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## Facing the Wreck: Death, Optimism, and the Fragmented Form

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Facing the Wreck: Death, Optimism, and the Fragmented Form

Facing the Wreck: Death, Optimism, and the Fragmented Form

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

by

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Wheaton College  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2009

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## ABSTRACT

Walter Benjamin described history as a winged angel who faces backwards, staring perpetually at the past as the violent winds of destiny carry him into the future (*Illuminations*). Despite a western, post-enlightenment myth of eternal progress, the wreckage of human contributions to history is clearly evident in our 21<sup>st</sup>-century understanding of anthropogenic impact on global ecology. In the context of these ecological crises (and the resulting political and economic questions), postmodern novels reveal a powerful ability to imagine different ways of living and interacting with the world. This thesis traces the relationship between fragmentation, death, and liminal experiences through Frederick Buechner's *Godric*, Marilyn Robinson's *Gilead*, and Paul Harding's *Tinkers*. By imagining death as a *khôral* space, both of total openness and total otherness, our connectivity to the seemingly *taut autre* is revealed. *Things* thus take center stage, serving as fragmented but viable *symbolons* which reveal inherent connection and demand sustainable reciprocity. Fragmented narrative structures become symbolons of their own with potential ecological, ethical, and political consequences. Both the detonated forms and each novel's intimacy with impending death require readers to shift their lines of sight and consider the texts from the periphery. The shift to the margins has ethical potential as it encourages the reader to metadiscursively react to their own viewing, ordering, and objectifying practices. These novels begin to suggest new ways that we might, as William Carlos Williams wrote, "reconcile / the people and the stones."

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the great damn state of Arkansas, to all *terra incognita*, and to those who wade in the Fourche Lafave.

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## INTRODUCTION

Miranda: O the heavens!  
What foul play had we, that we came from thence?  
Or blessed was't we did?

Prospero: Both, both, my girl:  
By foul play, as thou say'st, were we heaved thence,  
But blessedly help hither.

-*The Tempest*, Shakespeare (I. II. 55-61)

In the opening scenes of *The Tempest*, the spirit Ariel rouses the sea to a fury at the command of his master, Prospero. Ariel reports that as the sea rose, Prince Ferdinand cried out, “Hell is empty/ And all the devils are here” ( I. II. 14–15). As the boat sinks, the shipwrecked sailors and the audience are ushered into the hellish, sometimes heavenly, otherworld of the island. Both the temporal boundaries of the play and the geographical locale of the island craft a context outside known places or times. Identities are removed or suspended by the riotous shipwreck *Tempest* and the secluded, bounded space of the island; thus all involved are temporarily fixed in a liminal space.

During liminality, individuals “are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (Turner, *The Ritual* 94). In Latin, *limen* indicates the threshold or gateway into a city, a home, or a harbor. During the threshold state of *The Tempest*, each character passes “through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner, *The Ritual* 94). Identifying the island as a liminal space contextualizes Ferdinand’s invocation of hell. During rites of passage, social norms are sloughed off, identities are reshaped, and often, the otherworldly breaks in and forcibly suspends ordinary life (Turner, *The Ritual* 93). When Ferdinand invokes the island as a form of hellish afterlife, he has implicitly identified the island as a liminal zone of both danger and potentiality.



Over 350 years after Shakespeare penned *The Tempest*, George Steiner offered a strikingly similar description of a hell emptied into earth. Steiner describes the World Wars and specifically the atrocities of the Holocaust as Hell made immanent (55). Since the Enlightenment, he argues, the Western mind had increasingly found itself “intolerably deprived and alone in world gone flat” (55). For Steiner, it was most perceptibly, “the mutation of Hell into metaphor [which] left a formidable gap in the coordinates of location, of psychological recognition in the Western mind,” a void which was filled the charms of conspicuous consumption and by brutal totalitarian states (55). “In locating Hell above ground,” he contends, “we have passed out of the major order and symmetries of Western civilization” into a postculture (56).

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Walter Benjamin stood at the geographical center of this earthly hell, when, in 1940, he penned *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Attempting to hide from Nazis collaborators in France and only months away from committing suicide, Benjamin wrote an essay composed of 20 brief vignettes in which he criticizes historical materialism. To display historicism’s flaws, Benjamin offers a study of “Angelus Novus,” an oil print by Paul Klee, as the true representation of history:

[The print] shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees on single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257-258, emphasis original)

As a European Jew, Benjamin was forced to face the wreck of human history. He, like the angel of history, could not look away from the widespread destruction and death that human quests for power and progress had ushered in (see Figure 1, Klee). Benjamin's critique of historical materialism thus implicates all who conceive of time as linear path of continual progress.



Figure 1 (Klee)

Believing that time is a constant stream bringing us toward “redemption” (Benjamin 254) allows for atrocities to be justified in the name of human betterment. It is this conception of time that Benjamin suggests prompted the World Wars and the resulting atrocities.

In light of the past seventy years, some could argue that Benjamin's metaphor of history was overly pessimistic. Hitler was defeated. As the

20<sup>th</sup>-century passed, infectious disease and infant mortality rates plummeted. Radical scientific discoveries made DNA mapping possible, not to mention space travel. The Internet continues to improve education, public health, and democratic process across the globe. It would be foolish to diminish or ignore humanity's amazing innovations and improvements, yet Benjamin's critique is still glaringly necessary. Imagining time as a linear series of improvements still results in atrocities in the name of progress. As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one of the most evident, troubling consequences of this progressive conception of time is our current state of environmental upheaval. Despite our myth of eternal progress, the wreckage of human history is clearly evident in anthropogenic impacts on global ecology.

In *The Natural Contract*, Michel Serres attempts to theorize the near universal acceptance of the rampant destruction of particular landscapes through pesticide and herbicide use, deforestation, and desertification. In addition to the degradation of local landscapes, he details the global consequences of fossil fuel consumption, nuclear radiation, and irresponsible water use. Serres does not locate the root of these problems in an inherent desire for chaos or destruction. Instead, humans rightly desire safer spaces, more land and food for their children, better spots of ground to live in and love. But in the quest for progress, the earth became something that could be directed, controlled, mastered (Serres 11). Thus, due to human influences, “the immemorial, fixed Earth, which provided the conditions and foundations of our lives, is moving; the fundamental Earth is trembling” (Serres 86). Serres argues that a key component of our ecological disregard stems from imagining the earth as our *environment* which signifies, etymologically, something that revolves around a center. Humanity is thereby able to imagine itself “seated at the center of a system of things that gravitate around us, the navel of the universe” (Serres and McCarren 7). We have imagined the world as our environment, merely a tool in the timeline of our progress. What is the consequence of this ego-centric view of time and space? The Anthropocene: a term coined by Eugene F. Stormer to describe a new geological epoch categorized primarily by the changes humans have enacted on the globe.

Just as Benjamin argued that the World Wars were ushered in by a faulty view of time, Serres contends that the Anthropocene resulted from a perceived separation between nature and humans. We have tried to possess the earth and master it and as a consequence “it threatens to master us again in its turn” (Serres and McCarren 7). Similarly, in *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton argues the life-threatening ramifications of our global impacts can be traced from our long standing belief that *we* are subjects while *nature* is composed of objects. We want

to vacation in and take pictures of these objects, not realizing that we are always, already imbedded in a completely natural context. This false binary has allowed us to forget that the future of humanity and the earth are intimately intertwined. Serres argues that we, who he categorizes ironically as “former parasites” of the earth, are now “endangered by the excessive demands placed on [our] hosts, who can neither feed nor house [us] any longer” (Serres and McCarren 7). Serres concludes his argument by offering humanity a single choice for the future with our host: “either death or symbiosis” (Serres and McCarren 7).

Serres’ conclusion is bleak, particularly as it falls into the trap of progressive temporality that Benjamin warns against. If we have been thus unable to create even sustainable symbiosis, what possibly hope have we for future reconstruction? Morton has a different suggestion for a route forward, one that involves both of Serres choices. He argues that “instead of trying to pull the world out of the mud, we could jump down into the mud” (205). Rather than attempting to further dominate the world through conforming it to our future needs, Morton suggests that we might “accept our own death, and the fact of mortality among species and ecosystems” (205). To be willing to imagine our own death is to hold “our mind open for the absolutely unknown that is to come” (205). The possibility of accepting death rather than attempting to overcome it matches Benjamin’s description of the genuine trajectory of history. A wreck has been created; we cannot turn to look at the clear slate of the future for relief from what has come before.

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Morton’s embrace of the “absolute unknown” of our own deaths is perhaps a consequence of postmodernity’s unavoidable intimacy with death. Mark Taylor argues that the consequence of our entrance into Steiner’s flattened, postmodern world is “an overwhelming awareness of death—a death that ‘begins’ with the death of God and ‘ends’ with the death of

ourselves” (7). Taylor employs the language of liminality, so often likened to death or a wilderness, to help define postmodernity as “a time between times and a place which is no place” (7). Steiner and Taylor together describe our contemporary position as unavoidably liminal and, by consequence, inescapably intimate with the threshold of death. The Anthropocene, with its inherent potential for human destruction and as an unavoidable route towards change, further mark our phase in history as liminal. Morton’s suggestion of imagined death as a possible route of growth is a perfect of example of the liminal characteristics of our contemporary position. As we reflect on the position of humanity in such a time of ecological flux, the question of our relationship with death thus comes to the forefront.

During the past two centuries, western thought has had a tempestuous relationship to its own death. The rise of an educated populace ushered in new intimacy with the biological and medical processes of dying. As cities grew more densely populated, the living came into more frequent contact with disease, old age, and the dying. Growing secularization diminished belief in death’s trajectory towards either heaven or hell. In modernist art, death was often portrayed as grisly, strikingly embodied, and as the binary opposite of life. Global economic depressions, the World Wars, and the massive loss of life during the 20<sup>th</sup> century further grounded the modern fear and fascination with an ever impending, often gruesome death. As exemplified by authors such as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway, modernity (and the death inherent therein) is apocalyptic, a ruin, a desolation, or a wasteland. The fragmentation and chaos of life gives way to a physical death, perhaps the only form of peace available. The parched landscape of rocks and words mirrors the devastation of countries, populations, and traditional beliefs experienced during Modernism.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century neared its end, the focus on death shifted from physicality or religiosity toward further death of abstractions. Barthes proclaimed the death of the author, Lyotard praised the death of metanarratives, and Derrida mused on the death of the subject, the self, and identity. Postmodern fiction writers like Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace have further turned readers' attention to the death of traditional forms of belief and notions of identity. Changing forms of art, which for this discussion will be restricted to the novel, have helped to usher in and reflect the death, disruption, and deconstruction of many previously held beliefs. Wholly unreliable narration, narrative fragmentation, cinematic pacing, and polyphony have come to characterize much of the last 30 years of fiction.

However we choose to define the 21<sup>st</sup> century—the Anthropocene, the “time which is no time,” a liminal phase—we must evaluate our current and future relationship to death, both conceptual and embodied. What will be the enduring consequences of the confusions, ambiguities, and disorientations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Is there any type of reconstructive or sustainable growth that can result from the disillusioning complexity of our past understandings of death? Can literature be a useful tool in imagining this relationship to our own death?

*The Tempest* helpfully sets the stage for the ensuing discussion. As the play begins, Prospero reveals his identity to his daughter, Miranda, and allows her to know the full extent of their fall from luxury and power. She responds, “Oh the heavens!/ What foul play had we, that we came from thence? Or blessed was't we did?” (I. II. 55-57). Her father replies, “Both, both, my girl:/ By foul play, as thou say'st, were we heaved thence;/ But blessedly help hither” (I. II. 58-60). The space of blessing and cursing has been collapsed on the island of Prospero and Miranda's exile. Their trials have been severe and their expulsion from previously understood

social categories was complete. Yet the island, as a liminal zone, holds the hope of particular power and opportunity, in addition to its obvious wreckage and evident dangers.

Victor Turner contends that liminality provides the most ontologically stabilizing and orienting force in social structures. Neophytes—those enduring rites of passage—tend to “develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism” (Turner, *The Ritual* 103). In addition to this *communitas*, neophytes may encounter wisdom of “ontological value” which permanently and positively refashions “the very being of the neophyte” (103). The characters of *The Tempest* endure the arduous, leveling “foul play” of a rite of passage which, in turn, develops new patterns of understanding and new forms of being which can only be called blessed. When attempting to dwell fully in our current ecological space, the types of growth suggested in liminality may be capable of acknowledging the wreck of history while productively revealing an arc of death, development, and becoming.

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Contemporary voices in literature fruitfully examine death’s importance in orienting the liminal path of contemporary life. In part, this introduction began with the *Tempest* to demonstrate the liminal potential a play wherein the audience members are affected by the performance. In the space of the playhouse, they are at psychological risk of being changed, acting as neophytes in a rite of passage. The following chapters will argue that novels, even without the physical and sensory aspects of a performance, may also act as liminal experiences for the reader. I explore three novels, each structured to position the reader in a ritualized, optimistic relationship with death. Bearing resemblance in form as well as content, each novel begins with a direct indication of the protagonist’s impending death. This narrative arrangement serves to diminish the anticipation of climax that readers generally harbor. Instead, the reader

wanders through the text as multiple story lines, anachronistic memories, and muddled lines of thought coalesce into the narrative's final form. Each novel is an invitation, not to prescribe or fully understand the text, but rather to dwell in its expansive, fragmented space.

I will begin with Frederic Buechner's novel *Godric* to establish the utility of ecological and anthropological study in current literary theory and to demonstrate the optimistic threshold of death which becomes apparent in liminality. *Godric* provides an introduction to the key aspects of liminal human existence. This chapter will examine the protagonist's embodied memories, his position outside normal societal roles, and his mystical connections to others who wander, each a key aspect of rites of passage as described by Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep. Godric, the 12<sup>th</sup> century hermit who narrates the novel, loops through moments of time and memory, the fragmented form of the narrative emphasizing his wilderness wanderings. Godric's liminal position results in nearly fluid time which does not "progress" but instead wanders restlessly or circles around key events. The fluctuating temporality and Godric's intimacy with his own death result in shifted conceptions of secular and sacred. Buechner's novel suggests that those who recognize their ongoing pilgrimage towards death are always already in solidarity with that which seems totally other to the self. By imagining death as a khôral space, both of total openness and total otherness, Godric's pilgrimage reveals potential for renewed connectivity and sustainability.

In the next chapter, I explore some of the ecological consequences of a pilgrimage towards death through analyzing Marilyn Robison's *Gilead*. Throughout the novel, the protagonist, Reverend John Ames, meditates on his impending death. The text and the reader meander forward, always keeping the threshold of death in mind. Even as *Gilead* illustrates death's khôral dimensions, the novel's method of development allows for a key shift in



perspective towards the *things* of this world. Through the lens of Thing Theory, the tangible objects in *Gilead* serve to orient and stabilize Ames' identity, thereby revealing their qualities as actants and vibrant matter, terms I borrow from Bruno Latour and Jane Bennet, respectively. These objects serve as fragmented but viable *symbolons* which connect him to other individuals and to the person he will be as he passes through the threshold of his own death. As in *Godric*, *Gilead*'s attention to death and things becomes places of connection which discard an environmental view for an ecological one. The possibilities of Robinson's liminal time and vibrant matter will suggest new ways that we might, as William Carlos Williams wrote, "reconcile / the people and the stones."

In the third and final section, I further explore the formal extensions of this liminal lens in literature and everyday life. In examining Paul Harding's novel *Tinkers*, I consider fragmented narrative form as a symbolon of its own with potential ethical, ecological, and political consequences. *Tinkers*, in the lineage of *Godric* and *Gilead*, embraces our postmodern intimacy with death and deconstruction. Harding describes *Tinkers* as a series of "exploded moments," a structure that both complicates and stabilizes the characters' development. The detonated form requires the reader to shift their lines of sight and consider the text from multiple positions, particularly from the periphery. The shift to marginalized aspects of vision or sensation suggests that the form itself is capable of doing ethical work since it encourages the reader to metadiscursively react to their own viewing practices. Finally, by synthesizing G.K. Chesterton and Nietzsche's conceptions of levity, I draw attention to the form's ability to hold us in a liminal threshold. *Tinkers*, as the final component of my project, suggests tangible, sensory responses that authors and readers may choose in order to persist with levity and grace in the world.

By examining ways in which the ultimate threshold of death orients human life, we may realize that we continually inhabit a space like *The Tempest*: a threshold of danger and potential. In light of our current global ecological crises, attention to our own death may reveal productive spaces for sustainable growth. In a world that once seemed to demand exiting the threshold into totalized understanding, forward progress, or domination, renewed intimacy with our mortality and fragility may allow us to dwell more fully, sustainably, and peacefully in our own spots of ground.

## CHAPTER 1

### Old Godric's Mending and Wending: Liminality and Khôral Death in Frederick Buechner

A hermit and an abbot are sitting on the roof of a chapel in the pouring rain. Below them, a river rises out of its bank in a spring flood. The hermit, Godric, turns to his friend, Ailred, and describes his daily ablutions in the river Wear. He admits, "my ballocks shriveled to beansize in their sack and old One-eye [was] scarce a barnacle length clear of my belly and crying a-mercy. It was him I sought in freezing Wear to teach a lesson that he never learned" (*Godric* 3). This joke is a bit wicked in the fun it pokes at the awkward splaying of legs beneath habits, the clumsy assent of two old men, and the bedraggled image of those so often venerated. Coming to something like the punch line, Godric asks his holy friend, "What sort of hermit can he be who has a heart that gads about the very world he's left behind" (58). While we laugh at the ridiculous portrayal of "abbot and hermit... perched high like two old ravens in the wet" (57), the layering tones of gravity, poignancy, and comedy set the stage for Frederick Buechner's dramatic novel *Godric*.

Buechner has created a number of wayward, doubting, often lecherous holy men in his sixty years of writing. As with Flannery O'Connor's farcical preachers and Graham Greene's Whiskey Priest, Buechner's characters often combine pursuit of mystical holiness with an unquenchable desire for earthly delights. Buechner is a man of faith, a Presbyterian minister, and the characters he creates reveal his intimacy with the struggles of adhering to faith. His readership thrives outside the reach of most religious fiction writers, due in part to "the profound understanding Buechner demonstrates in all his writings for the skeptic and for the cogency of that viewpoint" (H Davies, 187). Beyond respect for the legitimacy of secularity, Buechner is

refreshingly open about the difficulties of his own belief. He has often described faith as “a kind of whistling in the dark because, in much the same way, it helps to give us courage and to hold the shadows at bay” (*Whistling* xi). In *The Return of Ansel Gibbs*, Buechner writes:

Every morning you should wake in your beds and ask yourself: 'Can I believe it all again today?' No, better still, don't ask it till after you've read The New York Times, till after you've studied the daily record of the world's brokenness and corruption... If some morning the answer happens to be really 'Yes,' it should be a yes that's choked back with confession and tears and great laughter. Not a beatific smile, but the laughter of wonderful incredulity. (*Ansel* 303–304)

Buechner's conception of the world is as a great shipwreck, full of brokenness and corruption, yet always open to the possibility of grace. His mix of faith and skepticism produces a fascinating array of characters who are ever doubting, always wandering, and forever unsure of who they will become. Buechner's religious figures, regardless of the time in which they are placed, struggle with internal angst, moral ambiguity, and a consistent desire for a stable self in the face of complex, globalized, deconstructed world.

Godric is, perhaps, Buechner's most fully realized religious man. He does not claim or attempt beatitude in the sense of perfect adherence to virtue. Instead, *Godric*, as a novel and as the fictionalized version of the actual 12<sup>th</sup> century holy figure, is open to the great laughter and the sorrow, the tragedy and the comedy of human existence. The hermit fights to maintain joy in the bleak misfortunes of his life and in the unavoidably murky darkness of his faith. Godric's alternating positions result in polyphonic discussions on the place of doubt, evil, and death in the midst of a life that attempts to better the world. Through both a fragmented narrative form and a fractured tone resulting from *Godric's* evocative mix of life and death, Buechner reveals a liminal space for the post-modern subject that promotes freedom towards death and solidarity with that which may have once seemed completely other.

Buechner's willingness to situate the tragedies and trials of life directly within the comedic arc of his faith has brought his fiction varying attention from critics. *Godric*, as Buechner's most widely read novel, has received particularly positive reviews. Upon publication, *Godric* was described as a "brilliant imaginative re-creation of [12<sup>th</sup> century] customs, concerns, and speech patterns" (Curley). The Times Literary Supplement praised the novel as a "stylistic tour de force" and an innovative, lively "picaresque tale" (Lewis). *Godric*'s idiosyncratic voice, "written in an idiom neither ancient nor modern but a bit of both cleverly combined (Hopkin's poems are brought to mind)," received particular praise from most reviewers (Lewis). The hermit's odd but entrancing speech patterns, both "brisk and tough-sinewed," doubtlessly brought the attention of the Pulitzer Prize reviewers who short listed the novel in 1981 (DeMott).

Though reviews issued when the novel was published were nearly universally positive, most critical attention to *Godric* has forced the novel into two distinct camps. In the first camp are Christian critics, mostly notably the Princeton faculty members Horton and Marie-Helene Davies, who describe *Godric* as updated hagiography with a primary intent of religious instruction (H. Davies, "The God of Storm," "Frederick Buechner"; M.H. Davies, "Fools for Christ's Sake," "Buechner's *Godric*"). The Davies claim *Godric* is a conversion narrative: "in the dark soul of Buechner's character, goodness is gradually and painfully winning its way over evil" (M.H. Davies, 169). The saint *Godric* narrates nearly a century of his raucous life, a sweeping autobiography that the Davies contend "turns him from predator into obedient sheep" (M.H. Davies, 164). As a saint, *Godric* is one of the "sinners who have faced the void of a godless life" and found grace "*per ardua ad astra*," through adversity to the stars (M.H. Davies 154, 155). Their focus on conversion is ultimately a focus on linear plot lines and linear temporality.

As a secular counterpart to the Davies (heavy-handed) heavenly gaze, a second area of criticism derides Buechner's "agenda fiction, temple rhetoric" (Dewey 2). John Dewey asserts—one wonders how he knows—that "clearly we are uneasy over Buechner's work" (2). He claims that Buechner's novels contain plot lines that can only be fully enjoyed by those who have an unceasing commitment to spiritual joy (2). While a reader may wish for the joyous sort of "benediction that brushes Buechner's characters," Dewey argues that most of us will not accept or understand the prescribed heaven-bound course of saintly life (16). While we wish for "lives shaped by plot rather than by the heavy drag of drift, collision, and exhaustion, lives that tap the spectacle of depth, the reward of consequentiality," our post-modern context denies us any of the clarity that Buechner allows his characters to enjoy (Dewey 16). Both Dewey and the Davies claim that Buechner's chief goal in writing fiction is to prescribe a specific way to live in the world, an objective they assert is easily identified in the forthright plotline and clear routes of growth in Buechner's novels.

The fixation on plot stands in odd contrast to the fragmented structure and looping temporality of *Godric*. Godric is an ailing centenarian when he begins to recount portions of his life to his biographer, Reginald. The result is 28 chapters of varying lengths which continually shift backwards and forwards in time. Buechner's biographer, Dale Brown, notes that "those readers looking for neat chronology... will be thwarted" as the "Faulkner-like array of episodes are arranged more or less randomly" (225). Within the first three pages, the entire plot has been revealed. Godric was born an English peasant who fled home at a young age in search of wealth and adventure. He joined the pirate, Roger Mouse, in sea-faring exploits after being run out of the town of Bishop's Lynn for peddling false relics. He buried treasure on the island of Farne and carried his mother on a pilgrimage to Rome to pray for his dead father's soul. He has

inexplicably mystical powers whereby he can “see the weather three days off and... see the deaths of men that still have years to live” (*Godric* 57). After fighting with Mouse over the morality of robbing pilgrims, he found himself in the Jerusalem and was drawn to baptism in the Jordan. He returned to England to keep a hermitage and banished most company to better heave his prayers heavenward, hoping “to hoist the world a cat’s whisker out of the muck” (6). The remaining 27 chapters reiterate and cycle around these moments in fragmented and fleeting episodes. A straight-forward plotline is sloughed-off so that the reader may encounter multiple events, competing emotions, and the liminal growth patterns of Godric’s life.

To categorize *Godric* as text which provides the reader with a liminal experience, I will briefly examine the anthropological requirements for a liminal state. Liminality—the middle stage of a rite of passage—is a vital cultural tool of social organization and self-awareness. Liminality is a space and time when one intentionally inhabits a context outside normal social boundaries and distinctions, thus moving “betwixt and between the position assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (Turner, *The Ritual* 96). Liminality forces neophytes into a guided journey towards new social standing, better understanding of social ordering, and fresh potential for consistency over time in the newly formed self (Turner, *The Ritual* 96). Liminal periods were first named and explored by anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in the early 1900’s. Van Gennep identified three distinct steps in a rite of passage: “separation, margin (or *limen*, signifying threshold in Latin) and aggregation” (Turner, *The Ritual* 94). Victor Turner expands on Van Gennep’s work, arguing:

Liminality cannot be confined to the processual form of the traditional rites of passage in which [Van Gennep] first identified it. Nor can it be dismissed as an undesirable (and certainly uncomfortable) moment of variable duration between successive conservatively secure states of being, cognition, or status-role incumbency. Liminality is now seen to apply to all phases of decisive cultural change, in which previous orderings of thought and behavior are subject to revision and criticism, when hitherto unprecedented modes of

ordering relations between ideas and people become possible and desirable. (Turner, *Image 2*)

In expanding beyond Van Gennep, Turner encourages further work on how contemporary rites-of-passage—such as the higher education system or boot-camp—take on the same features of tribal rituals. He also sets the stage for his own research on historical pilgrimage.

In pilgrimage, a practice of every world religion, “liminality is not only *transition* but also *potentiality*, not only ‘going to be’ but also ‘what may be,’ a formulable domain” (Turner, *Image 3*). Turner and his wife, Edith L.B. Turner, who co-authored *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, detail the history of Christianity as it “generated its own mode of liminality for the laity” through pilgrimage to holy sites or shrines (4). The difference between rites-of-passage and pilgrimage is the propelling force behind participation. In a traditional rite-of-passage, participation is obligatory; pilgrims voluntarily embark upon their journey (8). The Turners argue that the lack of obligation does not negate the initiatory aspects of pilgrimage since the “pilgrim is an initiand, entering into a new, deeper level of existence than he has known in his accustomed milieu” (8). Regardless of which religious tradition one examines, the Turners contend that “pilgrimage provides a carefully structured, highly valued route to a liminal world where the ideal is felt to be real, where the tainted social persona may be cleansed and renewed” (30).

The novels that I examine in this thesis each situate themselves in a liminal zone that correspond to the Turner’s definition of pilgrimage. In order to set the stage for the following analysis of Robinson’s *Gilead* and Harding’s *Tinkers*, I will examine the aspects of *Godric* which reveal its processual liminal form including *communitas*, “wending,” and non-linear temporality. These three particular aspects of liminality thread-through *Godric* and encourage the reader to pilgrimage through his or her own threshold of potential while reading.



Godric's body and mind are linked to a number of other characters through *communitas*: a word Turner uses to describe the binding solidarity formed by neophytes. The first line of *Godric* reads, "Five friends I had, and two of them snakes" (3)<sup>1</sup>. In addition to his two pet snakes, Tune and Fairweather, Godric names his pirate shipmate Roger Mouse, his abbot friend Ailred, and the ethereal maid Gillian whose physical existence we question throughout the text. Godric explains that his friends are worn, like wounds or tattoos, on his own being. Of these five friends, "Godric bears their mark still on what's left of him as in their time they all bore his on them. What's friendship when all's done, but the giving and taking of wounds?" (7). During pilgrimage, relationships can be formed between members of a group in a similar, indissoluble way. *Communitas* is a "relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities... which combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity and comradeship" (Turner, *Image* 250). Godric's connection with these people (and snakes) is more than general friendship. He is tied to them by something he cannot explain.

After he attempts greater piety by sending his snakes away, "they all three bled for it, and part of Godric snaked off too nevermore to come again" (*Godric*, 7). When the ailing Ailred comes to visit, "it's Godric's flesh that Ailred's cough cleaves like an axe" (7). Buechner never attempts to explain why or how these connections have been made though Godric often orients his being in relationship to the other individuals. Godric attempts his own, somewhat cryptic description of the bonds: "What made us friends was this. Fancy us each perched on a different

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<sup>1</sup> Allusions to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" fill *Godric*. Godric is a seafaring wanderer whose foolish choices wreck havoc on those around him. His connection with the snakes further alludes to Coleridge; the Mariner is only able to pray for relief and freedom from the curse of the dead albatross after he has blessed the teaming water-snakes, though he is "unaware" (Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" 274–289). Godric's friendship with the snakes echoes the redemptive potential of ecological connectivity Coleridge hints at.

rock in Wear. The water races in between with strength enough to kill. But each of us reached out to touch the other, and our friendship was the comfort of that touch" (96). For Godric, the connections he has formed across the racing rivers of life do not produce any measure of intersubjectivity and yet, do produce a tangible, active bond that exists throughout his life. His communion with the five friends is "undifferentiated, egalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, I-Thou (in Buber's sense)" (Turner, *Image* 250). His relationship to these entities is fully open to who they might be and how they might affect him.

The strength of his communion with these other subjects—both humans and snakes—persists up to the point of death, perhaps even beyond. When Mouse dies in a shipwreck, Godric is fully aware of the tragedy. He writes, "I saw Mouse in the eye of my heart go down with *Saint Esprit* off the Welsh rocks. He cried out the only name he knew me by, which was not Godric, and in the ear of my heart I hear him, helpless" (5). While we are free to interpret this as some sort of saintly second-sight—"this second sight of mine has ever much to do with death" (162)—perhaps Godric's ability to hear or see the deaths of his friends is merely the burden of a 100 year old man. Buechner's description of how the death of his own father affected his writing of the novel echoes this somewhat mystical, yet wholly human experience with death. Buechner writes in his auto-biography *Telling Secrets*:

although death ended my father, it has never ended my relationship with my father—a secret that I had never so clearly understood before [Godric]... it was to my father that I dedicated the book—*In memoriam patris mei*. I wrote the dedication in Latin solely because at the time it seemed appropriate to the medieval nature of the tale, but I have come to suspect since that Latin was also my unconscious way to remaining obedient to the ancient family law that the secret of my father must be at all costs kept secret (qtd. in Allen 122)

The blend of camaraderie with some measure of sacredness is exactly what Turner categorizes as the difference between normal communal connection and *communitas*.

Godric's position in the "universalism and openness" of *communitas* is heightened by the explicit descriptions of pilgrimage and rites-of-passage (Turner, *Image* 250). He takes his mother to Rome when she believes his dead father is suffering in purgatory. He, at first unwillingly, travels through Israel after he has fought with Roger Mouse and visits the holy sites of Jerusalem. After taking up his habit, Godric becomes a site of pilgrimage and his own body takes on the form of a shrine that others journey to see and touch.

During and surrounding the literal pilgrimages, Godric's life is portrayed as a continually wandering way, a mystically meandering through time that begins and ends with death. When he first leaves home, his parish priest asks Godric to notice the series of open thresholds which will welcome him to wander: "Every day is a door and every night... the street forks out and there's two doors to choose between. The meadow that tempts you to rest your bones and dream awhile... The sea that calls the man to travel far" (24). Godric fulfills each aspect of his priest's description, saying, "A flatterer I was. A wanderer. I thieved and pirated. I went to sea." (20). He "wanders through green shades" (119) in his dreams and "wanders north to the parish of Saint Giles" (130) after his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He finds the site of his hermitage when he is aimlessly strolling through a forest, after he has "wandered off a way" as he listens to the sounds of wind in the trees (138). This is not a pilgrim's progress. In fact, the notion of progress towards physical destination or moral rectitude is undermined throughout the novel, as I will discuss below. Instead, the repetition of the word "wandering" or "wending" forms a sort of cadence through the novel which invites the reader to enjoy the circuitous, unpredictable journey.

Dale Brown writes, "*Godric* is one of those great books, the kind where we prolong the reading, dread turning the last page, because the journey has been so musical, the reverberation so complete as to rearrange the chords of our inner lives" (*Book of Buechner* 225). Whether we

feel any such rearrangement, the commitment of the text to a wandering life in the wilderness emphasizes continual transition rather than arrival. Rites-of-passage often require the neophyte to embrace wandering through spaces that are often “likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness” (Turner 94). When Godric has a vision of John the Baptist, he is told, “Make thy place in the wilderness as I did mine that the Lord may house thee” (19-20). This is liminal pilgrimage in its fullest form, a turn away from recognized and structuring social spaces towards a potentially sacred unknown. In essence, wandering opens up the door to mystery. Tim Murray argues that at the heart of Buechner’s books, “is an idea that mystery and knowledge are bound up so tightly in some way that without one, the other can have no meaning” (qtd. in Brown 250). Critics have compared this commitment to wandering to the work of Graham Greene. Brown writes, “what Buechner carries away from his reading of Greene is a sense of the wild mystery of joy, and Buechner’s subsequent writing reflects a stewardship of the mystery” (Saint 61). Godric has no choice but to “wend” (72) his way through life, as Gillian tells him, but the wandering allows him access to mysteries and wonders that stability could not offer<sup>2</sup>.

The wandering narrator is matched by a wandering narrative form, the final aspect of a liminal text which I will examine here. Characterized as an “experimental narrative style” by the Pulitzer Prize Reviewers, Buechner’s fragmented “method not only conjoins perfectly with the picaresque style of the narrative, but it also reflects the chaos of Godric’s mind, his inability to sustain one method for very long” (Brown 226, 237). As we begin the novel, we are “plunged

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<sup>2</sup> As a consequence of his winding, circuitous path, Godric is never fully able to return or understand the spaces that he left behind. When he remembers the places and friendships he has left behind, he writes, “For now I’m long past mending them. Yet still they flood their banks like Wear and roar at me” (58). As a steward of mystery, Buechner is not naïve to the difficulties posed by an ongoing commitment to pilgrimage and change.

into a muddle of past, present, and future—a stream of consciousness” (Brown 225). Buechner’s structural choices which seem to err, rather than propose a direction, are antithetical to the straightforward route towards holiness which Dewey can’t stomach and the Davies praise. Time for Buechner “is not a linear concept; it does not entail an irreversible progression from one point to another. Time for Godric is a rough grey sea—an immeasurable expanse of reversing tides, colliding waves, and unknown depths” (Bruinooge and Engbers 41). Buechner comments on the novel’s structure through the voice of Godric when the hermit is sitting on the chapel roof. He asks, “what is the sea where hours float? Am I daft, or is it true there’s no such thing as hours past and other hours still to pass, but all of them instead are all at once and never gone?” (57). Time flows like driftwood on the waves and the reader is never fully able to pin down time or space. At moments, we are in Godric’s hut, listening to him speak. A second later, we sail through the past on the Mediterranean as flashes of future death cross Godric’s mind. The plot is quickly learned, and quickly left behind in favor of other concerns like cyclical development and *communitas*, and, as we shall see, an openness towards death.

By arranging the novel in such a way, *any* identifiable route from secular despair to mystical joy is undermined. Through the disjointed structure, every layer of Godric’s life is seen in cross-section and no particular iteration of his character is allowed to solidify as the final person. The result is a fragmented timeline of growth, but also a lack of clarity regarding Buechner (or Godric’s) moral judgments of most situations. Godric characterizes himself as “no true hermit but a gadabout within his mind, a lecher in his dreams” (21). Whenever a “maid but pass my way,” he divulges, “I burn for her although my wick’s long since burnt out,” for “deep inside this wrecked and ravaged hull, there sails a young man still” (40). Whether we are to

condone this old man who fights for the joys of youth or condemn him as a failed ascetic, is unclear.

In addition to acknowledging his inability to decide what constitutes sin, Godric reflects on his inability to decide how his God responds to waywardness, further undermining a prescriptive, plot-based moral interpretation of *Godric*. The old saint explains, “ever and again young Godric’s dreams well up to flood old Godric’s prayers, or prayers and dreams reach God in such a snarl he has to comb the tangle out, and who knows which he counts more dear” (40). The “he” is ambiguously comedic and poignant; does Godric refer to his own inability to harness his wandering mind or does heaven perhaps enjoy the vivid liveliness of Godric’s dreams? The sentiment is echoed in Godric’s description of his youth with Roger Mouse whose “sin smacked less of evil than larkishness the likes of which Our Lord himself could hardly help but wink at when he spied it out in whore and prodigal” (4). This winking god is thus made accessory to Godric and Mouse’s adventures, from piracy to theft to many nights in the arms of lovely ladies.

The text’s commitment to ambiguity towards moral standards is tested when we learn that Godric and his sister, Burcwen, harbored incestuous desire for the other throughout their lives and consummate their love on one occasion. On the night of their tryst, Godric’s bother William falls into the Wear and drowns while searching for Burcwen. Because *Godric* has already connected traditional forms of “sin” with potential godly favor and because of the fractured narrative which may call an action evil and good simultaneously, we as readers feel confusion and ambiguity even towards this incest and the resulting death. After revealing the details of his love for Burcwen, Godric states:

The worst that Godric ever did, he did for love. Nor was it of an earthy sort of that seeks its own but love that gives itself away for the beloved’s sake, and thus, when all is said and done, the love that God himself commands. (155)

Far more somberly, but with equal moral ambiguity, Godric notes that his behavior mimics what he believes to be God's love, even though it breaks all social taboos and results in his brother's death. Brown notes that in Welsh, Godric probably means "god's mirror" (238). Godric—and we infer his heavenly reflection, as well—see the incredible draw of earthly joy, relationships, and the rugged countryside on the banks of the Wear. The critics who interpret the text as proselytizing ignore these "inversions of chronology and deep and often paradoxical treatment of issues of friendship and hagiography" (Bruinooge and Engbers, 35). *Godric's* sinuous narrative and purposefully complicated position on holiness deconstruct plot as a primary arbiter of meaning while simultaneously destabilizing any moral position the reader may take toward the text.

The fragmented or layered style is further fractured by Buechner's conflation of Godric's and impending death. Into the tapestry of life, *Godric* continually weaves threads of death. On the first page, we read, "Godric's now more dead than quick, a pile of dark rags left to steam and scorch now by the fire" (3-4). Godric's announcement of his swiftly approaching end minimizes the reader's anticipation for a climax. We know the timeline of Godric's life within the first chapter and his failing bodily systems testify to the proximity of death. At his birth in the year 1066, "stark William marched his Normans north and harried the land from sea to sea... thus Godric first saw light at a dark time and the manger of his birth was death" (19). Godric makes his first fortune by selling cloth he claimed Jews had torn from the back of a martyred Christian and thus it is through "death that godly Godric's peddling prospered" (34). After swimming to shore in Israel and kneeling under the water's of the Jordan river to be baptized, he reflects "as a man dies many times before he's dead, so does he wend from birth to birth until, by grace, he comes alive" (99). Marie-Helen Davies would argue Godric is "weaned from his roguish past

and washed anew... through the waters of baptism" (155), but the repeated connections between death and birth undermine this notion of holy water's ability to destroy a former self in favor of a new being. Instead, physical, spiritual, and metaphorical deaths are nearly always connected to ongoing adaptation or cyclical patterns of growth<sup>3</sup>.

The connection between death and development is most vividly exemplified by the pattern of death seen in the flowing water of the river Wear. When he is on the roof with Ailred, Godric wonders if the past is "a sea old men can founder in before their time and drown?" (58). In the chapter "Of Wear and Perkin and Godric's tomb," Godric describes his daily washing in the bone-chilling river. "Is it too much," he asks, "to say, in winter, that I die? Something of me dies at least" (95). While washing in the river, once numbness has calmed the pain, he prays, "Praise God for all that's holy, cold, and dark. Praise him for all we lose, for all the river of the years bears off... praise him yourself, old Wear. Praise him for dying and the peace of death" (96). The flowing water matches the fluid wanderings of Godric's mind and the unceasing flow of the narrative towards death.

An extended debate on the significance of death's presence in the river occurs between Godric and his mother, Aedwen, when she comes to live beside his hermitage. Aedwen contends the river tells "that all things pass... there's not a man alive today but time, like Wear, will carry him off" (147). Though Godric thinks "it sounds a sad song," Aedwen rebukes him: "Can't you hear him chuckle when he sings? And well he may. Who wants a life that never ends? Not me,

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<sup>3</sup> This type of liminal development might be categorized as "sideways growth," a term coined by Kathryn Bond Stockton in her work in queer studies (Stockton, 11). As she writes, "there are ways of growing that are not growing up... I want to prick (deflate or just delay), the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up" (Stockton 11). She argues that queer studies can provide an alternative to our obsession with linear temporality and progress which has brought about violence, ecological destruction, slavery, bigotry, etc. Her theories suggest a productive line of inquiry that may help us develop new ways of envisioning, pursuing, and speaking about growth.



that's sure. Who wants a sun that never shuts his eye? Death's like the night we need to rest our bones" (147). When Godric, holy saint that he is, concedes they will "wake refreshed in Paradise," she again rebuts him:

'Or never wake at all? who knows? I only know life's like porridge. It's good to eat when eating's what you want, but the time comes when you've had your fill... Perhaps truth passes too,' she said. 'Perhaps that's why the river laughs until he wets the rocks with tears.' (147-148)

Aedwen anticipates death, likened to "truth" and seen in the face of the flowing water, as an open threshold into some totally unknown state. Death, by this reckoning, holds all the same liminal potential as an earthly pilgrimage.

We could here fault Buechner as a stereotypical religious author who proselytizes by offering heaven as the reason to welcome death. But if we could be generous enough to take Buechner at his word (or his whistle?), we can see that Godric does not welcome death because it ushers a soul into the afterlife. Critic Chad Wriggelsworth compares Buechner's descriptions of death to J. R. R. Tolkien's idea of eucatastrophe, which takes a possible moment of tragedy and instead turns the character to surprise, laughter and forgetting (Wriggelsworth 70). Brown also argues that *Godric* presents an open version of "Buechner's theology—death acknowledged and more than death embraced" (Brown, *Book of Buechner* 238). Even the Davies admit Buechner is "ambiguous in his discussion of the afterlife" (H. Davies, 190). The weaving of death into every aspect of life suggests that whatever threshold Godric is passing through does not need to correlate to an afterlife.

The moments surrounding Godric's physical death return attention to mystery and the unknown. After a stroke, Godric's servant boy, Perkin, lowers the saint's failing body into the Wear for a final time. Inexplicably, Godric and Perkin begin to laugh and "Wear joins [their] laughter too" (170). The river "slaps his rocky thighs and roars with mirth" (170). As the saint

passes through the final threshold of life, he offers us these parting words: “All’s lost. All’s found. Farewell.” (171). Here we find the answer to the joke that began on the roof of the cottage. What sort of hermit is Godric? A saint who loves the world and heaven who dies while lost and found, full of mirth and full of sorrow. Tolkien’s eucatastrophe involves being invaded by “a catch of breath, a beating and lifting of heart, near to (or indeed) accompanied by tears” (qtd. in Wriglesworth 70). This simultaneous lifting and lowing is vividly mirrored in Godric’s final moments. His is a death that anticipates, a death that affects all that comes before, a death that nods or winks at something beyond the self. In other words, Buechner’s descriptions of death are liminal, transitional, and expansive.

Godric’s position towards death seems to me a meeting place for the secular and spiritual reader. Buechner’s descriptions of death do not require belief in afterlife to retain poignance and power. Additionally, Godric’s impending death has been shown in this chapter to be fully integrated into all aspects of his life. In order to more fully explore the consequences in life that result from this openness towards death, I would like to suggest that Buechner, and following him Robinson and Harding, situate death in the space of *khôra* (χώρα).

*Khôra* indicates open space, though that definition barely scrapes the surface of the word’s possibilities. Plato, in *Timaes*, describes *khôra* as the field or space where the forms came into existence. For Plato, *khôra* was a way to “be *sans l’être*, beyond the border of being... neither form (idea) or sensible thing, but the place (*lieu*) in which the demiurge impresses or cuts images of the intelligible paradigm” (Caputo 35). Early Christianity appropriated the term and applied it to places of refuge like the Chora church in Edirnekapi, Turkey which integrates images of the womb and the country-side, both spaces of marginality and fertility. Heidegger, in rejection of the forms, defined *khôra* as the “clearing” in which being may take place and dwell,

a space of potential angst, abjection, and growth (El-Bizri 58). Since as mortals, “our being-in-the-world is that of being-toward-death,” *Dasein* is oriented towards both our impending cessation and towards fighting our demise (El-Bizri 52). Derrida, too, took up the term, to describe the space of deconstruction, in other words, that which is fully other to a stabilized and stabilizing version of the self. In *khôra* there is “something that is said, very apophatically, to be *neither* being nor non-being, neither sensible nor intelligible” (Caputo 35). From the combination of these definitions, we conceive of *khôra* “as *tout autre*,” the total or complete other (Caputo 36). By these reckonings, *khôra* is not easily understood or embraced and yet the openness of *khôra*—as a church in Turkey, as the womb, or as deconstruction itself—allows us to readily link the term with Buechner’s descriptions of death and pilgrimage. Godric’s openness towards and fluid movement into the totally other state of death “presents a pattern for aging and dying that makes them acceptable, even creative” (McCoy and McCoy 98). To imagine death as a space which opens up potentially marginal, undoubtedly fertile options for life is to reveal death’s *khôral* dimensions.

Turner writes that pilgrimage is to make a “movement of some kind, a step *per agros* ‘through the fields’” (*Image* 241). Buechner invites his readers to take a step through the fields of *khôral* death with Godric. *Godric* does not attempt to offer certainty about what lies beyond death; Buechner is more interested in the liminal dimensions of life which run right up to the final threshold into *tout autre*. In part, the draw of Buechner’s text, to secular and religious readers alike, is his embrace of the liminal structures which allow him to explore the possibilities inherent in Godric’s intimacy with death. John Dewey, even in the midst of his criticism of *Godric*, acknowledges that Buechner offers the reader something that is missing “in this uncertain quietus of the twentieth century” (17). In our post-industrialized, post-modern context,

a desire for joy or mystery is sustained only by “by marveling over technology's gimcracks, or by indulging in the flashy shadowshow of big-budget films and the hokey melodramatics of athletics, or by immuring ourselves with the casual pornography of our games of virtual realities” (Dewey 17). What Buechner’s *khôral* death offers is the ability to dream “of an absolute surprise, [while] pondering an absolute secret, all waiting for the *tout autre* to arrive... For we are all—this is Derrida’s wager—dreaming of the wholly other that will come knocking on our door” (Caputo 3). John Caputo, writing here of Derrida, argues that we desire the *tout autre* as “a shock to the system in place, an inside/outside transgressive alteration that modifies the same, that alters it instead of confirming it in its complacency” (24). In other words, imagining our death as an entrance into that which is which is totally other can force a shift of perspective in our daily lives, particularly in regards to what we believe is like us or different than us.

Buechner’s fragmented form and surprising mixture of life and death invite the reader to envision the threshold of death as the entrance into *khôra*—that space which is not hostile to and yet completely other than the self. What happens if we choose to imagine our life as an unceasing pilgrimage towards that which is *taut autre*? In the following chapters, I will explore ways that this intimacy with impending otherness might impact our politics, our ethical structures, and our ecological awareness. Turner suggests that “Pilgrimage may be thought of as extroverted mysticism” (*Image*35). Recent critical turns towards locality, thing theory, object oriented ontology, ecology, and even the renewed attention to form are exactly this sort of extroverted mysticism. The next chapter will investigate, through the lens of Robinson’s *Gilead*, the renewed attention to *things* and local spaces that may result from recognition of our pilgrimage towards *khôra*. The final chapter will examine Harding’s *Tinkers* to further explore texts whose fragmented forms requires shifts of perception and understanding, changes which

may allow for a greater freedom towards our own death and a more symbiotic relationship with all earthly forms of life. By examining these liminal texts, texts which force us to exist betwixt and between, we may begin to imagine new forms of sustainable growth in both life and death.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Biscuits and Gravestones: “Blessed and Broken” Symbolons on the Way towards Death in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead***

In 1981, *Godric* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and Marilynne Robinson’s first novel, *Housekeeping*, was published. In *Housekeeping*, the narrator, Ruth, meditates on loss, longing, and her experiences with the watery grave of Lake Fingerbone. Ruth lives on the shore of the lake in which her grandfather, mother, and countless others have drowned. In the town of Fingerbone, built on land which “once belonged to the lake,” Ruth contemplates the “puzzling margins” between land and water, life and death (Robinson 4). Of the water’s deathly history, Ruth tells the reader:

One is always aware of the lake in Fingerbone, or the deeps of the lake, the lightless, airless water below... At the foundation is the old lake, which is smothered and nameless and altogether black. Then there is Fingerbone, the lake of charts and photographs, which is permeated by sunlight and sustains green life and innumerable fish, and in which one can look down in the shadow of a dock and see stony, earthy bottom, more or less as one sees dry ground. And above that, the lake that rises in the spring and turns the grass dark and coarse as reeds. And above that the water suspended in sunlight, sharp as the breath of an animal, which brims inside this circle of mountains. (9)

The lake is a khôral space, an opening of primordial darkness, spring fertility, dangerous flooding, and life-sustaining atmosphere.

All of Ruth’s senses support her persistent awareness of these overlapping aspects of the lake. The inhabitants’ constant awareness of the lake sets an eerie tone of danger and pending loss. Andrew Brower Latz describes the lake as “threatening, a challenge to survival,” where as the homes of Fingerbone are “a means of keeping out nature... a barrier between outside and inside, between nature and culture, between drifters and the settled” (292). Yet the water creeps into Ruth’s house when her Aunt Sylvie comes to care for her. When Sylvie arrives, she is “more or less like a mermaid in a ship’s cabin. She preferred [the home] sunk in the very element it was

meant to exclude” (Robinson 99). Sylvie welcomes in the chaos, the cold, and the potential rejuvenating effect of the watery death’s layers. Both the presence of the lake and Sylvie’s siren-song bring Ruth into intimate proximity with her own death throughout the novel.

Robinson aligns Lake Fingerbone with the space of death and insists that the lake will flood and impact every aspect of life. Lake Fingerbone closely mirrors the khôral attributes of death previously explored in *Godric*. Khôra, if its usage is traced through Plato, Heidegger, and Derrida, can be imagined as the space of total-otherness, which flows into every aspect of life (Caputo 35, El-Bizri 58). George Handley describes “Ruth’s place [as] above and below water, solid and fluid, and outside and inside the bounds of ecology” (509). He argues that the novel resonates with audiences because Ruth’s story is alive with “puzzling margins,” spaces she is able to inhabit because of the “loss of her grandfather, her mother, and all human forbears in the lake” (Handley 509). Ruth’s liminal position forces her to recognize that both the lake and death exert a constant pull.<sup>4</sup> Ruth’s attention to the margins results in her “apprehension of the human present/presence” (Handley 511). Apprehension—communicating here both anxiety and a captivating or arresting capacity of the present—seems to be a result of Robinson’s insistence on breaking down barriers in her text between self and other, nature and culture, life and death. Ruth is constantly caught in the “puzzling margins” between the seemingly clear binaries. As the novel ends, Ruth crosses the lake and enters a vagabond lifestyle with Sylvie having realized that she cannot resist or ignore the push and pull of death in all of life.

Robinson’s second novel, *Gilead*, is noticeably more optimistic than *Housekeeping* and yet the themes of memory, yearning, and death remain at the forefront. *Gilead* again turns to

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<sup>4</sup> The khôral aspects of life are always liminal and often “abysmal” since they require “thinking about the very grounds and origins of difference and *otherness*” (El-Bizri, “Qui Êtes-Vous Chora?” 477).

reader towards puzzling margins as “Robinson emphasizes that the liminality between nature and culture is the particular realm of orphaned people who live in spaces off the maps of history: the rural, provincial, and the disparaged” (Handley 511). Robinson’s fascination with liminal identities finds brilliant form in the shrinking, rural town of Gilead, Iowa and the person of Reverend John Ames. While *Housekeeping*’s tone is brooding and murky with the presence of death, *Gilead* is awash with lively light. In her first novel, Robinson seems intent on breaking down the binary between life and death. *Gilead*, perhaps taking as a given an intimate awareness of impending death, is keenly interested in exploring the tangible, practical consequences of lives which pilgrimage towards khôral death.

*Gilead* tells the story of John Ames, his father, his grandfather and his son(s). Written in the form of an extended letter to his young son, who is never named, Ames reflects on his own chronic illness, the beauty of the world, his personal regrets, and his “begats” (9). On the first page, Ames reveals he is nearing death and throughout the rest of the novel, we are never allowed to forget that the final climax has already been acknowledged. In the opening lines of his letter, Ames tells his son, “If you’re a grown man when you read this... I’ll have been gone a long time. I’ll know most of what there is to know about being dead, but I’ll probably keep it to myself. That seems to be the way of things” (3). The mixed verb tenses of this initial reflection reveal Ames’ constant awareness of his journey toward death. Ames situates himself as already speaking from the grave, though he is still an alert, relatively spry 76-year old man. Throughout the novel, Ames explores the consequences his own increasing proximity to death.

Ames’ descriptions of who he might be after death do not differ significantly from who he is in life. As noted in the lines above, he anticipates that he will still be learning after his death and still prone to private musings. Ames also thinks that he will continue to care for and pray for



his young wife and son after he dies, writing “I regret very deeply the hard times I know you and your mother must have gone through, with no real help from me at all, except my prayers... I [prayed] while I lived, and I do now, too, if that is how things are in the next life” (4). Ames, though a religious character, suggests that his being after death will not be so very different from life, an interesting extension of Robinson’s treatment of death in *Housekeeping*. The water of Lake Fingerborne made its way into every detail of Ruth’s life, continually reminding her of death’s inescapable grasp. Ames’s treatment of death accepts and builds on this watery seepage as he expects his life to somehow mutually flow into the unknown space of dying and death.

Ames’ vision of the mutual exchange between life and death is illuminated in his brief, yet captivating descriptions of the afterlife. While the book is clearly rooted in pending death from the first pages, Ames rarely discusses any particular thoughts about heaven. In addition to the two passages noted above, Ames only talks about his post-earthly condition a few times and when he does, it is always with a earthly focus. He writes:

I can’t believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence... In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. (57)

Ames compares this life to mythology, while anything that follows is not treated to nearly as vivid or resounding a description. In fact, the novel’s treatment of the afterlife is not remotely other-worldly. While *Housekeeping* acknowledges that death can be conceived as completely other to a stabilized, socialized self, Ames’ take on the afterlife is a space of familiarity. If the dead are sentient or somehow aware after this life ends, Ames believes they will take pleasure in reflecting on their lives, perhaps taking joy in its gritty particularities. *Housekeeping* insists on death’s presence in daily life while *Gilead* mirrors and inverts the theme by focusing on attributes of life which Ames believes will stabilize the self as it moves towards death.

Ames' belief in life's persistence in death eventually brings his attention back to his earthly existence. In a poignant scene, Ames' best friend, another ailing minister named Boughton, attempts to imagine heaven. Boughton says, "I just think about the splendors of the world and multiply by two" (147). Perhaps, Boughton muses, he should multiply by more, but "two is much more than sufficient for my purposes" (147). Ames responds, "If I were to multiply the splendors of the world by two—the splendors as I feel them—I would arrive at an idea of heaven very unlike anything you see in the old paintings" (149). Heaven, Ames believes, might be composed of a series of tactile experiences from his past: an "ashy biscuit, summer rain, her hair falling wet around her face" (149). In Ames and Boughton's reckoning, the afterlife is merely an extension of this world by particularized doubling (or more, if they could stand it).

Even during Ames' description of what heaven might be like, his attention is turned towards his earthly spot of ground. In the same scene, Boughton reminds Ames of the pranks they pulled and jokes they told as young men. Boughton muses, "Seems to me the stars were brighter in those days. Twice as bright" (147). Ames replies "and we were twice as clever" (147). The doubling of the bright stars or of the men's cleverness in those days of youth is comparable to what heaven offers. The reader leaves this scene with a suspicion that all talk of heaven is merely a way to remember, relive, and possibly re-imagine moments of this life. As Christopher Leise notes, Ames prefers to "leave considerations of the infinite for when he gets there, and turns instead toward a sense of the miraculous in his aesthetic appreciation of the immediate natural world" (350). Leise has interpreted *Gilead* in the tradition of Puritan writers (particularly Thomas Shepard and Anne Bradstreet) who, when nearing death, wrote instructive letters for their children and the general public. Ames' letters focused on how to live a right life in anticipation of heavenly reward, but "Robinson would not even have us try moving beyond

the immediate” (Leise 362). Instead of offering a meditation on how to reach heaven, these letters’ descriptions of death become a particularly helpful way for Ames to thoughtfully consider and value the things that fill his earthly life.

Robinson is similar to Buechner in her depiction of death as a productive threshold in life. *Gilead* takes on the form of a didactic text, displaying what a life that anticipates death might look like. A primary consequence of embraced khoral death, which *Godric* hints at and *Gilead* explicitly offers, is shifted attention to the physical world, to ecology, to our bodies, and to tangible things. Through the lens of recent work in thing-theory, *Gilead* reveals the active potential of earthly entities which enact change, bring resolution, and create spaces of peace and healing. Particular landscapes and tangible objects in *Gilead* serve to orient and stabilize Ames’ identity throughout his pilgrimage. These things serve as viable symbolons—blessed and broken fragments—connecting him to other individuals and to the person he will be as he passes through the threshold of his own death.

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A brief exploration of Robinson’s position in the contemporary divide between religious and secular writers provides an entrance to the novel’s attention to active things and landscapes. Like many before her, Robinson is often relegated to either “purely religious or secular spheres” (McGuire 508). Olivia McGuire, focusing on Flannery O’Connor notes that “the academy’s relative discomfort with religion makes it difficult to comment productively on a twentieth-century American author of such religious sensibility” as O’Connor or Robinson (508). Though Robinson’s fiction includes many religious figures and often turns the reader to metaphysical questions, her work is intended for and read by secular and religious readers alike. Robinson describes religion as a “a framing mechanism” and a “language of orientation” that helpfully

illustrates and “talks about the arc of life” (Fay). She argues that the spiritual components of her novels open a “set of questions” for both writer and reader, questions which undermine categories, rather than reinforce them (Fay). Leise compares Robinson’s treatment of religion to Mark C. Taylor and other post-modern a/theologians who promote “a method that looks at religion not as a stable entity at all but one that is fluid and—quite the opposite—actively destabilizing” (Leise 350). McGuire argues that O’Connor’s wrote fiction out of a “hope to deepen mystery” (508), a phrase that resonates with the characterization of Graham Greene and Frederick Buechner as “stewards of mystery” (W. D. Brown, “To Be a Saint” 61). Robinson’s continues in this lineage of stewardship and destabilization by crafting novels that, rather than fitting into clearly secular or religious spaces, ask why and how such categories persist.

McGuire’s work on O’Connor suggests that we need to craft a neutral lens through which we can view authors interested in the overlap of secular and spiritual concerns. The strength of our interpretation, she argues, will “come from its ability to withstand and even affirm complexity” (508). She argues “thing theory has the ability to function as a tool for this sort of neutral but robust reading” (McGuire 508). To explore the active potential of things, McGuire draws on Heidegger’s “Das Ding.” He asks, “in what way do things appear as things” rather than objects (qtd in McGuire 514)? Objects here refer to things we believe we understand and can control. Heidegger answers that things reveal themselves to us when they fail to work, as his iconic broken hammer suggests, and thus require vigilant attention on the part of the viewer. The first step towards such vigilance, he writes “is the step back from the thinking that merely represents—that is, explains—to the thinking that responds and recalls” (qtd. in McGuire 514). Heidegger encourages a type of thinking which requires a sort of call and response between the viewed and the viewer. Things call attention to themselves when they don’t work as we wish and

thus require a second look. Things which require a second glance, a capacity Graham Harman has described as the “allure” of objects, are acting in an arresting or captivating way. Robinson has said that *Gilead* is a book about the allure, or the pull and push, that God and home exert (Appleyard). Home, she argues, as a complicated, even “primordial notion” implies “that either you regret it or you will return to it. It’s a sort of pole” (Appleyard). By connecting home, spiritual yearning, and an alluring process of retreat and return, Robinson arrives at the Latin the root of the word “religion.” *Religio* or *religare* indicated recalling, returning, and especially, to be bound again to something. Though religion may typically be viewed as a binding of an individual to a set of rules, Robinson’s interest turns the set of rules into a space: the earth or a place on it. In this way, her spirituality does not reinforce boundaries or focus on an afterlife. Instead, religion for Robinson values mystery, affirms complexity, and binds itself to the tangible things and pressing questions of this earth.

The consequence of being bound again to the earth in *Gilead* is a particular attention to things and landscapes which function as active agents of change and possibility. Bill Brown argues in “Thing Theory” that we need to shift our language from speaking of objects to speaking of *things*. We make this linguistic move when “the thingness of objects” inescapably display itself, as Heidegger noted (B. Brown 4). “The story of objects asserting themselves as thing,” as Brown explains, “is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relationship” (B. Brown 4). In *Gilead*, objects assert themselves as active agents in the lives of characters and the trajectory of the narrative. Andrew Brower Latz comments that Ames’ clear “enjoyment of existence is expressed as a continual newness of perception, an astonishment and wonder [which] comes through an attention to the *material*” (287, emphasis mine). The result is a

layering of perception that increases Ames' joy in life and offers him sustainable methods (or rituals) for considering his space, his relationships, and his own being. Jane Bennet's recent book *Vibrant Matter* describes the capacity of things to "not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii). This vibrancy of matter is clear throughout *Gilead*. Though many things populate and direct Ames' life, this paper will examine guns, water, and biscuits as particularly vibrant and alluring things that bind Ames (and the reader) to earthly life.

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Ames' descriptions and stories of firearms lay the groundwork for Robinson's treatment of vibrant matter. Though Ames never touches a gun in the timeline of the novel, rifles and pistols appear throughout the text as objects with the potential to shape and direct human life. Ames is a pacifist, like his father before him, and regrets violence, both historic and present. He believes that a gun, or even just the image of one, can act upon the viewer in a life-shaping way. When his young son is given a book about German guns and aircraft, Ames reflects that "if I were my father, I'd find way to make you think that the noble and manly thing would be to give the book back" (55). Ames worries that his son will be affected by viewing, memorizing, and learning to treasure the images of weapons of war.

Of course, a guns most easily recognized capacity to affect others occurs when it is wielded violently. Before the Civil War, Ames grandfather, also named John Ames, was involved in violent insurgence against slave catchers. When the radical abolitionist John Brown is shot, Old Ames takes him into the church to staunch his wounds. While trying to help Brown escape, Old Ames shoots a U.S. Army soldier and leaves him for dead. The violence of this event affects all members of the Ames family far into the future. After the war, Ames describes

his grandfather as “stricken and afflicted... like a man everlastingly struck by lightning” (49). Old Ames has only one working eye after being injured in a gunfight. The old abolitionist has many friends who were similarly marred by gun fights. He describes “one old fellow whose blessing and baptizing hand had a twist burned into it because he had taken a young Jayhawker’s gun by the barrel” and the still smoking rifle had forever branded him (50). A gun, when shot or simply held, displays its inherent capacity to change life forever, yet its ability to physically and permanently disfigure is not the aspect of their power that Robinson seems to focus on.

Robinson’s attention to a gun’s ability to act before or after a person pulls the trigger is evident in her repeated attention to Old Ames’ pistol. Ames father, yet another John Ames, had become a pacifist after fighting in the Civil War. The pacifist Ames is juxtaposed with Old Ames’ radical, sometimes violent abolitionist actions. Despite their differences, all three John Ames were preachers. While the abolitionist Ames would stand in the pulpit, preaching the “war of the armed and powerful against the captive... with a gun in his belt” (101), the pacifist son would go to “sit with the Quakers” (100). The grandfather’s parishioners could see the gun accompanying their spiritual leader, and it acted on them such that during these sermons, “they always shouted amen, even the littlest children” (101). Old Ames’ gun is more than a symbol of his commitment; it is physically taken to the pulpit and acts as a vital component of his call to war. A gun, more than simply acting as a symbol, has viable potential, to change those who interact with it before it has ever been loaded or fired.

In the letters to his son, Ames discusses his father and grandfather’s disagreement about to how to best fight injustice. After a terrible argument in which his father brings up the deadly battle with the U.S. soldier, the grandfather “took off west,” leaving only a note and a small bundle of goods for his son. Inside the bundle are old shirts with blood stains, a few hand-written

sermons, and the pistol that accompanied Old Ames in the pulpit. Ames' father buries the bundle in the yard, but comes back in a few hours to unbury the papers and shirts. Nearly a month after that, "he dug the pistol up again and set it on a stump and broke it up the best he could with a maul" (79). He then walked to the river and "flung the pieces of it as far as he could into the water" (79). Ames knew his father would "have set about to retrieve [the pieces] from any depth at all if he'd thought of a way to make them vanish entirely" (79). His father could not resist the pull of the gun, even when buried underground, and it acted on him so acutely that he wished he could entirely dissolve its existence. When the gun appears, it becomes the placeholder for the father and son's animosity and simultaneously embodies their inability to break down familial bonds.

Deleuze and Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, examine processes which bring to light the "life proper to matter, a vital taste of matter as such, a material vitalism that doubtless exists everywhere but is ordinarily hidden or covered" (411). The vital materialism of a gun is evident when it disfigures a person, but its ability to act on Ames' father is just as powerful when it lies empty of bullets and buried in the dirt. Deleuze and Guattari speak particularly of a metal object's ability to reveal the process wherein "an energetic materiality overflows the prepared matter and... the succession of forms tends to be replaced by the form of a continuous development" (Deleuze 411). Metal and metallurgy, they contend, replace our conceptions of material objects with a "matter of a continuous variation" (Deleuze 411). The metal firearms in *Gilead*, while in a preacher's belt at the pulpit, while permanently scarring the hands of an abolitionist, or while broken in pieces at the bottom of a river, display a thing's ability to continuously change and act upon those whose share its space.



Rifles and pistols in *Gilead* direct a route through some of the darkest and most sorrowful portions of the text. In conjunction—not competition—with this atmosphere of death and loss, Robinson showers the text with moments of joy through Ames’ interactions with water and light. Since we typically do not experience water or light as a “thing” like a gun, Deleuze and Guattari’s description of a thing’s “continuous variation” and Bruno Latour’s term “actant” become extremely useful. Latour uses the term “actant” for anything that has conative power. An actant can “be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events” (Bennet vii).

When Michael Vander Weele examines’ the didactic nature of *Gilead*, he identifies Robinson’s call to recognize non-human “actants,” though he does not use the term. Vander Weele writes, “The first and perhaps most important turn [in *Gilead*] is... from feeling a stranger in this world to feeling at home in it” (227).<sup>5</sup> Vander Weele argues that this shift occurs when Ames senses “how achingly beautiful” the world is, particularly “the beauty of water, of light, of darkness, of ashes: of elements” (227). Robinson’s call to vigilant thought about the many actants of the world is most clearly seen, for Vander Weele, in elements like water and light. In an interview with the Paris Review, Robinson articulated the importance of ordinary elements. She asked the interviewer to “think about a Dutch painting, where sunlight is falling on a basin of water,” since “that beauty is a casual glimpse of something very ordinary” (Fay). She thinks that “cultures cherish artists because they are people who can say, Look at that,” when all they are pointing at is “a brick wall with a ray of sunlight falling on it” (Fay). What Robinson

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<sup>5</sup> This turn can be identified as a shift from I/it to I/thou, as described by Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, a shift that Victor Turner identifies as a necessary component of *communitas*. Bruno Latour further identifies the internal and linguistic shift to I/thou as the consequence of recognizing actants existing in non-human forms.

describes in the interview takes potent fictional form in *Gilead* as the reader's gaze is turned to the beautiful, active forms of light and water.

Water and light direct Ames' gaze in a number of scenes, each time impacting him in a linguistic or tangible way. While out walking one day after a heavy rain storm, Ames sees a young man and woman strolling under a row of trees. Suddenly, "On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair" (27). The young man, perhaps emboldened by the storm to take part in the downpour, demonstrates the joy and sensuous delight of the water's surprise. Though Ames cannot clearly explain why, the moment "was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth" (26). Ames tendency, noted above, to compare moments of earthly pleasure to myth, emphasize the vibrancy and, what Ames calls elsewhere, the "incandescence" of mere existence. Ames notices that he wants to apply the word "just" to every aspect of this story: "The sun just *shone* and the tree just *glistened* and the water just *poured* out of it and the girl just *laughed*" (28, original emphasis). When people talk that way, indicating stress on the nouns and verbs, Ames thinks "they want to call attention to a thing existing in excess of itself, so to speak, a sort of purity or lavishness, at any rate something ordinary in kind but exceptional in degree" (28). Ames desire to repeat "just" over and over again is his linguistic tribute to the things of the story as the most vital elements. Ames thinks these things—a category including the sun, the tree, the water, *and* the girl—appear to exist in excess of themselves. What he really describes, according to Deleuze, Guattari, and Latour, are the things existing exactly as they always already are. Ames' moment of realization *just* acknowledges how active, abundant, and incandescent these things are.

Ames' descriptions of Baptism reveal even more clearly Robinson's insistence on water and light as active agents in *Gilead*. While Ames has baptized countless individuals throughout this life, the majority of baptisms in the text do not occur in a church. In the first example of baptism that Ames describes in the letter to his son, he recounts a moment of childhood piety and hilarity. He and his friends find a litter of kittens, and "being fairly sure that some of the creatures had been borne away... in the darkness of paganism," the children decide to baptize the cats (22)<sup>6</sup>. Though the scene is quite lovely in its portrayal of childhood sincerity, Ames doesn't offer the memory as simply a past moment. Instead, he writes that an experience like this one "stays in mind" and that for years after the incident, he "would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them" since the sprinkling of water was done "with the pure intention of blessing" (23). Ames believes, "there is a reality in blessing... [which] doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that" (23).

Ames could very well be explaining a purely spiritual form of blessing or sacredness here, but he follows this description of baptizing cats, with a discussion of Ludwig Feuerbach's praise of baptism from an atheistic perspective. Feuerbach wrote that since water was "the purest, clearest of liquids... water has a significance in itself" and thus "it is on account of its *natural* quality that it is consecrated and selected as the vehicle of the Holy Spirit" (qtd. in *Gilead* 23-24). This "beautiful and profound *natural* significance" is the quality of baptism that Ames is most attentive to (23-24, original emphasis). As the water touches the kittens, Ames and his friends are affected in ways that resonate through their lives for many years afterwards. They know that, despite having no baptismal font or religious training, the simple act of sprinkling the clear, pure water has a lasting effect. The effect, for the children in that moment, and for Ames as

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<sup>6</sup> As he recalls the water splashing lightly onto their "warm little brows," Ames reflects that they must have been glad he wasn't a Baptist (23).

he recalls the creaturely baptism, is mysterious joy. Ames describes the experience as “really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time” (23). As he feels the warmth of the kitten’s brow and the cold, wet fur, he feels the significance of their existences simultaneously. Ames writes to his son that though Feuerbach is an atheist, “he is about as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anybody and he loves the world” (24). Feuerbach’s recognition that water holds its own significance outside of any spiritual or other-worldly connection draws Ames’ respect while drawing the reader’s gaze to water’s position as an actant in the narrative.

In a second moment of (non)religious baptism, Ames describes his son hopping around in a sprinkler with another little boy. As the boys revel in the rainbows of color and the dancing droplets, Ames notes the “sprinkler is a magnificent invention because it exposes raindrops to sunshine” (63). Watching the boys play, Ames is reminded of times he had seen the Baptists go down to the river for their dunking, the water splashing and bubbling around the initiate. As in the previous example, this passage could have focused on spiritual sacredness and sacrament, but instead Robinson turns the reader’s attention to the physical element itself. In a slight lamentation of his own Congregationalist belief in sprinkling, Ames writes “I’ve always loved to baptize people, though I have sometimes wished there were more shimmer and splash involved” (63). Though Ames is committed to his theological heritage, the “shimmer and splash” has an irresistible pull. His beliefs about sprinkling, or even about baptism’s religious significance, are here set aside for a reflection on the allure of the water itself. Baptism, in this segment, becomes a way for Ames to take joy in water’s beauty. As Leise argues, “spurning the transcendent, Ames privileges the incandescent—a principle that does not deny the heavenly; it seemingly leaves the heavenly for its (non-) time and (non-) place” (362). The water itself has changed Ames’ thought

pattern, moving his gaze away from heavenly implications to worldly wonder. He turns his thoughts from theology back to the yard, writing “well, you two are dancing around in your iridescent little down pour, whooping and stomping as sane people ought to do when they encounter a thing so miraculous as water” (63). The other-worldly implications of baptism are set aside to enjoy the importance and incandescence of water droplets in a small front yard in Gilead, Iowa.

These descriptions of water and light could simply act as moments of wonder or awe, an encouragement to take notice of ordinary things; Robinson has written often of the “numinous” qualities of ordinary life (Fay). But the play of water and light, as with the firearms described above, display an arresting capacity. Water displays an ability to ground and stabilize identity in the midst of turmoil. A scene in which Ames describes his brother Edward will help illuminate water’s peace-making potential. Edward is Ames’ older brother, the only surviving sibling after a diphtheria epidemic. Believed to be a brilliant, young “Samuel,” he is sent off to Germany to study philosophy. Upon arriving home, at the dinner table the first night, he reveals his total rejection of religious belief. Their parents weep and pray after realizing Edward’s prodigality, but Ames, still in high-school at the time, takes his baseball glove and ball to play catch with his brother. The two brothers play in the street, lunging and leaping and firing pitches. They stop for a glass of water and, Ames recalls, Edward “poured his right over his head, and it spilled off that big mustache of his like rain off a roof” (64). As he stood there, “hair all plastered to his and head and his mustache dripping,” Edward recited words from Psalm 133:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is,  
For brethren to dwell together in unity!  
It is like the precious oil upon the head, that ran down upon the beard...  
Like the dew of Hermon  
that cometh down upon the mountains of Zion. (qtd. in *Gilead* 64)

Though the break between Edward and his father lasts for years, Ames admits that “after that day I did feel pretty much at ease about the state of his soul” (64). The water dripping down on over the head, another extra-religious baptism, forever erases tension between brothers, despite the brevity of the gesture. Each time he performs a baptism or sees the play of water in light, he can remember Edward’s actions and re-institute his own acceptance of Edward’s choices.

Beyond “summer rain” and a young woman’s “hair falling wet around her face,” Ames’ description of his personal heaven includes an “ashy biscuit” (149). The ashy biscuit will provide our final object of inquiry in *Gilead*. When Ames was a very small child, a local church was struck by lightning and badly burned. The next day, the town’s inhabitants came to help clean up the wreckage and salvage things of value. Ames describes the day in sensuous detail. The warm rain “sounded the way it does in an attic eave” (94). The air smelled of summer rain and fire and freshly baked pies. All the men become “black and filthy, till you would hardly know one from another” (95). In the midst of this gritty scene, Ames’ father comes to feed him. Ames recalls, “I remember my father down on his heels in the rain, water dripping from his head, feeding me biscuit from his scorched hand, with that blackened wreck of a church behind him” (95). As with the descriptions of baptism, this moment could dissolve into a symbol of communion, a purely spiritual exchange. But Ames’ focus is on the texture of the bread, the soot on his father’s hands, and the sounds of the old women singing. His focus is on the earth, its elements, its sounds, and its tangible pull on his being. Robinson has argued that communion, rather than dissolving bread into an ethereal symbol, “expresses the holiness of nurturing” (Gritz). Communion, she notes, can be imagined as “the ultimate emblematic signifier of the holiness of giving and receiving sustenance” (Gritz). Rather than bread symbolizing holiness, Robinson views Christian Eucharist as a ritualized comment on the beauty and importance of physically nurturing our bodies. In this

light, Ames' Eucharistic description brings further attention to the wondrous physicality of the scene, particularly the broken biscuit in all its ashy glory.

Beyond acting as a sign of physical sustenance in an isolated moment, memories of the biscuit play a prominent role in Ames' understanding of the world for the rest of his life. He acknowledges, "much of my life was comprehended in that moment... when I took communion from my father's hand" (96). He is intent on trying to explain the event to his son because it was one of those "things that mean most to you, and that even your own child would have to know in order to know you well at all" (101). Vander Weele argues that Ames' continual return to the day with the ashy biscuit is due to the bread acting as an identity-forming, life-affirming gift. Vander Weele uses Marcell Mauss' anthropological work on gifts to suggest that the biscuit is important because a "gift of exchange depends upon a prior recognition of the gift of existence" (228). Gifts, according to Mauss, always imply reciprocal exchange and thus the physical world can be imagined as "a gift and, far from static or passive, a gift with exchange built into it" (228). The father's gift to the son, be it a spiritual heritage, his name, or a mere biscuit, affirms the "gift" of general existence, evokes recognition of mutual existence, and suggests that something more is required.

Imagining the biscuit as a token requiring exchange is reinforced by Ames' focus on the breaking of the bread. In one recollection, Ames writes, "I remember it as if he broke the bread and put a bit of it in my mouth ...he did break it, that's true, and gave half to me and ate the other half himself" (101-102). Ames shifts his attention from the object as a whole, to the act of breaking. His description of the gift as broken bread is another nod to the Eucharistic tradition, but his language and Robinson's descriptions of communion allow for a much wider, more secular resonance. In an earlier passage, Ames reflects on how often he has been thinking about

“the body” after finding out about his heart condition (69). Each body, he thinks, is always already a “Blessed and Broken” thing, a realization that prompts him to “talk about the gift of physical particularity” (69). Earlier still, Ames remembers his grandfather once telling him that being blessed means being bloodied or broken, an etymological connection “in English—but not in Greek or Hebrew... so whatever understanding might be based on derivation has no scriptural authority behind it” (36). While Ames is looking for an etymology based in scripture, the connection between being broken and being blessed is vividly available in the nearly lost concept of a *symbolon*.

The ancient Greek root from which our word “symbol” is derived marries Ames’ seemingly divergent ideas of a blessed, broken gift requiring exchange. Before money was invented in Greece, “contracts of exchange required witnesses and/or visible *symbola*” (Shell 33). A *symbolon* was “an object (often a joint bone or stone or other hard object) broken in two. Two parties who had a contract or agreement kept the halves of the object as the token and sign of their agreement, as identification of the other individual” (Harris 23). Thus, the symbolon was thought to be a “witness to the transaction” (Shell 34). Gerhart Ladner, in his work on the history of symbolism, notes the etymology of *symbolon* as “to throw together, bring together, put together... literally related to ‘drawing together’” (Ladner 223). A symbolon connected two parties through materiality, a quality difficult to dismiss. The fragments, when placed together, indicated shared responsibility, mutual understanding, and fulfillment.

In addition to insuring contracts, symbolons identified individuals across time and space. Dutch writer Harry Mulisch describes the extension of the symbolon from a holder of fiscal agreement to a holder of individual identity. In his novel *The Assault*, he writes of an ancient traveler who wants to send his son back to the friends he has made in a distant city. Mulisch



writes, “I ask my host whether he would be willing to receive you too. How can he be sure that you really are my son? We make a symbolon. He keeps one half, and at home I give you the other. So then when you get there, they fit together exactly” (Mulisch 14–15). In this way, the symbolon became an object that was revealed and stored the identity of the bearer. The two broken stones were both necessary to ensure either party could recognize the other member of the agreement.<sup>7</sup> Symbolons thus can be understood as physical things or spaces which helped individuals know themselves, recognize friends from foes, and orient their lives in a globalizing world.

In *The Economy of Literature*, Marc Shell describes the gradual loss of the word “symbolon.” As contracts began to require down payments or other currency-based tokens, the term went out of use. A symbolon, Shell writes, “meant not only the pactual token but also *word*; and as Plato knew, the development of money corresponds to the development of a new way of speaking” (36). As economies shifted, monetary exchange overtook older forms of reciprocity; the apparent need for symbolons (spoken or tangible) diminished. Our current economic system has separated us so far from this tradition that it makes it difficult to imagine a purposefully broken object as a holder of meaning or value. Shell references Hegel’s comments on symbolons in the *The Spirit of Christianity*, where the thoughtful philosopher writes, “when friends part and break a ring and each keeps one piece, a spectator sees nothing but the breaking of a useful thing and its division into useless and valueless pieces; the mystical aspect of the

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<sup>7</sup> This aspect of the definition was extended to physical places of exchange and passage, such as harbors and entrances to a city. One particular place of note was the *Symbolon Limen*, or Signal Harbor, near the ruins of Ancient Chersonesos, a safe bay where Chersonesites would hide from marauding pirates (Strabo, VII, 4, 2). The specific name for land belonging to Cherosnesites was *chora* (Strabo VII, 4, 2). During peace-times, the Signal Harbor was uninhabited, but it became a physical extension of the space belonging to the Cherosenties, a chora of refuge and dwelling, when danger arose.

pieces he has failed to grasp” (qtd. in Shell, 35). The loss of symbolons in many ways reduced an objects ability to act as a physical or mystical place-holder for contracts, relationships, and identities.

John Ames offers the contemporary reader some glimpse of what value may still lie in broken symbolons. He recognizes how fully he has been shaped and identified by the breaking of the ashy biscuit. Though he cannot articulate for his son, “what that day in the rain has meant,” Ames repeatedly laments his inability to give his son such a gift (114). He tells his son, “you must not judge what I know by what I find words for” and briefly laments the limits of language by exclaiming, “If I could only give you what my father gave me” (114). Though unable to name it as such, the biscuit has acted as a symbolon, a broken portion given from the father to the son which helps Ames’ orient his identity in relation to those around him. The memories of the biscuit become a sort of safe-harbor, or a khoral space to which he can return to better understand himself and the world. The biscuit takes the form of a symbolon, a physical thing that reinforces the connection between father and son as it simultaneously awakens both individual’s recognition of their own wondrous, physical existence.

In the same manner, light, water, and even the guns mentioned in the text, become active, vibrant symbolons. The fragmented drops playing in the sunlight are a physical reminder of Ames’ reconciliation with his brother and his enduring love of young son. The droplets even form his, decidedly earthly, vision of heavenly. Old Ames’ pistol is also a symbolon, powerful in physical form in the pulpit, but all the more active after it has been broken and buried in the dirt. The pistol connects three generations of the Ames family across space and time in an indissoluble bond, most clearly viable after its breaking. Each thing offers a fragmented but expansive understanding of what the world can be, thus allowing character’s to build a sense of

self.<sup>8</sup> Each symbolon offers vital resources for living as characters attempt to dwell fully and feel at home in the world.

Even as they help Robinson's characters establish identity and relationships to others, her symbolons reveal their contractual root as well. As Mauss has demonstrated, all gifts and by extension symbolons, are objects of exchange requiring reciprocity and response. Furthermore, a symbolon was "broken apart deliberately (by the parties in question) in order to provide proof of the relationship" (Harris 23). A symbolon was a physical reminder of "an earlier understanding... specifically for the purpose of later comparison" (Shell 33). If Robinson truly has populated her text with broken symbolons, we must ask what sort of relationship or agreement she is calling us to acknowledge. What does she suggest is required of those who try to shore up the fragments? George Handley contends that the underlying contract in Robinson's fiction is of an ecological nature. Handley argues that Robinson uses her novels and non-fiction to suggest "that environmental degradation stems from a false separation of the human and natural" (504). This false dichotomy is perpetuated by ignoring the non-human actants that we daily interact with. The use of the word environment—indicating something surrounding, revolving around, or circling—allows the human subject to imagine itself as an exceptional creature at the center of a spinning world. Instead, Robinson suggests, we might imagine that "every local landscape is a version of the cosmic mystery... the landscape is ours only in that it is the landscape that we query" (qtd. in Handley, 504). Her description of localized space as

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<sup>8</sup> To briefly recall *Housekeeping*, even in its deathly pallor, Lake Fingerbone becomes a lively symbolon, linking Sylvie and Ruth to the physical landscape, the dead members of their family, and each other. Perhaps not coincidentally, knuckle bones were one of the most widely used symbolons of ancient Greece (Harris 23).

expansive *things* is revealed by the treatment of vibrant matter that I have detailed throughout *Gilead*.

A consequence of recognizing the conative qualities of actants is a shift from believing the world revolves around humans to vigilant viewing of other human and non-human subjects. This is a rejection of environmental lens towards an ecological one. Ecology indicates the study of the house or the dwelling place. To study or query the world around us—physical objects, elemental phenomena, landscapes—is to be ecological. A love of this life and this world, as Ames clearly displays, does not seek to control, own, or dominate the things around him. Instead, he dwells in the midst of the vibrant matter, able to recognize the lively trajectories of the things themselves. The symbolons of *Gilead* can thus be understood as binding Ames to the earth through a compelling ecological solidarity. On his route towards death, Ames recognizes the power and potential of the non-human actants in his world, his understanding of them partially born from his own impending total-otherness. Loving the world and all its inhabitants, Robinson's novel suggests, "is indispensable as long as it accomplishes precisely the opposite of what it sets out to do; instead of possessing, love must dispossess" (Handley 498). To dispossess or relinquish our desire to control the things in our ecological space is a very practical and demanding extension of Robinson's *religio*.

The first step in responding to the ecological ramifications of Robinson's symbolons is modeled by Ames's intimacy with and acceptance of his own death. In a thoughtful piece on graves in *Gilead*, June Hadden Hobbs notes that burial is "a way to attach the abstract to the concrete and thus fix it in time and space so that it is always at hand" (Hobbs 241). Graves, as an incomplete indicator of full, embodied lives, become symbolons showing our connection to the earth. Beyond providing a tangible link to memories of the dead, graves invoke the "secular

typology... of planting” (Hobbs 245). Things that have been planted produce new vegetation and new life, thus our own burials can be imagined as a physical exchange with the gift of existence.<sup>9</sup> Handley suggests that an ecologically sensitive approach to death will agree with Whitman, that “to die is different than anyone supposed and luckier” since we could never know what sort of thing will be made from the atoms of our decaying body.<sup>10</sup> Considering our own deaths as some small return on the investment that the earth has put into our being may be a helpful way to begin imagining an ecologically sound life.

Death may be our first, or final, giving back to the ground that sustains us, but the things of *Gilead* build a framework for more lively responses to the gift of existence. In the introduction to *Making Things Public*, Bruno Latour explores the etymological significance of things themselves. Latour suggests, “of all the eroded meanings left by the slow crawling of political geology, none is stranger to consider than the Icelandic Althing” (Latour and Weibel 13). The Althing was originally a meeting, an assembly or the place where a gathering occurred. Therein, “a thing” was understood to be the convergence of contrasting ideas, of competing interests, and of seemingly irresolvable differences. “Long before designating an object thrown out of the political sphere and standing there objectively and independently,” things instead “meant the issue that brings people together because it divides them” (Weibel and Latour 13). The Althing allowed for resolution through meeting in neutral territory to discover solutions to converging problems. As *Gilead* suggests, and as I’ve attempted to demonstrate here, thing theory provides

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<sup>9</sup> Handley uses the same images of burial and planting, arguing that since everything will die and in doing so, contribute to the elemental building blocks of future life, “all life is radically equal and interconnected by a great whole” (Handley 504). While perhaps Handley overstates the connectedness of beings in Robinson’s novels, his point draws our attention to the physical nature of our own death and how it physically connects us to all other earthly life.

<sup>10</sup> Graves are undoubtedly khôral. Threading the history of khôra through Plato, Heidegger, and Derrida, Nadar El-Biziri contends that khôra is “at the same time both origin and abyss” (El-Biziri, “’Qui Êtes-Vous Chora?’” 482).

just such a neutral ground on which secular and spiritual readers may discuss converging questions. Our current ecological crises, when approached as an Althing, might reveal a new, less volatile vocabulary with which to examine differences. Imagining the broken parts of our world as potentially self-identifying and reconciling symbolons may further promote projects of sustainability and mutually-assured stability.

Latour's attention to things as places of potential reconciliation is especially pertinent when we acknowledge that the novel is a thing in its own right. As a thing, it can be viewed as a neutral zone where options can be explored and seemingly competing views can be expressed. *Gilead*, and by association *Godric* and *Tinkers*, become places where questions and fears surrounding death may be explored. So often, death is an issue that divides, especially secular and religious groups, yet in these novels, death becomes a place of meeting and dwelling. Whether death is imagined as the entrance to the afterlife or as the final aspect of existence, the things of this world take on new connectivity and vibrancy when we acknowledge our pilgrimage towards *taut-autre*. To see these novels as broken symbolons—objects of fragmented intentions and a language which always fails to communicate perfectly—is to also recognize them as gifts requiring reciprocity. Perhaps, through Robinson's gift and through a more vigilant viewing of things, we might begin to see a world populated by subjects, each bearing (in the sense of both carrying a burden and wearing a distinguishing mark) the gift of existence.

## CHAPTER 3

### Formal Optimism through Fragmentation in Paul Harding's *Tinkers*

Let the snake wait under  
his weed  
and the writing  
be of words, slow and quick, sharp  
to strike, quiet to wait,  
sleepless.  
—through metaphor to reconcile  
the people and the stones.  
Compose. (No ideas  
but in things) Invent!  
Saxifrage is my flower that splits  
the rocks.

- William Carlos Williams, "A Sort of Song" (55)

All fictional forms, as the last chapters attempted to demonstrate, are vibrant things which act on the reader and display trajectories of meaning beyond human intention. All texts are thereby symbolons, conative entities broken by the deconstructed and deconstructing aspects of language. In the novels that I have explored, the authors intentionally fragment temporality, plot lines, and narrative threads, thus mimicking the fragmentary nature of language. Imagining these texts as symbolons reveals some of the ecological ramifications our solidarity with all materiality. *Godric* and *Gilead* use their fragmented form to explore ethical consequences of human solidarity with other forms of vibrant matter. Having explored Buechner's wandering temporality and Robinson's map of vibrant matter's trajectory, I now turn to Paul Harding's *Tinkers* as a final comment on the ramifications of intimacy with our own death. In this final chapter, I investigate the structural elements of *Tinkers*, a novel with striking similarities in form and content to *Godric* and *Gilead*. By rooting itself in impending death and meandering through exploded moments of time and space, *Tinkers* demonstrates ways that a fragmented novelistic form can be a tool in promoting ecological attention, ethical action, and freedom towards death.

As an introduction to this analysis of *Tinkers*, I will briefly comment on William Carlos Williams's suggestion that poetic metaphor, a two-part structure of separation and connection, can act as a form of reconciliation between humans and nature. Williams's poem "A Sort of Song" describes a landscape of things which promote invention, composition, and reconciliation. While the poem opens itself beautifully to a multiplicity of interpretations, it clearly comments on the role of the poet and the composition process. The poet waits to "compose" while "under/ his weed," hoping to write words which will be "sharp/ to strike" the hearts and minds of the reader. Through metaphor, Williams suggests, the poet takes on the arduous process of reconciling people with other entities. Since we can have "No ideas/ but in things," weeds, stones, and flowers become forces which may rend, deconstruct, and eventually reconcile human interactions with the rest of the world.

How can a textual device like metaphor work for reconciliation between parties that have, historically, been at odds? I. A. Richards, in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, meditates on Aristotle's praise of metaphor. For the rhetorician, Aristotle suggests, "the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor," though this skill is difficult to achieve, since "to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances" (qtd. in Richards 89). Richards critiques Aristotle's notion of metaphor as "something special and exceptional in the use of language, a deviation from its normal mode of working, instead of the omnipresent principle of all its free action" (90). All language, Richards argues, is metaphor: "a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts" (92). Richards, whose work on metaphor began in the 1930's, anticipated the linguistic revolutions of deconstruction which expose all language as contextually situated signs, devoid of intrinsic meaning. Richards understood that all language is metaphorical and that the differences between sign and signifier allow for endless play of meaning.



Yet, Aristotle's praise of metaphor may still be helpful in that it identifies the need to cultivate an "eye for resemblances" between seemingly disparate items. Linguist Roy Harris notes that Aristotle often described words as re-connected symbolons. Particularly evident in written communication, Aristotle noted that both aspects of symbolons are present: "an agreement (between two parties) and a (physical) relationship between the items" (Harris 23). Aristotle saw written communication as word and sound "broken apart deliberately (by the parties in question) in order to provide proof of the relationship" (23). Aristotle's description resonates profoundly with his comments on the importance of resemblance in metaphor. In a symbolon, two distinct yet intimately connected halves must be present for a contract to be fulfilled; in the traditional understanding of metaphor, two seemingly disparate things show proof of their relationship by drawing attention to their perceived difference<sup>11</sup>. If we, as Richards and poststructuralists argue we must, expand our understanding of metaphor to include all instances of communication, we begin to see the impetus for William's belief in a poetic metaphor's reconciling potential. Metaphor, as an inherent quality of language, accepts our inability to get at any inherent or stable meaning of words. Thereby metaphor embraces the fragmented qualities of speech in order to reveal connection and open possibilities for new perspectives.

The ethical and ecological potential of metaphor is demonstrated in "A Sort of Song." Though each thing named in the poem takes on symbolic qualities through Williams' metaphor, they retain their gritty materiality. Saxifrage, in particular, exposes locality and potentiality. Its

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<sup>11</sup> As Roy Harris describes: "The two disjoint parts of the symbolon have no value at all individually. Each is significant only as a counterpart of the other... there is no question of one *representing* the other or being a substitute for the other. They are not identical, nor equivalent... Nor is there any question of one half being a copy of the other. (On the contrary, it is important that they should differ). The whole point is that they are both *different* and *unique*. (23-24)

Latin name, *saxifraga*, means “stone-breaker,” a reference to its ancient use as a treatment for kidney stones (National Plant Collections). Within the human body, saxifrage can destroy blockage and renew health. The flower grows, nearly exclusively, in alpine climates in rocky crevices and on boulder fields. Its name is thus doubly appropriate, describing where it may be found and what it might do. The flower, even as it breaks stones, is a symbolon of its own, reminding Williams of his (broken) connection to the things around him. By attending to multiple aspects of the flower’s ontology, Williams finds an apt metaphor for his own position as a poet, a person who breaks conventional ways of thinking in order to awaken new paradigms of interaction. He lives in a world full of fragmented narratives and imperfectly transferred communication, and yet, by cultivating an “eye for resemblance” and being acutely aware of things, he still is able to play an integral role in encouraging ecological connectivity. Form, fragmentation, metaphor, symbols and symbolons all become necessary components in the project of reconciliation between “the people and the stones.”

Paul Harding, in the Pulitzer winning *Tinkers*, embraces the potential of our metaphoric language and its reconciling qualities. In this way, he follows in the footsteps of Buechner and Robinson and extends their project of fragmented timelines and wandering narratives. Harding emphasizes the metaphorical qualities of language to vividly symbolize a post-modern life on its pilgrimage towards death. The fragmented structure kills chronology, clarity, and anticipation for climax and thereby forces the reader to recognize death as an opening to new possibilities. Because of Harding’s continual insistence on language as metaphor, we come face-to-face with our own cognitive estrangement within the text and the world. *Tinkers* maps our postmodern space in a way that rejects dominating impulses or totalized understanding. Instead, Harding explores the dissolving boundaries of our postmodern landscape, revealing borderlands of beauty

and expectation. Through the text's continual attention to mortality and its fragmented structure, Harding's novel achieves a feeling, or in the language of the text, a *rhythm* of optimism. Through examining *Tinkers'* dialectic of death and its formal attributes, we begin to see how postmodernity's particular relationship with death may provide optimistic directions for our ecological concerns.

The first line of *Tinkers* reads, "George Washington Crosby began to hallucinate eight days before he died" (Harding 7). The rest of the novel, while exploring everything from horology to epilepsy, quantum mechanics to flower-wreath creation, continually returns to death and dying. Primary among the narrative focal points are the deaths of George Washington Crosby, his father Aaron Howard Crosby, and his grandfather, who is never named. When Harding recently was asked why both of his published novels begin with the death of a major character, he replied that he has no particular fascination with death. Rather, he stated, "I'm fascinated with what's anachronistically called metaphysics... I'm interested in the greater whole of which we are a part, but cannot perceive. That makes death an interesting threshold" (McAlister). He argued that privileging a theme of death "sets our eminence in release against the omega point of our mortal career. It's the absolute value that I create narratively and aesthetically—it's a powerful subject to write about" (McAlister). *Tinkers* powerfully attends to and memorializes the main characters deaths as Harding describes the trajectories of their lives.

Harding's self-proclaimed interest in the threshold of death is displayed in George Washington Crosby as acute resistance to dying. George has steeled his world against impending death as carefully as possible. He has built his life and his home around him to ward off elemental destructive and deconstructive forces—we literally see him in the foundation of his house soldering plumbing joints in a lightning storm. Lightning strikes the foundation and throws

“him to the opposite wall,” but “he got up and finished the joint” (8). He has sealed his space carefully and competently: “Cracks in his plaster did not stay cracks; clogged pipes got routed; peeling clapboard got scraped and slathered with a new coat of paint” (8). Before he became too ill, he was always a “fastidiously neat dresser” (48) and kept his wardrobe and his finances in equally precise order. When he retires, he begins to fix expensive, antique clocks and meticulously collects the profits “in half a dozen safety-deposit boxes located around the North Shore” (34). After he dies, his wife is comforted by surrounding herself with a large number of his clocks. When she lies in bed listening to the competing, cacophonous beats, “she knew without a doubt that the fastidious ghost of her husband was drifting around in the living room, inspecting each machine through his bifocals, making sure that they were all even of beat, adjusted, and precise” (35). George maintains a sense of self by regulating, fixing, and tinkering with the objects around him, imposing order but also working alongside objects in order to find a stable place for himself and his family.

While George’s attempts to order space and time betray a need—seemingly fundamental to the angst-riddled postmodern subject—to reconstruct stabilizing entities, he also betrays a keen interest in the threshold of death. George’s imaginative musings about his father most clearly demonstrate his tendency to eschew his need for control in favor of curiosity and exploration of possibilities. Though the novel begins and ends with George, the bulk of the text is focused on his father. Howard is a tinker, a wanderer, an epileptic, an embracer of wonder and chaos who foils George’s need for order. Before George was ill, he “never permitted himself to imagine his father” (19). Memories of his errant father could only occasionally break-in to his structured life at moments when George was unable to create the order he desired. We read:

Occasionally, though, when [George] was fixing a clock, when a new spring he was coaxing into its barrel came loose from its arbor and exploded, cutting his hands,

sometimes damaging the rest of the work, he had a vision of his father on the floor, his feet kicking chairs... his head banging on floorboards, his teeth clamped onto a stick or George's own fingers. (20)

The propensity of the tiny, unwieldy clock cogs and gears to evade order immediately conjure the images of his father in an epileptic fit, not only because Howard's body or brain had seized "loose from its arbor," but also because the father's choices created chaos and instability in the son's life. However, when cancer takes over George's body and Parkinson's disease begins to confuse his mind, he realizes, "he wanted to see his father again. He wanted to imagine his father" (21). As soon as George voices his need or desire to remember his father, *Tinkers* shifts to the fragmented, collaged memories and imaginings of Howard's life and death. Time and scene jump page by page between four generations of the Crosby's daily lives, their inner musings, and their deaths.

As George begins to imagine his father's life, "Harding counterpoints the stasis of George on his deathbed by following his looping recollections, taking us back a lifetime to his epileptic father" (James 857). George's successful, structured life in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century is contrasted with Howard, who spends afternoons selling trinkets from his tinkers cart or crafting flower-wreaths; he eventually leaves his wife and children so they will not admit him to a mental hospital. In the midst of these real or fabricated memories of Howard, we begin to realize that George's yearning for control is matched by the awe and wonder he experiences when he leaves understanding behind. While the events and recollections are included as parts of Howard's life, the novel reveals itself as the products of George's imagination or memories—probably a bit of both—as he lies dying. Due to the inability to separate Howard's life from George's imagination, both men are revealed as "extraordinarily porous to nature and prone to becoming 'unhitched' from everyday human existence and entering a state of ecstasy, even

transcendence” (Seaman). “In this rhapsodic novel of impending death,” George’s imagination displays “humankind’s contrary desires to both conquer the ‘imps of disorder’ and to be one with life, fully meshed within the great glimmering web” (Seaman). George, in the dialectic of his need to both repress and imagine his father’s wandering life, embodies the draw and fear of the unknown which echo through the novel.

*Tinkers* exposes a particular cultural relationship with death. Contemporary attitudes towards death are often simultaneously fearful and fascinated. We freeze our eggs, sperm, and DNA to ward off aging and the inevitable end. We live-stream the funerals of our heroes and celebrities. We fear both the falling birth rates in the industrialized world and the rising global population. We call ourselves “post-modern,” a small death inherent in the very naming of our age. Mark C. Taylor describes the “the sense of irrevocable loss and incurable fault” which usher in the postmodern era (Taylor 6). This fault line or “wound is inflicted by the overwhelming awareness of death—a death that ‘begins’ with the death of God and ‘ends’ with the death of ourselves. We are in a time between times and a place which is no place” (7). The current cultural fascination with death is not only curiosity and fear of the future, but also an inability to place ourselves stably in the present. This existential angst is a quasi-death in its own right. The ambiguity and transience of the liminal space reminds us of our fragility, our arbitrarily erected boundaries, and our inability to control the cosmos.

The simultaneous fear and draw of death is mimicked in the novel’s oscillating form. Harding uses a fragmented structure to tinker with the boundaries between subjects and objects, inside and outside, life and death. The novel reads almost like an anthology, as the reader must maneuver between multiple voices, perspectives, genres and temporalities. We hear the voices of George, Howard, and Howard’s father in small, alternating sections of thought, memory,

dialogue, and narration. We have snippets of text from *The Reasonable Horologist* by Rev. Kenner Davenport and lost pamphlets supposedly penned by Howard. Embedded in the Crosbys' lives are stories of old Indian guides and backwoods hermits and women who cut holes in the ice of frozen lakes to drown the pain of their cold lives. At points, we seem to hear the thoughts of angels or gods, or perhaps some metadiscursive voice reflecting on the novel from a future position. Though limited scholarly work has been produced on the recently published *Tinkers*, those who have reviewed the novel describe its fragmented structure in a number of ways. Jay Parini notes that polyphonic voices resonate in a "Faulkneresque manner" as the novel "twists and turns through time, breaking free of it." George Core suggests *Tinkers* is a "picaresque tale, despite the fact that Howard is far from being the usual sly picaro" (lxvii). A number of reviewers describe *Tinkers* as local fiction seen through the eyes of multiple generations, a distinction reinforced by Harding's second novel *Enon* which is set in the same small town where George dies (Perez; McAlister; Parini). Harding is not inventing new structures, but rather riffing on a tradition of amalgamation, montage, and the picaresque.

Harding offered his own comments on the novel's structure after he won the Pulitzer. In an interview, he called himself a "guerilla writer" to indicate that he wrote on whatever was available, "bookmarks and the backs of receipts, transcribing the scraps into the computer later" (Rich). When he found he could not bear to let it lay in pieces any longer, "he printed out his mishmashed computer file and laid it out on the living-room floor. Nursing a few fingers of whisky, he cut up the document, stapling and taping sections into the structure that ultimately made it to publication" (Rich). Harding's montaging process of writing stands in contrast to the affective draw of text. Ironically, over 40 publishing houses rejected the novel because, as Harding explained, "nobody wants to read a slow, contemplative, meditative, quiet book" (Rich).

The pensive aura of *Tinkers* may seem to contrast such a fragmented construction, but Harding's continual attention to what he calls "exploded moments" allows for the text to disregard linear trajectory and still progress meditatively. He explains:

I find that when I write fiction it comes to me not quite in episodes but in instances. The instant when Howard realizes he's leaving his family. The instant when George realizes he's going to die. Then I spend a lot of time exploding those moments. You know when you buy a lawnmower, and you look at the instruction manual and it has those exploded views: the nuts and bolts and little parts of the wheels. That's basically what I do. (Perez)

The collage of *Tinkers* is an interlocking series of these exploded moments juxtaposing concrete, earthly items with swirling infinitude. Harding describes this melding of ordinary and sublime as absolutely central to the structure of the novel. Since George is lying in bed thinking for the majority of novel, "all the scenes and things he thinks about had to have their correlating literal and concrete images, even just so it stayed imminent and physical and didn't just dissolve into pure idea" (Perez). Metaphor, as a form which correlates concrete image with imagination, is necessary to ground the often metaphysical content Harding includes. When one is "leaning too much on the abstract and conceptual," he admits, "it's easy to drift off into the ether" (Perez). Harding's metaphors thus guide the reader through landscapes of pure idea and particular physical locals through his purposefully detonated form.

David James, one of the first to critically comment on *Tinkers*, locates ethical potential in the novel's metaphorical focus. James suggests that *Tinkers* reveals "sublimity within the ordinary," as the striking metaphors reveal new ways of interacting with seemingly quotidian things and events (James 846). James argues that *Tinkers* is a form of psychological realism which bursts the ordinary instances of the Crosby's lives into moments of sublime wonder. Borrowing a term from Iris Murdoch, James calls *Tinkers* a crystalline novel. Murdoch, in the mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century, categorized two types of novels: crystalline and journalistic; the latter



composed of “outward facing documentary realism” (847). James attempts to update both terms, arguing that modern authors choose crystalline forms in order “to affirm how the novel, after an era of being subjected to a self-reflexive deconstruction and epistemological doubt, still has the capacity to simulate and thereby intensify our attention to the aesthetic dimensions of ordinary experience” (857). Crystalline novels such as *Tinkers* coordinate instances of “individual discernment with instances of shared observation and copresence, plotting the ramifications of the way characters behave towards sublimity of their everyday environments in terms of how that behavior is shared by others whom it also affects” (850). It is in these moments of “copresence” that James locates *Tinkers* social and ethical potential. Though at first Harding’s exploded moments seem internalized or “individuated... they turn out to have intersubjective dimensions” which suggest communal or ecological ways to live and interact in the world (851). In order to take part in the “phenomenological richness of ordinary experiences,” (851) characters and readers must recognize their inherent connectivity with the things around them. James’ focus of the psychological risks and rewards of reading a novel such as *Tinkers* reinforces my distinction of the novel as a liminal text, the reader of which forces change and new types of connectivity with the world.

James contends that Harding advances “the possibility that after an era of postmodernist cynicism, fiction can mobilize perceptions of the mundane made marvelously strange” (James 846). James’ comments are mirrored in a fascinating recent movement in architecture which responds to postmodern forms of perception and even to *Tinkers* itself. In *Architectural Design*, architect Birgir Örn Jónsson categorizes recent architectural trends which physically embody scholarly trends in peripheral vision studies. In order to “treat the entire field of vision, and the periphery in particular, as a rich and dynamic mode of sensation,” Jónsson designed his project

*Islands of Vision* (57). His creation is both an art installation and a model for structural components of future buildings. *Islands of Vision* is composed of “an assembly of architectural attractors, obfuscators, and scintillators... choreographed in relation to an observer as he passes through” (Jónsson 57). The result of these montaged features “is to constantly turn the attention of the observer from what is in front of him to what is around him... he is encouraged to witness himself *seeing*, and by so doing is dislocated from the centre of his own gaze” (57). *Islands of Vision* (see Figure 2) is part of a larger trend in architecture which, in catering to “peripheral vision, provides a key to the other senses, and a means to empower the observer, as it demands more engagement on his behalf” (59). Since “the thing that is represented can be veiled” when



Figure 2 (Jónsson 59)

we privilege only the human view point, forcing the observer to continually shift their techniques of perception may indeed promote ecological, rather than environmental viewing practices (54). A more dynamic, sensuous world becomes available when we are forced to consider multiple lines of sight.

David James’ contention that *Tinkers* is “perception made strange,” is echoed by Jónsson, for whom *Tinkers* was an inspirational springboard. Jónsson uses the novel as an entrance point to *Islands of Vision*. He quotes from a passage in which the

reader is invited into George Crosby's study. There, we view an oil painting hanging above his desk:

If you watched the straight lines of the schooner's masts and rigging long enough in the dim light of an early evening or on a rainy day, the sea would begin to move at the corners of your vision. They would stop the moment you looked directly at them, only to slither and snake again when you returned your gaze to the ship. (Harding 32)

Peripheral vision is indispensable to experiencing the oil painting, *Islands of Vision*, and *Tinkers* itself. As David Michael Levin and other scholars contend, "peripheral vision is concerned with the question of 'where' and the gathering of stimuli" (Jónsson 56). The opposite of peripheral is foveal vision, which "constitutes the central two degrees in our horizontal field of vision, the bit that we are looking at" (56). This component of our vision "deals mainly with objects," with defining and placing meaning on the things which we "arrest" with our foveal line of sight (56). Harding's attention to the periphery denies the arresting, dominating aspects of a fixed gaze. His fragmented form and attention to death simultaneously blind foveal vision, requiring us to see and read from the margins. The shift to periphery necessarily limits our ability to determine exactly what we are looking at. As a consequence, we ourselves are arrested, required to "form a spatial hypothesis of our surroundings in concert with [our] other senses" (Jónsson 56). Fragmentation does not equal loss in these architectural or literary settings. Rather, the collage encourages new view points, reveals alternative lines of sights, and captivates the viewer in potentially productive ways.

*Tinkers* proceeds through non-linear time, a mosaic of moments that shift, break, and re-orient the viewer's gaze. Three textual examples will help to demonstrate the outcome of these shifted lines of sight. George's journey towards death evocatively demonstrates the liminal or marginal zone where vision begins to blur. As he draws near to death, his vision and other senses begin to distort the boundaries between his being and the things around him. "One hundred and

thirty-two hours before he died,” George wakes to find the living room, in which his hospital bed is placed, eerily unfamiliar. Unable to name the strangeness, he surveys the room, taking note of the objects around him. Suddenly he realizes, “all of the clocks in the room had wound down” (Harding 33). As he looks at the silent clocks—meticulously described tambours and carriages and grandfathers and cuckoos—“he felt the inside of his own chest and had a sudden panic that it, too, had wound down” (34). In the moment the silent clocks make themselves heard, “he understood that he was going to die in the bed where he lay” (34). Harding’s focus on peripheral vision is here expanded to other forms of sensory phenomena including aural and vibratory sensations which demonstrate the same ability to force new perception.

Harding further blurs the lines between George’s life and the instruments with which he tinkers through George’s recollections. George remembers, “when his grandchildren had been little, they had asked if they could hide inside the clock. Now he wanted to gather them and open himself up and hide them among his ribs and faintly ticking heart” (34). The clocks display all the conative qualities of vibrant matter. Bennet describes vibrant matter’s capacity “not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). The clocks beat away a time which George helped to set, but as *things*, they also define a trajectory for his own life and death. Harding’s interwoven things and persons begin to disintegrate the barrier between George’s inner life and that which seems external to him. Harding’s attention to the unwieldy tendencies of things—which “often flee to dusty and obscure nooks,” (Harding 17)—begins to disintegrate bounded concepts of interiority and exteriority. When the clocks stop ticking, they force George to recognize the “thingness” of his own body. George’s view from the liminal space of his death-

bed allows him to recognize, name, and be comforted by from his own place among the things in his life.

Howard Crosby's epileptic "fits" further illustrate the consequences of *Tinkers* peripheral sensory experiences. Our first description of Howard's seizures begins with the question, "What is it like to be split open from the inside by lightning?" (Harding 45). During his seizures, Howard feels as if a door inside of him secretly opens "on its own to an electric storm spinning somewhere out on the fringes of the solar system" (46). When closed, this door appears to form a portion of the boundary between self and cosmos: "closed, it was invisible, cloaked in the colors of the world" (46). But when it opens, Howard stands in the threshold of "the door, or maybe not even doors, just the curtains and murals of this world and the star-gushing universe" (47). In George's moment of connectivity with the clocks, his beating heart was conflated with the ticking timepiece. For Howard, a consistently marginal or liminal character, his whole being becomes the threshold between interior and exterior, other and self. When a seizure begins, the door that exists in a healthy mind and body disappears completely.

In his unavoidably liminal position, Howard imagines that the seizures explode the distinctions between life and death:

It was like the opposite of death, or a bit of the same thing death was, but from a different direction: Instead of being emptied or extinguished to the point of unselfness, Howard was overfilled, overwhelmed to the same state. If death was to fall below some human boundary, so his seizures were to be rocketed beyond it. (47-48)

The primal, vibratory, sensory phenomenon of the seizure gathers the boundaries of Howard's world, shatters their arbitrarily placed delineations, and reorients him within and yet around the "too-muchness" and complexity of the world.

Harding further demonstrates the connections between humans and all other vibratory matter through associating Howard's seizures with times of feasting. Bennet argues that when we

are able to envision that which enters the body as vibrant matter, we begin to see “foods as conative bodies vying alongside and within an-other complex body,” the synthesis of which is capable of “inducing/producing... salient, public effects” (39). In Harding’s words, when the lightning breaks into or explodes out of him, “Howard, by accident of birth, tasted the raw stuff of the cosmos” (47). While “other, large, inhuman souls might very well thrive on such a feast,” when Howard ingests it, “instead of sating, [it] instantly burst the seams of his thin body” (47). Bennet argues that “eating constitutes a series of mutual transformations between human and nonhuman materials” (40) and in the throes of his seizures Howard indicates just such an interaction: figuratively and physically.

Howard’s “diet of lightning” eventually convinces his wife, Kathleen, to admit him to a mental hospital in an effort to lock away the inconveniences and embarrassments of his boundary breaking seizures. The final grand mal seizure that compels her to institutionalize her husband occurs in the midst of a Christmas feast when the scent of a giant ham holds the entire family momentarily transfixed. During the seizure, George and Kathleen try to force a wooden spoon between Howard’s teeth to keep him from biting off his own tongue. Howard had previously reflected that “some-well intentioned being...had spoon-fed him voltage from behind the door” (46) but during this particular seizure, “Kathleen jammed the spoon crosswise into his mouth, like a bit” (85). Kathleen must rein-in the violent, destructive power she sees in her husband’s life, both his wandering, tinkering ways, and his seizures.

During the climactic seizure, in a twist of narrative and bodies, George realizes his father might swallow the spoon and “stuck his fingers into Howard’s mouth” to save him (86). In the moments of Howard’s consumption of the “raw stuff of cosmos,” he consumes gritty fragments of this earth as well: bites of the ham from the table, bits of wood from the spoon, and his own

son's blood. George recalls, "*he was smiling when he nearly bit my fingers off, or it felt like he did... Instead of terror though, I thought, So this is what it is; I know what it is now. My father is not a werewolf or a bear or a monster*" (87, original emphasis). The replacement of the spoon with George's flesh is both gruesome and somehow calming to the boy. The spoon, both in figurative and physical form, bridges a divide between Howard and George, perhaps in one of the moments of "unselfness" that Harding has named. The gift that Howard is offered from the "other side" of the door is an overwhelming, self-splitting feast but in this instant, the diet of lightning also feeds George's understanding of his father, a mutual nourishing. The Eucharistic undertones of father and son, blood and flesh are not lost on the reader. The necessity of death inherent in the possibilities of such redemptive, embodied consumption return our attention to the primacy of fragmentation and mortality in the novel.

Harding is not undermining or ignoring the terrifying or harmful aspects of the seizures. Nor is he belittling the pathos of mourning experienced by George or his family as he nears death. Illness, poverty, the cold winter of New England, the breakdown of marriages, estranged familial relationships: each is, in turn, a focal point of the narrative. The moments of heart-ache and loss are never minimized and the text has a meditative tone due to the loneliness and grief that many of the characters feel. Yet, always lingering in these scenes of distress is Harding's insistence on the potential inherent in fragmentation and loss. Moreover, these moments of suffering and sorrow become the very obstacles to foveal vision that promote and encourage the view from the periphery.

A final example of Howard's peripheral vision highlights the empowering potential of a marginal view of the world. Howard, as an epileptic, can never ignore his own propensities to spin off into the remote parts of the cosmos. He is unable to establish the solid structures of

being that his son is eager to maintain. Thus his life demands what Harding describes as a constant “turning of his head” (Perez). In a contemplative scene, Howard walks on a rutted path through the deep woods, trailing his tinker’s cart. It was, to Howard “the best part of the afternoon, when folds of night mingled with bands of day” (53). He wished he could “crawl into the shadows and sit quietly and become a part of the slow freshet of night” (53). If he could wait until the night’s shadows had flooded him completely, he thinks that he might begin to see some secret even though “each time he turned his direct his attention to [it]... it scattered to just beyond his sight” (54). He reflects:

The true essence, the secret recipe of the forest and the light and the dark was far too fine and subtle to be observed *with my blunt eye—water sac and nerves, miracle itself, fine itself: light catcher. But the thing itself is not forest and light and dark, but something else scattered by my course gaze, by my dumb intention.* (54, original emphasis)

Howard is trying to resist own interpretation of what a *thing* is; he wishes to fight his own arresting gaze which forces “dumb intention” onto the ineffable forest at twilight. He believes that his peripheral vision, those shadows swimming at the corners of his eyes, give him the fullest possible view of what the forest might actually be. Howard believes that if he could be “nimble enough to scale the silver trunk and brave enough top poke my finger into [the thing itself], that might offer to the simple touch a measure of tranquility or reassurance” (54). He has been partially privy to whatever is “beyond” human perception during his seizures, and those moments of eruption open him to other opportunities for shifted viewing of the world.

Despite the language used, Harding is not interested in transcendence. Instead, in speaking of the scene described above, Harding characterizes Howard’s shifting gaze as a type of scientific inquiry. Every time Howard “turns his head, everything behind him disappears or changes” (Perez). This scene, Harding argues, is “fooling around with quantum physics, just in a narrative sense” (Perez). Harding is interested in quantum theories because “the most



sophisticated quantum mechanical experiments only make the nature of matter more ambiguous than it ever was before—it's all observer dependent" (Perez). The qualities of "supraluminal influence and observer dependent reality... speak to the experiential and participatory nature of human consciousness" demonstrated in Howard's character (Perez). Howard relies on his peripheral gaze to locate a tear in the fabric of reality, "a glimpse of what is on the other side" (54), but the other side, as Harding indicates, is simply the name for a different observer position.

Death paradoxically attracts and repels the self, an oscillating pattern embodied by Howard as he yearns to understand the secret of the shadows in the forest. In a world that prizes production, control, knowledge, and hierarchical growth, death seems the ultimate end. The skull leers from the grave and the fear of impending cessation drives an ever increasing need for structure, mastery, and domination over the things that might usher in death. Even for those who believe in an afterlife, death brings an end to their being in this world. The ever approaching end brings release from the things that seem to define us as subjects, be it our place over nature or under god. Mark C. Taylor describes death, for the contemporary individual "as a hostile invader, one that carries the threat of a mortal wound for otherwise healthy subjects" (144). Harding, following in the lineage of Frederick Buechner or Marilynne Robinson, chooses to begin a narrative with unavoidably impending death, producing, in the reader, a sense of dislocation or anxiety. When individuals are "bound to and by the exclusive logic of identity, the affirmation of the self is inseparable from the negation of otherness" (Taylor 145). As the looming shadow of death obstructs the foveal view of plot or moral purpose, the reader is unable to define the self in opposition to anything. Instead, as Birgir Örn Jónsson suggests in *Islands of*

*Vision*, we are forced (perhaps empowered) to witness ourselves seeing.<sup>12</sup> While fear or confusion may be aroused in this decentered, peripheral position, our anticipation for climax dissipates. The audience, trained to read analytically, is suddenly left with a different set of questions to ask. Rather than who acts, what actions matter, and what orders the actions, we ask: What is obstructing my vision of the world and how can I turn my head to catch a glimpse? What is possible to see, feel, taste, or touch in these vignettes, these montages? What *does* it feel like to be split apart by lightning?

Instead of reading from the beginning of Howard or George's life until the end, we wander through the cosmos with them, decentered and dethroned from a position of power as a reader or even as a subject. Taylor investigates the odd relationship between death and the postmodern subject through the concept of "erring." To err is "to ramble, roam, stray, wander, like "Chaucer's 'weary ghosts that errest to and fro'" (Taylor 11). As we loop through Harding's text, we are told that the "universe's time cannot be marked" by a clock since "such a crooked and flimsy device could only keep the fantastic hours of unruly ghosts" (Harding 17). A linear progression through the novel would force the shifting lines of sight into a facsimile singularity and would, in the process, diminish the possibilities of Harding's narrative. When the errant nature of the text is encountered, we begin to see that the end, or "death, in other words, is a force in life rather than merely the tragic demise of life" (Taylor 144). George and Howard's deaths become final thresholds for Harding to explore and explode, instances of light and color that allow the reader and the character to question and imagine.

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<sup>12</sup> Jónsson suggests that peripheral vision is "more tuned to our spatial perception in natural environments, in which we lose our focal points and lines of reference in favour of a heightened peripheral awareness" (59). While I am not sure of his definition of "natural," in landscapes not purposefully curated by human hands, this sense of perception may indeed be heightened.

As George nears death, he finds that the moments of his life come to him as a “shifting mass, the tiles of a mosaic spinning, swirling, replotting, always in recognizable swaths of colors, familiar elements, molecular units, intimate currents, but also independent now of his will” (Harding 18). Any of George’s attempts to mediate or impose order on the events of his life are thwarted by the mosaic tiles as they shift, swirl, and recede into his periphery. George’s memories here reject structure in favor of “the labyrinthian play of surfaces” (Taylor 16). George reflects that the mosaic tiles of his life will continue to move even after his death, “so that [he] will remain a set of impressions porous and open to combinations with all the other vitreous squares floating about in whoever else’s frames” (Harding 65). Imagining his own death as a fertile ground for other’s lives echoes Reverend John Ames’ metaphors of death as planting. As George imagines his tiles shrinking into the boundary lines between other tiles, he reflects, “(yes, I am lucky, lucky)... if we are fortunate [we] have fleeting instances when we are satisfied that the mystery is ours to ponder, if never to solve... not to solve anything but just simply to see it again one last time” (66). The ability to see the tiles from multiple positions and various times is sufficient for George Washington Crosby, and he counts himself fortunate to ponder the mystery of his shifting vision.

Howard too envisions his death as the interplay of light, shadow, and color. His seizures opens the doorway into the “universe surrounding a pinwheel of light,” a quasi-death that is beyond life (Harding 43). He imagines that the weaver of the world might have left “one bad loop” in the tapestry “of whatever it is this world is knit from” and that he, Howard, has been fortunate to briefly glimpse the known and the unknown of the cosmos (54). Though he readily acknowledges that “everything is made to perish,” he as readily announces that “the wonder of

anything at all is that it has not already done so” (119).<sup>13</sup> Howard lives a life of “serpentine wandering,” the result of acknowledging that “human experience can no longer be graphed along a line that has a definite beginning, middle, and end” (Taylor 15). Howard’s intimacy with death and his resulting attention to the raw stuff of earth allow him to walk an errant path with reduced anxiety regarding traditional notions of progress.

In the space of fragmented ideas and disassembled selves, the novel’s beginning in death becomes vaguely, and eventually pointedly, positive. Instead of moving through the text to seek out what happens, we take part in the shifts of fear and wonder in the Crosby’s lives. For the reader of *Tinkers*, the result is a quiet but wondrous awe. Harding draws the reader through intimate New England homesteads to the farthest reaches of the cosmos. In this looping, wandering journey a degree of lightness, or levity, is achieved. *Tinkers* begins in life and ends in death thereby appearing to create a classic tragic arc, moving from high to low. But the structure, the mosaic, the shifted lines of sight, all work to upend the arc. Though we conclude in the valley of death, it is also a khôral field, a place open and expansive, full of possibility, side-ways growth, and humor.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche posits that optimism and even delight can occur when, in the midst of an errant journey, death remains in close proximity. Nietzsche suggests that “the certain prospect of death [can] sweeten every life with a fragrant drop of levity” (qtd. in Taylor, 146). G. K. Chesterton also speaks of the levity of stories that “surprise us from behind,” in other words, from the point of death (152). This type of story, which for Chesterton finds its culmination in the Christian myth of God become man, “is not made of what the world would

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<sup>13</sup> If, as Nietzsche writes, we wish to “read the word ‘death’ without negation” we can offer “to be free for death and free in death; a sacred “No” when the time for “Yes” has passed” (quoted in Taylor 145).

call strong materials” (152). Chesterton suggests that stories of an optimistic pilgrimage towards death must be “made of materials whose strength is in that winged levity with which they brush us and pass” (152). Bound and buffered notions of self and other, subject and object cannot achieve the levity that Nietzsche and Chesterton suggest may be available for those who embrace death. Instead, all forms of vibrant matter must be perceived as shifting and adjusting, creating updrafts of potential in their light, malleable qualities. Levity and shades of shifty beauty color every mosaic tile in *Tinkers*. The stuff of *Tinkers*, be it “light, gravity, or dark from stars,” brushes past the characters and we, like Howard, turn our heads to try to view whatever has receded into our periphery (Harding 54).

In *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton offers a series of metaphors to attempt to explain the persistence of the story of the Incarnation. The story of a god becoming man is the ultimate rejection of upward movement in favor of metamorphosis. Stories driven by the mysterious conflation of life and death do not touch us primarily because of a compelling plot or anticipation for climax. The pull of these stories, he writes:

Does not exactly work outwards, adventurously, to the wonders to be found at the ends of the earth. It is rather something that surprises us from behind, from the hidden and personal part of our being; like that which can sometimes take us off our guard in the pathos of small objects or the blind pieties of the poor. It is rather as if a man had found an inner room in the very heart of his own house, which he had never suspected; and seen a light from within. It is as if he found something at the back of his own heart that betrayed him into good... It is all that is in us but a brief tenderness that is there made eternal; all that means no more than a momentary softening that is in some strange fashion become a strengthening and a repose; it is the broken speech and the lost word that are made positive and suspended unbroken; as the strange kings fade into a far country and the mountains resound no more with the feet of the shepherds; and only the night and the cavern lie in fold upon fold over something more human than humanity. (Chesterton 184-185)

Chesterton echoes William Carlos Williams’ metaphors of objects, broken words, and reconciliation. Stories that ask us to re-examine our most intimate surroundings, our definitions

of subjects and objects, and our conceptions of ourselves will change us by placing us at psychological risk as they take us through liminal zones of danger and potential. There, in the margins, in the mud, we find that each *thing* is full of possibilities, vibrant capacities, and light. A light from within, a spoonful of cosmos, a flower that can split the rocks: perhaps it is through metaphors like these that we may begin to reconcile the people and the stones.

## CONCLUSION

Let us return to the wreck that began this project. Through the words of Buechner, Robinson, and Harding, we have seen the truth of Prospero's *both, both*: "By foul play, as thou say'st, were we heaved thence;/ But blessedly help hither" (I. II. 58-60). As *The Tempest* nears its climax, Prospero again returns to the themes of looping time and death. He has just cut short the celebration of Ferdinand and Miranda's engagement. To justify his exit from the scene on urgent business, he offers them this thought on the brevity of life:

The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which is inherit, shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
is rounded with a sleep (IV. I. 153-158)

Shakespeare's metaphor is, simultaneously, a comment on the brief life of a play in the theatre, praise of the vast possibilities of the imagination, and recognition of the vital circumscribing of life by death.

*Godric*, *Gilead* and *Tinkers* propel readers to view the levity and gravity of our mortal condition from within this globe of death. Buechner, Robinson, and Harding ask us to consider the optimistic possibilities inherent in imagining our own deaths. Once we have realized that death is always, already worked into the fabric of life, our attention to that which seems totally other may be able to retain "the gravity of tragedy" while taking on the "the levity of comedy" (Taylor 16). Thereby we may develop a khôral imagination, one that defines the self, not through negation or domination of others, but through liminal living, sensory interaction, layered perspectives, and errant wandering. In developing this imagination, perhaps we will see that world has always been populated with a multitudinous diversity of subjects, each of whom are involved in the metamorphic processes which carry us into the future.

The notion of levity becomes helpful in considering the next step. The obvious question, after considering literary forms which usher in liminal periods of sustainable growth, is how we can engage in forms of life, rituals of daily living which promote symbiotic relationships with the vibrant things around us. Jane Bennet suggests that we would be well served by replacing, in our vocabulary and our ecological developments, the archetype of nature with the model of *phusis*, a Latin word equivalent to root *natura*. She writes:

*Phusis* comes from the verb *phuo*, which probably meant to puff, blow, or swell up, conveying the sense of germination or sprouting up, bringing forth, opening out, or hatching. *Phusis* thus speaks of a process of morphing, of formation and deformation, that is to say, of that becoming otherwise of things in motion as they enter into strange conjunctions with one another. (118)

To be puffed up as a seed, blown about by the winds into some unknown open field, this is Bennet's suggestion for those who accept her premise of vibrant materiality. Typical responses to our current questions of climate change, agricultural sustainability, and population growth include anxiety, austerity, and panic. But the authors included in this thesis suggest a different disposition as we face the wreck: Levity. This can mean willingness to change, to morph our goals or dreams into sustainable vision. It may also mean welcoming the strange or the surprising into our lives and keeping a sense of humor as we endure these paradigmatic shifts. As Chesterton suggests, "moderate strength is shown in violence, supreme strength is shown in levity" (*The Man Who Was Thursday* 163). Perhaps our drive for domination or mastery will be reduced and perhaps the consequences may be adjusted if we can instead pursue a route of side-ways growth, of continual liminal living, of levity.



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