. So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again. (153)

In *Moby Dick*, Melville writes, "there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself" (Melville 850). The significance Ruth attaches to the role and importance of the mother is defined by no longer having her. Ruth's expression of her mother through memory and dream contributes perhaps an even larger component of the identity of her mother than an embodiment could, for it is the loss that makes her truly notice the specificities. The stagnation in waking life that Ruth experiences as she is pulled forward by time and backward by memory is not so much a pause, as an expansion of a present moment that requires space to encompass not the loss, but the growth of perception that the loss necessitates.

In these moments, Ruth is the architect of her past, grasping splinters from fleeting moments and allowing the suggestions the fragments make to become the building supplies

she requires. Dispersed throughout the novel is a certain thought-experiment that comes to read as a refrain. In conveying to the reader the unsubstantiated past of her family that must have led to this point of present, what a third person narrator would simply state as true, our first person narrator poses as a trail of imaginative logic. The reader is asked to participate in the same logical wanderings that Ruth must walk. She begins to explain her grandmother hanging laundry out to dry.

*Say* there were two or three inches of hard old snow on the ground, [...] and *say* she stooped breathlessly [...], and *say* that when she had pinned three corners to the lines it began to billow and leap in her hands [...]. That wind! She *would say* [...]. Edmund *would carry* buckets and a trowel [...], She and Edmund *would climb* until they were wet with sweat. [...] The wind *would be* sour with stale snow and death and pine pitch and wildflowers. (16, emphasis mine.)

In her essay on poetic experience, the poet Ann Lauterbach writes, “By forgetting I have found a method by which the materials of the actual become materials for the possible” (Lauterbach 3). From her loss, Ruth weaves scenes into a tapestry of the past situated somewhere between memory and imagination. When she tells the reader the story of her grandmother, the narrative is no less real than if it were fact. These things happened. There is no way to see them happen, or to know the events by our senses, but we know they have come to pass because we have *said* them, and called them into a particular form of being. To say this is to express this, and expression according to Emerson, is half of all that exists. After we have “said” a certain thing, what builds onto the foundation of our own creation comes naturally. To follow the semantic logic, if we *say* a particular thing, another thing *would* happen. Ruth never asserts that Edmund, her grandfather, *did* anything—what *did* happen lies in darkness at the bottom of the lake. For one in the present to speculate about the past, everything that can exist does on the condition of its expression—a no less valid form of experience.

Yet, still we might feel the desire to keep the enactment of events and their expression separate. Emerson suggests that this separation is unnecessary and untrue to the human experience of events. Knitting expression-as-event to the event itself, Emerson suggests that the two types mingle more than they mirror. The poet, for Emerson, is a god-like man for his power to discern the truth of nature—what is, or has been. In giving this truth to others, he immortalizes it. He writes of poetry:

But the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other. This expression, or naming, is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree. [...] Genius is the activity which repairs the decays of things, whether wholly or partly of a material and finite kind. (*The Poet* 457)

There is a scene in *Housekeeping* in which most of the town becomes submerged by a flood, and a particular image which resonates with Emerson's description of poetry.

The water shone more brilliantly than the sky, and while we watched, a tall elm tree fell slowly across the road. From crown to root, half of it vanished in the brilliant light. [...] The water was so calm that the sunken half of the fallen tree was replaced by the mirrored image of the half trunk and limbs that remained above the water. (Robinson 62-63)

The tree, though fragmented, sliced in half by the water that obscures the ground, remains whole—perhaps even more whole in its symmetry—because of the reflection in the water. Water, at once obscuring and creating, completes the image of the natural. It mirrors the image literally, but is also analogous to perception: our mental faculties are subject to the same ebb and flow of rivers, tides, and floods. “Why should not the symmetry and truth that modulate these, glide into our spirits, and we participate in the invention of nature? (*The Poet* 459). We use the world around us, the fragments of our experiences, and convert them into symbols that we use to synthesize the experiences that have eluded our grasps. Trees become stories in order that we might see trees again. Emerson writes of symbols:

For, though life is great, and fascinates, and absorbs, -- and though all men are intelligent of the symbols through which it is named, -- yet they cannot



originally use them. We are symbols, and inhabit symbols; workman, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and, being infatuated with the economical uses of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object. (*The Poet* 456)

Though *Housekeeping* is saturated with images of the natural world—the lake, the hills, the snow, the ice—the unnatural world, the world of objects within the household, is just as prevalent. Robinson takes care to impart to the reader the immensity of the scale of the universe within the home. Compiled here is an abbreviated “packing list” of the things that are found in the house. There are wading boots, a fringed rug, a radio, *Good Housekeeping*, a Chinese vase, a piano, cinnamon sticks, quilts, photographs, unreturned library books, egg shells, a wasps nest, whitened shoes, an apron, a tea-strainer, a pull-down ironing board, issues of *Reader's Digest*, snow boots and skates, a box of candles, newspaper wrapped Christmas ornaments, a wood stove, a hot-water bottle, a suitcase, a lamp, stamps, a straw-hat, a periodic table of elements, kitchen spoons, Monopoly, lace curtains, a bag of clothespins, a deck of cards, a china cup, a vanity, a couch, cuttings of philodendron, tea-towels, bats and barn-swallows, a plum-colored davenport, a defrocked doll, a brown pearl, a box of hair-pins, a wardrobe, a chest, balls of twine, socks, a wax angel, a black velvet pincushion, *National Geographic*, a frying pan, plates in detergent boxes, stacked china, dishtowels, brimstone tea, towers of tin cans and bottles, a dictionary full of pressed flowers, a sewing machine, *Ivanhoe* and *Wuthering Heights*, grocery string, a diary, stacks of newspaper, cobwebs and cats, artificial flowers, a box of cornflakes, a wide-toothed comb, a roll of tape, a flashlight, soap-boxes and shoe-boxes, almanacs, Sears' catalogues, telephone books, a shovel, lampshades, piano-scarves, doilies, a saved lock of hair, a hatbox, and a grey purse.

There is a cadence in the specificity, and logic to the arbitrariness. Who among us does not see our own home, the home of our mothers, or grandmothers, in these objects? Marilynne Robinson, in naming the trifles nearly always overlooked in any home, has gotten to the heart of just how many things we collect. Events pass, but they leave us with souvenirs. At best, we hope for the power of Emerson's poet. We hope to make things speak. Ruth describes her grandmother in the garden. "She burrowed her hand under a potato plant and felt gingerly for the new potatoes in their dry net of roots, smooth as eggs. She put them in her apron and walked back to the house thinking, What have I seen, what have I seen" (19). Objects, at their most powerful are hoped to catalyze an urgency for naming experience. I have seen this thing, I have touched this thing, it has mattered, it has been noticed, and it has suggested to me a way of comprehending what I have experienced. Emily Dickinson writes:

This was a Poet – It is That  
Distills amazing sense  
From ordinary Meanings –  
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species  
That perished by the Door –  
We wonder it was not Ourselves  
Arrested it – before – (448, 1-8)

It is hoped that by arresting an object it will become a symbol, something at once physical enough to hold and transcendent enough to contain aspects of ephemeral truths. Ruth's grandfather, Edmund, would revel in finding trophies of the new spring. "He would pick up eggshells, a bird's wing, a jawbone, the ashy fragment of a wasp's nest. [...] He would peer at them as if he could read them, and pocket them as if he could own them. This is death in my hand, this is ruin in my breast pocket" (Robinson, 17). When objects are imbued with symbolism, they take on an illusion of permanence that serves as a remedy

against the ever-present threat of forgetting experience. Hannah Arendt writes, “Work and its product, the human artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time” (Arendt 30). Robinson writes:

If one should be shown odd fragments arranged on a silver tray and be told, ‘That is a splinter from the True Cross, and that is a nail pairing dropped by Barabbas, and that is a bit of lint from under the bed where Pilate’s wife dreamed her dream,’ the very ordinariness of the things would recommend them. Every spirit passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has to come to look and not to buy. So shoes are worn and hassocks are sat upon and finally everything is left where it was and the spirit passes on [...]. So Fingerbone, or such relics of it as showed above the mirroring waters, seemed fragments of the quotidian held up to our wondering attention, offered somehow as proof of their own significance. (73)

In the wake of catastrophe where life and origin are lost, these objects that are left contain a sacred power to hold the world in place. They assure and remind us of the reality of a single moment in “the undifferentiated past” (41), and come to take on the human qualities of those who have been lost, and even give us back aspects of our own missing identities. It is for this reason that the ordinary expands its economical use, and takes on nearly mystical significance. Lucille pours through magazines of hairstyles and patterns for new dresses, seeking out the not-yet-acquired objects with which she will rebuild herself. Ruth, looking backward at an evasive past, directs her search toward the house. “It seemed that something I had lost might be found in Sylvie’s house” (124). Lucille is looking for futurity offered by new things, Ruth is looking for the history offered by old. Ruth recounts:

My grandmother had kept, in the bottom drawer of the chest of drawers, a collection of things, memorabilia, balls of twine, Christmas candles, and odd socks. Lucille and I used to delve in this drawer. Its contents were so randomly assorted, yet so neatly arranged, that we felt some large significance might be behind the collection as a whole. (90)

The drawer houses anxiety that is characteristic of Ruth's relationship with her larger objective history. Objects have the potential to speak, or at least to act as keys to unlock the conscious mind's power to speak, order, and express events—but this doesn't mean they always do. In objects, we hope for certainty—the certainty of a thing that lasts, and the certainty of a story. In this respect, all the objects of Ruth's life are valuable for their potential to help her find what she has lost, and for their potential to be ordered.

There would be a general reclaiming of fallen buttons and misplaced spectacles, of neighbors and kin, till time and error and accident were undone, and the world became comprehensible and whole. [...] What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally? (92)

But the hopeful feeling of significance only exists in contrast to the randomness of the drawer, and the fact that as of yet, the buttons and spectacles have *not* been reclaimed. They are still fallen and misplaced. The whole that *might* be assembled is a flash of light in a room that is overwhelmingly shadowed by the unspoken *might not*. In this case, despite their potential to speak, objects remain silent, acting as better representations of the loss itself than what was desired to be remembered. The potential for the drawer to become a whole is another way of saying that its immediate condition is fragmented and incomplete. What does a candlestick really have? What does a ball of twine mean? The possibility for these inconsequential trifles to become lucid necessitates Ruth to hang onto a vast universe of “things” that also ensure that she is forever swimming against a current of randomness, meaninglessness, and the embodiment of loss. By holding onto all these objects, the absence of completion remains the foremost presence.

The futility of this struggle puts one at odds against the very nature of our selves. Our consciousness and our capacity for memory necessitates that we create narratives, deeply inadequate though they often seem. Emerson writes on the death of his son, “Well, souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and

the things we aim at and converse with. Grief too will make us idealists. [...] I cannot get it nearer to me” (*Experience* 473). The incapacity for consciousness to ever touch the forces that shape it can leave one with an incredible sense of isolation and powerlessness. The character in *Housekeeping* who seems to know this best is Ruth’s Aunt Sylvie. “Sylvie, on her side, inhabited a millennial present. To her the deteriorations of things were always a fresh surprise, a disappointment not to be dwelt on” (94). With a fierce denial of the incapability of her consciousness, Lucille disavows the past and moves forward aggressively. Ruth stagnates under her compulsion to look-backward. Sylvie, perceiving that both searches for meaning are ultimately useless, becomes almost an object herself without past or future.

Much has been written on the character of Sylvie and the breaching of human boundaries. Ethereal Sylvie, with her proclivity for darkness, coldness, and water over the more life-conducive elements of light, heat, and land, seems to wander effortlessly between the realms of the living and the lost. Christine Carver, in “Nothing Left to Lose: *Housekeeping’s* Strange Freedoms” associates Sylvie with the part of Ruth’s consciousness that longs for death as a way of rejoining the whole from which she feels outcast. “Because Sylvie represents all that this family cannot articulate or resolve, Ruth’s complete acceptance of her suggests that she has surrendered her identity to a grief without time [or] space” (Carver, 126). Carver’s reading of Sylvie suggests that Sylvie’s way of coping with loss and displacement is not to try to find centering locating narratives, but rather to give up an essentially human quality—the desire to make meaning at all.

This is Sylvie’s concern: in a world where millions of fragments are left behind when a family is broken, why should people be the only ones to follow our losses to the underworld, swimming upstream against the changes and losses that are thrust upon us? Sylvie, as close a model to non-being as mortally possible, engenders these thoughts in

Ruth's mind. "Why must we be left, the survivors picking among flotsam, among the small, unnoticed, unvalued clutter that was all that remained when they vanished, that only catastrophe made notable?" (116). When individual identity is so entwined with the thing or person that has vanished, what are the survivors but another variety of flotsam? It may seem as if we too are capable of becoming objects without symbolism, the signifier devoid of a signified. Sylvie's ghostly ability to permeate and dissolve boundaries, while maintaining just enough substance to keep from fading into non-humanity entirely makes her one of the most remarkable characters of contemporary literature. Under Sylvie's influence, Ruth begins to experiment with Sylvie's method of matching loss that is taken with a loss that is given. She describes the night she and Lucille spent in the woods:

[Lucille] would say I fell asleep, but I did not. I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones. [...] Darkness is the only solvent. [...] it seemed to me that there need be not relic, remnant, margin, residue, memento, bequest, memory, thought, track, or trace, if only the darkness could be perfect and permanent. (116)

Nothing in this world is permanent. Things and people come and go with a timing that is beyond our control. By allowing the darkness of inside and outside to pass freely and without barrier is a way of striving for completion that is otherwise impossible. What is not wrested from us, we will freely give. After all, "It is better to have nothing, for at last even our bones will fall. It is better to have nothing" (Robinson 159). Emphasizing this moment in the novel, Carver argues that Ruth's search for identity is ultimately relinquished when she chooses to follow Sylvie into a life of transient drifting. This is a crucial moment in the novel, however, this reading is one that places too great an emphasis on the cold and dark elements of *Housekeeping*. If Robinson dwells on the pursuit of unconsciousness that the teachings of Sylvie encourage, it is to illuminate the machinations of consciousness that ultimately will not be suppressed in Ruth.

Though the desire to eliminate lack and wanting by becoming object-like is a powerful one, it is the presence of divinity within the human being—the essential unobjectiveness of consciousness that cannot be eradicated—that Robinson celebrates in a quiet and contemplative way. Thomas Gardiner makes a case for this in “Enlarging Loneliness,” a reading of *Housekeeping* that relies on Emily Dickinson’s aesthetics and philosophical foot-paths. Gardiner calls upon this passage from *Housekeeping*:

Because, once alone, it is impossible to believe that one could ever have been otherwise. Loneliness is an absolute discovery. When one looks from inside at a lighted window, or looks from above at the lake, one sees the image of oneself among trees and sky—the deception is obvious, but flattering all the same. When one looks from the darkness into the light, however, one sees all the difference between here and there. (157-8)

Gardiner writes, “Having been out in the dark, Ruth knows there is something beyond the limits of the lit world: call it a ‘Druidic Difference’, a world ‘not me, not like me, not mine’” (15). Playing with the boundaries of how far one can move into realms without light and sustenance, an act embodied by the night spent on the lake with Sylvie, does not facilitate a merging of elements. Quite oppositely, it exaggerates the characteristics of human consciousness that prohibit merging from occurring. In lighted, and warm spaces, our own body temperature goes unnoticed. Like the perceptively increased luminosity of a dim light in total blackness, we only consider the heat of our own bodies when it is thrown into contrast against a cold so inhibiting that it must be inhuman. For this reason, though the darkness tempts Ruth into a fantasy of non-being, it is actually the illusion of warmth and light within the house that risks eliminating Ruth. The light threatens perilous invisibility while the darkness offers salvation through contrast.

When Melville writes, “[No] man can ever feel his own identity aright except his eyes be closed; as if darkness indeed the proper element of our essences, though light be more congenial to our clayey part” (851), he points explicitly to this paradox. Though we see

ourselves most clearly in the dark—it is not a condition conducive for nurturing the life that we find. We live in houses. In a world where we are not objects, where consciousness envelops us in heat and divides us from the chill of meaninglessness, how will we decide to keep house? Houses are passed down from mother to daughter, bequeathed and cluttered museums of unarchived moments and the ghosts of events. Our birthrights are contained between four walls, a collected disconnectedness that aspires to history. Even Sylvie, unable to loose herself from the infinite anchors of objects and things considers “accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping” (180). Yet the “storage of cans and newspapers [are] things utterly without value”—and perhaps not so different from any of the other objects that remain silent in the impending accusation of their own arbitrariness.

Ruth’s grandmother was a religious woman who conceived of Heaven as “some plain house where one went in an was greeted by respectable people and was shown to a room where everything one had ever lost or put aside was gathered together, waiting” (10). The remarkable transformation of objects into history is not a metamorphosis meant for the living—it is precisely the insular quality of being alive that prohibits us from finding community among mute and static things. Invisible to the eye, mattresses grow heavier with microscopic fragments of dust and the shedding of our own cellular pieces. Houses grow heavy with the unsloughed remnants of our own passage through time.

In the house is a wardrobe, painted by Ruth’s grandfather with pictures and scenes economically wiped out and painted white. “Each of these designs had been thought better of and painted out, but over years the white paint had absorbed them, floated them up just beneath the surface” (90). If the object contains a story, it can only suggest from underneath opaque surfaces what it cannot tell. What can we do with impermeable membranes and masked shapes? The wardrobe grows thick and unmovable with its own obstructed



expression and solidifies, tomblike, in the corners of the places we live. It is amazing that the structures of our houses do not petrify under the conditions of their dead histories.

[For] the appearance of relative solidity in my grandmother's house was deceptive. It was an impression created by the piano, and the scrolled couch, and the bookcases full of almanacs and Kipling and Defoe. For all the appearance these things gave of substance and solidity, they might better be considered a dangerous weight on a frail structure. (Robinson, 159)

Here Ruth suggests that there is something essential within the house actually in opposition to the lifelessness of things. Our real homes are more than the sum of our infinite objects, and accumulation risks the suffocation of this essence lost amid the clutter. To lose something within one's home is a maddening experience. The certainty of the lost object's existence paired with the habit and acculturation of experience in a familiar place can make a perfectly obvious misplacement hopelessly invisible. We stop seeing the objects themselves; even in our present moment we see the memory of how we expect them to be. I cannot find a ring I've misplaced because it should be on a table where I always put it. In actuality, it is in plain sight on top of a dresser mere feet away, but my expectations have blinded me to the reality of my experience. In my waking present moment, I am locked into my past. No less invisible is the mislaid essence of the home for which Ruth searches when she says, "it seemed that something I had lost might be found in Sylvie's house" (124).

In this situation, no amount of cleaning or organizing can call forth the specter of the house. How will we keep our houses? We will burn them down.

For even things lost in a house abide like forgotten sorrows and incipient dreams, and many household things are of purely sentimental value, like the dim coil of thick hair, saved from my grandmother's girlhood, which was kept in a hatbox on top of the wardrobe, along with my mother's gray purse. In the equal light of disinterested scrutiny such things are not themselves. They are transformed into pure object, and are horrible, and must be burned. (209)

The dominant reading of the end of the novel is one of renunciation. By burning the house Ruth is read to have given up her history, the normative expectations of domestic womanhood, a desire for permanence, and ultimately her identity—I would like to suggest that the opposite is true. Ruth is not burning down her home, she is burning down her house. By burning the objects, she's liberating their essence. By asserting power over the objective world, she is embracing the subjective world in a somber celebration of consciousness and individual identity. Ruth commits arson against not simply the house, but a former identity of loss defined by unreachable objective truths. She knows now that the fragments will not combine into a whole, but rather each fragment will become its own whole, herself most importantly. "Every last thing would turn to flame and ascend, so cleanly would the soul of the house escape" (212).

After the burning of the house, Sylvie and Ruth decide to flee the town they only way they can—they cross the bridge over the lake by foot and hop a train moving west. To read the burning of the house as an act of destruction is to ignore the final Orphic turn the novel makes. It is as if Robinson were rewriting the fate of Eurydice, "I followed after Sylvie with slow, long, dancers steps [...]. I could barely see Sylvie. I could barely see where I put my feet. Perhaps it was only the certainty that she was in front of me, and that I need only put my foot directly before me" (211). Both escape because neither looks back. Like Thoreau walking westward—in the east lies only the past—the burning of the house sets both women in a direction of futurity that neither has traveled before. Ruth for the first time feels certainty. She has stopped looking for what can be seen, and has begun to rely upon what she can sense.

In consequence of this pivotal turning from the past to the future, the final section of the novel diverges from everything that has come before; the novel ends in the present

tense. A return to Emerson's question: *Where do we find ourselves?* Ruth says, "I know my life would be much different if I could ever say, This I have learned from my senses, while that I have merely imagined" (216). This is not the lament of an individual—this is a condition of existence. *Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion.* A grandfather's accident, a mother's decision, a grandmother's passing, the great aunts' refusal, a sister's divergence: "All this is fact. Fact explains nothing. On the contrary, it is fact that requires explanation" (217). And so Ruth, survived from the wreck, explains. To this point, she has told us what she thinks she knows, growing the fragments, knitting a story that is half itself and half its expression. However, once here in the present, the real wholeness comes from her ability not simply to construct what has been, but what is *being* and *will be*. Objects that are lost within sight are found when we can perceive—and create—our present. Ruth speculates on the fate of the house while she wanders with Sylvie:

We cannot see [the house] from the tracks. Someone is living there. Someone has pruned the apple trees and taken out the dead ones and restrung the clothesline and patched the shed roof. Someone plants sunflowers and giant dahlias at the foot of the garden. I imagine it is Lucille. (216)

Seen this way, objective truths no longer paralyze Ruth, turning her into a pillar of salt as she anxiously scans her past. She cannot see the house—she does not know. Yet, someone *is* living there. Not only is someone living there, but someone is living there elaborately, and that someone is Lucille. This is an authorship of the present that does not rely upon facts—which mean so little in the end—but rather upon truths that are our own. Emerson writes:

Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say, 'It is in me, and shall out.' Stand there, baulked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until, at last, rage draw out of thee that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own. (Emerson 467).

Doubt always lingers. Doubts of origins, doubts of facts, doubts of purpose, doubts of self.

We question our experience every day. *What have I seen, what have I seen?* But this is why we

sing the songs and tell our tales. *Housekeeping* leaves us with a final scene, as real as it is dreamed.

Imagine Lucille in Boston, at a table in a restaurant, waiting for a friend. She is tastefully dressed—wearing, say, a tweed suit with an amber scarf at the throat to draw attention to the red in her darkening hair. Her water glass has left two-thirds of a ring on the table, and she works at completing the circle with her thumbnail. Sylvie and I *do not* flounce in the door, [...] we *do not* sit down, [...] my mother, likewise, *is not* there, [...] My grandfather, with his hair combed flat against his brow, *does not* examine the menu [...]. We *are nowhere* in Boston. [Lucille] *will never* find us there, [...] the perimeters of our wandering *are nowhere*. No one watching this woman [...] could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she *does not* watch, *does not* listen, *does not* wait, *does not* hope, and *always* for me and Sylvie. (219, emphasis mine)

Do not, is not, does not, are nowhere, will never. Before not, nowhere, and never are do, is, does, and are. Before any of these things can “be not” they must “be.” In order to see this scene then, to know what *is* not, we imagine every negated detail occurring. In the moment that Sylvie does not flounce through the door, we see her walk in. We know nothing except through contrast, and in her absence, she will appear. As thinking is not distinguishable from dreaming, these stories complete each other and neither is untrue. Absence is presence, and stories—the substitutes for events—become our truths. Truths become wholes, always fragments, always complete. *Where do we find ourselves?* Not and always in a house, not and always in a town, not and always in the lake, not and always in a family, not and always in our words, not and always in the mind.

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