‘The Empty Mirror’: Selfhood and Transparency in Marilynne Robinson’s Housekeeping


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Nietzsche places this declaration right at the beginning of his *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) as an unequivocal statement of fact. It contains, for him, the central problem of what it means to be human: the near impossibility of genuine self-knowledge. As a prophet of postmodernity, Nietzsche saw a profound correlation between conceptions of God and conceptions of self. As Mark C. Taylor has highlighted, “the death of God finds its completion in the death of selfhood” and Nietzsche, the first to articulate the divine passing, was also the first to see how the blood spilled in the murder would necessarily colour how the self is to be thought post-mortem (Taylor 89). This connection between God and self was also observed by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), the atheist thinker celebrated in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* (2004) for his joyous pursuit to the limits of human understanding of God and theology. Feuerbach, decades before Nietzsche articulated his theory of the death of God, perceived a link between what theologians say of the divine and what is to be found inwardly, within the speaker. Indeed for him theology was merely mystified anthropology, religious beliefs a product of projection onto a heavenly tabula rasa (Feuerbach 1-10). In this Feuerbach is demythologising an insight of Calvin’s who, like Nietzsche, opens his *Institutes* with a statement on self-knowledge: “[o]ur wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves” (Calvin 1). For Calvin, Robinson’s theologian, knowledge of God begins with knowledge of self. The problem of gaining self-knowledge, of coming to a sufficient level of self-understanding, then, is an issue that unites disparate strands of Western thought, bringing together Reformation theology, nineteenth-century continental philosophy and the entire enterprise of psychoanalysis as disciplines that place this issue right at the heart of their existence, though their approaches and foundational assumptions may differ radically. With the central problem of self-knowledge in mind, Marilynne Robinson’s first novel *Housekeeping* (1980) becomes a distinctive exploration of the issue, situated, as will be developed, in a Freudian landscape of repression, doubles, repetition and suicide, a fictive setting in which God is dead and the transparency of the self is reflected in the absence of any kind of transcendent reality. The Freudian reading presented here of *Housekeeping* is by no means incidental. The text, when read in light of Robinson’s non-fiction and its explicit critique of Freud, encourages an exploration of its imagery that pays close attention to the Freudian theory it evokes. Freud, working and writing in the aftermath of Nietzsche’s madman is the figure Robinson most fiercely critiques in her essays, arguing, “Freud’s star has dimmed, at last. But his theories were propagated so widely for so long, with so great a degree of certainty of their value, that they

survive the demise of his reputation and flourish among us as received truths” (Robinson, “Darwinism” 58). Demonstrating Robinson’s rejection of Freud begins in this negative exploration of his impact in her first novel, this article will examine how Ruth, Robinson’s protagonist, in lieu of any kind of transcendent reality, seeks to overcome her lack of identity through language. This activity results in the text *Housekeeping* becoming itself a means to reflect Ruth’s ‘self’ back to her, allowing her to see herself, distinct from a history of defection, maternal absence, and absolute passivity.

**Selfhood and Mirrors**

Weintraub has rightly noted the pervasive Freudian imagery of *Housekeeping* and the implications of this use of Freud now need to be sketched with reference to Robinson’s wider project. This article reads *Housekeeping*’s Freudian imagery as an exploration of a world in which transcendence is not permitted existence and, as a result, the novel’s protagonist must seek an alternative source of redemption, in language. Robinson is very clear that Freud was instrumental in the collapse in theological and metaphysical thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, stating, If I had to propose a date for the event [the death of metaphysics], a moment in which this old habit was put aside, I would say it occurred when European thought turned from epistemology and ontology to politics and parascience—and when Freud was creating his great narrative about the nature of the mind. (Robinson, *Absence of Mind* 99)

Robinson is clear there is a causal link between the collapse of transcendence threaded through Freud’s work to a total collapse of selfhood, as his “[a]ccount of human origins goes very far towards describing an anti-metaphysics, proposing an encapsulated self with as few ties to a larger reality as are consistent with its survival” (100). *Housekeeping*, then, is a text that bears the marks of the death of God through a sustained engagement with Freud’s vision of the human. The novel is an imaginative exploration of a landscape in which the divine has passed away and Ruth, abandoned by mother and father, finds her ‘self’ a vacant space, a collapse in self-knowledge mediated through a vision of the individual that bears the nuances of a Freudian anthropology. This article, in developing a reading sensitive to Robinson’s engagement with Freudian ideas, detects a causal relation between the use of repression, the uncanny and the death drive and Ruth’s own sense of invisibility.

Robinson sets up the crisis of selfhood in the text as one of ontological transparency. Beginning from a seemingly confident statement of self-assertion—“[m]y name is Ruth”—the narrator goes on to describe her existence as one that barely qualifies for the term, a pervasive limpidity leaking into every self-conception (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 3). As the text develops, Ruth’s self-conception (or lack of) becomes clear, literally, as a transparent self. Imagining what her aunt thinks of her, Ruth writes, “[s]he did not wish to remember me. She much preferred my simple, ordinary presence, silent and ungainly though I might be […] She could forget I was in the room” (195). For Ruth, “[i]t was a relief to go to Latin class, where I had a familiar place in a human group, alphabetically assigned” simply because dissolving into a predetermined order reflects her sense of an interior nothingness (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 136). Asked by her aunt what she thinks, Ruth’s ”confession” that “I suppose I don’t know what I think” “was a source of both terror and comfort” as it compounds her realisation that she “often seemed invisible—incompletely and minimally existent” (105). Indeed if Descartes rooted his belief in his own existence in thinking, it is telling that Ruth is unaware even of her own thoughts. On Sylvie’s arrival Ruth is negatively defined, “[y]ou’re Ruthie. And you’re Lucille. Lucille has the lovely red hair” (45). Ruth here is ‘not Lucille’, she isn’t simply ‘Ruth’. Her minimal existence reflects the
ghostly transients that haunt Fingerbone, hiding under railroad bridges, neither here nor there, their lives making no real dent on the landscapes in which they find themselves.

In place of the theological framework of the Gilead novels, Robinson saturates her principal character here in Freudian theory. In so doing Robinson has the means to explore the impact of Freud’s ideas on conceptions of the human self, an effect that, as will be noted, Robinson sees as excessively reductionist and needlessly negative. Ruth’s personal history, recounted in the text with an almost journalistic disinterest, includes a maternal suicide, a paternal defection and the death of her grandmother. Throughout the text, details of her mother (the colour of her hair, the colour of her car) are memories that cannot be agreed upon with her sister. The emotional repression of her mother’s death, figured in the blurring of these incidental details, is also highlighted by her lack of grief in the first half of the text and her refusal to use the words ‘death’ or ‘dead’, her preference for euphemistic phrases like “came to rest” or “eschewed awakening” point to the reality of repression at work within Ruth (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 29, 164). Her building of a maternal figure out of snow, a mother that would inevitably melt back into the lake, works as a repetitive replaying of her mother’s own disappearance. Helen is both literally and psychologically repressed in the text. At once submerged in both the lake and Ruth’s unconscious, she perpetually threatens to rise to the surface of the psyche and, in so doing, produces the uncanny effect of her own double in Sylvie. Indeed as Ruth engages with the absence of her mother more and more, she increasingly conflates the identity of Helen and Sylvie, the repression of grief resulting ultimately in the projection of the absent mother onto the transient aunt, a literal return of the repressed.

Robinson’s placing of Ruth within a Freudian anthropological framework gives rise to her clear and haunting experience of the uncanny and, as a replacement maternal figure, Sylvie is the terminal around which the *unheimlich* revolves, literally as a representation of the ‘unhomely’ in her privileging of nature over the domestic. However, beyond this she, as Ruth reveals, “began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to displace it” (53).

As Sylvie and Ruth form an uncanny triangle with the deceased Helen, the repetitive motif of suicide surfaces as the three figures circle the lake in various ways, evoking Freudian notions of repetition and the impulse toward death. Ruth’s mother, drowned at the bottom of the lake, draws the other two females towards her, literally in both cases, with Ruth’s frequent visits to the lake and Sylvie’s attraction to the bridge that oversees the water. The repetitive visits Ruth makes to the lake take on increasingly dark resonances as the force that pulls her there is revealed to be connected to the suicidal impulse that drew Helen to its depths. In a typical passage, Ruth imagines her own fate whilst out on the lake in a boat with Sylvie:

*Say that water lapped over the gunwales, and I swelled and swelled until I burst Sylvie’s coat. Say that the water and I bore the rowboat down to the bottom and I, miraculously, monstrously, drank water into all my pores until the last black cranny of my brain was a trickle, a spillet.* (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 162)

Robinson’s protagonist is, in line with Robinson’s reading of Freud, “[e]ncapsulated, engrossed by an interior drama of which [she] cannot be consciously aware” (Robinson, *Absence of Mind* 105). She is a Freudian self, incapable of genuine self-knowledge; an individual governed by forces operating beneath her conscious mind.

Whilst space prevents a full Freudian reading of *Housekeeping*, it is necessary to note a few features of the text to support the notion that the novel bears a distinctly Freudian anthropological vision, a conception of selfhood that is, in Robinson’s worldview, arbitrarily reductionist. “If there is one thing Freud asserts consistently, from which every theory proceeds and to which every conclusion returns, it is just this—that the mind is *not* to be trusted,” notes
Robinson. In locating the mutually exclusive presuppositions she and Freud bring to questions of selfhood, Robinson’s emphasis on a theologically infused individual freedom clashes directly with Freud’s psychological determinism (Robinson, Absence of Mind 105). For Robinson, the tradition of which Freud is an archetype is one that encourages the view that the ‘self’ is an illusion and that the beliefs, values, and ethical commitments a person holds are, at best, ‘illusory’, resulting in a reduced vision of what it means to be human, generating all too many reasons for persons to doubt their own experience of themselves. For, as Robinson argues, “[t]he self is no longer assumed to be a thing approached with optimism, or to be trusted to see anything truly,” and she sees Freud as instrumental in this development (xviii). This is exactly what is presented in the text of Housekeeping. Immersed in Freudian theory, Ruth is ensnared in a crisis of selfhood that manifests itself in a transparency that precludes her from self-understanding.

Freud’s work, as Robinson conceives of it, is relatively unsurprising when understood in the philosophic context from which it sprung. Working and writing as he was during a surge of interest in evolutionary theory, Freud “takes Darwinism to have disposed of the old prejudice that set humankind apart from the animals” (Robinson, Absence of Mind 90). In this context, and particularly in the wake of Feuerbach and Nietzsche, he was given little encouragement to view the human as participating in any kind of larger, grander vision of Reality. With the challenge to metaphysics in the nineteenth century, Freud was consistent with his context in placing the human firmly in the animal world, free from the religious vocabulary of morality and separate altogether from any notion of ‘soul’. As Nietzsche puts it, “[w]hatever a theologian feels to be true must be false: this is almost a criterion of truth” (Nietzsche, The Portable Nietzsche 576) and Freud, an equally anti-theological figure, declares, in The Future of an Illusion (1927), “[r]eligion […] is the universal human obsessional neurosis” (55). As Robinson reads him, Freud makes clear that the mind is not to be trusted, that humans are, at base, vicious and cruel, and that the self is, as it is experienced moment to moment, an illusion. As Robinson argues, Freud envisions a self compelled by unconscious urges, sexual (in the broadest sense) in nature, “the unacknowledged core of archaic frustration and guilt at the centre of subjective experience which baffles and misleads conscious awareness” (Robinson, Absence of Mind 105). She counters this in her argument that far from being statements of scientific observation, these assertions arise primarily from a worldview influenced heavily by Darwin and the anti-metaphysicians. Robinson argues, “[p]rior to any statement about the mind is an assumption about the nature of the reality of which it is part” (31), and it is this link, between theorising the mind, the self, and the reality it participates in, that highlights Freud’s insistence on an ‘encapsulated self’, totally stranded from anything beyond its own mind. Whilst Housekeeping does not present Ruth as a typical Freudian neurasthenic, it does explore the reduction of the self that takes place in his work and as such, the novel engages in a negative exploration of a philosophy Robinson herself rejects and goes on to counter in her more positive and theological approach to selfhood in Gilead (2004), Home (2008), and Lila (2014).

This diminished self is figured in the scene that plays out in the basement of the house, a sequence that connects Ruth’s invisibility, her experience of the death of her mother, and Nietzsche’s death of God. Ruth, having followed Sylvie down to the darkness with all candles having been extinguished by the fierce wind, begins to call out for Sylvie in the obscurity. In the period of intervening silence Ruth experiences a particularly poignant example of her ‘minimal existence’. She describes the event: “[d]eprived of all perspective and horizon, I found myself reduced to an intuition” (Robinson, Housekeeping 70, emphasis added). Here Ruth experiences a mode of existence that is consistent with her self-conception, as she comments, “[w]hen we did
not move or speak, there was no proof we were there at all” (70). Robinson interrogates the very notion of ‘being’ here (or there), questioning the parameters enclosing the murky term ‘existence’ and asks the question: as Ruth fades out of the sensible world in the basement, can she really be said to exist at all? The absence of God and of mother is mirrored in Ruth’s sense of invisibility. When Nietzsche’s madman experienced the death of God, he noted the dissolution of perimeters, the opening up of space into a cold and vast infinity, declaring, “[a]re we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?” (Nietzsche, The Portable Nietzsche 181). Ruth confronts a similar experience in the basement, noting that “[t]he wind and water brought sounds from any imaginable distance” (Robinson, Housekeeping 70). Where Nietzsche experiences God’s death, Ruth confronts the absence of her mother, both of which lead to a sense of infinite space and, in experiencing the disappearance of Sylvie, Ruth re-experiences her mother’s death. “Even the illusions of perimeters fail when families are separated”, notes Ruth (198). Her awareness of a limitless space enveloping her in the basement and of the disappearance of the self are the sensual symptoms of the resurgence of the suicide of Helen, and merge with Nietzsche’s madman in his imaginative engagement with the implications of the death of God. Notably, following this scene Ruth increasingly begins to conflate Sylvie and her mother, the basement scene inaugurating a blurring of identity boundaries that leads to Ruth consciously identifying Sylvie as Helen, as she describes, “[t]he faceless shape in front of me could as well be Helen herself as Sylvie. I spoke to her by the name Sylvie, and she did not answer. Then how was I to know? And if she were Helen in my sight, how could she not be Helen in fact?” (166). The uncanny effect produced here in the identity confusion arises, as Freud himself argues, “[w]hen the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes” (150). Freud’s comment speaks directly to Ruth’s experience, the symbol (Sylvie) taking on the full significance of what, for Ruth, she symbolises (Helen), resulting in Sylvie’s transformation into the double of Ruth’s mother. It is telling that this scene in the basement ends with Sylvie comforting Ruth, patting her shoulder saying, “It’s alright, Lucille”, inducing the reply from Ruth, “I’m not Lucille” (Robinson, Housekeeping 70). The connection between the death of God and the death of the self is subtly gestured towards here: Ruth’s disappearance and Sylvie’s inability to distinguish between her nieces connecting Ruth’s awareness of absence with her own invisibility, produced always by the absence of both God and mother.

The ‘reduced’ Ruth is described in the text as possessing a complete lack of self-reflection, literal as well as psychological. The novel itself is, as Bessedik has noted, full of reflective surfaces: the lake itself, evening darkened windows, and a number of actual mirrors (570). Ruth imagines herself looking through windows from the outside, staring in at a family scene absent from her own history or experience. When she cannot look through a blackened window, she equally cannot see her own reflection, the mirror-like surface becoming “warped and bubbled”, or “warped as water” (Robinson, Housekeeping 188, 86). Whilst it is unclear whether it is the windows themselves that are distorted or if it is Ruth’s self-perception, she cannot get a glimpse of herself. In addition, the surface of the lake and the image that mirrors carry always revolve around Helen, a haunting fact made explicit by Ruth: “Helen is the woman in the mirror, the woman in the dream, the woman remembered, the woman in the water” (132). Ruth, in this extended metaphor, sees her mother in place of herself, a link that makes the pervasive presence of Thanatos within her and the text explainable in Freudian terms and, as will be discussed, situates her own crisis of selfhood in Lacanian territory.
Lacan’s concept of the ‘mirror stage’ marries interestingly with Robinson’s novel. As he would have it, the sight of oneself in the reflection in a mirror is a symbolic event that begins the movement towards owning an individual identity for a child, distinct from its mother, the self seen for the first time as an integrated whole. Of course this is precisely the opposite of what occurs in Ruth’s experience, the uncanny tripling of Helen onto Sylvie and onto Ruth means that to look at either woman necessarily means looking at Helen. Reflection as a means to separate oneself from maternal possession, then, is not possible for Ruth, her mind and self-conception being so bound up with her mother, her suicide, and her absence that any notion of self distinct from her is an impossibility. The absence of Helen necessitates the absence of self for Ruth and her ontological transparency is the product of her tendency to conflate her identity with that of her mother, her sister and, as the text progresses, her aunt Sylvie. Rather than actively set upon the task of self-creation, Ruth passively assimilates herself into those she finds herself closest to, revealing, “I feel no reluctance to speak of Lucille and myself almost as a single consciousness”, and later, “Sylvie and I (I think that at night we were almost a single person)” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 98, 209). The reader is confronted with a narrator who is aware of her own emptiness, has no notion of God and cannot conceive of her ‘self’ apart from a history of absence and defection. With no transcendent reality operating above Ruth’s mind, she turns, within the text of the novel, to language as a replacement source of selfhood.

**Language**

*Housekeeping* sets up a crisis of selfhood situated firmly in the results of the nineteenth century philosophical territory in which Freud was working; a context in which the self was under attack from within theology, continental philosophy and the burgeoning enterprise of psychoanalysis. Robinson subtly explores the effect of the supposed death of God on selfhood through engagement with Freud, one of the most prominent thinkers who took on the task of rethinking the self in the aftermath of Nietzsche’s declaration. Robinson’s novel has no notion of transcendence; indeed there is nothing that exists beyond Ruth’s imagination and experience. With this in mind then, Ruth’s solution to the problem of invisibility articulated above, must, as will be developed, be found in language. Thomas Gardner’s piece “Enlarging Loneliness” has provided a thorough and thoughtful consideration of language in the text of *Housekeeping* and it is on his observations that the conclusion to this article is constructed.

*Housekeeping*, writes Gardner, “picks up on a set of images first put into play by Emily Dickinson and unfolds them in a new situation, examining the world they make visible” (11). Ruth, in the text of *Housekeeping*, becomes the poet of her own history, constructing a reality out of the fragmentary, using images and words to build a world and conception of self that functions as the reflective surface lacking in her landscape. Ruth, as a solution to her reduced self and empty reflection, must turn to language in search of identity as *Housekeeping* is a text that necessitates the link between the death of God and the privileging of language. This link is present in contemporary theologies and Robinson writes it imaginatively in *Housekeeping*, proving Taylor’s assertion that, “[t]he death of God, the disappearance of the Father, is the birth of the Son, the appearance of the Word—the appearance of language as Sovereign” (Taylor 91). This shift from divine Word to ‘words’ is present in the work of many diverse thinkers in the wake of the death of God: Derridean deconstruction, Nietzschean aesthetics, and contemporary radical theology. Taylor, himself a postmodern theologian, argues that the death of God meant “the narrative thread [of the world] unravelled leaving a text to be interpreted in place of a story to be uncovered” (90). He goes on, “since the world text no longer had an authoritative author who
established its intrinsic intelligibility, interpretation by necessity became creative rather than imitative” (90). The death of God inaugurates a hermeneutic imperative: where the text of reality once bore the inscription of absolute authority, the removal of the divine necessitates the creative engagement of the individual to create meaning out of chaos. In theological language, the absence of the Johnannine Word become flesh means the task of every individual interpreter is to ensure the enshlement of words by themselves, for themselves. In this way meaning is to be extracted and shaped from the otherwise nihilistic raw materials of a godless cosmos.

Robinson herself declares, “I think it is past time to put aside other business and turn our energies to the remystification of virtually everything” (“About Books”). Here she is specifically reacting against a pervasive strain of contemporary thought (found in Nietzsche and Freud, mediated through the logical positivists, and currently present in contemporary new atheism and scientism as she sees it), that is fundamentally reductionist in its implicit argument that only that which can be grasped in precise language is real, meaningful, and true. She continues,

We cannot in good faith sketch serpents in where the cartography of our understanding frays. But perhaps we can develop language that will acknowledge that it does fray, and where it does, and that those things we do not understand are not mere gaps to be closed by extensions of existing ways of thinking, but are sphinxes, riddles, their solutions likely to be astonishing and full of implication. (“About Books”) For Robinson, as for Ruth, language does its job of opening onto meaning precisely when it lets go of narrow questions of apparent accuracy or veracity. As noted, Ruth’s sensibility is altogether poetic, and it is in her turning to poetics that her philosophy of language and her solution to the problem of selfhood is made evident.

With a word, Genesis reveals, Creation was spoken into existence and, in the absence of such theological truths, Ruth embodies this for herself, describing events and times she surely would have had no knowledge of, by writing them into existence. For example, Ruth’s apparent omniscience extends far into the past preceding her birth, of the lives of her mother, aunts, and grandmother: “[a]fter their father’s death, the girls hovered around her, watched everything she did, followed her through the house, got in her way” (Robinson, Housekeeping 10). Not only does Ruth write about events she has not experienced, she also feels the creative freedom to inhabit the mind of another. Speaking of her grandmother she writes, “[w]hen she had been married a little while, she concluded that love was half a longing of a kind that possession did nothing to mitigate” (12). She records poetically the quality of an experience she never had, noting, “time and space and light grew still again and nothing seemed to tremble, and nothing seemed to lean” (15). Ruth conjures the effect of an event that pre-existed her with the confidence of a poet and, as Gardner has demonstrated, engages in empathetic invention, writing happenings that, if they occurred or not, nevertheless reveal something meaningful beyond their actuality or invention. Relating another, potentially created, memory of her grandmother’s, Ruth demonstrates her own impulse to create meaning through language, noting, “[s]o the wind that billowed her sheets announced to her the resurrection of the ordinary” (17). This ‘resurrection of the ordinary’, almost an ironic utterance given the novel's lack of genuine faith, is an interpretative effort on the part of Ruth, evidence of her imaginative engagement with both world and memory, an engagement that is ultimately aimed towards constructing a reflection of herself, her history and her family.

Ruth is not on her own here, nor is her creativity without precedence. Edmund, her grandfather, was the first of the family to engage in the disregard for the porous line distinguishing fact and imagination, meaning and truth. Introducing this aspect of her grandfather’s character, Ruth notes, “[h]e painted many more mountains, none of them
identifiable if any of them were real” and she concludes, “whether the genius of this painting was ignorance or fancy I could never decide” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 4). Ruth inherits her grandfather’s creative impulses, her tendency to perceive “pictures, images in places where images never were, in marble, in the blue net of veins at my wrists, in the pearled walls of seashells” (90). This admission follows a description of some furniture once built by Edmund on which he had painted designs (a hunting scene, a peacock, a wreath). Ruth imagines these ornamentations “had been thought better of” and painted over (90). Despite this though, “over the years the white paint had absorbed them, floated up just beneath the surface” (90). Like the presence of Helen and the trauma of her suicide, Edmund’s paintings cannot be successfully blotted out or covered over and, like the submerged paintings, Ruth’s mother continually rises to the surface of the Freudian unconscious, spilling into the conscious mind. More than this, Edmund’s persistent designs also link to Ruth’s poetic mind, the force in the text that abhors a blank canvas and perpetually seeks to fill it in. Ruth herself is aware of this, confessing, “I have never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming. I know my life would be much different if I could ever say, This I have learned from my senses, whilst that I have merely imagined” (215). In the absence of a transcendent source of truth, Ruth disregards the distinction between what is actual and what is imagined for, without God, the imagination becomes sovereign. For Ruth, it seems, reality is created as much as it is experienced, and in the absence of the divine, mother, and grandfather, she seeks to imaginatively engage in the creation of her own reality, sketching herself in poetic language in order to create the self she feels to be absent.

This turn to poetic expression is, as Gardner has convincingly established, an echo of the voice of Emily Dickinson. He argues that Ruth engages in the interior activity of extending a Dickinsonian sensibility beyond the poems to Ruth’s own view of the world. He gives several examples of how Ruth opens up Dickinson’s way of speaking, a project that offers the world to Ruth as a nameable, describable, and relatable phenomenon. He writes, “[a]s Ruth inhabits and gives voice to analogies, she both builds a world for herself in a place of abandonment and extends, by reenacting the manner of speaking, a conversation Dickinson had begun” (31). Building on this, then, metaphor and analogy can be seen to function in the text as replacement mirrors for the ones that do not bear Ruth’s reflection. In her creative writing of her past and present experiences, Ruth creates a relationship between self and text, sketching her own version of herself that exists beyond the shadow of her mother. If Freud created the conditions necessary for the reduction of the self, Ruth finds a way to expand her own self-conception through the redemptive power of language. Like the nineteenth-century writers admired by Robinson (Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson), Ruth reveals a faith in the potency of metaphor for meaning-making and self-construction and, paradoxically, in order to write herself into existence, Ruth has to accept that she is a construction of lack and a product of absence. She tells herself a parable, a tale that mirrors her own story:

> Once there was a young girl strolling at night in an orchard. She came to a house she had never seen before, all alight so that through any window she could see curious ornaments and marvellous comforts. […] Like Noah’s wife on the tenth or fifteenth night of rain, she would stand in the window and realize that the world really was lost.

(Robinson, *Housekeeping* 204)

Ruth, reflecting on her made-up story, writes, “I learned an important thing in the orchard that night, which was that if you do not resist the cold, but simply relax and accept it, you no longer feel the cold as discomfort” (204). She goes on, “[f]or example, I was hungry enough to begin to learn that hunger has its pleasures, and I was happily at ease in the dark, and in general, I could
feel that I was breaking the tethers of need one by one” (204). Ruth’s realisation of lack becomes the impetus for creativity, the nothing of her existence forming the platform for a creation of self almost \textit{ex nihilo}. Commenting on this section of the text, Robinson writes, “[t]here is a kind of exultation about that passage. It’s the pure experience of oneself by stepping out of oneself, in a certain sense. It’s an exultant escape that is a self-rescue” (Gardner 61). Robinson’s phrase ‘self-rescue’ is crucial here, as this is what Ruth is engaged in throughout the text, literally rescuing her ‘self’ from invisibility and setting out on the task of self-making. In this important passage, Ruth finally reaches the conclusion that to exist means to be alone, to be abandoned, and to have to creatively engage in meaning-making. “[My conception] occurred in darkness and I was unconsenting,” says Ruth near the end of the text, exposing her awareness that her own existence was an unchosen fate thrust upon her (Robinson, \textit{Housekeeping} 214). The text of \textit{Housekeeping} exists as the product of the active thought of Ruth and even if much of it is her reporting on her feelings of invisibility, this is her attempt to write herself into being.

In the course of the text Ruth reveals a desire to make sense of the world, even if that means having to create it herself. Arendt comments, “implicit in the urge to speak is the quest for meaning, not necessarily the quest for truth” and this is precisely the case for Ruth in her building of a world and set of memories that are in dubious relation to actuality (99). Arendt goes on, “[t]he sheer naming of things, the creation of words, is the human way of \textit{appropriating} and, as it were, disalienating the world into which, after all, each of us is born as a newcomer and a stranger” (100). Arendt here gives a succinct explanation behind Ruth’s urge to imagine and understand the world through image and metaphor. Implicit within language and speech is the desire to understand, control and master: all capacities absent in Ruth’s experience of life. Language also contains, as seen in \textit{Housekeeping}, the means to house our self-conceptions and provides the raw materials for the creation of a self to counter the one thrust upon us. The close of the novel strongly suggests that Ruth’s attempt at self-rescue ultimately fail, with the headline of the local newspaper declaring “LAKE CLAIMS TWO” (Robinson, \textit{Housekeeping} 213). The lake, either literally or metaphorically, finally swallows Ruth, and, in becoming a ghostly figure, (“When did I become so unlike other people?” Ruth asks her reader) reflecting on her transient existence and inability to connect to anyone beyond Sylvie, she finally resigns herself to invisibility (214). Language, it may be concluded here, is simply not enough to rescue Ruth on its own and, with Robinson’s later fiction in mind, it is ultimately the absence of God that ensures Ruth’s entrapment within a reflection-less self. Robinson goes on in the Gilead novels to explore the apophatic, a reality that exists beyond the reach of conceptual language. Robinson’s writing of the utility of language, tightly connected to her conception of selfhood, is modified in her latter three novels due to the reintroduction of a notion of transcendence. \textit{Housekeeping}, on the other hand, explores the philosophic implications of the death of God through a distinctly Freudian vision of the individual, and the collapse of transcendence on selfhood and language. As her debut novel, it stands in stark contrast to how language and reality are conceived of when God is re-born and transcendence re-introduced in her later texts.

NOTES
1. It is interesting to note than when Ruth does make mention of scripture, her impulse is to treat it as myth, as a story that can be read with poetic licence. “In the newness of the world God was a young man,” asserts Ruth in an extended passage that reads the Creation story and the raising of Lazarus as ancient tales of loss and human despair, not as the foundation for theological doctrine. Indeed Ruth engages with scripture as an existentially symbolic text that
speaks to her own experience of absence, not as a source of transcendent truth (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 194).

WORKS CITED


