The poetics and politics of liminality: new transcendentalism in contemporary American women’s writing

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The Poetics and Politics of Liminality: New Transcendentalism in Contemporary American Women’s Writing

by

Teresa O’Rourke

A Doctoral Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University

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ABSTRACT

By setting the writings of Etel Adnan, Annie Dillard, Marilynne Robinson and Rebecca Solnit into dialogue with those of the New England Transcendentalists, this thesis proposes a New Transcendentalism that both reinvigorates and reimagines Transcendentalist thought for our increasingly intersectional and deterritorialized contemporary context. Drawing on key re-readings by Stanley Cavell, George Kateb and Branka Arsić, the project contributes towards the twenty-first-century shift in Transcendentalist scholarship which seeks to challenge the popular image of New England Transcendentalism as uncompromisingly individualist, abstract and ultimately the preserve of white male privilege. Moreover, in its identification and examination of an interrelated poetics and politics of liminality across these old and new Transcendentalist writings, the project also extends the scope of a more recent strain of Transcendentalist scholarship which emphasises the dialogical underpinnings of the nineteenth-century movement.

The project comprises three central chapters, each of which situates New Transcendentalism within a series of vertical and lateral dialogues. The trajectory of my chapters follows the logic of Emerson’s ‘ever-widening circles’, in that each takes a wider critical lens through which to explore the dialogical relationship between my four writers and the New England Transcendentalists. In Chapter 1 the focus is upon anthropological theories of liminality; in Chapter 2 upon feminist interventions within psychoanalysis; and in Chapter 3 upon the revisionary work of Post-West criticism. In keeping with the dialogical analogies that inform this project throughout, the relationship examined within this thesis between Adnan, Dillard, Robinson and Solnit and the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists is understood as itself reciprocal, in that it not only demonstrates how my four contemporary writers may be read productively in the light of their New England forebears, but also how those readings in turn invite us to reconsider our understanding of those earlier thinkers.
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INTRODUCTION

In April 2015, I found myself in a government building on Market Street, San Francisco, sharing a lift with Rebecca Solnit. I introduced myself – having just listened to her forcefully address a board of officials regarding what she saw as their tardy and ineffectual environmental policies – and explained that she was the focus of my doctoral thesis, alongside Etel Adnan, Annie Dillard, and Marilynne Robinson. How, Solnit asked, did I intend to bring together such a disparate group of thinkers? We walked through the market, Solnit on the lookout for the fresh cherries that were just then becoming available, and I explained that my premise was to examine the influence of New England Transcendentalism on their writings. We chatted briefly about Thoreau and Eadweard Muybridge before parting ways – me to a conference, and Solnit to the library where she was working on her latest book.

While only a very short conversation, Solnit’s initial reaction to being aligned with Adnan, Dillard and Robinson was particularly fitting, given Laura Maria Child’s response when asked to define Transcendentalism in 1844: ‘It is a question difficult, nay, impossible to answer; for the minds so classified are incongruous individuals.’ Many have acknowledged the elusive nature of the nineteenth-century movement, as was most concisely expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s close friend, Almira Burrows, who famously described Transcendentalism as ‘A little beyond’. Contemporary critics have been inclined to agree, with Joel Myerson asserting that ‘the longer one studies Transcendentalism, the more one realizes that the looser the definition, the more appropriate it is’. For this reason, Myerson posits, Burrows’ enigmatic definition ‘is ultimately more successful than a hard-and-fast

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description that is supposed to fit all the people considered to be Transcendentalists’. In 1998, Charles Capper discussed the implications of the movement’s seemingly disparate nature for scholars of American Transcendentalism, asserting that while Myerson’s 1984 review of the field identifies more than four thousand publications written on the New England Transcendentalists, relatively few of these works offer ‘a sense of the movement’s contours, phases, and significance as a past, multiform, collective entity, interacting with other entities in various “times”’.5

Capper’s article goes some way to addressing this lack, surveying a century of shifting responses to New England Transcendentalism, ranging from the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville, George Santayana and Lewis Mumford through to the later critical interpretations of Perry Miller and F. O. Matthiessen. Within the article’s closing sections, Capper recognises that ‘certain methodologies will continue to be essential to any Transcendentalism project’ including, he suggests, the centrality of ‘discursive intellectual history’, the imperative to ‘blend the empirical and contextualist methods of history and the linguistic and intrapsychic ones of literary studies’, and an inclination towards ‘getting a fix on what exactly was the movement in the movement’ (532). In this vein, Capper identifies several key lines of enquiry that he deems ‘ripe for radical revision’ (535). These include the question of Transcendentalism’s contribution to ‘romantic modernity’ for, he contends,

if modernity means, as postmodernist philosophers tell us, a self-reflexive engagement in a world seemingly without fixed “foundations”, the leading Transcendentalists, although idealists to the core, pushed closer to that leap than did any other American intellectual circle before the twentieth century (534).

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4 Transcendentalism: A Reader, p. xxv.
Capper also acknowledges ‘the surprisingly still underdeveloped subject of generational culture’ as integral to the Transcendentalist movement, despite the fact that these thinkers were ‘the first intellectual group in American history to make liberation from the “sepulchres of the fathers” […] the exhilarating (and covertly anxious) center of their social world view’ (534). In this regard, Capper continues, ‘it is hard to imagine a better venue for exploring such private cultures as friendship, family life, work […] than with the Transcendentalists’ (534).

Tracing more than a century of shifting responses to Transcendentalism and highlighting numerous underdeveloped and pertinent avenues for Transcendentalist scholarship, Capper’s article posits that what is most striking about the Transcendentalists is the extent to which they have become ‘luminous screens on which successive generations have projected some of their deepest ideological fears and desires’ (538). He thus concludes that ‘it seems not too utopian to suppose that, not a further vanishing, but a shock of recognition in Transcendentalism studies is in order’ (539). Indeed, if Transcendentalism is, as Emerson himself famously declared in 1842, ‘the very oldest of thoughts, cast into the mould of these new times […]; Idealism, as it appears in 1842’, then it may be said that the scholarship it provokes is equally bound by and reflective of its historical moment.6 This is particularly true of responses to Transcendentalism, for its cultural ubiquity is such that the waxing and waning of scholarly enthusiasm for the movement and its contemporary relevance is a particularly keen indicator of prevailing ideologies in the United States.

While Capper’s article is compelling in its evaluation of historical trends in Transcendentalist scholarship and its recognition of those aspects of the movement that remain (or are becoming increasingly) apposite within our contemporary context, this thesis

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contests Capper’s suggestion that ‘as a historical movement, Transcendentalism would seem to have entered a long eclipse […] roughly since the 1970s’ (502-3). The chapters that follow extend a strain of Transcendentalist scholarship that emerged drawing exactly this period, most notably within the writings of Stanley Cavell, and which gained momentum around the time of Capper’s article through studies by Judith Shklar, George Kateb and Sharon Cameron, before being further developed throughout the last decade by scholars including Branka Arsic, Cary Wolfe and Adam Levine. The central focus of this critical strain is a re-evaluation of the philosophical and political contribution of Transcendentalism’s most prominent proponent, Ralph Waldo Emerson. While each of these scholars emphasises a different aspect of Emerson’s philosophical, ethical and/or political approach, all share a desire to challenge long-held misconceptions about his writings, and particularly those pertaining to their central tenet of self-reliance, which has for so long been reduced to a byword for an intrinsically American mode of hyperindividualism. That the sum of these writings signals a fundamental rupture in the field of Transcendentalist studies is most explicitly stated in Adam Levine and Daniel S. Malachuck’s introduction to The Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson (2011), where it is asserted that the recovery work undertaken by these writers and those who followed them ultimately constitutes ‘The New History’ of Emerson’s writings.7 Taking these revisionary re-readings of Ralph Waldo Emerson as a point of departure, this thesis explores how this revisionary turn allows us to reconsider the enduring influence of American (and specifically Emersonian) Transcendentalism within contemporary American literature. While this specific aspect of Emersonian Transcendentalism is the project’s central focus, the analysis also recognises and explores related texts and practices by those who formed Emerson’s immediate circle,

including Mary Moody Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and particularly Henry David Thoreau. By exploring both the key similarities and fundamental differences between Etel Adnan, Annie Dillard, Marilynne Robinson and Rebecca Solnit, and their nineteenth-century antecedents, the analysis contends that each of these four contemporary writers may be understood as contributing towards a mode of New Transcendentalism that reinvigorates and repurposes American Transcendentalism in light of and in response to major cultural and critical developments which took root in the early 1970s. Drawing together several recent critical trends, the discussion develops two interrelated strands. The first extends the premise of recent studies that provide a more sustained consideration of the dialogical, often dialectical thinking that lies at the heart of New England Transcendentalist (and particularly Emersonian) writings. With reference to key studies by Jonathan Levin (The Poetics of Transition, 1999) and Joan Wry (‘The Art of the Threshold’, 2010), I explore how this dialogical perspective contributes towards a wider poetics of liminality within these texts, the legacy and influence of which may be traced in the work of Adnan, Dillard, Robinson and Solnit. The second recognises an integral interplay between this liminal poetics and a more materialist politics of liminality, presenting the relationship between these two elements as mutually informative and thus in itself dialogical.

Rather than directing our attentions a little beyond, then, the New Transcendentalism proposed throughout this thesis draws our focus toward what Victor Turner describes as the ‘betwixt and between’, exploring the liminal practices, spaces, temporalities and experiences...
which pervade Transcendentalist writings both old and new.\textsuperscript{9} The analysis focuses on three theoretical frameworks in particular: anthropological theories of liminality, feminist interventions within psychoanalysis, and the revisionary work of New and Post-West criticism. Setting the writings of Adnan, Dillard, Robinson and Solnit into dialogue with both their nineteenth-century antecedents and these contemporary critical discourses, the analysis addresses Capper and Myerson’s concerns regarding both Transcendentalism’s resistance to definition and its enduring legacy. Considered within the context of a specifically Transcendentalist mode of liminality, the elusive nature of Transcendentalist philosophy is presented here as an extension of its liminal poetics and of the productive ambivalence that such a poetics engenders. Moreover, by recognising how its underlying principles readily lend themselves to the interrogation of peripheral or marginal experiences that ‘elude or slip through the network of classifications’, American Transcendentalism is here presented as just that ‘multiform, collective entity, interacting with other entities in various “times”’ that Capper identifies.\textsuperscript{10}

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Given the prevalence of revisionist movements in the latter half of the twentieth century – New Historicism and Neo-Victorianism, for example, not to mention this ‘New History’ and the New Americanists alluded to above – it is surprising how few scholars have given any sustained attention to establishing New Transcendentalism as a critical term, despite so many acknowledging the far-reaching and enduring impact of the nineteenth-century movement. The most notable exception is a 1972 article by preeminent Emerson scholar, Harold Bloom,

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{The Ritual Process}, p. 95.
entitled ‘The New Transcendentalism: The Visionary Strain in Merwin, Ashbery and Ammons’. Admitting that his choice of authors is ‘affected by the limitations of personal taste [and that] it could be argued that the true continuators of the Emersonian strain are to be located elsewhere’, Bloom builds his case upon a definition of American Transcendentalism that ‘centers upon Emerson’s stance of Self-Reliance, which is primarily a denial of the anxiety of influence’. While Bloom’s readings allude to themes that will be integral to the analysis that follows – his sense of Merwin’s ‘lust for discontinuity’ (28), his description of Ashbery as ‘a bearer of an influx of the Newness that he cannot know himself’ (35), and his acknowledgement of Ammons’ preoccupation with ‘the bleak [often littoral] periphery of possibility’ (39) – there are at least two important ways in which Bloom’s New Transcendentalism runs directly counter to my own.

The most obvious distinction relates to the gender of the authors considered. While Bloom acknowledges other possible candidates for the New Transcendentalist cohort beyond Merwin, Ashbery and Ammons, it is striking that – as is characteristic of his model of literary influence more generally – those he aligns or even considers aligning with a Transcendentalist (particularly Emersonian) legacy are almost exclusively white men: Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Robinson Jeffers, Allen Tate, Hart Crane, James L. Dickey, Robert Penn Warren, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Theodore Roethke, Conrad Aiken. . . in such a list the inclusion of the idiosyncratic Emily Dickinson reads as somewhat of a token gesture. Indeed, the fact that this is such an extensive and relatively eclectic mix of writers renders the omission of any twentieth or twenty-first century female suggestions all the more conspicuous. In focusing specifically on female writers, then, my

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own project redresses an imbalance within the current criticism which so often sees the legacy of American Transcendentalism played out as a passing of the mantle from renowned white male writer to renowned white male writer. In doing so, I extend a line of enquiry set in motion by Jana L. Argersinger and Phyllis Cole, whose 2014 essay collection directs us Toward a Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism. Describing their project as one in ‘archaeology and reinterpretation’, the collection excavates the foundations of the Transcendentalist movement, tracing its origins back to (Waldo’s aunt) Mary Moody Emerson, through key female Transcendentalists including Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody and Caroline Healey Dall, ending with Laura Dassow Wall’s essay on ‘The Cosmopolitan Project of Louisa May Alcott’.  

The collection’s overarching themes include a belief in ‘mutual self-cultivation’ through conversation and dialogue, the coexistence of vertical and lateral genealogies, and ‘the double dynamics of selfhood and group identification’. Taken together, these themes problematise Bloom’s vision of a New Transcendentalism that reiterates both the overdetermined trope of uncompromising self-reliance and an agonistic patrilineal genealogy. As such, Argersinger and Cole’s study, like my own, serves to reimagine the trajectory and legacy of a movement which has all too often been devalued by feminist critics as ‘only a discourse of male egotism and privilege’.

This leads us to the second, intrinsically related distinction between Bloom’s New Transcendentalism and that which is proposed throughout this thesis. Anticipating his own ‘anxiety of influence’ model – his exposition of which, though all but completed by 1967, would not be published until a year after his article on New Transcendentalism – Bloom presents Emerson’s central tenet of self-reliance in the hyperindividualist terms that this

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13 Toward a Female Genealogy, pp. 7, 21.
14 Toward a Female Genealogy, p. 21.
project resists. As such, Bloom considers the legacy of ‘only one side of a dialectic’ that more recent scholarship has suggested cannot be considered in isolation, and should instead be positioned as having ‘a structural counterpoint’ to its seemingly uncompromising individualism. In this vein, Capper’s article recognises how Transcendentalist scholars have historically oscillated between two apparently opposing perspectives: those who highlight ‘Emerson’s original paradigm of a hyper-individualist Transcendental ethos’ (513) on the one hand, and those who prefer to position the movement as a ‘local social phenomenon’ on the other, given its advocacy of radical social, political and cultural reform (531). Writing in 1998, Capper’s conclusion anticipates the twenty-first-century shift which emphasises the interaction between these two perspectives, asserting that the enduring methodologies of Transcendentalist scholarship ‘will need to be revitalized and revised’ going forward, in order to reflect the fact that ‘no other intellectual circle in early America thought more than the Transcendentalists so self-consciously of itself […] as at once individualistic, nationalist and cosmopolitan’ (532). This thesis, akin to Capper, positions this interrelated ‘trinity’ as central to New England Transcendentalism’s enduring relevance in the twenty-first century, given that, as Capper asserts, ‘our considerably more purely anxious civic present and future seem increasingly to hang on getting this trinity right’ (539).

In the same year as Capper’s article, Sharon Cameron published her seminal essay, ‘The Way of Life by Abandonment: Emerson's Impersonal’. Though she takes a more philosophical approach than Capper’s, she too seeks to debunk the reductive interpretation of Emersonian self-reliance as an uncompromising and self-aggrandising stance at odds with a sense of social obligation. Instead, Cameron argues that ‘what self-reliance turns out to mean for Emerson is a strong recognition of the inadequacy of any person: other persons or this

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person. And what the preacher and the American Scholar know how to do is break out of the tyranny of egotistical self-enclosure.” In her note to this section, Cameron identifies Bloom alongside Richard Poirier and Barbara Packer as three of the major critics who ‘have understood that if one threat to self-reliance is conformity, the other is petty self-interest or self-cherishing’ (7). Yet she positions her own concept of the impersonal as being ‘related to, but not identical with, Poirier’s genius, Bloom’s energy, Packer’s powers’, on account of the fact that all three of these readings ‘rely on a Neoplatonic, upward, sublimatory movement away from material particularity’ (7). By contrast, resisting such hierarchical and hegemonic notions of power and genius, Cameron asserts that ‘in acceding to the impersonal, one is […] beyond the idea that identity is fixed. But not beyond the social or recognizable’ (11). While I would contest Cameron’s suggestion that Emerson ultimately demonstrates a ‘strong recognition of the inadequacy of any person’, given that it seems to apply a dualistic logic that, as we shall see, Emerson so strenuously resists, this thesis recognises similarly mutable notions of power, knowledge and identity in the work of my four writers. In doing so, I present their renegotiations of the hegemonic and hierarchical rhetoric so often associated with their nineteenth-century forebears as a key element of their New Transcendentalist perspective.

Cameron’s essay extends and combines elements of Stanley Cavell’s call to explore ‘Emerson’s own philosophicality’ and George Kateb’s exploration of Emerson’s politics. In a 1993 talk entitled ‘What Is the Emersonian Event?: A Comment on Kateb’s Emerson’, Cavell responds to (at that point unpublished) passages of Kateb’s seminal work of 1995, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*. In the course of his response, Cavell recalls a challenge once posed to him by Judith Shklar: “My dear Stanley, […] let us say that everything you have

said about Emerson is true. You will still not have told the story unless you can tell the politics of this writing.”\textsuperscript{18} Shklar’s claim is again indicative of the shift in Transcendentalist scholarship that challenges the previously accepted view of Emerson’s ‘supposed contradiction or inconsistency’ in favour of recognising the dialogical relationship between Emerson’s philosophy and his politics.\textsuperscript{19} Cavell’s work has taken on particular critical currency in recent years, with William Rossi’s 2010 review of the field acknowledging Cavell’s influence on several major studies of that year, including Barry Tharaud’s \textit{Emerson for the Twenty-First Century} and \textit{The Other Emerson}, edited by Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe, to which Cavell even ‘contributes an affectionate afterword’.\textsuperscript{20}

Rossi’s review also gives special mention to Branka Arsić’s individual study of the same year, \textit{On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson}. Heavily influenced by Cavell (Rossi even quips that the book ‘could’ve been subtitled “A Tribute to Stanley Cavell”’), Arsić considers Emerson’s ostensible inconsistencies, which she sees as being borne out of his desire ‘to achieve a contradictory demand: to live our lives in an ordinary way yet to make them beautiful to the point of strangeness’.\textsuperscript{21} Responding to Cameron, Arsić asserts: ‘I don’t read Emerson’s impersonal as a negation of the person, but rather as an assemblage of forces and powers (of perceptions and sensations, emotions and thoughts) that work within the personal.’\textsuperscript{22} While her discussion is not explicitly framed in relation to theories of liminality, Arsić’s contention of ‘a personal identity contrived of tensions, divides, and gaps, that make it permanently “tremble”’ resonates strongly with Turner’s description (alluded to above) of ‘liminal personae’ as those who ‘elude or slip through the network of classifications [and are]

\textsuperscript{19} ‘What Is the Emersonian Event?’, p. 186.
\textsuperscript{20} William Rossi, ‘Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and Transcendentalism’, in \textit{American Literary Scholarship} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 3-35 (p. 8).
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{On Leaving}, p. 14.
neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between’. As will be borne out in the chapters that follow, many thematic parallels can be drawn between Arsić’s study and my own; its recognition of water as a primary metaphor, its exploration of Transcendentalist notions of love, and particularly its preoccupation with the paradox of perpetual becoming. Moreover, as detailed later in this introduction, her study’s discussion of the significance of leaving in Emerson informs the specifically Transcendentalist mode of liminality examined throughout this thesis.

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How, then, do these recent critical developments shape the New Transcendentalism proposed here? Drawing back, we have already seen how Bloom’s 1972 study perpetuates the historically held view of New England Transcendentalism as, at best, a ‘constant attempt at self-reliance’ and, at worst, a group of predominantly white male writers for whom ‘divination […] means primarily an apprehension of their own possible sublimity, the gods they are in the process of becoming’ (28, 33). Of course, the publication date of Bloom’s article is significant. For not only does it predate both the literary careers of all four of the writers considered within this thesis but also ‘the New History’ of Emerson’s writings alluded to above. While Capper overstates his case when claiming that this scholarly decline is a result of ‘all the corroding acids applied […] by postliberal and postmodernist critiques since the 1960s’, the suggestion that the cultural upheaval of this period marked a pivotal moment in Transcendentalist scholarship carries weight (532) For, in this light, Bloom’s proposal of a literary genealogy that foregrounds the egocentric power struggles between generations of white men reads less like a ‘New’ critical movement and more like the last

hurrah of an outdated and unashamedly patriarchal mode. It is surprising, however, that so few critics have sought to extend or revise the line of enquiry opened by Bloom’s study. Indeed, the fact that the notion of a New Transcendentalism drew almost no scholarly attention until the turn of the millennium corroborates Capper’s sense of a post-1970 waning in scholarship considering Transcendentalism as a specifically historical movement. Since then, however, several attempts to define the term have surfaced. Disparate and often speculative, these more recent instances cannot be said to constitute an established field of study at this point. Yet by drawing them together here we can identify several key lines of interest to take forward into my own development of the term.

In 2003, the Prairie Group – which brings together Unitarian Universalist ministers from across the U.S. with the aim of ‘[studying] thought as it affects religion’ – held a two-day conference on ‘Neo-Transcendentalism’.24 Reverend Roger Bertschausen’s talk was one of five delivered at the event, and was the only one to be subsequently posted on their website, under the title: “‘There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground”: A New Transcendentalism’.25 While employed in an entirely different context, Bertschausen’s vision of a New Transcendentalism shares several themes with my own. Reflecting the broader trend outlined above, Bertschausen states the importance of ‘finding balance in the paradox between oneness and manyness’, asserting that any notion of New Transcendentalism ‘founded in genuine pluralism needs to achieve a balance between the individual and the community’.26 In 2006, Matthew W. Hughey ventured a similarly theologically-informed model of New Transcendentalism in ‘Moving beyond “Liberation Theory”: “New

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26 Roger Bertschausen, “‘There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground”: A New Transcendentalism’, paper delivered to The Prairie Group on November 4, 2004, available at <www.prairiegroupuu.org/images/PG_Transcendentalism_paper.doc> [accessed 10 February 2017]. I have cited the date as November 2004 in keeping with the document, although it is possible that the actual year was 2003 in line with the event dates given on the website.
Transcendentalism” as Critique of Positivist-Binary Cultural Logic’. Taking Michel Foucault’s work as his point of departure, Hughey posits that ‘the dualistic version of looking at conflict is the predominate form of logic in the West. […] The nature of division along binaries has effectively captured the social imagination of everyday life, almost removing the ability to critique the existence of the binary as a repressive discourse itself.’ Arguing that ‘the ideology of transcendentalism depends on the culture in which it is born’, Hughey proposes a New Transcendentalism that challenges the ‘culture wars’ discourse, contending that ‘by using an ideology that transcends the binary of political distinctions and places itself under an umbrella of faith, we are left with the implications to wonder where that faith will lead us’. Hughey identifies ‘five major implications’ of his ‘new transcendentalist’ perspective, all of which serve to provide ‘a direct critique of dualistic epistemology’. In doing so, Hughey promotes a model of New Transcendentalism that allows ‘leeway for connection and cooperation between concepts to show a more accurate view of the social world’ and thus narrows ‘the gap of us vs. them thinking’. As such, Hughey’s model – much like Turner’s understanding of liminality – recognises the double-bind of dualist thinking through which dissenting voices both within and outside ‘the linear model’ are marginalised. Moreover, the broader desire to balance paradox and to recognise the repressive nature of binary logic expressed by both Bertschausen and Hughey supports my own sense of a New Transcendentalism that consistently seeks to establish a mediating third term between opposing positions.

Ten years after Hughey’s article, Robert S. Corrington published the first book-length attempt to establish New Transcendentalism as a critical term. A rather dizzying combination

30 ‘Moving beyond “Liberation Theory”’, p. 61.
of theory, philosophy and theology, *Deep Pantheism: Towards a New Transcendentalism* (2016) emphasises the tension between ‘nature naturing’ (the perpetual becoming of nature) and ‘nature natured’ (nature as it presents itself to human consciousness). This dialectic, Corrington suggests, is most compellingly articulated in Emerson’s idea that nature ‘publishes itself […] arriving at consummate results without shock or a leap’. For Corrington, the interaction between these two aspects of nature has significant implications for ‘the Selving process’, which, he asserts, ‘unfolds most fulfillingly when it maintains the perennial tension between its own place(s) within nature natured, always shifting, and the potencies of nature naturing’. Corrington describes his speculative vision of a New Transcendentalism as representing ‘an “emancipatory re-enactment” of nineteenth-century New England Transcendentalism’ which will be ‘open to the liberating potency of what Ernst Bloch calls “the Not Yet Being” […] that clears away the psychic debris that blocks the fitful evolution of consciousness in its quest for encompassment under the stringent conditions of finitude.

Revisiting his notion of ‘new transcendentalism’ in his postscript, Corrington asks: ‘How do we make the transition from early-nineteenth-century thought to twenty-first-century thinking partly based on the principles of the older New England Transcendentalism?’ While we may expect such a question to have been the focus of the main discussion, Corrington’s postscript calls for a new Transcendentalism whose perspective is ‘both joyous and sober’, knowing as it does ‘the limits of Wisdom [and the] deafening silence coming from the Wisdom that can baffle human understanding’ (98). These points are reiterated within the book’s concluding remarks, where Corrington ‘affirms the

34 *Deep Pantheism*, p. x.
35 *Deep Pantheism*, p. xi.
36 *Deep Pantheism*, p. 102.
ambiguous powers’ of betweenness, wisdom and the arts (among a list of no less than twelve key elements of his model), and describes his ‘new Transcendentalism’ as one which recognises ‘the sense of the tragic’ but that is equally ‘sensitive to the innumerable ecstasies that do come out of nature’. While it takes a much more densely theoretical perspective than my own, then, this ability to recognise and account for the interdependence of beauty and horror, of good and evil is fundamental, as will be shown, to my own model of New Transcendentalism. Moreover, Corrington’s emphasis on an anti-teleological mode and his preoccupation with ideas of betweenness, wisdom and the arts echo aspects of both Bertschausen and Hughey’s studies, and also reflect several key elements central to the New Transcendentalism outlined within this thesis.

One question which remains unexplored by the above instances, then, is who, if anyone, may be considered to be working within this revisionary movement? Elsewhere, a handful of names have been ventured. Ross Hair, for example, opens his 2010 study of Ronald Johnson’s Modernist Collage Poetry, with a chapter discussing ‘Johnson’s New Transcendentalism’, a premise borne out of the fact that Johnson described himself as a ‘New Transcendentalist’ in a letter sent to Dirk Stratton in 1991. Other less developed suggestions include John Taylor’s allusion to ‘the neo-Transcendentalism at the heart of [Booth’s] project’ in his review of Peter Booth’s poetry collection Lifelines (1999), and Jan Garden Castro’s acknowledgement of sculptor Stephen Schaum’s intention to ‘elaborate his vision of a new transcendentalism’ in an online article of 2012. It is in such contexts, then, that my own group of writers begins to emerge. Annie Dillard is described in Peggy Rosenthal’s review of For the Time Being (1999) as a writer who she ‘can imagine literary history, down

37 Deep Pantheism, p. 103.
the road, naming the chief of a movement called Neo-Transcendentalism’. Likewise, in her review of *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, Susan Salter Reynolds describes Marilynne Robinson as ‘a member of a merry band [she calls] the New Transcendentalists’, a merry band in which Salter Reynolds includes Wendell Berry, Thomas Merton, Mary Oliver and, significantly given the premise of this project, Rebecca Solnit. Unlike the more considered (if speculative) expositions outlined above, however, all of these more anecdotal examples seem to present New Transcendentalism as a simple derivative of the nineteenth-century mode. ‘Johnson’s New Transcendentalism’, like Bloom’s, once again foregrounds an ‘emphasis on individualism and self-reliance’, and constructs the Transcendentalist canon as ‘comprising Emerson and Thoreau, with Whitman on the periphery’, and Salter Reynolds offers a rather vague sense of New Transcendentalism as ‘a belief in the human spirit and its capacity for community, generosity, and stewardship; in what Walt Whitman called “radical uniqueness”, and in the vital connection to nature as a source of creativity and innovation’.

There seems to be a divide, therefore, between those critics who aim to develop New Transcendentalism as a philosophical or theoretical concept, and those who attempt to identify New Transcendentalism as an artistic mode. Furthermore, while current attempts to define the term share several thematic trends, none convincingly situates these themes in relation to the more recent scholarly developments in Transcendentalist studies. My suggestion of a New Transcendentalism that is underpinned by an interrelating poetics and politics of liminality is positioned at the intersection of these critical strands, interrogating as it does their various theoretical, historical and literary perspectives.

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Having situated the project within its various critical contexts, then, we return to the question posed by Solnit at the outset of this introduction: what is it that unites Etel Adnan, Annie Dillard, Marilynne Robinson and Rebecca Solnit in particular, such that they may be considered a coherent grouping worth studying alongside one another?

Described by Edward Abbey as ‘Thoreau’s true heir’, Annie Dillard has frequently been aligned with the New England Transcendentalists throughout her literary career. Indeed, the presence of Henry David Thoreau looms large in Dillard’s life in a number of ways. In the late 1960s, she took up a place on the renowned women’s writing programme at Hollins College in Virginia, graduating with a Master’s degree in 1968 having written her dissertation on *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau’s seminal work of 1854. Dillard’s first major publication was the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974). The text recounts the two months she spent living close to Tinker Creek in Virginia, and is described by Dillard within its opening pages as ‘what Thoreau called “a meteorological journal of the mind”’. As will be drawn out in the opening chapter of this thesis, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is the most explicitly Transcendentalist of Dillard’s writings, and also establishes many of the central themes that recur throughout her work, particularly in terms of its theological ambivalence and exploration of the intrinsic connection between human consciousness and the natural environment. The text is also indicative of Dillard’s resistance to formal and generic categorisation, as Margaret Loewen Reimer has acknowledged in describing it as one which ‘falls between several categories or disciplines’. Dillard’s body of work shifts between poetry and prose, fiction and journalism, essay and memoir, and while often compared to the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists, Dillard’s influences are vast and diverse; her elusive style frequently draws unexpected connections between seemingly incongruous subjects. The

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geographical coordinates of her work are equally expansive, shifting from the banks of Tinker Creek in Virginia (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 1974), to the sand dunes of Provincetown, Massachusetts (*The Maytrees*, 2007), via the mudflats of the Pacific Northwest (*Holy the Firm*, 1977; *The Living*, 1994). By considering the liminal poetics and politics at play within her writings, then, this thesis extends and unites several related lines of enquiry established by critics including Margaret Loewen Reimer (‘The Dialectical Vision of Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 1983), Sandra Humble Johnson (*The Space Between: Literary Epiphany in the Work of Annie Dillard*, 1992), and Colleen Warren (*Annie Dillard and the Word Made Flesh: An Incarnational Theory of Language*, 2010).\(^{46}\) Rather than focusing solely on those texts which demonstrate the most obvious affinity between Dillard and her nineteenth-century antecedents, however, my analyses move beyond the established Thoreauvian and Emersonian readings of individual texts such as *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, so as to develop a more holistic understanding of how her liminal aesthetic evolves throughout her wider body of work.

If Dillard has often been labelled by her peers as a literary descendant of the New England Transcendentalists, Marilynne Robinson is keen to acknowledge their influence on her work in her own terms. In 1984, *The New York Times* led a symposium in which sixteen young writers were asked to discuss their literary influences. Robinson wrote: ‘If to admire and to be influenced are more or less the same thing, I must be influenced most deeply by the 19th-century Americans – Dickinson, Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, Emerson and Poe. […] I happen to have read these old aunts and uncles at an impressionable age, and so I will always

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answer to them in my mind.’  

In another piece for the New York Times in 1987, she unequivocally states ‘I am an Emersonian’, and in a 2012 interview for The Guardian, she asserts: ‘I am supersaturated in nineteenth-century American literature. The affinity I feel for it is off the charts, but I don’t consciously model anything I do on anything.’

While the reference to ‘aunts and uncles’ here perhaps suggests a refracted rather than a direct genealogy (as Chapter One will explore), critics have been inevitably keen to examine these connections within her work. Most focus on Robinson’s debut novel, Housekeeping (1980), which depicts an adolescent girl who ‘went to the woods for the woods’ own sake’ – a phrase which may easily be read as an allusion to Thoreau’s much-quoted assertion ‘I went to the woods as I wished to live deliberately’. Much is also made of the fact that Ruth lives, much like Thoreau in Walden, on the edge of Fingerbone Lake which looms large throughout the novel. While this scholarship is compelling and fruitful, my own project – as is the case for all four writers considered throughout this thesis – positions these readings as the foundations upon which to build and explore a much wider framework of dialogical themes and practices within and across Robinson’s works. This extends not only to Robinson’s three later novels, referred to collectively – for now at least – as the Gilead trilogy (Gilead, 2004; Home, 2008, and Lila, 2014 – with a fourth novel set within the same narrative world rumoured to be imminent), but also to her five non-fiction works, three of which were written in the two-and-a-half decades between Housekeeping and Gilead. Like Dillard, Robinson’s faith and


theological perspective is key to understanding her work. While not as intensely ambivalent as Dillard – Robinson is clear and consistent in defining herself as a ‘liberal Calvinist’ – the interrelation between Robinson’s literary and theological perspectives is ever present within both her fiction and non-fiction works, as will be borne out in my analyses.\(^{51}\) Similarly to Dillard, Adnan and Solnit, Robinson’s texts are consciously positioned within their landscapes, whether it be the Idaho setting of *Housekeeping* and Robinson’s own childhood (she was born in Sandpoint, Idaho in 1943), the Midwest (or Middle West, as Robinson prefers) locales of the Gilead novels and Robinson’s later life, or even the Cumbrian countryside which provides the setting for Robinson’s rather anomalous 1989 study, *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution*. Despite Robinson’s almost unprecedentedly positive reception (each of her novels has been awarded a prestigious literary award including the Pulitzer Prize for *Gilead*, and she was also presented with the National Humanities Medal in 2012 by Barack Obama), it is striking how few extended studies focus on her work – the first essay collection on Robinson was published as recently as 2016.\(^{52}\) This may be due at least in part to the fact that Robinson is often viewed within the current criticism – and, indeed, actively presents herself – as a relatively solitary writer; she rarely positions herself in relation to her contemporaries and neither do her critics. By positioning her writings alongside Dillard, Solnit and Adnan, however, and in establishing New Transcendentalism as a recognised literary mode, we are able to explore not only Robinson’s professed connection with her nineteenth-century ‘aunts and uncles’, but also to situate her work within a wider network of contemporary American (women) writers.

The youngest of the four writers considered here by almost two decades, Rebecca Solnit is the author of more than twenty books, ranging from the widely-quoted *Men Explain*
Things to Me (2014), to her lesser-known biography of the nineteenth-century photographer, Eadweard Muybridge, *Motion Studies* (2004). As has already been suggested of Dillard’s work, Solnit’s writing is equally difficult to categorise, incorporating elements of the critical essay, memoir, journalism, and cultural history. More so than either Dillard or Robinson, however, (and as I witnessed first-hand that day in San Francisco) Solnit is keen to make known her active engagement with the literary, political and cultural milieu surrounding her, particularly in her immediate locale of California and specifically the San Francisco Bay Area. The American West provides the backdrop for much of her writing, and the intrinsic connection between politics and place is an integral theme running throughout her oeuvre, as evidenced within her 2007 essay collection, *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics*. The influence of the New England Transcendentalists has been acknowledged – not least by Solnit herself – on texts such as *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2006) and *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2001). The latter study is easily paralleled with Thoreau’s 1851 essay, ‘Walking’, and Thoreau is explicitly evoked within the opening chapter of *Field Guide* as a writer, much like Solnit herself, ‘for whom navigating life and wilderness and meaning are the same art, and who slips subtly from one to the other in the course of a sentence’.

Again, though, while these texts point directly to an affinity between Solnit, Thoreau, and New England Transcendentalist thinking here, they are but the point of departure for exploring the broader influence of these writers on her work, considering not only how she aligns with but also how she deviates from their tropes, and thus re-examines the significance and potential of Transcendentalist thinking within contemporary culture. Unlike Dillard and Robinson, Solnit is more inclined to take a political than a theological perspective. This is not to say that Solnit doesn’t recognise the significance of religious discourses, and religious contexts often provide framing for her texts – the opening passages

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of *Field Guide*, for example, recall one Passover in Solnit’s childhood, when she first drank wine in the company of her disappointed mother (‘a lapsed Catholic’), another woman (‘a former Protestant’), and ‘their husbands [who] were Jews’. 54 As in this instance, however, such references tend to evoke more local familial or social concerns, rather than the broader theological questions that are so often posed in Dillard and Robinson’s works. Yet despite her prominent position within both political and literary circles, it is striking how few scholarly responses there are to Solnit’s work. A handful of studies have begun to emerge in recent years, however, including Neil Campbell’s 2016 study, *Affective, Critical Regionality*, which includes a chapter entitled, ‘A New Atlas of Emotion: Rebecca Solnit’s West’. 55 By setting Solnit’s writing into dialogue with not only the works of Dillard, Robinson and Adnan, but also those of the New England Transcendentalists and key critical and theoretical movements of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, this thesis recognises Solnit’s significant contribution to contemporary U.S. literary and political culture, particularly in terms of positioning America’s New England traditions in the context of the increasingly deterritorialized American West.

Almost forty years Solnit’s senior, and two decades older than both Dillard and Robinson, Arab American writer and painter Etel Adnan is perhaps not the most obvious choice to be considered alongside Dillard, Robinson and Solnit. Born in Beirut in 1925, Adnan went on to study philosophy at the Sorbonne University in Paris, before emigrating to the United States in the early 1950s, settling – like Solnit – in the Bay Area of San Francisco. Splitting her time between these three locales for over fifty years – Beirut, Paris, and Sausalito – the interactions and intersections between these places are a constant point of

54 *Field Guide*, p. 3.
reference within Adnan’s work. When asked in a 2012 interview how her cosmopolitan outlook influences her work, Adnan remarked:

I could’ve decided to forget and be an American. Or I could have decided to hate America and be an Arab. I could have decided not to be an Arab. But personally, I don't ask myself too many questions about national belonging; identity is like a tree, one day it is happy, one day it loses its leaves, but there is continuity. […] Beirut becomes my home when it has problems. It is not my only home. I have spent more time in California than in Beirut. I am pretty much American. And I grew up in French schools. [...] To be honest, I feel alright in the world. There are certain places that I like best, but I cannot be in both places at the same time: northern California, near San Francisco, and Beirut. Those are my two true homes.56

Yet while Adnan is content to remain fluid in her understanding of her own national identity – though, as we shall see, her assertion here that she doesn’t ask ‘too many questions about national belonging’ is contestable given the preoccupation with this subject throughout her oeuvre – current scholarship on Adnan’s work is somewhat less expansive. As Lisa Suhair Majaj and Amal Amireh discuss in their collection of essays on Adnan’s work:

Despite her growing prominence in the English-speaking context, there is little critical assessment of Adnan’s artistic and literary oeuvre, and almost no discussion of the role of her work in the context of American and European literature and art. Meanwhile, within the Arab world her work is often overlooked because she writes in English and French, and as a result tends to be excluded from discussion about Arabic literature. This occurs despite the fact that Adnan considers herself an Arab, is attuned to political and cultural events in the Middle East, and writes about topics of crucial importance to the Arab world.57

A decade and a half since the publication of their collection, the outlook is much the same, with Majaj and Amireh’s volume remaining one of very few attempts to bring together critical responses on Adnan’s work. However, in the last decade or so, Adnan has begun to gain recognition in the United States, in light of an increasing interest in Arab American

literature apparent over this period. In 2010, her short story collection, *Master of the Eclipse* was awarded the Arab American Book Award, established by the Arab American National Museum in 2007. The collection also received the 2010 PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award, which aims ‘to honor writers of exceptional works often not acknowledged by the mainstream literary community’. Even so, as Ammiel Alcalay acknowledges, ‘[although] she has lived in America for more than thirty years, the pleasure and power of Etel Adnan’s writing remain the privilege of far too few readers in this country’.

Without underestimating the significance of Arabic and Middle Eastern influences upon her work, then, this thesis redresses the lack of scholarship focusing on Adnan’s relationship with her American literary antecedents. As will be discussed in the opening chapter of this thesis, the enduring influence of her early years in the Bay Area of Sausalito is reflected upon in Adnan’s 1986 poetic essay, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, where she muses upon her intimate connection to the natural landscape, and explores how this relationship continues to shape her artistic perception and perspective. As has been said of both Dillard and Solnit, Adnan’s work actively resists formal and generic definition. Many of her texts combine poetry, essay, and memoir, while others draw together textual and visual practice. Examples include *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989), which incorporates both standard text and symbols, and also her ‘folding books’, in which long lines of Arabic text (a language which Adnan cannot actually read but reproduced for these texts) are presented across many concertinaed pages.

While *Journey* allows us to explore the clear affinities between Adnan and her American literary antecedents, my analyses set the liminal poetics identifiable within that earlier text into a broader nexus of dialogical relationships developed across Adnan’s wider

body of work. To an even greater extent than the other writers considered here, Adnan’s writing exemplifies and emphasises the intersectional experience of contemporary U.S. culture, such that what may be read as a derivative Romantic aesthetic in her earlier work evolves within her later writings into a much more complex mode of negotiating the contradictions and ambivalences she experiences as an Arab American writer. In positioning Adnan’s work within the context of a New Transcendentalism, my analyses go beyond simply recognising the transnational shift in American Studies as a thematic trend to be accounted for within the criticism, instead recognising how this transnational shift is itself embedded at the heart of this new phase in Transcendentalist thought.

Overall, then, this thesis provides a more comprehensive account of the influence of New England Transcendentalism on Dillard, Robinson, Solnit and Adnan, each of whom, with the exception of Adnan, has previously been situated (if primarily anecdotally) in relation to the nineteenth-century movement. I argue that critics’ attention is usually focused on this relationship in its most obvious sense, primarily in terms of their preoccupation with nature and its use as a central metaphor throughout their work. This project posits that there is a more fundamental affinity between these writers which positions this preoccupation with nature as forming one (albeit integral) aspect of a much larger dialogical framework that underpins these writings – a framework which I argue here constitutes both a poetics and politics of liminality.

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Having acknowledged at the outset of this introduction the difficulties associated with defining Transcendentalism, and with an awareness that this project’s other key term, liminality, is equally prone to manifold applications, this final section outlines the specifically
Transcendentalist mode of liminality that I identify and examine throughout this project. In doing so, it leads to a discussion of the affinities as well as the key point of divergence between Emersonian Transcendentalism and New Transcendentalism as understood and examined throughout this thesis.

Formulated by Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* (1909), the concept of liminality refers specifically to the unsettled middle phase of a three-part process – separation, transition, reintegration. Through this model, van Gennep seeks to ‘construct a definitive classification of rites’, in order to categorise the culturally-defined customs, rituals and processes ‘whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined’.60 ‘Whoever passes from one to the other’, van Gennep suggests, ‘finds himself […] in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds’.61 It is in relation to this original anthropological definition of liminality that we find a model for understanding the underlying principle of the Transcendentalist mode of liminality examined throughout this thesis. To draw this out, we turn to Branka Arsić’s 2010 study, *On Leaving*, in which she recognises the Christian foundations of what she describes as Emerson’s ‘ethics of leaving’.62 She cites a sermon that Emerson preached fourteen times in a four-year period, in which he draws on Hebrews 6:1 in order to ‘make an argument for the realm of ordinary life analogous to that which Paul advanced in respect of religious rituals.’63 ‘Paul’s idea of leaving ritual in order to reach something more religious’, Arsić suggests, ‘is translated by Emerson into the necessity of leaving our habits in order to set ourselves on the path of self-perfecting’ (27). It is from this

61 *The Rites of Passage*, p. 18.
basic principle, Arsić asserts, that Emerson ultimately develops the concept of self-reliance. She elaborates:

The self possesses the counterpower to refresh life by breaking with habit, thus putting itself in tension with itself in a different way. Similar to Paul’s injunction to perfect Christianity by annulling the very essence of Christian doctrine, Emerson proposes that we set ourselves on the path of bettering the self by annulling its very identity. For if stepping over the threshold of the self is performed by our own thinking, it is through thinking that the self will hollow itself out, as if cancelling out its “I” in order for a new self to be formed (31).

Arsić recognises this as the essential argument of Emerson’s 1841 essay, ‘Self-Reliance’, as is most succinctly borne out by Emerson’s claim that: ‘Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. […] The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.’ This concept of aversion, this perpetual turning away from the self and all other (ostensibly) fixed values, is, I would argue, the fundamental principle of Emersonian Transcendentalism, and is integral to both the Transcendentalist poetics and politics of liminality presented throughout this thesis. Indeed, the relationship between van Gennep’s model and Emerson’s concept of aversion is further evidenced by Arsić’s exposition of the term:

[Aversion] is not only the act of detaching the self from the customs of the community, but also, no less importantly, the act of turning the self against the ways of its own thinking, which are the habits of the mind. […] As the power of turning away, aversion places the self in a nonconformist position against itself. Aversion therefore produces a self that doesn’t conform to its own identity, but rather functions as an internal discrepancy or disjunction – the interval of self-distancing – that enables the self to leave for another self. As the power of depositioning the self that operates within it, aversion is, in fact, figured in Emerson as otherness within the self (31-2).

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64 Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Self-Reliance’, in Selected Prose and Poetry, pp. 72-93 (p. 74).
Articulated through the lens of van Gennep’s model, Emerson’s aversive turn may be understood – and is understood throughout this project – as the continual initiation of a rite of passage whereby one actively turns away from a settled identity. For Emerson, however, unlike van Gennep, this is not a culturally-defined teleological process which culminates in reintegration. Rather, the Transcendentalist self is one who perpetually – returning to van Gennep’s terms – ‘wavers between two worlds’; who constantly seeks the ‘self-perfecting’ potential of the liminal phase. For, as Emerson asserts, ‘power resides in the moment of transition.’

This aversive process, which continually seeks to situate the self between definitive positions, is the underpinning principle of the specifically Transcendentalist mode of liminality that informs this thesis. The chapters that follow examine how the ramifications of this mode are borne out on a textual, interpersonal and national scale.

The first chapter takes as its point of departure Emerson’s suggestion that ‘the experience of poetic creativeness […] is not found in staying at home, nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible.’

With reference to Stanley Cavell’s readings of Emerson’s writing mode, the chapter begins by considering how this Emersonian proposition relates to the aversive principle outlined above. Drawing on key studies by Jonathan Levin (The Poetics of Transition, 1999) and Joan Wry (‘The Art of the Threshold’, 2010), and with reference to the anthropological theories of liminality proposed by Arnold van Gennep and later Victor Turner, the chapter distinguishes between transition on the one hand and liminality on the other, arguing that the latter articulates more readily the Emersonian imperative of ‘residing in a moment of transition’.

Having outlined this key distinction, the chapter goes on to offer a series of close readings which examine the thematic, formal and

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65 ‘Self-Reliance’, p. 84.
67 Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Self-Reliance’, in Selected Prose and Poetry, pp. 72-93 (p. 84).
stylistic means by which both Old and New Transcendentalist works ‘present as much transitional surface as possible’ within their writings. The readings are underpinned by anthropological theories of liminality proposed by Arnold van Gennep and later Victor Turner, demonstrating how themes including pilgrimage and communitas further elucidate the relationships between my writers and their Transcendentalist antecedents. Focusing on the texts identified above that exhibit the most explicit parallels to those earlier New England Transcendentalist works (Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*; Solnit’s *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*; Adnan’s *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*), the discussion recognises how these texts employ many of the established Transcendentalist tropes of liminal experience. Extending these readings, the discussion also considers the more materialist practices – which significantly influenced Emerson – identified by Argersinger and Cole in the work of Moody Emerson, Fuller and other female Transcendentalists. My analysis focuses specifically on conversation and dialogue as key to their intellectual endeavour. The analysis examines what I refer to as the ‘dialogical tactics’ employed across both the texts acknowledged above and also Robinson’s Gilead novels. It argues that these textual strategies effect a series of thematic, stylistic and structural ‘transitional surfaces’ which resist definitive responses and thus provide a means of negotiating the limits of knowledge, understanding and power. The opening chapter thus lays the foundations for the subsequent chapters by demonstrating how the Transcendentalist mode of liminality outlined above manifests itself as a series of textual practices, the cumulative effect of which, I argue, may be read as a specifically Transcendentalist poetics of liminality.

In line with Emerson’s assertion that ‘around every circle another can be drawn’, each of the subsequent chapters emanates from the textual concerns of the opening chapter, taking an ever-widening theoretical lens through which to explore the lived political implications of
Taking up key readings by George Kateb, Johannes Voelz and Branka Arsić that explore the themes of love and friendship in Emerson’s writings, the second chapter moves on to consider the implications of this Transcendentalist mode of liminality (which, as defined above, is predicated upon a perpetual turning towards and turning away from the self) for the interaction between self and other. The opening sections establish several parallels between Emerson’s thinking on love and friendship and the respective intersubjective models proposed by feminist psychoanalysts, Luce Irigaray and Jessica Benjamin. My analysis traces movements between these various texts in order to explore not only how feminist interventions in psychoanalysis provide a framework through which to understand the relationship between Solnit, Dillard, Robinson, Adnan and the New England Transcendentalists, but also how the New England Transcendentalists prefigure many of the formal and stylistic ‘innovations’ proposed by Irigaray and Benjamin. It argues that my contemporary writers may be read as intermediaries between these seemingly disparate cultural movements, such that the Transcendentalist liminal poetics identified in the opening chapter becomes a means by which they negotiate the interpersonal throughout their writings.

The analysis engages with concepts advanced by Irigaray and Benjamin including intersubjectivity, thirdness and the sensible transcendental, setting them into dialogue with readings by Kateb, Voelz and Arsić. The chapter recognises the liminal perspective that lies at the heart of both Irigaray and Benjamin’s work, and their sense – similar to the Transcendentalist mode of liminality outlined above – that ‘the theoretic equivalent of that ability to face mystery and uncertainty […] would be the effort to understand the contradictions of fact and reason without any irritable reaching after one side at the expense

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of the other’. The analysis explores how Irigaray and Benjamin’s respective theories of intersubjectivity are borne out through close readings of texts by Solnit, Robinson and Dillard. The first offers an Irigarayan reading of the fraught mother-daughter relationship identified in Solnit’s *The Faraway Nearby*. The second explores Robinson’s debut novel, *Housekeeping*, in light of Benjamin’s model of intersubjectivity and particularly her notion of the ‘potential space of thirdness’. The final reading draws upon readings of marital love by both Emerson and Irigaray in an examination of Dillard’s most recent novel, *The Maytrees*.

By acknowledging how both theorists develop their revisionary models *from the inside* in a manner which both problematises and reimagines ideas established by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the chapter recognises a similar dynamic operating between Irigaray, Benjamin and their psychoanalytic forefathers to that which this thesis establishes between my four writers and their Transcendentalist predecessors. As such, in line with the overarching argument of this thesis, I argue that New Transcendentalism constitutes what Benjamin terms a ‘redemptive critique’: a mode which recognises the problematic elements that have shaped the perception of Transcendentalist thought in the critical and popular imagination, but that also unearths the progressive potential of its original principles.

The final chapter turns to a consideration of the wider national implications of this Transcendentalist mode of liminality. The analysis identifies a tension between the anti-teleological perspective that the Transcendentalist mode of liminality is predicated upon and the unavoidably future-oriented – and inevitably hegemonic – rhetoric of Manifest Destiny with which those earlier writings are so often inflected. Particularly pertinent here is Thoreau’s 1851 essay, ‘Walking’ in which he remarks that:

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The Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions. If we do not succeed this time there is perhaps one more chance for the race left before it arrives on the banks of the Styx; and that is in the Lethe of the Pacific.\textsuperscript{71}

Within this analogy, Thoreau sets the temporal and geographical coordinates of America’s intellectual endeavours. A century and a half later, this chapter explores how the Transcendentalist movement has fared in its westward journey across the United States. It considers why the movement was destined to remain wedded to its East-coast origins in its own time, recognising the tension between the idealised West of New England Transcendentalist texts and the lived reality encountered by attempts to take the movement westward. In light of more recent theoretical interventions by New and Post-West critics including Jane Tompkins (\textit{West of Everything}, 1992) and Neil Campbell (\textit{The Rhizomatic West}, 2011), the analysis considers how Adnan, Dillard, Robinson and Solnit repurpose a Transcendentalist liminal poetics in order to explore both the enduring myths of the American West, and their own lived experiences of these landscapes. The first half of the chapter offers a comparative reading of Dillard’s \textit{The Living} (1992) and Robinson’s \textit{Lila} (2014), considering how the two novels both appropriate and subvert many of the common tropes associated with the Western genre so as to complicate the hegemonic imperatives of the genre. The latter half of the chapter moves to a consideration of Solnit’s lived experience of the American West, exploring how her writings negotiate the private and public histories of the region. It also considers her 2003 biography of Eadweard Muybridge, \textit{Motion Studies}. I explore how the text is not only, as Edward Rothstein has acknowledged, ‘the biography of an era; not a man’, but also in many ways a biography of the American West.\textsuperscript{72} My reading


explores how the text opens a dialogue between our moment and the nineteenth century, and, moreover, presents Muybridge as the liminal figure par excellence; as ‘a doorway, a pivot between that old world and ours’. As such, I argue that the text explores the reciprocal dynamic between the nineteenth century and our own contemporary moment that underpins this thesis. The final reading turns to Adnan’s *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (2005). A response to William H. Gass’s *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* (1968), Adnan’s is a text of shifting geographies, raising questions about national belonging, arbitrary cartographic boundaries, and – to use Edward Said’s term – the ‘contrapuntal’ experience of exile. My analysis proposes that Emerson’s concept of ‘transitional surfaces’ can provide its own framework for the exilic experience that moves beyond the binary connotations of the contrapuntal, in its ability to incorporate seemingly oppositional aspects of both lived experience and literary practice.

In addition to providing the foundations for the Transcendentalist mode of liminality examined throughout this thesis, the parallel drawn here between Emerson’s aversive principle and van Gennep’s rite of passage model also highlights an underlying tension which, I argue, lies at the heart of Emersonian Transcendentalism and which I have alluded to in part in my summary of the third chapter. For it strikes me as a significant limitation of Emerson’s aversive mode that for all its resistance to teleological constructs it remains bound in an imperative to ‘onwardness’; to the suggestion that the self must progress in one, future-oriented, ‘self-perfecting’ direction. This sentiment is articulated in ‘Circles’: ‘I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back.’ An earlier rendering of this premise is found in an 1838 journal

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74 The notion of ‘contrapuntality’ was integral to Said’s work during the last three decades of his life. For an early exposition of this idea see Edward Said, ‘Reflections on Exile’, in Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile, ed. by Marc Robinson (Winchester, MA and London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 137-49 (p. 146).
entry in which Emerson implores: ‘Be not the slave of your own past. […] But dare rather to quit the platform, plunge into the sublime seas, dive deep, & swim far, so shall you come back with self-respect, with new power, with an advanced experience, that shall explain & overlook the old.’76

It is in relation to this desire to ‘overlook the old’, this assumption that the new will necessarily be ‘advanced’, that I identify the central divergence between nineteenth-century Transcendentalism and the New Transcendentalism proposed throughout this thesis. Indeed, my claim regarding the ‘newness’ of the New Transcendentalism relates in large part to how Adnan, Dillard, Robinson and Solnit orientate themselves towards the past. For while Emerson’s conception of progress (both personal and cultural) is predicated upon supplanting what has come before, I argue that my four writers conceive of progress as a more reciprocal dynamic whereby the progressive principles of the past are recovered as a means of navigating the future. In the readings that follow, I contend that Adnan, Dillard, Robinson and Solnit’s writings challenge the logic by which Emerson equates aversion with perpetual leaving. To unpack my thinking here, let us consider the closing lines of Arsić’s introduction to On Leaving:

To leave, therefore, is not to betray or abandon those who we don’t love, but to depart from people still loveable and places still liveable. […] Because those we left guide our departures, we are still looking at them as we walk away from them. That is why our existences tremble with restlessness: we cannot stay, and so we walk, but we remember and mourn. […] Only thus, through such a restlessness, do we acquire some truth. […] Our existences amount to a double dealing: we can stay, repose, and live a lie, or we can depart, gaining truth only by experiencing the restlessness of living in the oppositions and aporias that make our being swing (17 – emphases added).

Within this passage, Arsić simultaneously laments and accepts the imperative to leave. This seems to me, however, to reinforce the very ‘oppositions and aporias’ that the aversive principle attempts to navigate. If aversion is indeed a simultaneous turning away and turning toward; if ‘the experience of poetic creativeness is not found in staying at home nor yet in travelling but in transitions from one to the other’, then why must ‘people still lovable, places still livable’ be so unequivocally effaced? What might we gain from staying or, indeed, turning back? How might we live in such a way that satisfies both the imperative to leave and the desire to stay? At what point does leaving itself become conformity? It is questions such as these, I suggest, that characterise the New Transcendentalism proposed throughout this thesis.

I see this tension in Emerson – between a professedly antiteleological mode on the one hand and a perpetual future-oriented leaving off on the other – as the inevitable extension of the cultural imperatives of his time. Yet it is important to acknowledge the extent to which Emerson was aware of his own historical limitations. This may be gleaned within the final lines of ‘The Transcendentalist’ (1842), where Emerson asserts:

Soon these improvements and mechanical inventions will be superseded; these modes of living lost out of memory; these cities rotted, ruined by war, by new inventions, by new seats of trade, or the geologic changes: — all gone, like the shells which sprinkle the seabeach with a white colony to-day, forever renewed to be forever destroyed. But the thoughts which these few hermits strove to proclaim by silence, as well as by speech, not only by what they did, but by what they forbore to do, shall abide in beauty and strength, to reorganize themselves in nature, to invest themselves anew in other, perhaps higher endowed and happier mixed clay than ours, in fuller union with the surrounding system. (348)

This passage exemplifies a tendency in nineteenth-century Transcendentalist writings to defer to a future cultural context in which it will be possible for their principles to be more fully realised. This is true of not only Emerson but also Thoreau, as is most famously declared in the final lines of Walden: ‘I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this; but such is the character of the morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. […] Only the
day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning
star.’

Stanley Cavell explores this constant sense of deferral in reference to Friedrich
Nietzsche’s concept of ‘a man for tomorrow and the day after tomorrow’, recognising how
both the Emersonian and Nietzschean text is ‘evidently […] written in order to create, or
hasten the creation of, the one for which it is written.’ Particularly pertinent given the
premise of this thesis is Emerson’s claim that ‘[s]o many things are unsettled which it is of
the first importance to settle, – and, pending their settlement, we will do as we do’.

Considered in light of van Gennep’s model, Emerson’s comment may be read as an
acknowledgement of not only the rite of passage in which his nation was at that point
intensely engaged, but also his sense of the limitations that this process inevitably imposed
upon the realisation of his own philosophical principles. I argue that one of the primary
limitations imposed by this cultural rite of passage manifests itself as the imperative to
‘onwardness’ described above. That is to say, I understand this passage in particular but also
the sense of deferral found in Transcendentalist writings more generally as an
acknowledgement of the paradox between adhering to a philosophical principle which
necessitates a constant throwing off of any stable notion of identity on the one hand and on
the other remaining committed to the national project of establishing a specifically American
culture.

This thesis proposes that the cultural and political upheavals since the mid-twentieth
century have created that not-yet-realised future context so often alluded to in
Transcendentalist writings. In the chapters that follow, I explore the ways in which this is
borne out within the respective writings of Annie Dillard, Etel Adnan, Marilynne Robinson
and Rebecca Solnit. Loosed from the cultural imperative to perpetual ‘onwardness’, these

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78 Stanley Cavell, ‘Old and New in Emerson and Nietzsche’, in Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes (Stanford,
four writers invite us to draw back to those founding principles upon which U.S. culture over the last two centuries has largely been built. Now from a cultural vantage point in which they are able to evaluate the historical trajectory that those early principles have (sometimes problematically) taken, I read my writers as establishing an alternative trajectory for these principles and the overdetermined tropes with which they are commonly associated. It is this alternative trajectory that I position throughout this thesis as a New Transcendentalism.

To summarise: this thesis recognises a series of shared thematic, formal and stylistic elements through which we may align Annie Dillard, Etel Adnan, Marilynne Robinson and Rebecca Solnit with the nineteenth-century New England Transcendentalist movement. These include: an integral relation between self and nature that underpins many of their writings and which provides a key site for exploring the simultaneous potentiality and existential jeopardy of liminal experiences; a shared mode of antiteleological thinking which manifests itself within the form, style and structure of Transcendentalist texts; the conspicuous and self-reflexive foregrounding of the writer/artist’s liminal perspective as a figure who occupies a representative (in both senses) middle ground; a reverence for the common and everyday; and a general tendency towards what is referred to throughout the analysis as ‘productive ambivalence’. My analysis takes as its primary focus Emersonian Transcendentalism, particularly as presented within revisionary readings of recent decades, and which is understood here to refer specifically to a mode of Transcendentalist thought which is predicated upon the principle of aversion – the constant turning towards and turning away from fixed principles so as to remain in a state of perpetual becoming. Considered within the context of Arnold van Gennep’s rite of passage model, this aversive mode becomes the underpinning principle of the specifically Transcendentalist mode of liminality examined throughout this thesis. Ultimately, I argue that while, in theory, Emerson’s writings advocate an ability to account for the simultaneity of oppositions as central to intellectual
endeavour, this principle manifests itself in practice as a constant and often fraught oscillation between extremes: from sentence to sentence, essay to essay, past to future, self to other. In contrast, Adnan, Dillard, Robinson and Solnit deploy the tropes commonly associated with nineteenth-century Transcendentalism in such a way that are able to hold contradictory elements in productive tension without attempting to reconcile – even provisionally – between one side and the other. In doing so, the underlying principles of Emersonian Transcendentalism become a means of articulating and negotiating the always-already liminal intersectional experiences that these four writers bring to bear on that earlier tradition, in such a way that both recovers and reimagines American Transcendentalism for our contemporary moment.
CHAPTER ONE

‘TO PRESENT AS MUCH TRANSITIONAL SURFACE AS POSSIBLE’: NEW TRANSCENDENTALISM AND THE POETICS OF LIMINALITY

In ‘Thinking of Emerson’, Stanley Cavell considers the relationship between Emerson’s theory of self-reliance and his idiosyncratic writing style. He describes Emerson’s prose as ‘a battle specifically to remain in conversation with itself, answerable to itself.’\(^1\) He continues: ‘[s]uch writing takes the same mode of relating to itself as reading and thinking do, the mode of the self’s relation to the self, call it self-reliance. Then whatever is required in possessing a self will be required in thinking and reading and writing.’\(^2\) Cavell thus articulates how the Transcendentalist mode of liminality outlined in the introduction to this thesis, that process of situating oneself in a perpetually liminal state between fixed principles, manifests itself within Emerson’s writings. Much of Cavell’s work on Emerson is devoted to unpacking this process. In ‘Hope against Hope’, for instance, he describes Emerson’s writing as ‘the expression of his self-reliance’, going on to posit that

Emerson’s writing and his society are in an unending argument with one another – that is to say, he is writing in such a way as to place his writing in his unending argument […] an unending turning away from one another, hence endlessly turning toward one another. […] His prose not only takes sides in this aversive conversation, but it also enacts the conversation, continuously creating readings of individual assertion that mutually turn from and toward one another. […] This is what most immediately gives to Emerson’s prose its sometimes maddening quality of seeming never to come to a point.\(^3\)

It is this tendency, then, this resistance to fixity that is always palpable in Emerson’s writings, that I understand as the underlying element of the Transcendentalist poetics of liminality

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\(^2\) ‘Thinking of Emerson’, p. 17.

\(^3\) Stanley Cavell, ‘Hope Against Hope’, in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, pp. 171-82 (p. 181).
identified and developed throughout this thesis. In the following passage from ‘Plato; Or, The Philosopher’, Emerson describes the act of writing as follows:

Every great artist has been such by synthesis. Our strength is transitional, alternating; or shall I say, a thread of two strands. The sea-shore, sea seen from shore, shore seen from sea; […] the experience of poetic creativeness, which is not found in staying at home, nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible.\(^4\)

The dialogical relationship Emerson sets up here between neither staying nor travelling bears out Cavell’s sense of the relationship that Emerson’s central tenet of aversive self-reliance informs his writing process, and that the aversive principle is constantly at play and at stake on the page.

This chapter examines how Emerson’s notion of ‘[presenting] as much transitional surface as possible’ manifests itself thematically, formally and stylistically in both Old and New Transcendentalist writings. It argues that the various dialogical strategies deployed across these texts bear out a poetics of liminality that underpins Transcendentalist thinking, and which is integral to the New Transcendentalism proposed throughout this thesis. In light of the Transcendentalist mode of liminality outlined within the introduction, this opening chapter sets key studies by Jonathan Levin and Joan Wry into dialogue with anthropological definitions of liminality established by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, in order to further elucidate the fruitfulness of the liminal frameworks considered throughout this project. The analysis identifies how Annie Dillard, Marilynne Robinson, Etel Adnan and Rebecca Solnit often employ many of the established Transcendentalist tropes of liminal experience: the woods as wilderness, the mountain as stability, the sea as flux, and – as the above extract suggests – the shoreline as the transitional surface par excellence. Moving beyond these recognised affinities, the discussion also recognises – in line with Cavell’s

descriptions above – conversation, defined in its broadest sense, as a liminal textual practice that is integral to the Transcendentalist liminal poetics examined throughout this thesis. My analysis recognises the influence of thinkers including Mary Moody Emerson and Margaret Fuller on Transcendentalism’s dialogical mode, and acknowledges conversation as a fruitful analogy for the formal and stylistic strategies employed by my four contemporary writers. The chapter thus lays the foundations for the arguments ventured within the subsequent chapters, in which it is demonstrated how Dillard, Adnan, Solnit and Robinson extend this Transcendentalist poetics of liminality as a means of negotiating their lived intersectional experiences of contemporary U.S. culture.

**Between Transition and Liminality: A Question of Terminology**

In *The Poetics of Transition* (1999), Jonathan Levin traces the legacy of Emerson’s transitional poetics through pragmatism and American literary modernism. Following the well-established trajectory from Emerson to William James and later Wallace Stevens (among others), Levin positions the poetics of transition as ‘a distinct American intellectual and literary inheritance’, describing it as ‘not a set of ideas or concepts but rather a general attitude towards ideas and concepts […] often manifest as a pervasive formal or stylistic restlessness [and] stimulated by a core dissatisfaction with all definite, definitive formulations, be they concepts, metaphors or larger formal structures’. Levin’s study also identifies several paradoxes that lie at the heart of Emerson’s philosophy, and, in particular, the sense that ‘the poetics of transition requires the very forms it ceaselessly attempts to overcome’ (x). Having recognised that ‘Emerson values processes but not necessarily their end products, which are in any event only instruments of further processes’, Levin’s project

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traces Emerson’s legacy through a Jamesian pragmatism which conversely asserts that ‘the important thing about a train of thought is its conclusion’ (2). Thus, Levin develops a poetics of transition that becomes increasingly distanced from its anti-teleological origins (50).

While Levin’s text positions the poetics of transition as a particularly Emersonian legacy, Joan Wry traces a poetics of liminality that she sees as underpinning the writings of Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. Wry’s analysis takes Arnold van Gennep’s *Rites de Passage* (1909) and Victor Turner’s subsequent expansion of van Gennep’s framework as its point of departure, focusing on Emerson’s preoccupation with ‘the endlessly unfolding potential of the aesthetic ideal in “the space between”’. Similarly to this project, Wry contends that the fruitfulness of the term liminality lies in its mutability, and specifically its capacity to simultaneously articulate ‘both essence and process: it addresses and values the physical space that is a borderline or threshold between things, as well as the passage or movement across whatever that threshold space or borderline demarcates from one level to another’ (15). By placing Levin and Wry’s studies alongside one another, then, we draw attention to a key distinction between transition on the one hand and liminality on the other – a distinction which, given the premise of this chapter, warrants closer scrutiny. For although his work predates van Gennep’s coining of ‘liminality’ as a critical term by over half a century, liminal states, experiences and spaces proliferate throughout Emerson’s writings to such an extent, Wry suggests, that Emerson’s work ‘likely helped to shape aspects of these twentieth-century visions’ (2).

In ‘Self-Reliance’, for example, Emerson asserts that ‘[p]ower ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state.’ While phrases such as ‘the instant of repose’ and ‘the moment of transition’ emphasise a temporal dimension, the

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7 Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Self-Reliance’, in *Selected Prose and Poetry*, pp. 72-93 (p. 84).
fact that Emerson describes power as *residing in* these moments (or ‘states’, as he later describes them) foregrounds his emphasis on the spatial dimension of transitional experience. Levin himself draws attention to this paradox – ‘What, after all, could it possibly mean to reside in a moment of transition?’ (ix). He posits that ‘residence carries that same negative connotation Emerson already associates with repose’, before going on to draw a parallel here to Emerson’s later assertion that ‘every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit’ (ix). Levin himself recognises the inadequacy of the term ‘transition’, acknowledging that it ‘remains a slippery term in Emerson’s prose’ and explaining that ‘this is due, in part, to the way in which the term is used to stand for a process or event, not a thing’ (2). This inadequacy is drawn out in (and by) Levin’s own discussion, particularly in his contention that ‘Emerson’s effort to make the transition from repose to a state of unsettled possibility is compromised, in advance, by language in which that effort is destined to be realised’ (ix). While this may be true of Emerson’s original text, I would argue that Levin exacerbates this paradox through his failure to engage with discourses of liminality. For, by definition, transition must always point to its two extremes and is always suggestive of a shift from one state – temporal, spatial, psychological – to another. Such binary logic, however, is often problematised within Emerson’s writing, as is demonstrated in the following remark:

> Oneness and otherness. It is impossible to speak or to think without embracing both. [...] These strictly-blended elements it is the problem of thought to separate and to reconcile. Their existence is mutually contradictory and exclusive; and each so fast slides into the other that we can never say what is one, and what it is not.\(^8\)

As Wry acknowledges, the ‘intrinsic relational quality’ of liminal frameworks enable us to negotiate this paradox, ‘because their interstitial nature allows for the possibility of literally being in two places at once, or aesthetically perceiving the dynamics of change and transformation from within the very processes themselves’ (7). In this way, the concept of

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\(^8\) Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Plato; Or, The Philosopher’, p. 178.
liminality is able not only to articulate transition as process, but it also allows us to simultaneously locate that experience in physical space; to understand it as, in van Gennep’s own terms, ‘an independent state’ in and of itself.⁹

Victor Turner would later extend the significance of Arnold van Gennep’s original rites of passage model, placing particular emphasis on the liminal phase. Drawing on the Hegelian ‘dialectical triad’ which asserts that ‘In Yea and Nay all things consist’, Turner recognises that ‘liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as the realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise’.¹⁰ Turner developed this concept further in his 1969 monograph, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, most notably within following passage:

> The attributes of liminality or liminal *personae* (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. [...] Thus liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.¹¹

In light of its multiple conceptual and thematic resonances, this thesis adopts and extends the significance of Joan Wry’s phrase, ‘a poetics of liminality’ rather than Levin’s ‘poetics of transition’. For the concept of liminality incorporates a spectrum of ‘betweenness’: interstitial spaces, intersectional identities, temporal margins, geographical borders, cultural boundaries, dialogical practices and dialectical perspectives. Thus it provides a theoretical framework through which to explore the ambivalent nature of being ‘betwixt and between’ in its

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multifarious senses, enabling us to negotiate these various conditions as simultaneously existentially fraught and sites of ‘pure possibility’.

‘Glad to the Brink of Fear’: Liminal Nature in New England

Transcendentalism

The coexistence of existential jeopardy and potentiality is nowhere more apparent than within Emerson’s famous ‘transparent eye-ball’ episode, which appears in the opening chapter of *Nature; Addresses and Lectures* (1849):

> Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. [...] There I feel that nothing can befall me in life – no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, -- master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance.12

Through references to crossing, melting snow, twilight, the snake casting off his slough, perpetual youth, and the notion of being ‘glad to the brink of fear’, the opening lines here highlight the various liminal contexts – spatial, temporal, existential – of the passage, culminating in a seemingly paradoxical assertion: ‘I am nothing; I see all.’ The significance of the ambivalences and shifting power dynamics of this passage will be drawn out throughout this chapter, as the episode is set into dialogue with key passages from texts by my writers. Here, it serves as an exemplar of the liminal experiences in nature that are so characteristic of New England Transcendentalist writings, and which form the basis of the poetics of liminality presented within Wry’s study. Despite spending some time unpacking

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the transparent eyeball passage, however, Wry contends that Emerson’s liminal poetics is primarily articulated through abstract concepts including transition, polarity and compensation, and that the liminal aesthetic he develops is more tangibly realised in the subsequent works of Thoreau and Whitman, where she identifies the prevalence of ‘liminal set-pieces’, which ‘[move] the indeterminate potential of Emersonian idealism firmly into the definitive topos of the natural landscape’ (19). Wry returns to this point later in the study, arguing that while Thoreau ‘rarely makes use of the keywords themselves as abstract references in his own writing’, one of the primary elements he takes forward from Emerson is his sense of ‘both the power and the indeterminacy of continual regeneration and renewal’ (73).

As will be borne out throughout this chapter, I would argue that both Levin and Wry’s studies are limited by their reluctance to offer any sustained interrogation of the tensions that arise from this concurrence of power and indeterminacy in Transcendentalist writings; between their professed commitment to a progressive anti-teleological mode and the hegemonic forms, structures and discourses through which this commitment is articulated. This is evidenced within Wry’s reading of Emerson’s ubiquitous figure of ‘The Poet’, a hypothetical figure who ‘stands among partial men for the complete man […] in virtue of being the largest power to receive and impart. […] The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign and stands on the centre.’13 In her reading of this passage, Wry contends that ‘here “the centre” represents not the status of authority but a liminal positioning that allows the poet to filter impressions from the natural world and then translate them for the “partial” individuals who do not yet share his higher form of seeing’ (63). Yet how can we ignore the hegemonic rhetoric here? How do we understand this figure, this ‘emperor in his own right’, if not as one with ‘the status of authority’? This point is not

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addressed by Wry; despite acknowledging that Harold Bloom names Emerson as ‘the American theoretician of power’, the observation serves only as a segue into her discussion of Thoreau.

In line with Wry’s argument, it is indeed the case that Thoreau’s work takes the Transcendentalist sensibility more ‘firmly into the definitive topos of the natural landscape’. Yet he also takes with him those compromising hegemonic tensions we find in Emerson’s writings. This is particularly apparent in The Maine Woods (1864). The most famous section of this text, ‘Ktaadn’, may be read as an exemplar of the Transcendentalist liminal experience in nature. Here we follow Thoreau as he ventures alone to the summit of Mount Ktaadn where he finds himself ‘deep within the hostile ranks of clouds, and all objects were obscured by them’.¹⁴ There, in stark contrast and perhaps even direct response to Emerson’s sense that ‘in the woods […] nothing can befall me in life’, that there he becomes ‘part or particle of God’ and one who can ‘know all’, Thoreau’s overwhelming sense is one of threat:

Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone than you can imagine. There is less of substantial thought and fair understanding in him, than in the plains where men inhabit. His reason is dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtile, like the air. Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you. [...] Why seek me where I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother? Shouldst thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, here is no shrine, nor altar, nor any access to my ear. (64)

Quite unlike the Thoreau of Walden – who famously proclaims, following William Cowper, ‘I am monarch of all I survey’ – the overriding sentiment of this passage is one of hostility and fear.¹⁵ While we may read this as due reverence and an undercutting of the archetypal image of the dominant male conquering the natural landscape (the female pronouns and allusions to motherhood are significant in this regard), this deference is all the more striking

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when juxtaposed with the rest of the narrative. Wry cites Thoreau’s remark in Walden, ‘[e]njoy the land, but own it not’ as evidence that he ‘denounces the notion of property [and] challenges Emerson’s abstract idea of ownership’. Yet Thoreau acknowledges that his primary reason for heading out to ‘the backwoods of Maine’ in this later narrative is not to seek wild adventure, but ‘to accompany a relative […] engaged in the lumber trade in Bangor, as far as a dam on the West Branch of the Penobscot, in which property he was interested’ (1). Indeed, the entire narrative bespeaks this surveyor’s perspective. As he travels through the landscape, Thoreau painstakingly details the coordinates of each location, relaying ‘names and distances […] for the benefit of future tourists’, often depicting the landscape in terms of its potential for settlement and profit (45). An orchard is described as ‘a good speculation […] for a Massachusetts boy to go down there with a trunk full of choice scions, and his grafting apparatus, in the spring’ (7); he acknowledges that ‘the beauty of the road itself was remarkable’ (9), and elsewhere admits that ‘it was easy to see that driving logs must be an exciting as well as arduous and dangerous business’ (41). Particularly at odds with Wry’s suggestion that Thoreau ‘challenges Emerson’s abstract idea of ownership’ is the moment he recalls the group finding ‘a whole brick’ along their journey, which he and others later regretted not taking ‘to the top of the mountain, to be left there for our mark. It would certainly have been a simple evidence of civilized man.’ The often ambivalent relationship between Emersonian and Thoreauvian principles of self-reliance and individualism and the exponential rise of market capitalism has been much debated. As Philip F. Gura asserts, from the later decades of the nineteenth century onwards,

the uneasy balance between the self and society that had characterized the antebellum phase of the Transcendental movement tipped irrevocably in the direction of the self. The intellectual power of Transcendentalists was directed toward individual rights and, implicitly, market capitalism, not humanitarian reform. Emerson’s admittedly

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16 ‘The Art of the Threshold’, p. 77.
17 The Maine Woods, p. 45.
demanding philosophy of self-reliance, an artifact of the early 1840s, was simplified and adopted as a chief principle. More and more, people identified Transcendentalism with the idea of individualism alone, rather than with the ethic of brotherhood that was supposed to accompany it.\footnote{Philip F. Gura, ‘Transcendentalism and Social Reform’, in History Now: The Journal of the Gilder Lehrman Institute <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform>.
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While the original texts are undoubtedly more nuanced than these later interpretations allow, Gura’s claim here is indicative of the extent to which the Transcendentalist movement has been reductively reappropriated within the cultural imagination to provide the ideological foundations for America’s cult of individualism and, by extension, the rise of market capitalism.

If ‘the ethic of brotherhood’ waned over time on account of there being a more receptive market for a derivative and reductive principle of self-serving individualism, the same cannot be said for the ethic of sisterhood that had developed amongst female members of the Transcendentalist movement during this period. The history of these women and their connections is traced within Jana L. Argersinger and Phyllis Cole’s recent collection, \textit{Toward a Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism} (2014). Argersinger and Cole’s introduction to the collection recognises not only the vertical genealogies by which knowledge was passed down through generations of Transcendentalist thinkers, but – in reference to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the ‘rhizome’ – also the lateral routes via which knowledge circulated throughout these New England communities in the mid-nineteenth century, for which – as Cole contends – ‘Relationality might become a term more apropos than influence or lineage’.\footnote{Jana L. Argersinger and Phyllis Cole, ‘Introduction’, in \textit{Toward a Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism}, ed. by Jana L. Argersinger and Phyllis Cole (Athens, GA and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2014), pp. 5-30 (p. 17).}

The collection opens with a chapter on Ralph’s aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, identifying her as a key figure whose working practices influenced a generation of Transcendentalist thinkers. Particularly influential was her belief in ‘dialogic self-
cultivation’, through which Moody Emerson and her contemporaries advocated conversation as a key means of self-advancement for the women of their community long before Fuller’s series of Boston ‘Conversations’. Beyond simply face-to-face dialogue, however, and most pertinent to the premise of this chapter, Emerson transferred these dialogical methods into her writings. She produced commonplace books throughout her lifetime, essentially scrapbooks in which she drew together fragments from journals, letters and literature, as well as original material directly addressing both real and imaginary interlocutors. These books – referred to as her ‘Almanacks’ – were circulated amongst her social circle in the spirit of ‘mutual self-cultivation’, and are described by Baker as a space in which Emerson ‘chases her own evolving truth’ (36). As Baker’s epigraph acknowledges, the fact that this practice was directly borne out of Emerson’s conversational practices is recognised in an 1830 letter she received from her nephew (and Ralph’s brother) Edward Bliss Emerson, in which he remarks: ‘a scrap from your day-book must always have the worth and the effect of a letter; for it is as much like conversation, in the true sense of the term’ (35). As Baker acknowledges, it was through the creation of this ‘stimulating dialogic zone’ both on and off the page that ‘Emerson [engaged] in the scientific, theological, political, and philosophical debates’ of her time (38). Many years before her nephew would profess the self-affirming value of becoming ‘a transparent eye-ball’, then, Mary Moody Emerson recognised the liminal potential of what Baker invitingly refers to as ‘moments of expanding knowledge in the third sphere of public discourse’ (44).

Several decades later, Margaret Fuller would prove to be another prominent thinker for whom liminal experiences were not primarily an abstract philosophical concept, but rather a dynamic integral to her working practice. As Carol Strauss Sotiropoulos argues, while her

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20 Noelle Baker, “‘Let me do nothing smale’: Mary Moody Emerson and Women’s “Talking” Manuscripts’, in *Toward a Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism*, pp. 35-56 (p. 36).
male counterparts remained wedded to the essay and lecture forms so popular in this period, Fuller ‘struggled to adapt to patriarchally endorsed writing modes’.\textsuperscript{21} Instead, she advocated the progressive potential of conversation, due to her ‘belief in the transformative power of self-expression and dialogue’.\textsuperscript{22} Adapting elements of both Unitarian church ‘Conversations’ and the European salon movement, Fuller organised a number of Conversation series over a period of five years (1839-44).\textsuperscript{23} While she organised the venues and set the overarching agenda for these discussions, Fuller was adamant that her role within these meetings was ‘not as teacher, but facilitator – she would be “one” among, not over, the “class” in their mutual exploration of the topics she proposed’.\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, in the first conversation, the scribe – believed to be Elizabeth Peabody – acknowledges Fuller’s claim that ‘she merely meant to be the nucleus of conversation’.\textsuperscript{25} Although the notion of being ‘merely […] the nucleus’ of these discussions may not convey the self-effacing sentiment Fuller (or Peabody) intended, these conversations provided a forum for young women to engage in intellectual and political debate at a time when they were denied the social and educational privileges extended to their male peers.

Positioning these practices alongside the more abstract liminal aesthetic found in the writings of their male counterparts, this chapter recognises both Moody Emerson and Fuller’s contribution to a Transcendentalist poetics of liminality. The discussion posits that the non-hierarchical structure of their dialogical working practices, in which the artist is positioned as central to but not the primary voice of the discussion, offers a counterpoint to the ostensibly self-serving individualism commonly associated with New England Transcendentalism. The

\textsuperscript{21} Carol Strauss Sotiropoulos, ‘Fuller, Goethe, Bettine’, in Toward a Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism, pp. 81-101 (p. 84).
\textsuperscript{22} ‘Fuller, Goethe, Bettine’, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{23} ‘Fuller, Goethe, Bettine’, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{25} ‘Margaret Fuller’s Boston Conversations’, p. 203.
close readings below examine how more abstract liminal experiences in nature, akin to those found in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, coexist alongside various formal and stylistic dialogical tactics, similar to those advocated by Moody Emerson and Fuller, in the writings of Dillard, Adnan, Robinson and Solnit. It recognises conversation as a recurring theme in and of itself, which, as we shall see, is integral to the liminal poetics which this thesis understands as integral to the New Transcendentalism it proposes.


In their introduction to *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), Victor and Edith Turner discuss how their work expands van Gennep’s concept of liminality, such that it articulates

not only *transition* but also *potentiality*, not only ‘going to be’ but also ‘what may be’, a formulable domain in which all that is not manifest in the normal day-to-day operation of social structures […] can be studied objectively, despite the often bizarre and metaphorical character of its contents.  

Building on ideas ventured in a 1974 article by Victor Turner, their analysis identifies pilgrimage as an exemplar of this liminal condition. They argue that it is the means by which ‘Christianity generated its own mode of liminality’, in that it necessitates a departure from one’s fixed locality, ‘to a sacred site or holy shrine located at some distance away from the pilgrim’s place of residence and daily labour’ (4). The Turners’ description of pilgrimage as a practice that involves ‘a movement from a mundane center to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the individual, an *axis mundi* of his faith; movement itself, a symbol of communitas’ reflects the integral individual-world dialectic that, as we have already seen, is so central to Transcendentalist thought (34). Using an analogy reminiscent of Emerson’s transitional surfaces, the Turners later describe the practice

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as ‘comparable to a series of overlapping, interpenetrating ellipses’ that reflect both its exterior physical route and interior spiritual journey (22). *Image and Pilgrimage* presents this interrelation between the physical and spiritual routes of pilgrimage as integral to its liminal nature; they claim that ‘pilgrimage may be thought of as extroverted mysticism, just as mysticism is introverted pilgrimage. The pilgrim physically traverses a mystical way; the mystic sets forth on an interior spiritual pilgrimage’ (33-4). Here, I posit that Annie Dillard’s first major publication, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, represents just such a pilgrimage experience. Taking the Turners’ own analogy, I argue that *Pilgrim* itself may be understood as incorporating three interpenetrating ellipses. The first and second reflect the dialogical relationship already identified by the Turners between the physical and the spiritual aspects of pilgrimage. For *Pilgrim* is both a physical journey, detailing Dillard’s actual liminal experiences when visiting Tinker Creek, and a spiritual journey, exploring the theological questions she works through during those excursions. Moreover, as a literary text, *Pilgrim* introduces a third element, in which the writing process itself is understood as integral to Dillard’s pilgrimage; an artistic journey she takes as she retrospectively seeks to capture these physical and spiritual elements in the creation of the text itself. The discussion below contends that the interrelation between these three elements – the physical, the spiritual and the artistic – is primarily borne out through the liminal motifs and strategies that Dillard deploys throughout the text, many of which echo those found in key passages from Emerson and Thoreau’s writings.

Published in 1974 – notably the same year as Turner’s formative article on the subject of pilgrimage – *Pilgrim* details the months Dillard spent living close to Tinker Creek in Virginia. Its opening pages ‘propose to keep what Thoreau called “a meteorological journal of the mind”, telling some tales and describing some of the sights of this rather tamed valley, and exploring, in fear and trembling, some of the unmapped dim reaches and unholy
fastnesses to which those tales and sights so dizzyingly lead’. Dillard’s passing reference to ‘this rather tamed valley’ is particularly significant here. For, much like Thoreau’s Walden Pond, Dillard’s Tinker Creek was not the isolated wilderness that the text leads us to imagine. Instead, Dillard’s excursions to this ‘sacred periphery’ were undertaken in the spaces between activities required by the ‘mundane center’ of her suburban life. As Diane Saverin reveals in ‘The Thoreau of the Suburbs’, despite reading as ‘a chronicle of solitude’, Pilgrim was in fact written while Dillard was living with her then husband, Richard Dillard, in the hours between playing softball and seeing to the daily chores, a backdrop so obscured that many readers assume she lived in her own Walden-esque cabin. Here we see the interrelation between the physical and artistic dimensions of Dillard’s pilgrimage. For the wilful erasure of what she describes as her ‘stupid little suburban neighborhood’ was, as Saverin notes, due to Dillard’s sense that no one would take her seriously as a ‘Virginia housewife named Annie’, and her belief that such a position would preclude her from the male-dominated tradition in which she actively sought to position herself. The irony, of course, as Dillard well knew, is that these revered male writers were themselves guilty of overselling their ‘lone-man-in-the-wilderness’ perspectives, not least Thoreau, whose cabin was built on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s land and who famously took his washing home to his mother on a regular basis. As such, Dillard’s wilful obfuscation of her wider domestic situation ultimately brings her closer to the writing practices of her Transcendentalist forebears, in which liminal experiences are most often sought in the margins of daily life. Having said this, it would be facile to suggest that Pilgrim amounts to a simple derivative of those earlier Transcendentalist writings. In one early

29 ‘The Thoreau of the Suburbs’, paras. 4, 11.
30 ‘The Thoreau of the Suburbs’, para. 25.
review, for example, Hayden Carruth describes the text as ‘plain old-fashioned optimistic American transcendentalism […] with little reference to life on this planet at this moment’, and later as ‘atavistic and essentially passive, not to say evasive’. Yet – to revisit the Turners’ definition of liminality cited above – by creating her own ‘formulable domain in which all that is not manifest in the normal day-to-day operation of social structures […] can be studied objectively, despite the often bizarre and metaphorical character of its contents’ – it is exactly ‘life on this planet at this moment’ that Dillard is most closely concerned with here – life, for sure, but not as we know it.

In her 2005 memoir, *Heart of Lightness*, Edith Turner describes liminality as ‘a place where the normal does not apply. It is a kind of crack between the worlds, like the looking glass world of Alice.’ With this analogy in mind, let us turn to the closing pages of *Pilgrim*, where Dillard writes:

> The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit’s only home […] Go up into the gaps. If you can find them; they shift and vanish too. Stalk the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock – more than a maple – a universe. This is how you spend this afternoon, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow afternoon. […] I am interested in Alice mainly when she eats the cooky that makes her smaller. I would pare myself or be pared that I too might pass through the merest crack, a gap I know is there in the sky. I am looking just now for the cooky. (274)

The striking similarity between these two passages (Turner writing some thirty years after Dillard), allows us to draw a direct parallel between the liminal conceptual frameworks of Dillard and the Turners. In a narrative that consistently undercuts resolution, it is these ‘gaps’, experienced spiritually at the edges of the everyday and effected artistically through Dillard’s liminal poetics, that *Pilgrim* constantly strives towards. Indeed, the fact that this passage – one of *Pilgrim*’s few didactic moments – occurs in the closing pages of the text, presents the idea that ‘the gaps are the thing’ as a key to the text, emphasized by the image of

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the maple key that introduces the section which the above quotation ends. In keeping with the dialectical perspective of the text, however, Dillard’s acknowledgement that she is still ‘looking just now for the cooky’, alongside her recognition that these revelatory opportunities tend to ‘shift and vanish’, positions this ‘stalking of the gaps’ as not an endpoint to reach but the perpetual aim of Dillard in both her life and her writing.

While this exposition doesn’t occur until Pilgrim’s closing pages, these intersecting liminal contexts are set up within its opening lines:

I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump through the open window by my bed in the middle of the night and land on my chest. I’d half-awaken. […] Some nights he kneaded my bare chest with his front paws, powerfully, arching his back, as if sharpening his claws, or pummeling a mother for milk. And some mornings I’d wake in daylight to find my body covered with paw prints in blood; I looked as though I’d been painted with roses. […] What blood was this, and what roses? It could have been the rose of the union, the blood of murder, or the rose of beauty bare and the blood of some unspeakable sacrifice or birth. The sign on my body could have been an emblem or a stain, the keys to the kingdom or the mark of Cain. I never knew. (3)

From the outset, Dillard thrusts the reader into a liminal space between waking and dreaming (‘half-awakened’), violence (‘sharpening his claws’) and nurture (‘pummeling a mother for milk’), beauty (roses) and horror (blood), and, ultimately, between knowing and unknowing (‘I never knew’). This wrong-footing, in which neither the narrator nor the reader knows the ‘true meaning’ of the image, or, more accurately, Dillard’s implication of the potential coexistence of both possibilities, lays the foundations for the liminal perspective that characterises the text as a whole. For, as has already been acknowledged, Pilgrim is a narrative in which definitive responses are constantly undercut; a text which continually directs us towards definitive answers, yet ultimately leaves the reader with a sense that our preoccupation with explaining mystery is ultimately (and necessarily) futile.

The text’s liminal perspective is reiterated later in the first chapter by the image ‘of a small green frog […] exactly half in and half out of the water, looking like a schematic diagram of an amphibian’ (7). More than a symbol of the text’s own amphibious perspective,
however, the frog gestures towards a fundamental dialectic that lies at the heart of Dillard’s narrative. For as she watches, Dillard witnesses a ‘monstrous and terrifying sight’: ‘just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like an emptied tent. […] I gaped bewildered, appalled’ (7-8). Margaret Loewen Reimer has identified this moment – in which a giant water bug sucks out the frog’s innards from below the waterline – as representing one half of a dialectic that underpins Pilgrim. ‘The first level of the dialectic’, Reimer contends, ‘is the tension between the material and the spiritual, the natural and the transcendent, but another dialectic is at work within this framework: the prevailing contradiction between the beauty and the horror within the natural world.’

Clearly the suggestion here of ‘the tension between the material and the spiritual’ recalls the Turners’ explanation of the liminal pilgrimage experience. Moreover, this image of the crumpling frog, foregrounded here and recalled throughout the text, is an exemplar of one of the ‘gaps’ that Dillard alludes to in the final pages – a moment in which the paradoxical beauty and horror of the natural world is laid bare before our eyes. If the crumpling frog of the opening pages is one such image, it is balanced at the end of the second chapter by Dillard’s recollection of ‘the tree with the lights in it’, an experience Dillard describes as being ‘utterly focused and utterly dreamed’ (36). These two episodes, Reimer posits, ‘yield two opposite conclusions’ which Dillard ‘holds in constant tension throughout the book’. In an afterword added to the text in 1999, Dillard explicitly recognises how this dialectical perspective is reflected within Pilgrim’s structure:

Running the story through a year’s seasons was conventional, so I resisted it, but since each of the dozen alternative structures I proposed injured, usually fatally, the already frail narrative, I was stuck with it. The book’s other, two-part structure interested me more. Neoplatonic Christianity described two routes to God: the via positiva and the via

34 The Dialectical Vision, p. 185.
negativa. [...] The book’s first half, the via positiva, accumulates the world’s goodness and God’s. [...] The via positiva culminates in “Intricacy”. A shamefully feeble “Flood” chapter washes all that away, and the second half of the book starts down the via negativa with “Fecundity”, the dark side of intricacy. “Northing” is the counterpart to “Seeing”. A concluding chapter keeps the bilateral symmetry. (279-80)

While Dillard suggests a very clear distinction between these two sections of the text, with the first half being ‘washed away’ by the pivotal ‘Flood’ chapter, the analysis below argues that Pilgrim presents the inherent mutability of these two approaches. It will contend that, rather than being mutually exclusive, the two modes of engagement with God (which, as will be shown, is itself a negotiated term within this text) are held in productive tension throughout, thus becoming one of many ‘transitional surfaces’ upon which this text skates.

While Reimer is right to dispute Carruth’s suggestion that Pilgrim amounts to ‘plain old-fashioned optimistic American transcendentalism’, then, the fact that she later suggests that Dillard’s ‘dialectical vision’ in some way distances the text from its Transcendentalist antecedents and that their work functions for Dillard as ‘only a fond remembrance of a world that seemed to promise more clarity’, is altogether more contentious.35 Likewise, we find a similar argument put forward by Sandra Humble Johnson in her 1992 study, The Space Between. Johnson cites ‘the tree with the lights in it’ as an exemplar of Dillard’s use of ‘literary epiphany’.36 Standing apart from four other categories of ‘illuminated moment’ (the experience of the ‘sublime’, the mystical experience, the conversion and the vision), literary epiphany, Johnson posits, is most nearly concerned not with the epiphanic experience itself, but the means by which that experience is presented on the page. Most important, Johnson argues, is the extent to which the moment engages the reader: ‘the literary epiphany works upon the reader, forcing him into an experienced moment’, such that the readers are ‘allowed to make their own connections and are consequently drawn into the subjectivity of the

moment’ (8). It is this sense of immediacy that, Johnson suggests, aligns Dillard more readily with a Wordworthian Romanticism as opposed to an American Transcendentalism: ‘[i]n the hands of Emerson and Thoreau, the illuminated moment becomes […] a different literary experience, from that expressed by Wordsworth. The change might be summed up by stating that in general these Americans lost immediacy and gained philosophic exposition in the matter of illumination’ (39). Johnson contends that Emerson ‘begins to lose epiphanic power when he depersonalizes this experience by using the third person’ (38). She continues: ‘[b]y shifting out of a personal narrative, a single incident, by changing voices, and by offering meanings to his reader, Emerson is not acting substantially different from his fellow Transcendentalists’ (38). Moving to a consideration of several near-epiphanic moments in Thoreau’s Walden, Johnson contends, somewhat patronisingly, that ‘the gilded poetry of the language is a lovely and fitting extension of Walden’s themes but [this] does not lift it fully into the epiphanic tensions of a Wordsworth or Dillard illumination’ (39).

While Johnson’s reading of the affinity between Wordsworth’s and Dillard’s use of the epiphanic moment is compelling for the most part, I would argue that there is a distinct irony in the fact that her study sets so many rigid criteria in order for a passage ‘to qualify as a literary epiphany’, particularly given her insistence that the central function of the device is its ‘necessary ambiguity and psychological depth’.37 She states within the opening chapter that the epiphanic moment remains ‘entirely personal’ and echoes Henry Vaughan’s claim that epiphany is ‘the opposite of allegory, conceit, metaphor’.38 It strikes me, however, that these aspects of the Wordsworthian epiphany are at odds with the dialogical nature of epiphanic experience. This tension is borne out to an extent as Johnson’s study develops through chapters considering ‘The Shape of Epiphanic Time’ and ‘Surfaces and Directions in

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37 The Space Between, pp. 182, 10.
38 The Space Between, pp. 7, 9.
Epiphanic Time’, titles which are themselves clearly suggestive of an Emersonian preoccupation with surface and temporality. Towards the end of the study, Johnson posits that:

the objectless space between […] is where the attention should be placed. […] The heart of the epiphany can only be observed obliquely, as it glances off the bordering objects of the moment. But just as the physical objects or the staged properties of epiphany should not be seen as symbolic or metaphoric, so the objectless center should not be considered as symbol. The symbol is too static a device for the extreme organic quality an epiphanist must achieve.39

I would argue that the privileging of the first person perspective and the emphasis on the particular event as opposed to the general experience that Johnson identifies as integral to Wordsworthian literary epiphany undermines both this imperative for an ‘objectless center’, and her later assertion that ‘if the language is left open, if spaces are left between word meanings, the moment can occur’.40 Moreover, for all the attention placed on ‘the space between’, it is striking that, to a greater extent even than Jonathan Levin, Johnson never brings theories of liminality to bear on Dillard’s (or anyone else’s) use of literary epiphany. Yet in these attempts to articulate ‘the objectless center’ of the epiphanic experience, along with her reference to ‘[glancing] off the bordering objects of the moment’, and her acknowledgement that the epiphanic moment cannot be reduced to a static symbol, the study veers ever closer to the rhetoric of the unfolding potential of the liminal condition so central to Emerson’s philosophy.

I wish to argue here that while both Reimer and Johnson offer cogent readings of Pilgrim, their suggestion that these dialogical, liminal aspects of the text in some way distance Dillard from her Transcendentalist antecedents is decidedly less compelling, for reasons that may be borne out by a comparative reading of the moment Dillard witnesses ‘the

40 The Space Between, p. 181.
Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. [...] There I feel that nothing can befall me in life – no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, -- master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance.41

That opening section has already identified the liminal contexts that are foregrounded within the first lines of this passage. Moreover, far from losing a sense of immediacy, I would argue that the shift from ‘I have enjoyed’ to ‘I am glad’ and the persistent use of the present tense throughout imbues the passage with a continuity of experience, suggesting that the significance of the moment transcends the boundaries of its specific context, thus enabling the reader to become – to revisit Johnson’s terms – ‘drawn into the subjectivity of the moment’. As we enter the epiphanic moment proper, the first person continues to predominate, not only literally, but also through the conflation of the ‘I’ and the ‘eye’. Yet this self-affirmation is undercut by the assertion that ‘all mean egotism vanishes’, and by the centred subject becoming at the same time ‘transparent’ and ‘nothing’ in the moment of epiphany. Likewise, the notion of ‘the Universal Being’ and of being ‘part or particle of God’, alongside the suggestion that ‘to be [...] master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance’, collapses the (Hegelian) dialectic between the self and the other (or, to use Emerson’s terms, the ME and the NOT ME), and complicates the power structures at play within the passage. Yet the assertion that ‘the name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign

and accidental’ simultaneously identifies this as a retreat from the social, reiterated by the claim that such experiences are only found in these solitary ‘tranquil landscapes’, as opposed to in ‘the streets or villages’. While this moment may be set in stark relief, then, it ultimately serves to encapsulate many elements of Emerson’s broader liminal poetics, not least the knowing contradictions and paradoxes that characterise his philosophy. My central argument here is that although Johnson suggests early in her study that this Emersonian epiphanic moment fails to meet certain rigid criteria given its shifting qualities, and thus distances Emerson’s mode of literary epiphany from Dillard’s, there are a number of productive parallels that may be drawn between the two passages.

In her afterword to the text, added in 1999, Dillard offers her thoughts on Pilgrim, twenty-five years after its original publication: ‘Above all, and salvifically, I hope, it seems bold. That it is overbold, and bold in metaphor, seems a merit. […] Its willingness to say “I” and “me” embarrasses – but at least it used the first person as a point of view only, a hand-held camera directed outwards’ (281-83). Prompted by the publication of her second novel, The Maytrees, in 2007, Dillard added a second brief afterword, in which she explicitly acknowledges Emerson’s influence on Pilgrim: ‘Using the first person, I tried to be – in Emerson’s ever-ludicrous phrase – a transparent eyeball’ (283). In both celebrating her bold use of metaphor and distancing herself from the pervasive use of the first person throughout Pilgrim, Dillard’s comments here to some extent undermine Johnson’s eagerness to foreground these aspects of the narrative and to distance Dillard’s writing from its Transcendentalist influences. This may be gleaned when comparing Emerson’s ‘transparent eye-ball’ experience with Dillard’s experience of ‘the tree with the lights in it’. Through its woodland setting and apparent nonchalance – ‘one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it’ (35) – the passage is immediately reminiscent of that famous Emersonian moment. As we delve deeper into
Dillard’s description of the experience, the heightened rhetoric so characteristic of Transcendentalist writings ensues: ‘I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, *each cell buzzing with flame*’ (36). The last phrase here may be read as a conscious allusion to Emerson’s notion of being ‘part or particle of God’, in that Dillard chooses not to specify whether it is the cells of the tree or her own that are ‘buzzing with flame’, such that the whole scene is set alight.\(^{42}\) In this regard, I agree with Johnson, for there is a certain openness to the language here; by not explicitly defining this as a moment of divine intervention, as Emerson does, Dillard enables power to circulate much more freely through the passage. Here we find another striking echo between Dillard and Edith Turner. In *Heart of Lightness*, Turner differentiates between ‘Power I’ and ‘Power II’, the former pertaining to the City of Man and the latter to the City of God; the first associated with hierarchy, power, dominion and structure and the second connoting love, communitas and holding ‘its own meaning, in its own right’ beyond the hegemonic structures imposed upon it.\(^{43}\)

Yet despite its indeterminate aspects, I would argue that the passage does just that ‘shifting out of a personal narrative, a single incident’, and the same ‘offering [of] meanings to [its] reader’ that Johnson condemns in Emerson’s writing. Though unexpected in its particular moment, Dillard highlights that this witnessing of ‘the tree with the lights in it’ was, in fact, an experience she had been searching for ‘through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years’ (36). More than this, it was a phenomenon she was inspired to seek by the story she read in Marius von Senden’s *Space and Sight* of a previously-blind girl who gained sight for the first time, and was taken out into a garden where she described seeing ‘the tree with the lights in it’ (35). Further still,

\(^{42}\) Of course, ‘the light’ that resonates throughout this passage is in itself readily understood as a reference to Christ.

\(^{43}\) *Heart of Lightness*, p. 93.
although the passage focuses primarily on the first time Dillard experienced the phenomenon, she recognises that she has ‘since only very rarely seen the tree with the lights in it. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in’ (36). As in Emerson’s case, however, these aspects do not necessarily detract from the epiphanic tension of the moment. Instead Dillard positions herself within a wider dialogical framework in which she represents both writer and reader, in that the moment alludes to not only the solitary nature of traditional epiphanic experiences, but also simultaneously to their social dimension through the connection drawn between herself, Marius von Senden, the female subject of the story he tells, and, in turn, us as the reader. In addition to reinstating the social dimension of epiphany, there are a number of other ways in which Dillard reimagines Emerson’s earlier mode. As has already been alluded to, this is particularly apparent in the moment’s conspicuous subversion of power relations. Like Emerson, Dillard foregrounds the motif of ‘Seeing’ – this passage provides the final image of a chapter with this title, in fact – but rather than the all-seeing eyeball of Emerson’s rendering, Dillard posits that her experience was ‘less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance’ (36). Far from disempowering, however, the experience imbues Dillard with an enduring power that she is ‘still spending’ long after the epiphanic moment has passed (36). For Dillard, power is depicted as residing in – to use Emerson’s phrase – these moments of transition but, more than this, as a process of transaction; a process – to use Edith Turner’s terms – that may be characterised as Power II as opposed to Power I.

This dynamic is borne out further through the bell metaphor here, in which Dillard describes herself as having been ‘lifted and struck’. A semi-echo of Emerson’s notion of being ‘uplifted into infinite space’, the image presents Dillard as being acted upon by an unspecified force. By describing herself as a metaphorical bell, however, Dillard articulates
how this process is simultaneously turned outwards as a means of reaching out to others – for what use is the resonating ring of a bell without others to hear it? Far from antithetical to the epiphanic moment, then, I would argue that this bell metaphor functions as a means of signalling epiphanic experience or the ‘gaps’. There are a number of allusions to the chime of bells throughout Pilgrim, and it is notable that such instances recur alongside moments of epiphany. For instance, in the fourth chapter, ‘The Fixed’, Dillard recounts a childhood experience in which her class conducted an experiment with the cocoon of a Polyphemus moth: ‘The teacher fades, the classmates fade, I fade: I don’t remember anything but that thing’s struggle to be a moth or die trying’ (62). The story – itself, of course, an exemplar of the liminal condition – concludes with Dillard standing ‘alone, stock-still, but shivering’ as she watches the recently-released moth ‘[heaving] himself down the asphalt driveway by infinite degrees’ (61-2). But the scene is interrupted: ‘The bell rang twice; I had to go. […] I went; I ran inside. The Polyphemus moth is still crawling down the driveway, crawling down the driveway hunched, crawling down the driveway on six furred feet, forever’ (62). While the ringing school bell may be easily dismissed as a mundane detail of this formative experience, I would argue that in setting this moment into high relief, Dillard aligns the ringing of the bell here with the recurrence throughout the wider narrative of the bell motif as a marker of illuminated experience.

More than simply a signalling, however, the bell also functions more specifically as a means of articulating the liminal positioning of the artist. This connection is previously established when the bell metaphor is first introduced in Pilgrim’s opening chapter: ‘I walk out; I see something, some event that would otherwise have been utterly missed and lost; or something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I resound like a beaten bell’ (14). Once again, the image is presented alongside an awareness of both seeing and being seen. To reiterate this liminal dynamic, Dillard describes herself as ‘an explorer
[and] also a stalker, or the instrument of the hunt itself", drawing an analogy with the Native American hunting practice in which hunters ‘used to carve long grooves along the wooden shafts of their arrows’ (14). Dillard elaborates:

The function of lightning marks is this: if the arrow fails to kill the game, blood from a deep wound will channel along the lightning mark, streak down the arrow shaft, and spatter to the ground, laying a trail […] that the barefoot and trembling archer can follow into whatever deep or rare wilderness it leads. I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood. (14-15)

Unpacking this analogy, it seems that Dillard understands her role as an artist in much the same way as Emerson outlines in ‘The Poet’. The introduction to this chapter discussed Emerson’s ideal poet – a hypothetical figure who ‘stands among partial men for the complete man […] in virtue of being the largest power to receive and impart. […] The poet is the sayer, the namer, and […] stands on the centre.’44 As cited above, Joan Wry asserts that ‘here “the centre” represents not the status of authority but a liminal positioning that allows the poet to filter impressions from the natural world and then translate them for the “partial” individuals who do not yet share his higher form of seeing’.45 While my discussion questioned Wry’s reading of the hegemonic imperatives underpinning Emerson’s idealised poet, it corroborated the underlying premise presenting the artist as a liminal figure mediating between ‘the seeing’ and ‘the saying’. As we have seen, this notion rings true with the readings of both Emerson and Dillard offered above. It may be said, in fact, that it is even more apparent in Dillard’s work than Emerson’s, in that Dillard often consciously foregrounds her own liminal positioning and the reciprocal nature of her own epiphanic experience.

One of the central motifs used to articulate the inherent duality of her perspective is the image of her ‘[straddling] the sycamore log over the creek, […] I’m drawn to this spot. I come to it as an oracle’ (7). That Dillard returns again and again to this place, physically, and

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44 ‘The Poet’, p. 123.
to this image, textually, and that she often adopts the verb ‘straddle’ to describe this position, suggests that in these moments she is consciously presenting her own liminal position. It is notable that within the ‘Flood’ chapter, which, as we have seen, ostensibly serves to ‘wash away’ the via positiva approach of the text’s first half, Dillard draws conspicuous attention to her sycamore log: ‘My log is gone for sure, I think – but in fact, I discover later, it holds, rammed between growing trees’ (154-55). It may be said, then, that this image gestures towards the enduring duality of Dillard’s perspective, acknowledging how despite professedly foregrounding these two approaches as discrete and mutually exclusive, the text ultimately demonstrates their inherent mutability. Elsewhere, she questions the very ideology underpinning notions of power, positing an image of a God who ‘has not absconded but spread […] to a fabric of spirit, so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we only feel blindly at its hem’ (9; emphasis added). ‘But,’ she goes on, ‘have we come even that far? Have we rowed out to the thick darkness, or are we playing pinochle at the bottom of the boat?’ (11). It is through this constant shifting, this mode – to quote Marilynne Robinson – of ‘[creating] models of understanding and then [destroying] them’, that Dillard articulates her own dialogical perspective and indicates a fundamental resistance to forms of rhetorical control, and an awareness that the role of the artist is not unequivocally one of power.46 For although these two apparently disparate ‘routes to God’ inevitably emphasise a theological perspective, by calling the very concept of ‘God’ into question as she does here, Dillard implies that the most pertinent element of these two modes is the juxtaposition they present between omniscience (via positiva) and unknowability (via negativa). That Dillard asserts that she finds the latter route ‘more congenial’ once again reiterates her resistance to hegemonic constructs (279).

Early in *On Leaving*, Branka Arsić outlines what she understands as a key implication of Emerson’s thinking:

In order to reconnect to things, being, and emotions, […] men need to overcome the fear of discontinuities and heal the anxiety of change. […] by coming closer to life one would by no means avoid pain and danger; such a protected life doesn’t exist, and that is not what Emerson is proposing. Rather, he enjoins us to follow the interruptions and inspect the line of breakages, despite the fear that comes with it. One would be required to register motions and movements and welcome changes. […] To allow for change, to abandon the stationary, to overcome the fear of rupture, and to face interruption are all, in fact, modes of leaving where and what one is.47

As we have seen, Dillard’s *Pilgrim*’s ability to articulate and embrace the coexistence of beauty and horror, its insistence that ‘the gaps are the thing’ and its unwavering attention to almost imperceptible changes makes it an exemplar of this Emersonian mode. Where Arsić seems to frame this as some sort of crisis of masculinity here, may be read as an act of self-assertion, situating herself confidently and squarely within this historically male-oriented tradition.


In a 2012 essay entitled, ‘The Cost of Love We Are Not Willing to Pay’, Adnan remarks: ‘I can recall in my own existence two passions that did not concern human beings but that at turns took center stage.’48 She elaborates: ‘I developed from my early years a sensual response to the sea, a fascination, a need that I lived like a secret. It enchanted me, and it isolated me. It has lasted all my life.’49 She describes the sea as her ‘one great love’, to the

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49 *The Cost of Love We Are Not Willing to Pay*, p. 5.
extent that her ‘sensuality was absorbed by the beauty of the sea all around Beirut’. The second of these ‘two passions’ is her love of Mount Tamalpais. Located in the Bay Area of San Francisco where Adnan has lived for over thirty years, the mountain she describes as her ‘very idea of home’ and as ‘the very center of [her] being’. Elsewhere, Adnan has also acknowledged how the mountain ‘became a companion. […] I painted nothing else but this for years, until I couldn’t think of anything else. To observe its changes became my major preoccupation. I even wrote a book in order to come to terms with it – but the experience overflowed my writing. I was addicted.’ Brandon Shimoda has described Adnan’s work as ‘clarifying a great, if even more ephemeral existence, holding anchor the world among mountains and paintings, bodies of water and language […] indivisible passions’. Through a comparative reading of Adnan’s 1986 poetic essay, Journey to Mount Tamalpais and her 2012 work, Sea and Fog, this section examines the dialectical relationship Adnan constructs between these two spaces – the mountain on the one hand and the sea on the other. It recognises, in line with Shimoda’s suggestion here, how this relationship informs her creative practice, the mountain symbolising stability, her immediate physical context in America and her role as a painter, the sea representing flux, her recollections of Beirut and her role as a writer. In doing so, it presents this dialectical relationship and the nexus of interconnections that emanate from it as integral to Adnan’s evolving poetics of liminality. Extending the premise of the previous section, I begin by establishing how Journey may also be read as a pilgrimage narrative, before going on to read passages from the text alongside the two extracts from Emerson and Thoreau discussed earlier in this chapter. The analysis contends

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52 The Cost of Love We Are Not Willing to Pay, pp. 5-6.
that two similarly liminal moments in *Journey* reflect both the affirming and hostile images of nature reflected in the comparison above between Emerson’s transparent eyeball scene and Thoreau’s excursion to Mount Ktaadn. These readings provide a point of departure for the comparative study of *Journey* and *Sea and Fog*, which identifies a shift from the sense of self-affirming creative freedom articulated in the former text to the frustrations of stifled artistic expression foregrounded in the latter. As well as recognising how these texts may be read in light of Adnan’s Transcendentalist predecessors, my analysis also identifies a second parallel to Dillard’s *Pilgrim*, drawing an analogy between the dialogical relationship Dillard sets up between the *via positiva* and *via negativa*, and Adnan’s exploration of a similar tension between the known and the unknowable across the broader arc of her writings.

While *Pilgrim* makes an explicit claim via its title, Adnan’s *Journey* also incorporates many key elements of the pilgrimage narrative. The text details her first years in San Francisco in the late 1950s, and has been described by fellow American writer Wendell Berry – who, as the introduction to this thesis acknowledges, has himself been named anecdotally as a potential New Transcendentalist – as ‘a new outlook on the importance of Nature as an element of thinking; one of the major works of the “spirit of place” in contemporary literature’. As Berry’s comment here implies, *Journey* is very much the product of a specific time and place in American cultural history; a time when, as Stephen Motika acknowledges, the area surrounding Mount Tamalpais ‘emerged as an important site for artists and writers’. Rather than placing its focus on the broader theological questions posed in *Pilgrim*, however, *Journey* is framed as an artistic pilgrimage above all else, bound for the cultural Mecca of San Francisco’s Bay Area, a journey to the veritable shrine of Mount Tamalpais. Similarly to *Pilgrim* – and in line with both the Turners’ analogy and Emerson’s

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55 Stephen Motika, ‘Revisiting Etel Adnan’s *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*’, in *Homage to Etel Adnan*, pp. 57-60 (p. 57).
notion of ‘presenting as much transitional surface as possible’ – *Journey* may too be read as incorporating a series of interpenetrating ellipses, in which the physical, spiritual and artistic overlap, a space in which ‘geographic spots become spiritual concepts’ (10). This interrelation is indicated within the opening pages, where Adnan writes:

> Like a chorus, the warm breeze had come all the way from Athens and Baghdad, to the Bay, by the Pacific Route, its longest journey. It is the energy of these winds that I used, when I came to these shores, obsessed, followed by my home-made furies, errynies, and such potent creatures. And I fell in love with the immense blue eyes of the Pacific: I saw its red algae, its blood-colored cliffs, its pulsating breath. The ocean led me to the mountain. (9)

The Turners recognise arduousness as integral to pilgrimage, noting that ‘not only may it be long, it is also hazardous, beset […] by natural dangers’, but equally that ‘these fresh and unpredictable troubles represent, at the same time, a release from the ingrown ills of home’.56 Adnan’s journey is here presented in just such terms: not just long but ‘the longest’, not just a release *from* but actually borne along *by* her ‘home-made furies’. Moreover, this early passage gestures towards the dialogical relationship between the ocean and the mountain that is developed throughout the essay. Indeed, Adnan later foregrounds the fact that the name Tamalpais itself derives from the mountain’s original Indian name, ‘Mountain Tamal-Pa, “The One close to the Sea”’ (15), and the fact that she sees her journey between the two landscapes – her pilgrimage – as integral to the construction of this dialectical relationship is more explicitly acknowledged within her subsequent claim that: ‘[a] Voyage is like water. A pure experience. What kind of experience? A JOURNEY. I am water and I move. I need to circle the mountain, because I am water. The mountain has to stay and I have to go, and it all comes to the same thing’ (18).

Beyond such abstract examples, there are a number of more tangible ways in which we can align *Journey* with the pilgrimage narrative. The Turners describe the pilgrim as ‘an

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initiand, entering into a new, deeper level of existence than he has known in his accustomed milieu. [...] While the pilgrim seeks temporary release from the structures than normally bind him, the tribal initiand seeks a deeper commitment to the structural life of his local community.'

Problematic pronouns aside, Adnan’s experience of the O’Hanlon workshops corresponds with this description. ‘The early workshops’, she remarks, participated of the newness of the world. Yes, they were at the very beginning of the Sixties, yes they participated in the prophetic spirit of a decade […] This time a whole nation was again being involved in a Great Experiment, unabashedly, through street marches, music, songs, underground movies, and millions of silent events which tried to uproot a culture and plant a new one, a new forest. (37)

This notion of ‘being involved in a Great Experiment’, of trying ‘to uproot a culture and plant a new one, a new forest’ can be understood in much the same terms as the New England Transcendentalists’ project before them, particularly in regard to this last metaphor of planting a new forest, a new wilderness, a new potential site of national, cultural and artistic progress. Adnan presents Tamalpais as representative of an increasingly elusive wilderness in Journey’s opening pages, remarking that ‘[t]here is a smell of wilderness in a civilized country thanks to that majestic being which stands among us in all its beauty’ (10).

If Dillard’s pilgrimage was taken in the tradition of self-reliant solitude akin to Emerson and Thoreau (albeit, as we have seen, in reimagined terms), Adnan’s more readily mirrors the practice of ‘mutual self-cultivation’ promoted by Moody Emerson and Fuller as outlined at the outset of this chapter. ‘It was destiny’, Adnan asserts early on, ‘to join in a great experience: to live with the mountain and with a team, to encounter them regularly, to know them without ever reaching a point or an end’ (11). Just as Moody Emerson and Fuller

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57 Image and Pilgrimage, pp. 8-9.
advocated, this sense of ‘mutual self-cultivation’ directly informed the group’s creative practice. Adnan recalls one workshop in particular:

A painter also looks like a loner. His work seems to be the result of a solitary struggle. […] But one day at the Loft we broke tradition. Ann distributed huge pieces of paper, […] and within an hour or two there were five or six people working on the same surface, overlapping, interfering with each other’s work […] The paintings had, each, more quality, more strength, more ‘unity’ of composition and feeling, than many individual works. […] Through them, a moment, a group, an adventure, a culture, found its expression. They were a being made of us all. (48)

As gestured towards in the reading of Dillard above, the notion of communitas is integral to the Turners’ understanding of pilgrimage, and to their concept of liminality more generally. Described as ‘a spring of pure possibility’, communitas denotes a group bond characterised by ‘a relational quality [and] liminal phenomenon which combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity, and comradeship’.59 The Turners identify three overarching forms of communitas: spontaneous, normative and ideological. The latter is most pertinent here, referring to ‘the formulation of remembered attributes of the communitas experience in the form of a utopian blueprint for the reform of society’.60 The resonances of such a notion of communitas and the experience Adnan outlines above and throughout Journey are self-evident, as are the resonances between Adnan’s commitment to creative endeavour ‘without ever reaching a point or an end’ and that anti-teleological Transcendentalist mode considered throughout this thesis. More intriguing still, Adnan herself highlights the liminal significance of her pilgrimage experience as indicated by her assertion that ‘[w]e, members of the Perception Workshop, had climbed a steep trail thinking of […] a long travel across lava country, of sudden bursts of meteors. We had with us no rite of passage. We had gone through no initiation, as we went into childhood and into adolescence with no warning. This is why we come to the mountain. We have no other elevation’ (21).

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60 Image and Pilgrimage, p. 252.
For all its foregrounding of communitas, however – and in line with the Turners’ later acknowledgement of pilgrimage as a process which is both characterised by the ‘emergence of the integral person from multiple personae’ and serves as ‘a symbol of communitas’ – *Journey* also presents images of the solitary self in nature (34). The natural landscape is identified as a site of personal and artistic inspiration throughout *Journey*, culminating in moments of revelatory self-affirmation, as is most memorably demonstrated in the following passage: ‘Standing on Mount Tamalpais I am in the rhythms of the world. Everything seems right as it is. I am in harmony with the stars, for the better or the worst. I know. I know. I know.’ (13). Within the context of this discussion, this passage cannot fail to remind us of Emerson’s transparent eyeball scene; we cannot but hear the chiming of Adnan’s ‘everything seems right as it is’ with Emerson’s ‘I feel that nothing can befall me in life’, of her being ‘in harmony with the stars’ with his having ‘the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me’, and of her self-affirming ‘I know. I know. I know’ with his ‘I see all’. Couched as they are in an idealistic rhetoric, Adnan’s liminal experiences on the mountain, of which the above is an exemplar, often read as a somewhat derivative reworking of that characteristically Transcendentalist mode, by which the human subject becomes subsumed within the overarching rhythms of the natural landscape. Within the space of a few lines, however, this sense of a benevolent and welcoming nature is undercut: ‘Tamalpais remains alone, wise in its ingathering, peaceful in its knowledge, happy. Do not climb that mountain unless you know it needs you. Otherwise, you shall die like a diseased raven, and carry your skeleton in crowded streets, and never, never, recover your memory’ (14). So soon after an image strikingly reminiscent of Emerson’s pivotal scene, this warning strongly evokes Thoreau’s experience at the top of Mount Ktaadn, where he depicts a hostile landscape which ‘seems to say sternly […] Why seek me where I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother? Shouldst thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, here is no
While perhaps not so sustained as Pilgrim, then, Journey explores the coexistence of beauty and the horror in the natural world, a dialectical vision (to repurpose Reimer’s terms) which enables Adnan to assert that: ‘It was most appropriate that they found a man hanging by a tree near the top of Tamalpais. It was not horrible. It was just one of the many events that happen up there following the death of birds or the growth of plants’ (18).

While central to the liminal poetics Adnan develops throughout her body of work, the paradoxical ambivalence of the natural landscape functions primarily throughout Journey as an analogous backdrop to the text’s central focus: Adnan’s evolving artistic sensibility. Much of the text is devoted to meditating on this process: ‘We are most of the time painting but this is beside the point; our involvement is with Perception. Ann O’Hanlon, who started it all, says “To perceive is to be both objective and subjective. It is to be in the process of becoming one with whatever it is, while also becoming separated from it”’ (11). This assertion clearly resonates strongly with Emerson’s sense that ‘it is impossible to speak or to think without embracing both’ oneness and otherness, reflecting a shared belief that the challenge of reconciling this paradox is integral to ‘the experience of poetic creativeness’.61 What is more, its allusion to a continuing ‘process of becoming’ again gestures towards the anti-teleological perspectives that underpin Transcendentalist thought, as does her later description of a mode of painting (recognised in Cézanne) which ‘moves within [a] circle. With no satisfaction, no resting point’ (57). Moreover, the notion of simultaneously ‘becoming one […] while also becoming separated’ anticipates the intersubjective perspectives that will be considered within the second chapter of this thesis. The dual perspective afforded to Adnan as both a writer and a painter is a touchpoint throughout Journey. Adnan consistently reiterates what

61 Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Plato; Or, The Philosopher’, p. 178.
she sees as the intrinsic connection between perception and painting, describing them at one point as ‘an unbreakable dual concept. They became interchangeable’ (28). Within this same section, she suggests that ‘[p]ainters have a knowledge which goes beyond words. [They] have always experienced the oneness of things. They are aware that there is an interference and intervention between the world and ourselves’ (27). Cole Swensen expands on Adnan’s sentiment here in an essay on her work:

it is only with the work of a person who, like Etel, works both in painting and writing that one can notice in any detail just how differently painting and writing occupy the mind, how they allow two completely different sorts of imaginative expansion. And these two sorts are not at all exclusive; in fact, only with a person who works in both can we get the full effect of their potential complementarities. Etel’s work does this; each one renders the other more complex, all the while building toward a more intricate whole. A single mind and sensibility responding to the world in multiple forms and media creates a whole that cannot be achieved in any other way.62

In both instances, the suggestion that an awareness of our mediated existence is reserved to only those who both write and paint is, of course, highly contentious. However, in recognising how ‘each one renders the other more complex’, both Adnan and Swensen gesture towards the potentiality of the liminal state ‘betwixt and between’ these distinct yet inherently connected creative practices, a perspective further evidenced within Adnan’s later assertion that ‘[p]oetry, it is believed, is the revelation of the self. Painting, the revelation of the world. But it could also be the other way round’ (34). Despite such claims, it is intriguing that Adnan has commented elsewhere: ‘[m]y writing and my paintings do not have a direct connection in my mind. But I am sure they influence each other in the measure that everything we do is linked to whatever we are.’63 While this may seem contradictory, given her various meditations on the inherent connection between her roles as writer and painter, I would argue that rather than placing the emphasis on the end product itself and on how this

62 Cole Swensen, Untitled, in Homage to Etel Adnan, pp. 79-81 (p. 79).
dual perspective of both writer and painter may or may not manifest itself within her work, Adnan’s remark here suggests that she is primarily concerned with presenting this process and perspective as creatively productive in and of itself.

‘Whatever one’s feelings’, Adnan affirms, ‘the moment of painting is always a moment of happiness. [...] Hell will belong to the folklore of the past, and suffering will feel monstrous, out of place, if we say paradise now, and use our hands’ (28). In this light, much like that early review of Pilgrim, we may be inclined to describe Journey as at least as ‘atavistic and essentially passive, not to say evasive’ as Dillard’s earlier work. For despite being punctuated with these ambivalent and interconnecting juxtapositions between the mountain and the sea, nature’s beauty and its horror, the practice of painting and the practice of writing, Journey’s overriding tone remains one of self-revelation and artistic freedom. If we were in any doubt, the closing lines of the essay provide one final reiteration of this sentiment: ‘In this unending universe Tamalpais is a miraculous thing, the miracle of matter itself: something we can single out, the pyramid of our identity. We are, because it is stable and it is ever changing. Our identity is the series of the mountain’s becomings, our peace is its stubborn existence’ (63).

In Transcendentalism in America, Donald N. Koster outlines a number of the reservations held by critics of the movement. He cites twentieth-century historian, James Truslow Adams, who ‘questions the maturity of a Transcendental doctrine that refuses to recognize and to wrestle with the problem of evil’, and traces this same concern back to Herman Melville, who could not reconcile the Transcendentalists’ sense of ‘blind optimism and its failure to conceive of evil as a positive force operative in a mindless universe’.64 Melville’s opposition here found its way into his most famous work, Moby-Dick (1851), when a ‘sunken-eyed young Platonist’ takes his post on the mast-head and becomes

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64 Donald N. Koster, Transcendentalism in America (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1975), pp. 79, 82.
lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie […] by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature […] In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; […] forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over. […] Heed it well ye Pantheists!  

In many ways, Adnan’s 2012 collection, *Sea and Fog* reads as just such an oblique meditation on this ‘blending cadence of waves with thoughts’, presenting as it does a series of interrelated yet elusive aphorisms inspired by the elements to which Adnan’s title refers. It is notable, therefore (as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three), that Melville’s novel is a particularly frequent touchpoint in Adnan’s writing. Indeed, she explicitly asserts that ‘[a]s everyone who heard of Melville knows this oft repeated remark: “meditation and water are wedded forever.”’ As will be shown, however, rather than ‘vacant, unconscious reverie’, *Sea and Fog* takes these natural elements as the necessarily shifting base from which to interrogate the shadowy sides of human existence. As such, once again, we find those many transitional surfaces, those interpenetrating ellipses held in ambivalent tension, here constituting a series of separate yet interrelated meditations on war, ecological catastrophe, and the limits of language.

Drawing back to a comparison with *Journey*, then, what we find in *Sea and Fog* is the counterpoint to the dialectic introduced in that earlier text: the sea’s flux versus the mountain’s stability, the unfathomability of war versus the self-affirmation of peace, the frustrations of articulating subjective experience versus the ‘pure perception’ of creative communitas. These two latter themes are intertwined throughout *Sea and Fog*, as is indicated within the opening lines: ‘[t]he sea. Nothing else. Walls ruptured. Sea. Water tumbling. Oil. Transparency. The sea. Field of stirring liquid. Gathering of pouncing waves going to battle’ (3). The reading above has already outlined the nexus of ideas that are consistently evoked in

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relation to the sea, tending towards two overarching strands: those pertaining to language and the practice of writing on the one hand, and those evoking memories of Beirut and the Middle East on the other. In this light, each of these images reflect this two-fold significance. Framed by the context of war, the ruptured walls connote the physical destruction caused by years of civil and international unrest. The juxtaposition of oil/transparency gestures towards the widely assumed but never officially acknowledged motivation for the West’s intervention in the Middle East; the gathering waves ready for battle are indicative of Adnan’s perpetual sense of an impending threat in the region. At a more meta level, however, the same lines may be read as establishing the formal and stylistic mode of the text: the ruptured walls indicative of the text’s desire to break down (or break out) of existing semiotic structures; the incongruent movement from oil to transparency anticipating the paradoxical logic that, as we shall see, characterises the text.

If rather oblique in these first lines, this interrelation is taken up once again within the later assertion that ‘[w]ater’s iridescence is language. An exchange of blood endangers our arteries for this salt, this oil. A privilege’ (6). This ‘exchange of blood’ is still more explicit in its foregrounding of war, an allusion that is again presented in relation to oil, acknowledged here as ‘a privilege’ to those who desire it – not an entitlement. That this stanza is prefaced with the notion that ‘water’s iridescence is language’ is once again indicative of the paradoxical associations by which the text is borne along, as an image that highlights the beauty of language while equally acknowledging this beauty as that which precludes seeing beyond itself. Perhaps to an even greater extent than Dillard’s Pilgrim, then, the elusive nature of the text is such that positing any definitive response is to impose a structure that the text itself resists. What we can say, however, is that by overlapping seemingly paradoxical semantic fields, Adnan generates unexpected connections between apparently disparate themes, locating the text’s meaning in the space between these fields of association. In doing
so, while often abstract and obscure, Adnan does not flinch from the coexistence of beauty and horror.

It is here that we may reiterate the connection between the dialogical relationship set up between these two texts and the ‘bilateral symmetry’ of Pilgrim. On the one hand, Journey may be read as analogous to the via positiva perspective, in which the workings of the world are laid bare to the beholder in brilliant clarity. On the other, Sea and Fog explores the ‘darker side’ of this dialectic, through a perspective akin to the via negativa, whereby the world’s workings are concealed in essential unknowability. Moreover, like Dillard, I would argue that it is this latter perspective by which Adnan is increasingly compelled:

And we are here, anywhere, so long as space would be. Is given to us sea/ocean, sea permanent revelation; open revelation of itself, to itself. Mind approximates those lit lines in the front, that darkness above, meant not to understand but to penetrate, to silence itself by heightening its power, to reach vision in essential unknowing.

The sun hasn’t set yet and there is no light. O the obscure clarity out of which we are made. (35; emphasis added)

A far cry from the revelatory clarity of ‘I know. I know. I know’ on the mountain in Journey, this notion of an ‘obscure clarity’, of ‘reaching vision in essential unknowing’ recurs throughout Sea and Fog. This idea is set up within the opening pages:

On a clear day a different kind of clarity starts to be lacking. We face the river.

Oh these walls that surge, building impregnable fortresses, then collapse suddenly, in fierce light, and rise further down, in similar though not similar repetition.

And this erratic edge called restless tide changes its geometry, and with urgent, terrifying power, covers the flat rocky formations that were here and are no more, when waters and foam are so icy that the spine calls for mercy. (7)

Within these three short stanzas, the river becomes analogous to history, with ‘these walls that surge’ representing the received ideas of an historical moment which ultimately become ‘impregnable fortresses’ of accepted knowledge. The sudden collapse of these fortresses may therefore signify moments of paradigm shift (‘fierce light’), which, in turn, are themselves destined to become ‘impregnable fortresses’ (‘rise further down, in similar though not similar
repetition’). The ‘restless tide’ here seems to represent the cyclical nature of these processes, with the references to ‘terrifying power’ and ‘water and foam […] so icy that the spine calls for mercy’ perhaps articulating a sense of the intellectual and creative paralysis such structures inflict. In seeking ‘obscure clarity’, Adnan recognises the potentiality of those liminal experiences located ‘betwixt and between’ established structures, whether they be the limiting structures of language or the hegemonic structures by which history perpetuates itself. This reading is more clearly evidenced later in the text, where Adnan posits that ‘[p]oetry reaches the unsaid, and leaves it unsaid. It’s familiar, it’s indecently close, overpowering at times, as gray as cloudy skies over melancholy mountain ranges; It’s what it is, and for ever the question remains about its nature, and why we’re still looking for an answer’ (42).

The integral relation between Adnan’s lived experience of war and her creative practice and the tension between the Beirut of her past and the California of her present will be taken up in much greater detail later in this thesis. What this comparative reading of Journey and Sea and Fog has established, however, is how the overarching dialectical relationship that Adnan’s writings construct between the sea and the mountain provides the foundation for her wider poetics of liminality. For Adnan, then, like Emerson before her, the experience of poetic creativeness is indeed found in presenting as much transitional surface as possible, in the movements between the stability of the mountain (‘sea seen from shore’) and the flux of the ocean (‘shore seen from sea’). But more than this, as demonstrated by the evolution from Journey to Sea and Fog, Adnan’s liminal poetics develops into a means by which she negotiates the ambivalent politics of her own liminal condition.
‘THE BLUE OF DISTANCE’: REBECCA SOLNIT’S BLUE WORLD

In A Field Guide to Getting Lost, Rebecca Solnit muses on the differences between fiction and non-fiction. She asserts that whereas ‘fiction like painting lets you start with a blank canvas’, nonfiction presents the ‘challenge of finding form and pattern in the stuff already out there’.67 This challenge of finding connections between seemingly disparate subject materials is taken up across Solnit’s body of work and nowhere more so than in the two texts focused on within the final section of this chapter: A Field Guide to Getting Lost (2006) and The Faraway Nearby (2013). The analysis below will argue that one of the primary ways in which the narratives of these two texts are held together is through their liminal poetics. It will contend that, like the other texts discussed in this chapter, this liminal poetics manifests itself in both the form and the content of these two works, in such a way that we may read The Faraway Nearby as a companion text to the earlier Field Guide, and understand both as establishing a politics of liminality that resonates throughout Solnit’s wider body of work.

The first half of Field Guide’s opening chapter, entitled ‘Open Door’, sets up two ‘arts’ of getting lost. The first pertains to a mode that requires an acute knowledge of the landscape: ‘attending to weather, to the route you take, to the landmarks along the way, […] to the thousand things that make the wild a text that can be read by the literate’ (10). Solnit celebrates this ability, acknowledging it as ‘the language of the earth itself’, and lamenting the fact that many now ‘don’t stop to read it’ (10). It is notable that she sees this ability as particularly prevalent in the ‘nineteenth-century Americans [who] seldom seem to have gotten lost’, on account of the fact that they ‘knew how to live off the land, how to track, how to navigate by heavenly bodies, waterways, and word-of-mouth in those places before they were mapped’ (13). Of course, as we have seen, it is exactly this ability that we see manifest

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67 Rebecca Solnit, A Field Guide to Getting Lost (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006), pp. 143-44. This text will from here be referred to as simply Field Guide.
in *The Maine Woods*, a text in which Thoreau’s surveyor’s perspective is all-pervasive and is particularly apparent in his painstaking attention to ‘names and distances, [provided] for the benefit of future tourists’, his ‘entire faith in the compass’, and his claim that, when lost, ‘a stranger […] must set about a voyage of discovery first of all to find the river’. Solnit mentions Thoreau specifically, in fact, alongside Daniel Boone and Lewis and Clark, citing his assertion that ‘[n]ot till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations’. However, by qualifying his claim ‘in other words’, Thoreau reveals his underlying sentiment: that to be productively lost is to position oneself *outside* the world and its complications – or, indeed, its obligations. While this issue is not explicitly raised by Solnit, she identifies ‘another art in being at home in the unknown, so that being in its midst isn’t cause for panic or suffering’ (10). Despite recognising its indebtedness to a Thoreauvian aesthetic, then, it is this second dynamic that runs throughout *Field Guide*; a dynamic through which Solnit sets into dialogue not only those liminal wilderness experiences that may be found in retreating to the periphery, but also those that lie at the heart of contemporary existence.

That *Field Guide* constitutes a departure from an underlying rhetoric of control which seems to characterise conventional wilderness narratives is made apparent in the second half of the opening chapter. The section opens with a question from Meno: “How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?” (15) Solnit acknowledges this as a question that she pondered ‘for years and years’, one which remained unanswered until, at a time ‘when everything was going wrong, friends came bearing stories [that] seemed to provide, if not answers, at least milestones and signposts’ (15). Solnit relays these stories: the Virginia Woolf extract sent by a friend that reminded her of Woolf’s ‘urgent

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68 *The Maine Woods*, p. 36.  
69 *Walden*, p. 217.
need, to become no one and anyone’ and her ability to do so ‘in a stroll down the street’ (16); the story of the Wintu community for whom, as a result of conceiving space in relation to the cardinal directions as opposed to left and right, ‘the self only exists in reference to the rest of the world’ and for whom ‘it’s the world that’s stable, yourself that’s contingent, that’s nothing apart from its surroundings’ (17). She tells the story of a tattoo artist who was hospitalised as a result of his drug addiction, a stay that saw him lose his arm and with it his craft, but that cured him of his addiction, and describes his leaving hospital as ‘as abrupt and overwhelming an emergence into the world as birth’ (20). The final story presents ‘the blindfolded figure of Justice holding the scales’, which, in Solnit’s rendering, suggests that ‘to reside in comfort can be to fall by the wayside’; that one must ‘go to hell, but keep moving once you get there, come out the other side’ (21). As will be drawn out below, then, these stories present in microcosm the thematic threads of balance, rebirth and reciprocity running throughout the text. What is more, in relaying the stories that others have told her, Solnit draws the reader into the reciprocal dynamic that the stories themselves foreground.

That dialogical relationships lie at the heart of this text is more readily apparent within the closing passages of *Field Guide*’s opening chapter. Drawing back to Meno’s question, Solnit acknowledges her expectation that in its original the question would be posed as ‘part of a collection of aphorisms or fragments, like the fragments of Heraclitus’ (23). Yet in returning to the original, Solnit finds that Meno is, in fact, ‘the title of one of Plato’s dialogues’ (23). In this juxtaposition between the Heraclitus fragments – which themselves, as has been noted previously, explore the inherent ‘unity of opposites’ – and Plato’s ‘rigged boxing contests’, Solnit gestures once again towards her resistance to forms of rhetorical control (23). For, of course, Plato’s dialogues are not the ‘Open Door’ that the chapter’s title suggests. In Solnit’s memory, and much like Dillard’s notion of ‘resounding like a beaten bell’, Meno’s question resounded, ‘like a bell whose reverberations hang on the air’; a reverberating note that, Solnit
suggests, the contrived logic of the Platonic dialogues ‘seems determined to stop’ (24). Through this analogy, Solnit articulates her belief that ‘some questions are more significant than their answers [...] It is not, after all, really a question about whether you can know the unknown, arrive in it, but how to go about looking for it, how to travel’ (24). It is on such a journey, then, an exploration of that liminal space between destinations and their origins, questions and their answers, that Solnit’s Field Guide takes us; a journey in which mystery, to use a term favoured by both Dillard and Solnit, becomes its own ‘kind of compass’ (25).

If the leap here between dialogue, the dialogical and the text’s liminal perspective is a somewhat abstract theme running throughout the opening chapter of Field Guide, its second chapter addresses this theme more explicitly. It is here that Solnit introduces us to ‘The Blue of Distance’ that serves as the title for each alternate chapter. The phrase refers to the phenomenon of perspective that causes everything at the horizon to be tinged by a ‘deeper, dreamier, melancholy blue’ (29). As Solnit acknowledges, this is ‘the color of where you can never go’, for this blue is not found in the faraway place itself but is the colour of ‘there seen from here, […] in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains’ (28-9). Solnit sees this colour, this distance, as ‘inherent to the human condition’ and later describes it as one which ‘comes with time, with the discovery of melancholy, of loss, the texture of longing, of the complexity of the terrain we traverse, and the years of travel’ (29, 39). She continues: ‘If sorrow and beauty are all tied up together, then perhaps maturity brings with it not what [Gary] Nabhan calls abstraction, but an aesthetic sense that partially redeems the losses time brings and finds beauty in the faraway’ (40). The four ‘Blue of Distance’ chapters, then, become liminal textual spaces within the wider narrative, through which Solnit explores this ‘aesthetic sense’, developed not through a distancing from but a prolonged engagement with the trials and tribulations of the material world.
While never framed in such terms, liminal spaces, characters and experiences permeate the *Field Guide*. In the second chapter, for instance, Solnit discusses the term *shul*, a Tibetan word which refers to ‘the impression of something that used to be there’: a path, a footprint, or – for Solnit – the middle name she inherited from her great-grandmother and dropped in her teens, that now exists only as ‘*the blank space between* [her] names’ (62; emphasis added). Later in the text, Solnit describes conversations with an ex-partner as ‘words filling up the narrow space between us, as much a buffer as a link’ (130). And in the penultimate chapter, Solnit muses on the fact that ‘it is the unsurpassingly brief intervals of darkness between each luminous image that make [movies] possible’, and likewise that ‘a runner’s every step is a leap, so that for a moment he or she is entirely off the ground’ (175). While these images serve to extend the scope of the liminal aesthetic running through the text, perhaps the most intriguing of them are those that engage with the concept of liminality in its original sense, as the central phase of a *rite de passage*.

The clearest example of this is the motif of metamorphosis recurring throughout the text, presented primarily through the image of the caterpillar emerging from the chrysalis as a butterfly. This motif is first introduced in the closing passage of the second ‘Blue of Distance’ chapter. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the analogy precedes the original image:

> Some people inherit values and practices as a house they inhabit; some of us have to burn down that house, find our own ground, build from scratch, even as a psychological metamorphosis. As a cultural metamorphosis the transition is far more dramatic.

> The people thrown into other cultures go through something of the anguish of the butterfly, whose body must disintegrate and reform more than once in its life cycle. […] We have not much language to appreciate this phase of decay, […] nor of the violence of the metamorphosis, which is often spoken of as though it were as graceful as a flower blooming. (80-1)

It is this observation that motivates Solnit – during ‘a free hour in between a conversation and an obligation’ (81) – to visit a butterfly garden close to her home, where she watches four
butterflies emerge from their chrysalises. Having described the metamorphic process before her, however, the dynamic switches once more, and the analogy is reinstated:

The strange resonant word instar describes the stage between two successive molts […] It remains a caterpillar as it goes through these molts, but no longer one in the same skin. There are rituals marking such splits, graduations, indoctrinations, ceremonies of change, though most changes proceed without such clear and encouraging recognition. Instar implies something both celestial and ingrown, something heavenly and disastrous, and perhaps change is commonly like that, a buried star, oscillating between near and far. (83; emphases added).

The instar, described as such, is the liminal analogy par excellence. Indeed, Turner himself remarks that ‘an apt analogy for the rite de passage would be […] a pupa changing from bug to moth’, and so the image of the instar, along with the references to ‘rituals’ and ‘ceremonies of change’, suggests that this passage is perhaps a conscious allusion to van Gennep and Turner’s seminal works.70 While it is easy to identify this liminal motif running throughout the text, however, it is not, of course, simply the proliferation of these images that constitute the text’s progressive poetics of liminality. What is most striking about Solnit’s work is its ability to create these seamless transitions between natural analogies and their real-world implications primarily through the incorporation of this liminal aesthetic within, between and across her diverse body of work. More significant still, given the context of this thesis, is Solnit’s ability to reintegrate, as it were, a Transcendentalist idealism into the most unlikely spaces.

Field Guide’s fifth chapter, ‘Abandon’, is an exemplar of this dynamic. Positioned as the pivotal fifth chapter of this nine-chapter text, it recalls Solnit’s ‘coming of age in the heyday of punk’, a cultural moment in which she recognises that she was ‘living at the end of something’ (88). Having established the concept of the instar only a few pages earlier, ‘Abandon’ immediately encapsulates both the personal and cultural rites de passage that this

analogy gestures towards. Various rites of passage shape this section of the narrative: Solnit’s own ‘coming of age’; the seemingly failed rite of passage of Solnit’s close friend, Marine; the cultural rite of passage initiated by punk culture; the spatial rite of passage of the city left over to ruin; indeed, the textual rite of passage of the narrative itself as it traverses this pivotal point of its nine-part structure. It is telling, therefore, that this chapter represents a rhetorical collision, with Transcendentalist tropes of fecundity seamlessly reincorporated as a means of articulating these various liminal phases (88): ‘Before and after, landscapes rural and wild would be the places that resonated most powerfully for me, but for the decade that started with my discovery of punk it was cities’ (90). Yet Solnit undermines this distinction between the natural and the urban: ‘[w]hat’, she questions, ‘is a ruin, after all? It is a human construction abandoned to nature, and one of the allures of ruins in the city is that of wilderness. […] Ruins become the unconscious of a city, its memory, unknown, darkness, lost lands, and in this truly bring it to life’ (88-9). Drawing this analogy out further still, Solnit asserts that, ‘like ruins, the social can become a wilderness in which the soul too becomes wild, seeking beyond itself, beyond its imagination’ (90-1). Here, then, Solnit expands the Transcendentalist view of the natural world as an emblem of human consciousness, proposing that, in our contemporary context, urban ruins, both literally and analogously, become the dialogical counterpart of the natural world. This view is further evidenced later in the chapter, within Solnit’s assertion that ‘the time was about this kind of place, one that was ruinous, bleak, but somehow still imbued with a romantic outlaw sense of possibility, freedom, even the freedom to be idealistic, idealistic in the bitter vein of the Sex Pistols’ “No Future”, perhaps, but idealistic all the same’ (105). But rather than simply stated in abstraction, this notion of the social-as-wilderness and of death as the necessary counterpart of beauty is borne out through the story of Marine, a close friend of Solnit upon whose premature death the chapter centres.
Implicitly aligned with Persephone, a figure who, Solnit suggests, ‘knew that to be truly alive death had to be part of the picture just as winter must’, Marine represents ‘the glamour of a turbulent world [Solnit] was never quite part of’ (91). But, more than this, Marine is an artist; a musician in possession of a talent ‘utterly alien’ to Solnit (97). That Marine holds a wider symbolic significance may be read in the fact that Solnit often describes her through tripartite structures: ‘Three things define her for me, her beauty, her talent, and her mercurial disposition’, and later, more notably, ‘[p]erhaps rather than describe her as three characteristics, I could describe her as three places: the suburbs that made us and that we scorned and fled, the urban night she made into a home of sorts, and the pastoral world of a lyrical European culture and maybe of the hills past our childhood backyards’ (96, 98). This last spatial structure, I would argue, alludes to Marine’s layered function within the text. For while Marine herself never moves beyond ‘the urban night’ (she is found dead on her mother’s wedding night, aligning her once again with a rite of passage), her death is presented as the catalyst for Solnit’s own reintegration: ‘[e]verything had changed for me in the couple of years that ended with Marine’s death […] I lost a whole life and gained another one, more open and more free’ (107).

While ‘Abandon’ reincorporates a Transcendentalist sensibility into the urban landscapes so often eschewed by Solnit’s nineteenth-century antecedents, this is not to say that Field Guide excludes the more recognisable liminal experiences found in those earlier texts. Indeed, Solnit herself remarks: ‘Though I think of the 1980s as my most urban phase, Marine and I, who had both grown up in that suburban country of beautiful hills, kept one foot in the rural or the wild, for that direction was also an escape’ (107). Several such escapes are depicted within Field Guide, including her time spent in the Mojave Desert: ‘Once I loved a man who was a lot like the desert, and before that I loved the desert. It wasn’t particular things but the space between them, that abundance of absence, that is the desert’s invitation’.
Solnit wonders how one ‘could give all this up for what cities and people have to offer, for it ought to be less terrible to be lonely than to have stepped out of this sense of a symbolic order that the world of animals and celestial light offers’ (133). She concludes that the essential difference between these differing wilderness experiences relates to solitude: ‘solitude in the city is about the lack of other people […] but in remote places it isn’t an absence but the presence of something else, a kind of humming silence in which solitude seems as natural to your species as to any other, words strange rocks you may or may not have to turn over’ (131). Despite this assertion of the essentially solitary nature of these experiences, however, by highlighting the reciprocity between her time in the desert and the relationship that punctuated her time there (and the fact that she chooses this desert experience rather than her time spent ‘in other deserts’ (131)), Solnit reiterates the social-as-wilderness analogy set up in the earlier ‘Abandon’. Moreover, the chapter is once again framed as a rite of passage. Solnit remarks in its closing passages on how she ‘came out of this house transformed, stronger and surer than I had been, and carrying with me more knowledge of myself, of men, of love, of deserts and of wildernesses’ (136). As she so admires in Thoreau, then, Solnit, too, is a writer ‘for whom life and wilderness and meaning are the same art, who slips subtly from one to the other in the course of a sentence’ (14).

Through storytelling, Field Guide reimagines the function of wilderness in the cultural imagination. Most pertinent to this chapter, however, is the way in which this is achieved through the combination of two liminal discourses: a Transcendentalist notion of the creative potentiality of liminal spaces, articulated through and engaging with the rhetoric of personal, cultural and textual rites of passage.

If Field Guide may be read as essentially outward-facing, presenting the evolving cultural imagination through personal storytelling, The Faraway Nearby may be understood as taking the opposite trajectory, as ultimately inward-facing, navigating personal trauma via
wider public events. For lying at the heart of this text is the very private story of a woman coming to terms with the death of her mother; a woman facing her own mortality. As such, *The Faraway Nearby* is, at root, ‘the history of an emergency’.\(^{71}\) Several elements of the text point towards a specific connection between these two texts. Like *Field Guide*, whose alternating chapters mirror the dialogical relationships constructed throughout the text, the chapter structure of *The Faraway Nearby* reflects the central *rite de passage* traversed within the narrative. In a more explicit way than Dillard’s *Pilgrim*, Solnit presents the ‘bilateral symmetry’ of the experience: the chapters unfold – ‘Apricots’, ‘Mirrors’, ‘Ice’, ‘Flight’, ‘Breath’, ‘Wound’ – towards a central fulcrum, or ‘Knot’, in which Solnit faces her own cancer diagnosis, before the second half – initiated by ‘Unwound’ – travels back to its beginnings, ending, as it began, with ‘Apricots’. As the pivotal shift from ‘Wound’ to ‘Unwound’ highlights, however, this movement is not a regression but, as in Turner’s model, a *reintegration*. While Solnit suggests that the text takes its title from the phrase used by Georgia O’Keeffe when signing off letters to her loved ones back in New York when moving to New Mexico – ‘from the faraway nearby’ (108) – I would argue that, although this may be the origin of the specific phrase, the title relates more specifically to an analogy that runs throughout *Field Guide*, occurring perhaps most notably in the following two instances: ‘in this world we actually live in, distance ceases to be distance and to be blue once we arrive in it. The far becomes near, and they are not the same place’ (35); and ‘perhaps change is commonly like that, a buried star, oscillating between near and far’ (83). This dialogical relationship between the near and the faraway, then, aligned as it is with ‘The Blue of Distance’ and the *instar*, reiterates the liminal motif that runs through Solnit’s writing, and draws a specific connection between these two texts.

As in *Field Guide*, the importance of storytelling is a central theme running throughout *The Faraway Nearby*. The opening chapter begins:

What’s your story? It’s all in the telling. Stories are compasses and architecture; we navigate by them [...] and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of the world that spreads in all directions. [...] To love someone is to put yourself in their place, we say, which is put yourself in their story, or figure out how tell yourself their story.

Which means that a place is a story, and stories are geography, and empathy is first of all an act of imagination, a storyteller’s art, and then a way of travelling from here to there. (3)

This opening paragraph picks up where *Field Guide* left off, tracing the dialogical relationship between landscape and love (conceived in its broadest sense) through the art of storytelling; a relationship that is further reiterated in the ticker-tape text that runs along the bottom of each page:

Moths drink the tears of sleeping birds. This is the title of a short scientific report from 2006, [...] but the title is a sentence, and the sentence reads like a ballad of one line or a history compressed down to the barest essentials. There are two protagonists in it, a sleeper and drinker, a giver and a taker, and what are tears to the former is food to the latter. The story tells us everything we ever wanted a story to tell. There is difference. There is contact. (3-9)

The interaction between these passages – the main body of the text and the single line of text running along the bottom of the page – set, quite literally, into dialogue on the page, articulates not only the philosophical perspective of this text but the philosophical perspective that resonates throughout Solnit’s body of work; a perspective which, I would argue, may be understood as a reimagining of the following much-quoted passage of *The Maine Woods*:

I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, [...] but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. [...] Think of our life in nature, - daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it – rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?²²

Here, alone in the wilderness, detached from his own corporality and contemplating others

with fear and trembling, Thoreau is, indeed, ‘lost in the vastness of the world’ (3). For, as Solnit suggests, it is only through the act of storytelling, through the dialogical relationship we set up between both the places and the people around us, that this vastness becomes navigable. In many ways, this is an inversion of – and, I would argue, a challenge to – a more conventional Transcendentalist liminal aesthetic that locates, to use Emerson’s phrase once more, ‘power […] in the moment of transition’, and that suggests that the productive liminal experience lies beyond the social.\(^\text{73}\) My argument here is borne out more explicitly towards the end of The Faraway Nearby. Commenting on the pervasive concern of postmodern culture that ‘every experience was mediated [and] some pristine direct experience had fled’, Solnit claims that such an anxiety is ultimately bogus in its assumption that ‘it were not part of the world worth looking at […] as though you could be outside, and outside was a desirable place’ (191). ‘The real question,’ Solnit concludes, ‘was the caliber of what was mediating experience, and how much you’re cognizant of it’ (191). Significantly, the metaphor Solnit employs to explore her point here, is conversation:

> With practice, you can pause the conversation, in your head and around you, but exiting is not an option; it is you; and if you’re lucky, you’re it, participating in making this tangible and immaterial world around us and within you. […] You digest an idea or an ethic as though it was bread, and like bread it becomes part of you. Out of all this comes your contribution to the making of the world, your sentences in the ongoing interchange. The tragedy of the imprisoned, the unemployed, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized is to be silenced in this great ongoing conversation, this symphony that is another way to describe the world. (192)

I would argue that this passage may also be fruitfully read alongside Emerson’s ‘transparent eye-ball’ passage. What is more, the rhetoric of communion here – ‘like bread it becomes part of you’ – reincorporates the Transcendentalist trope of becoming ‘part and particle of God’ through these liminal experiences, but in such a way that foregrounds reciprocal communication (etymologically linked, of course, with communion) as opposed to patriarchal

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\(^{73}\) ‘Self-Reliance’, p. 84.
dominion. Moreover, Solnit’s conspicuous foregrounding of the hegemonic structures underpinning this ‘tangible and immaterial world’; her acknowledgement that ‘some of us have far more latitude than others’; and assertion that ‘the tragedy of […] the marginalized is to be silenced in this great ongoing conversation’, undermine Emerson’s individualist notion that ‘nothing can befall me in life’ (192). This shift, in which the central metaphor switches from one of passive witness to active participant, is perhaps the most tangible realisation of the dynamic between the seeing and the saying so central to Emerson’s philosophy.

‘Empathy,’ Solnit posits, ‘means that you travel out of yourself a little or expand’ (194). For, in empathising with others, ‘you haven’t only witnessed something but also translated it into your own experience; you have felt with and for that other’ (194). In its closing passages, The Faraway Nearby ends where Field Guide begins:

Listen: you are not yourself, you are crowds of others. The usual I we are given has all the tidy containment of the kind of character the realist novel specialises in and none of the porousness of our every waking moment. [...] Essayists too face the temptation of a neat ending, that point where you bring the boat to shore and tie it to the dock and give up the wide sea. [...] What if we only wanted openings, the immortality of the unfinished, the uncut thread, the incomplete, the open door, and the open sea? The quest is the holy grail, the ocean itself is the mysterious elixir, and if you’re lucky you realize it before you dock at the cup in the chapel. (248-9).

Here, then, we come full circle to the pilgrimage analogy set up in the earlier readings of this chapter and the anti-teleological perspective shared by all of the writers considered here that, to quote Emerson, ‘everything good is on the highway’. It is significant, though, that in drawing specific attention to her belief that ‘you are not yourself, you are crowds of others’, Solnit asks us in the same moment to take a decisive step away from the self-reliant individualism which tends to come hand-in-hand with such ideas of perpetual becoming. As will be further evidenced throughout the chapters that follow, the dialectical relationship between selfhood and community, or, to use another Emersonian construct, between the ME

and the NOT ME is a central preoccupation of Solnit’s writings. As we have seen, this perspective is reflected within her evolving poetics of liminality, through which Solnit invites us to explore that liminal space between the here and there, between the question and its answer.


Extending the themes of conversation raised in the reading of Solnit above, this final section explores the dialogical tactics that Robinson employs within her ‘coqual’ novels, Gilead (2004) and Home (2008). While the readings above have focused primarily on the parallels that may be drawn to Emersonian and Thoreauvian liminal experiences in the natural landscape, this discussion takes as a point of departure Robinson’s own acknowledgement that through her writing she is ‘consciously trying to participate in the conversation’ advanced by her nineteenth-century forebears which she ‘felt had been dropped’ by intervening generations. 75 Extending this theme of intergenerational dialogue – and specifically Robinson’s reference to Emerson, Thoreau, Melville and Emily Dickinson as ‘the old aunts and uncles’ to whom she ‘will always answer’ – the discussion recognises in turn Emerson’s own indebtedness to his forebears, and particularly his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, whose belief in ‘dialogic self-cultivation’ influenced a generation of Transcendentalist thinkers.76 In doing so, the discussion reveals a number of striking parallels between Waldo’s aunt and Robinson, thus adding another intriguing layer to the multiple shifting genealogies that this reading examines within and across the two Gilead novels.

76 “Let me do nothing smale”, p. 36.
In addition to this overarching dialogical analogy, the analysis also draws upon Robinson’s claim that what most interests her about these nineteenth-century New England writers is the way in which they ‘create models of understanding and then destroy them, so that the larger apprehension you get is the inadequacy of any particular apprehension’. Extending her thinking further in a 1994 interview with Thomas Schaub, Robinson recognises an Emersonian method which is based on the assumption of the inadequacy of the method. That’s what’s so brilliant about it. You can create an absolutely dazzling metaphor that seems to be resolving things and pulling things together and reconciling things and making sense of things, and then you can collapse the metaphor and what you’re left with is an understanding that’s larger than you had before, but finally it is a legitimate understanding because you know it’s wrong or you know it’s imperfectly partial. […] There’s always the drift toward self-invited order in language that makes resolutions that are too neat or too small or beside the point. This is what happens most of the time with most attempts to deal with anything in language.

Robinson posits that, for her, ‘the pleasure [of this method] is that what it is, whatever we are, whatever is passing between us, there is something passing between us, there’s some kind of conversation’. Much like Dillard, Adnan and Solnit, Robinson here recognises (to use Adnan’s terms) our capacity to ‘reach vision in essential unknowing’. Yet Robinson believes that even this process ultimately amounts to only ‘snagging a bit of reality’, in that we converse not so much with each other but with a totality that neither of us – nor any of us, for that matter – can ever fully access. Below, I explore how this notion of ‘conversing with totality’ – as Schaub succinctly phrases it – is borne out within Robinson’s Gilead novels. I argue that this idea is integral to Robinson’s liminal poetics, and that the many overlapping

77 ‘Interviews with Marilynne Robinson’, p. 3.
79 ‘An Interview with Marilynne Robinson’, p. 239.
80 ‘An Interview with Marilynne Robinson’, p. 240.
conversations that she constructs within and across the two novels may be read as a means by which she creates ‘as much transitional surface as possible’ within her writings.

The analysis begins by recognising the series of intergenerational dialogues that Robinson constructs between the four generations of Gilead, contending that this layering of voices – both within and beyond the novels – functions much like Moody Emerson’s practice of commonplaceing. For just as Noelle Baker describes Moody Emerson’s Almanacks as a space in which she ‘chases her own evolving truth’ by engaging with ‘both real and imaginary interlocutors’, so too do the Gilead novels set up a ‘stimulating dialogic zone’ in which Robinson ‘engages with the […] theological, political, and philosophical debates’ of her time.81 Recognising the parallel that may be drawn between this practice and the idea of ‘conversing with totality’, I argue that this mode is particularly significant in terms of the relationship between the two novels, in that by presenting the same narrative events from alternative perspectives Robinson affords the narrative its own ‘evolving truth’, located somewhere between the two texts, and thus only partially accessible to the reader. In doing so, the analysis both draws back to the productive ambivalence between the known and the unknown already examined within this chapter in relation to Dillard, Adnan and Solnit, and anticipates the intersubjective models discussed within Chapter Two.

As the introduction to this chapter has already acknowledged, Mary Moody Emerson was a strong believer in ‘dialogic self-cultivation’. Moody Emerson transferred this belief into the commonplace books that she produced throughout her lifetime, which were described by her nephew, Edward Bliss Emerson, as having ‘the effect of a letter; for it is as much like conversation, in the true sense of the term’.82 With this in mind, let us consider the opening section of Gilead which begins with a conversation between two unidentified interlocutors:

81 “Let me do nothing smale”, p. 38.
82 Edward Bliss Emerson, quoted in “Let me do nothing smale”, p. 35.
I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I’m old, and you said, I don’t think you’re old. […] It seems ridiculous to suppose the dead miss anything. If you’re a grown man when you read this – it is my intention for this letter that you will read it then – I’ll have been gone a long time.  

Like the other texts considered within this chapter, then, these opening lines foreground the liminal contexts that underpin the novel as a whole. It soon becomes clear that what we are reading here is a letter from a dying father to his son. Within the context of the novel, however, this letter reads as not only a communication from father to son, but also man to man, its voice simultaneously anticipating its own imminent death and projecting itself many years into the future. These genealogical lines are further skewed due to the relative ages of Ames and his son. For while, objectively speaking, Ames is only one generation removed from Robert, the great gulf between their ages is such that he seems to function as simultaneously father and grandfather to the young boy.

In *Toward a Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism*, Jana L. Argersinger and Phyllis Cole recognise not only the vertical genealogies by which knowledge is passed down through generations, but – taking up Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic metaphor – the lateral routes via which knowledge circulated throughout New England communities in the mid-nineteenth century. ‘Relationality’, Cole contends, ‘might become a term more apropos than influence or lineage.’  

As is apparent within the opening lines cited above, the coexistence of these vertical and lateral genealogies is integral to Robinson’s Gilead novels. Ames’s letter to his son (which constitutes the entirety of *Gilead*) traces at least four generations of that small Midwest town, and in particular two families whose men have served as the town’s clergymen since it was first settled. As Jason W. Stevens acknowledges, Gilead is

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characterised as ‘a barren town from which many of the young seem to have moved on’; as Ames recalls his brother stating very late in the narrative: ‘looking back on Gilead from any distance made it seem a relic, an archaism’ (268).\textsuperscript{85} Yet, as Stevens goes on to contend, there are many ways in which Gilead may be read as ‘an embarrassment to the complacencies of the present and a challenge, for those who remember the town’s heroic past, to recover their forebears’ prophetic fire’.\textsuperscript{86} This last image is an allusion to the hope Ames expresses in the final pages of the novel that ‘it is all an ember now, and the good Lord will surely someday breathe it into flame again’ (281). Given Robinson’s own acknowledgement of her intention to ‘consciously participate in a conversation’ that had been ventured by her nineteenth-century antecedents and then dropped by an intervening generation, this characterisation of the town as a space of shifting genealogies and forgotten hopes warrants closer scrutiny.

Considered within this context, the many striking parallels that may be drawn between Ames and Waldo Emerson are worth exploring. Like Emerson, Ames is born into a family at the centre of his community and follows in the ecclesiastical footsteps of his forefathers, a tradition towards which he often exhibits ambivalence. Like Emerson, Ames works through these ambivalences via informal dialogue with respected friends – his nightly porch conversations with Boughton reminiscent of those late night meetings of Concord’s Transcendental Club. Both record their thinking in tome upon tome of acutely observed prose, driven by their desire to leave something for a future generation. Indeed, even more specific parallels emerge when we consider their personal histories: both men marry young and are heavily impacted by the loss of their first wife and child, and both are asked to become godfather to a friend’s son as a direct result of this loss (Emerson to William James and Ames to Jack Boughton). As such (and here the chiming of Ames/Emerson,\textsuperscript{85}\textsuperscript{86}  

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{This Life, This World}, p. 13.
Robbie/Robinson is rather inviting), we might read the text as not only Robert’s familial inheritance but also Robinson’s cultural inheritance. Yet to complicate these intersecting genealogies further still, another layer is added when we consider Robinson’s position as author of the text, in that we may say she functions as simultaneously addressee and speaker, such that the text sets the cycle in motion once more, and the reader is drawn into its ongoing conversation.

That the interplay between these vertical and lateral genealogies is of particular importance to Robinson is indicated very early in the narrative. Ames remarks:

Your mother told you I was writing your begats, and you seemed very pleased with the idea. Well, then. What should I record for you? I, John Ames, was born in the Year of Our Lord 1880 in the state of Kansas, the son of John Ames and Martha Turner Ames, grandson of John Ames and Margaret Todd Ames. At this writing I have lived seventy-six years, seventy-four of them here in Gilead, Iowa, excepting study at the college and at seminary.

And what else should I tell you? (10)

With this objective account of his life and ancestry established, the very next line enters into the story of when Ames’s father took him to the grave of his grandfather. Here, within the opening pages of this most geographically anchored of texts, Robinson relates as clear an example of pilgrimage as any considered elsewhere in this chapter. Ames remembers his father as being ‘set on finding that grave despite any hardship’, and recalls moments in which he ‘truly believed they might just wander off and die’ (12). Indeed, Ames recalls his father’s claim that they ‘were like Abraham and Isaac on the way to Mount Moriah’ (12). The makeshift cemetery that they find at the end of this arduous journey is presented as the most liminal of spaces, a ‘half row’ of grave markers ‘swamped with brown grass’ at the edge of an overgrown road – ‘the incompleteness of it seemed sad to me’, remarks Ames (13). As the sun sets the following evening, having spent hours ‘putting things to rights’, Ames and his father stand alongside his grandfather’s grave and bow their heads in prayer:

Every prayer seemed long to me at that age, I was truly bone tired. I tried to keep my eyes closed, but after a while I had to look around a little. At first I thought I saw the
sun setting in the east; I knew where east was, because the sun was just over the horizon when we got there that morning. Then I realized that what I saw was a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it, as if there were palpable currents of light passing back and forth, or as if there were great taut skeins of light suspended between them. [...] They seemed to float on the horizon for quite a long time, I suppose because they were both so bright you couldn’t get a clear look at them. And that grave, and my father and I, were exactly between them.

(17)

No more comment is made at this point in the narrative as to the enduring significance of this experience, but later Ames recalls ‘what sweet strength’ he felt in this moment, and how he has ‘rarely felt joy like that, and assurance’ (56). He continues: ‘[i]t was like one of those dreams where you’re filled with some extravagant feeling you might never have in life [...] and you learn from it what an amazing instrument you are, so to speak, what a power you have to experience beyond anything you might ever actually need’ (55-6). I would argue that this episode has a threefold significance within the context of this discussion. Firstly, we find here another exemplar of the liminal experience in nature, the effects of which parallel particularly closely with Dillard’s experience of seeing ‘the tree with the lights in it’ discussed earlier in this chapter: the recognition of the self as ‘an amazing instrument’, the ambiguous sense of power that such recognition affords the self, and the fact that this experience is not framed in explicitly theological terms, for example. Yet this is not the usual image of solitary self-affirmation. Quite the opposite, in fact, as Robinson draws specific attention to the shared nature of this vision, a ‘miracle’ (as Ames describes it) which throws its light simultaneously across three generations (55). Extending this reading further, and with her earlier comments in mind, we may draw an analogy here to Robinson’s own intergenerational conversation with her nineteenth-century antecedents. For not only does this conspicuous shift from a sun setting in the east to a moon rising from that direction reflect Robinson’s desire to shine renewed light on the ideals expounded by the nineteenth-century New Englanders, but the image of ‘palpable currents of light passing back and forth’ between
these two phenomena recalls that sense of an ineffable ‘something passing between us’ that she identifies as being so integral to that nineteenth-century mode. Moreover, the fact that Robinson draws attention – in a manner which recalls Solnit’s ‘blue of distance’ – to the ‘most wonderful light between them’ and that both are ‘so bright that you couldn’t get a clear look at them’ may be read as analogous to that mode of ‘conversing with totality’, whereby impartial knowledge created in a dialogical space between is ultimately more illuminating than engaging solely with either of the poles from which that knowledge is borne.

If this is one way in which we may apply the notion of ‘conversing with totality’ to *Gilead*, another more tangible example is Ames’s ongoing meditation on his religious faith. For Robinson, as is borne out throughout the novel, religious faith is positioned as an exemplar of that method by which we converse with an ultimately unknowable totality or truth. This belief pervades the narrative, and is perhaps most readily apparent in the conversations between Ames and Jack Boughton. Midway through the narrative, for example, Jack interrupts one of Ames and Boughton’s nightly conversations and attempts to draw Ames out on the subject of predestination. Ames responds:

> there are certain attributes our faith assigns to God: omniscience, omnipotence, justice, and grace. We human beings have such a slight acquaintance with power and knowledge, so little conception of justice, and so slight a capacity for grace, that the workings of these great attributes together is a mystery we cannot hope to penetrate. (171)

In presenting God in this way, then, as ‘a mystery we cannot hope to penetrate’, Robinson (via Ames) comes very close to Dillard’s conception of a God who has ‘a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly at its hem’. 87 As in the case of Dillard, however, this is not to suggest that Ames does not question the religious doctrine that underpins his faith. Late in the narrative, he recalls a conversation 87 *Pilgrim*, p. 9.
with his brother, Edward, who encourages Ames to recognise that they have ‘lived within the limits of notions that were very old and even very local. I want you to understand that you do not have to be loyal to them’ (268). Yet Ames rejects his brother’s sentiment: ‘I knew perfectly well at that time, as I had for years and years, that the Lord absolutely transcends any understanding I have of Him, which makes loyalty to Him a different thing from loyalty to whatever customs and doctrines I happen to associate with Him. I know that, and I knew it then’ (268-69). This distinction between religious faith and religious doctrine is an integral one. For while Ames’s theological ambivalence punctuates the narrative (he often offers qualifications such as ‘[t]heologically, that is a completely unacceptable notion’ (229) and explicitly states that ‘doctrine is not belief, it is only one way of talking about belief’ (273)), his faith is never in doubt. Here we may draw another parallel between Ames and the sentiment expressed by Waldo Emerson in a journal entry of June 1832: ‘I have sometimes thought that, in order to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated. In an altered age, we worship in the dead forms of our forefathers.’

For all its theological meditation, however, Gilead’s most pressing prayer is the narrative itself, the letter from Ames to the adult son he will never know the clearest example of his ability to embrace an unknowable truth that extends beyond his own existence. From Ames’s perspective, the ongoing tension between himself and Jack Boughton, and his quandaries regarding Jack’s moral character are interpreted within the context of his own imminent death. Told from Ames’s perspective, the narrative sets the reader up in the same way; we see Jack’s increasing closeness with Lila and Robert from the context of Ames reality. As such, we too are wrong-footed in the final chapter of the novel, which opens with Ames’s abrupt assertion: ‘Jack Boughton has a wife and child. […] the wife is a colored

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woman. That did surprise me’ (247). In this one passage Robinson exemplifies that nineteenth-century method of ‘[creating] models of understanding and then [destroying] them, so that the larger apprehension you get is the inadequacy of any particular apprehension’. For while this moment cannot be said to provide some unequivocal truth to Jack’s narrative arc or explain away his moral ambiguity, it does impose an alternative reality on the narrative – one which has been present throughout but which we have not had access to up until this point.

Robinson’s decision to revisit these same narrative events four years later in *Home* from the perspective of Glory and Jack reflects her claim that ‘[w]hen I write in general I try not to create oppositions. What I’ve tried to do whenever there are conflicts is to make both sides as equal as possible.’ 89 Moreover, given the sibling relationship between the two protagonists of this narrative – it is written in the third person, focalised through Glory but much of the dialogue occurs between Glory and Jack – Robinson reopens this conversation from the perspective of lateral relationality. Significantly, both characters – and also Lila, who remains very much a peripheral character throughout *Gilead* and *Home* – represent that middle generation which Robinson identifies as having caused a rupture in America’s cultural conversation. All are portrayed as more worldly, as supposed sinners who are able to bring their lived experience of the world beyond Gilead to bear on the Christian principles that their fathers and their fathers and their fathers before them adhere to so unwaveringly. As in *Gilead*, Robinson foregrounds the dialogical relationship between vertical and horizontal genealogies within the opening pages of the narrative. Musing on her own intellectual and familial heritage, Glory asserts: ‘[s]o much had never been explained to her. They were that kind of family. Things necessary to know were passed along, brother to brother, sister to

89 ‘Interviews with Marilynne Robinson’, p. 4.
sister, and this was sufficient for most purposes. [...] but the chain of transmission was broken when Grace left to live with Hope in Minneapolis.' She continues soon after:

Her father taught his children, never doubting, that there was a single path from antiquity to eternity. Learn the psalms and ponder the ways of the early church. Know what must be known. Ancient fathers taught their ancient children, who taught their ancient children these very things. (22)

If this mode of vertical genealogy forms the backbone of *Gilead* (both the novel and the town itself), here it is more openly challenged. Glory describes this mode of transmission as being ‘like a voice heard from another room, singing for the pleasure of the song, and then you know it too, and through you it moves by accident and necessity down generations’ (22). Yet ‘Why pleasure in it?’, Glory asks, ‘[a]nd why the blessing of the moment when another voice is heard, dreaming to itself?’ (22). Thinking of her old life as a teacher, she considers her own role in this cycle: ‘No need to be a minister. To be a teacher was an excellent thing. […] The young might have been restless around any primal fire where an elder was saying, Know this. Certainly they would have been restless’ (22).

With the novel set in 1956, Glory speaks from a generation which was indeed a time of the restless young who sought to challenge the precepts of their elders. And while *Gilead* inevitably retains the insularity of the town itself on account of being written from Ames’s perspective, this second novel brings this wider world context to bear on its theological and moral meditations. Indeed, akin to the Underground Railroad that circulated beneath Gilead a century before, it is the wider cultural conversation of the civil rights movement that lingers in the margins of this narrative. For readers who haven’t read *Gilead*, the early allusions towards this underlying context could be easily missed: Glory finds Jack reading a well-worn copy of W. E. B. Du Bois which he describes as ‘something a friend gave me’ (49), for example, and she later finds him unable to draw himself away from the televisions in the

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window of the hardware store that are showing the footage from Montgomery (99). That afternoon, Glory and Jack decide to have a television delivered to the house for their father, and the first thing they watch is a news bulletin, showing ‘white police with riot sticks […] pushing and dragging black demonstrators’ (101). A debate ensues between Jack and his father, the latter having remarked, ‘[t]here’s no reason to let that sort of trouble upset you. In six months nobody will remember one thing about it’ (101). When Jack exclaims ‘Jesus Christ!’ at the sight of ‘police […] pushing the black crowd back with dogs’, Boughton’s flippant attitude towards the news bulletin is juxtaposed with his anger at having heard his son blaspheme: ‘[t]hat kind of language has never been acceptable in this house’ (102). Stopping himself short of highlighting his father’s skewed priorities, Jack apologises, to which Boughton responds: ‘[n]o need to be sorry, Jack. Young people want the world to change and old people want it to stay the same. And who is to judge between me and thee?’ (102). I would argue that it is into just this space that Robinson pitches the reader. As the narrative continues, Jack’s own personal connection to this history – for those who aren’t already fully aware having read Gilead – becomes increasingly clear, as does his father’s ignorance. Yet while a number of strong hints are woven throughout the narrative – Jack often makes comments such as ‘I have known a good many Negroes who are more respectable than I am’ (162), and ‘I have lived in places where there are Negro people. They are very fine Christians, many of them’ (227) – it is striking that Robinson again chooses to wait until the closing passages of the narrative to ultimately reveal that Jack is married to a black woman with whom he has had a child; it is not until Della arrives in Gilead with her son in the final chapter that Glory learns this information, just like Ames in the previous novel. While this may be read again as an example of her tendency to ‘create models of understanding and then destroy them’, I would argue that this strategy is less successful here; it strikes me as problematic that across the two novels this clearly integral discourse is voiced
only through its impact on an all-white cast of characters. The novel does, however, retain a
glimmer of hope and some sense of parity in its final pages. For just as *Gilead* closes looking
ahead to the life of Robert Boughton Ames, son of John Ames, in an acknowledgement that
‘hope deferred is still hope’ (281), *Home* concludes by looking ahead to the life of Robert
Boughton Miles, son of John Ames Boughton (Jack). Where *Gilead* closes extending its
prayer out to the future, *Home* imagines a moment in which Della and Jack’s son Robert has
returned to an unchanged Gilead and ‘answered his father’s prayers’ (339).

While the other texts considered throughout this chapter have sought liminal
experiences in the natural landscape, then, Robinson locates hers in ‘warn, modest,
countrified Gilead’, a last bastion of dormant hopes and forgotten values that endures on the
margins of American society (338). Through the dialogical relationships she constructs
within and between these novels – and here we may also include *Lila* which will be
considered later in this thesis – Robinson creates a space (both textually and geographically)
that is able to accommodate the complex ambivalences of her characters, a space which
presents these religious, moral and cultural ambiguities alongside one another without
reaching for any definitive answers. Much like the various threads running through the texts,
the relationship between the novels is not one that develops vertically. The three novels
inform one another dialogically, such that no one text encapsulates all that can be known
about the narrative events. Instead, the ‘truth’ lies somewhere between the three – a ‘truth’
that in itself shifts depending on the order in which the novels are read – and it is only in the
dialogue between the three texts that we are able to partially access that totality. While very
different to the liminal poetics identified in the other texts considered within this chapter,
then, Robinson’s *Gilead* novels develop that dialogical mode which is itself indicative of the
Transcendentalist proclivity towards ‘the betwixt and between’. In doing so, Robinson not
only engages in her own dialogue with those ‘aunts and uncles’ that so inspire her writings,
but also opens a route to recognising the intergenerational dialogues in which New England Transcendentalism was itself engaged, and in particular the significant role Mary Moody Emerson played in shaping the intellectual perspective and practices of her nephew and the wider New England Transcendentalist community.

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Drawing together the above, the readings have identified a range of thematic, stylistic and formal strategies that may be read as constituting a shared liminal poetics across Transcendentalist writings. These include setting textual elements into dialogue with one another quite literally on the page (most notably in Solnit’s writing through alternating chapter structures and the use of extratextual marginalia) so as to effect a layering of meanings across the text; the capacity to account for the coexistence of beauty and horror (most often found in nature) and to recognise the simultaneity of existential jeopardy and potentiality in the liminal space (exemplified in Dillard’s Pilgrim); and an aversive mode which undercuts definitive responses by effecting what I refer to here as productive ambivalence (most succinctly borne out in Adnan’s concept of ‘obscure clarity’). The last section highlighted dialogue and conversation as integral to Transcendentalist intellectual practices and demonstrated how Robinson creates a series of intergenerational dialogues across her novels which exemplify the concept – to use Thomas Schaub’s phrase once more – of ‘conversing with totality’. Looking ahead, the second chapter of this thesis builds upon the themes of dialogue and vertical and lateral routes of influence identified in the reading of Robinson. It considers how the work of my four writers may be positioned at the intersection of New England Transcendentalism and feminist psychoanalysis, such that their liminal
poetics becomes a means by which they negotiate the relationship between self and other in their writings.
CHAPTER TWO

‘WHAT IF THE OBJECT STARTED TO SPEAK?’: SITUATING NEW TRANSCENDENTALISM IN THE INTERSUBJECTIVE SPACE BETWEEN

So far, then, we have identified several key implications of the Transcendentalist mode of liminality outlined at the outset of this project. These include: an ability to hold seemingly disparate concepts, modes and viewpoints in productive tension; a recognition of the coexistence of potentiality (beauty) and existential jeopardy (horror) in the liminal space, particularly as experienced in nature; and a shared belief in the importance of conversation and dialogue as a mode of mutual self-culture, which the previous chapter traced back to the intellectual practices of Mary Moody Emerson in particular. Building upon these themes, this second chapter recognises how the Transcendentalist mode of liminality becomes in turn a point of departure for exploring the lived experience of relationships with the other. Drawing on readings by George Kateb, Johannes Voelz and Branka Arsić, my analysis examines intriguing parallels between Emerson’s key writings on friendship and love and the psychoanalytic frameworks of Luce Irigaray and Jessica Benjamin. While nineteenth-century Transcendentalism and twentieth-century feminist psychoanalysis may not at first seem the most likely interpretative pairing, my analysis proceeds with a twofold critical intention.

The first section identifies Benjamin’s notion of ‘redemptive critique’, exploring how both she and Irigaray excavate the foundations of psychoanalytic theory, uncovering its original principles in an attempt to reclaim and reinvigorate their progressive potential whilst simultaneously challenging their underpinning hegemonic assumptions.¹ The similarity between this mode of redemptive critique and my own proposal of a New Transcendentalism which reactivates and repurposes progressive elements of Emersonian Transcendentalism to

articulate the lived intersectional experience of contemporary U.S. culture is self-evident. Moving beyond this methodological similarity, therefore, I outline several relevant aspects of Emerson’s thinking on themes of love and friendship. By setting these aspects into dialogue with Irigaray and Benjamin’s respective writings on intersubjectivity, thirdness and the sensible transcendental, I demonstrate how feminist psychoanalysis provides a theoretical lens through which to explore the gendered implications of Emersonian understandings of the relationship between self and other. The chapter bears out this proposition through close readings of texts by Solnit, Robinson and Dillard, positioning them at the intersection of this dialogue between Emersonian and psychoanalytic approaches to the interpersonal dynamic.

In line with this thesis’s central proposal of a New Transcendentalism which emphasises an integral movement – itself dialogical – between a poetics and a politics of liminality, my analysis thus explores the potential political (and particularly gendered) implications and applications of the specifically Transcendentalist mode of liminality that informs this project. Of particular interest is the primacy of the mother figure. Extending the theme of intergenerational dialogue established in the previous chapter, the discussion offers readings of Rebecca Solnit’s *The Faraway Nearby* (2013) and Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* (1980) which foreground the reclamation of the mother figure as a complex subjectivity in her own right and which recognise the mother-child (and specifically mother-daughter) relationship as foundational to subsequent interactions between self and other. The final section turns to an examination of romantic and marital love, in a reading of Annie Dillard’s 2007 novel, *The Maytrees*. Here, I consider how both Emerson and Irigaray’s interpretations of love may read within the context of Plato’s *Symposium* and particularly Diotima’s speech, demonstrating how the Transcendentalist liminal poetics outlined in the previous chapter becomes a means of negotiating sexual difference throughout the novel.
By examining these various psychoanalytic and Transcendentalist writings alongside one another, the discussion positions the respective works of Irigaray and Benjamin as a theoretical framework through which we can further explore the complex relationship between my four writers and their nineteenth-century antecedents, a framework which allows us to negotiate the often ambivalent dynamics at play in such relationships without appropriating an agonistic oedipal model of intellectual inheritance. This is a line of enquiry that is all the more significant given the relationship identified within the introduction to this thesis between Harold’s Bloom’s notion of New Transcendentalism and his ‘anxiety of influence’ model, which, as we saw, serves to perpetuate the very patriarchal logic that Irigaray, Benjamin, and my four contemporary writers seek to displace. Moreover, and in keeping with the various dialogical strategies explored throughout this thesis, the discussion identifies not only how feminist interventions in psychoanalysis provide a framework through which to understand the relationship between Solnit, Dillard, Robinson and the New England Transcendentalists, but equally how the New England Transcendentalists prefigure many of the formal and stylistic ‘innovations’ proposed by Irigaray and Benjamin.

‘AN INNAVIGABLE SEA WASHES SILENTLY BETWEEN US’: EMERSON’S SELF-RELIANT INTERSUBJECTIVE

In Emerson and Self-Reliance (1995), George Kateb poses a question: ‘[i]f we say that self-reliance is the true principle of Emerson, we then ask, Does the self-reliant individual need others?’² Here, we take self-reliance to mean that aversive process identified at the outset of this thesis and examined throughout whereby one seeks a permanent state of potentiality through a perpetual turning away and turning toward the self. Kateb contends that this process takes two overarching forms: mental self-reliance and active self-reliance, and argues

that the former – which he, like Emerson, privileges above the latter – is attained (or at least potentially attained) through the mutual self-culture found in friendship. Though he never uses the term explicitly, Kateb’s reading gestures towards the intersubjective dynamic that is so often evoked in Emerson’s writings, foregrounding Emerson’s sense that ‘friends assist the self-reliant individual to progress toward a particular and especially personal acquisition of truth: the sense that some other being in the world is as real as oneself.’ The foundations of this thinking can be read in the following passage from Emerson’s 1837 lecture, ‘Society’:

> What constitutes the charm of society, of conversation, of friendship, of love? This delight of receiving again from another our own thoughts and feelings, of thus seeing them out of us, and judging of them as of something foreign to us. [...] Your own thought and act you shall behold with new eyes, when a stranger commends it.  

The previous chapter recognised the origins of just such a dialogical mode in the intellectual practices of Mary Moody Emerson, and here Kateb traces its development in Waldo Emerson’s thinking. That this may be understood as a specifically intersubjective dynamic is borne out by the following passage from ‘Friendship’:

> Friendship requires that rare mean betwixt likeness and unlikeness, that piques each with the presence of power and of consent in the other party. [...] Let him not cease an instant to be himself. The only joy I have in his being mine, is that the not mine is mine. [...] There must be very two, before there can be very one. Let it be an alliance of two large, formidable natures, mutually beheld, mutually feared, before yet they recognize the deep identity which beneath these disparities unites them.

Kateb summarises this dynamic thus: ‘The not mine must not become merely mine if it is to be mine in a worthwhile way. It must remain its own simultaneously. I, too, must not be merely mine, and I must also remain my own.’ Johannes Voelz examines the intersubjective nature of this Emersonian dynamic explicitly. For Voelz, this dynamic is at root a process of

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3 *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, p. 106.


6 *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, p. 107.
mutual recognition which he defines as ‘a term that attempts to account for the social genesis of identity’.\textsuperscript{7} In line with the revised interpretation of self-reliance which informs this thesis, Voelz asserts that, ‘Emerson’s notion of self-reliance was concerned with recognition much more centrally than has hitherto been noted.’\textsuperscript{8} For Emerson, Voelz contends, ‘friendship must be of use, for us, for our achieving self-reliance’, and he theorises it thus as ‘a relationship from which we want to extract identity. Friendship is a relationship from which we seek recognition’.\textsuperscript{9} Voelz describes the specifically Emersonian understanding of recognition in which ‘the process of growth itself is part of the individual’s identity. In other words, he conceptualizes what we think of as identity as a tension between a moment of fixity and transformation, or, self-possession and growth.’\textsuperscript{10} Drawing back, this may be read as an extension of the aversive process of turning towards and away from the self which underpins the Transcendentalist mode of liminality examined within this thesis, in which one situates oneself in a liminal state or phase of potentiality between definitive categories. Applied within the context of intersubjectivity, this process also explores the other side of the self-reliant dialectic: that as one turns away from and toward the self, one turns towards and away from the other. Thus, identity is not understood here, as it is in van Gennep’s model, as a fixed principle occupying either side of a binary, but as the unsettled liminal process itself. What is more, akin to the vertical and lateral genealogies discussed in the previous chapter, when applied to the meeting of selves, this dynamic may be understood as both diachronic (between the old self and the new self) and synchronic (between two persons).

In 1990, Jessica Benjamin published ‘An Outline of Intersubjectivity: The Development of Recognition’ in which she extends the developmental model outlined in \textit{The

\textsuperscript{7} Johannes Voelz, \textit{Transcendental Resistance: The New Americanists and Emerson’s Challenge} (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), p. 95.
\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Transcendental Resistance}, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Transcendental Resistance}, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Transcendental Resistance}, p. 122.
Bonds of Love. The article emphasises the role of ‘mutual recognition [whereby] the subject gradually comes to recognize the other person’s subjectivity, developing the capacity for attunement and tolerance of difference’. Benjamin argues that ‘the human mind is interactive rather than monadic, that the psychoanalytic process should be understood as occurring between subjects rather than within the individual’ (34). As such, intersubjectivity is defined as ‘the field of intersection between two subjectivities, the interplay between two different subject worlds’ which recognises ‘that zone of experience or theory in which the other is not merely the object of the ego’s need/drive or cognition/perception, but has a separate and equivalent center of self’ (34-5). Intersubjective theory maintains that ‘the other must be recognized as an other subject in order for the self to fully experience his or her subjectivity in the other’s presence’ (35). Most crucially, Benjamin’s intersubjective model ‘[stresses] the simultaneity of connection and separation. Instead of opposite endpoints of a longitudinal trajectory, connection and separation form a tension, which requires the equal magnetism of both sides’ (38).

Writing over a century and a half apart, Emerson’s and Benjamin’s thinking on the intersubjective dynamic is strikingly similar. Indeed, while both Irigaray and Benjamin present their models of intersubjectivity as frameworks through which they challenge ‘the logic of the subject and object that predominates in Western philosophy and science’, it is clear from the above passages that Emerson had gone some way towards articulating this more reciprocal interpersonal dynamic. As the next section discusses, however, where Emerson’s intersubjective ultimately serves to obfuscate the intersectional identities that an individual may bring to bear on interpersonal interactions, Benjamin, Irigaray and the writers who I position here as New Transcendentalists (Adnan, Solnit, Robinson and Dillard) present

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the intersubjective as means by which to articulate and negotiate sexual and cultural difference.

LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD: IRIGARAY’S AND BENJAMIN’S REDEMPTIVE CRITIQUES

In 1974, Luce Irigaray published her first monograph, *Speculum*, a complex and wide-ranging text that is split into three overarching sections. The first of these sections offers a critique of Freud’s conception of femininity and female sexuality. Irigaray takes issue with the fact that the female position is consistently conceived as the not-male (read: not-present, not-active, not-subject) side of a self-perpetuating dualism, in such a way that assumes and reinforces the notion that men are the true arbiters of meaning. This is borne out most clearly, she argues, within Freud’s oedipal model and the concept of ‘penis envy’, in which the girl is ultimately understood as ‘a disadvantaged little man […] whose needs are less catered to by nature and who will yet have a lesser share of culture. […] Unattracted to the social interests shared by men. A little man who would have no other desire than to be, or remain, a man.’

Throughout this opening section of *Speculum*, we see Irigaray ‘quote Freud’s own words against him’ in such a way that undermines their logic, not least by assuming the role of the active (activist) subject and by galvanising other women to do the same.

For, as Irigaray’s conclusion contends, what is most concerning is the fact that Freud’s assumptions – and those of Western philosophy more generally – have been so readily accepted, such that women have been ‘reduced to a function and a functioning whose historic causes must be reconsidered: property systems, philosophical, mythological, or religious systems – the

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13 *Speculum*, p. 43.
theory and practice of psychoanalysis itself – all continually, even today, prescribe and define that destiny laid down for woman’s sexuality’.14

This revisionary intent continues into the second section, in which the eponymous ‘Speculum’ constitutes a subversion of the Lacanian mirror stage. As Margaret Whitford acknowledges, Irigaray’s central premise here is that ‘Lacan’s mirror can only see women’s bodies as lacking, as a “hole”; [...] the mirror, of course, is the mirror of theory and discourse, and although Lacan is not named, Speculum is as much a challenge to Lacan as it is to Freud and to Western philosophy.’15 Reclaiming the mirror analogy employed by Lacan, the notion of specularization functions throughout this section of Irigaray’s text as a means of reflecting and challenging the phallogocentric nature of discourse (and by extension, culture) that she problematises throughout her oeuvre. Moreover, the castration anxiety of the text’s first section on Freud’s oedipal theory is mirrored here as Irigaray considers the systematised obstruction of women from the subject position in language. She asserts that ‘the silent allegiance of the one [the woman], guarantees the autosufficiency, the auto-nomy of the other as long as no questioning of this mutism as a symptom – of historical repression – is required’.16 ‘But what’, Irigaray ventures, ‘if the object started to speak?’17 In An Ethics of Sexual Difference (1984; trans. 1993), Irigaray argues that the issue of sexual difference amounts to a fundamental ‘problematic of space and time’, one which requires ‘the creation of a new poetics’.18 This primary dualism, Irigaray posits, maps directly onto sexual difference. On the one hand, she suggests, ‘the feminine is experienced as space’ – as the bodily or the origin of the bodily; as the object into which the masculine enters and against

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14 Speculum, p. 129.
16 Speculum, p. 135.
17 Speculum, p. 135.
which he must define himself, both physically and psychologically. On the other hand, Irigaray states that ‘the masculine is experienced as time’ – as genealogy, language and the subject, and thus as ‘the axis of the world’s ordering’.\textsuperscript{19} Irigaray contends that subverting this (culturally constructed) dichotomy requires ‘a change in our perception and conception of [...] the relations of matter and form and of the interval between’, a change which equates, she claims, to ‘a change in the economy of desire’.\textsuperscript{20}

In 1988, Jessica Benjamin drew on similar source materials for her first book, \textit{The Bonds of Love}. Like \textit{Speculum}, the text opens with a critique of Freud, whose ‘vision of conflict between instinct and civilization’, Benjamin posits, ‘has actually created an impasse for social thought’.\textsuperscript{21} She challenges Freud’s assumption that the relation between the self and the other is inherently hostile, and takes issue with Freud’s flawed logic of a self-perpetuating cycle of fear, revolt and guilt – a cycle which she identifies as being articulated ‘always in terms of the primary metaphor of the father-son struggle’ (6). Similarly to Irigaray, however, Benjamin’s central concern is not only the overt cultural privileging of this patriarchal metaphor, but the underlying hegemonic structures that have allowed this systematic oppression to be so readily accepted, or worse \textit{perpetuated} by ‘even the most radical’ of psychoanalytic thinkers, such that ‘woman’s subordination to man is taken for granted, invisible’ (6-7).

While not generally considered an obvious source of progressive gender politics, Emerson’s writings demonstrate at least an awareness of the limitations imposed by this primary dualism between masculine and feminine. To draw this out, we begin with the following passage from ‘Society’:

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{An Ethics of Sexual Difference}, p. 7.  
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{An Ethics of Sexual Difference}, pp. 7-8.  
The first Society of Nature is that of marriage, not only prepared in the distinction of Sex, but in the different tastes and genius of Man and Woman. This society has its own end which is an integrity of human nature by the union of its two great parts, Intellect and Affection. For, of Man the predominant power is Intellect; of Woman, the predominant power is Affection. One mainly seeks Truth, whose effect is Power. The other delights in Goodness, whose effect is Love.22

In this early lecture, then, we find just that reductive essentialism that Irigaray and Benjamin seek to challenge. Following this strand of his thinking, however, we find increasing nuance in Emerson’s responses to sexual difference. Acknowledging at the outset of his analysis that Emerson ultimately ‘remains bound by convention to the extent he finds that the love between men and women must be a relationship of unequals’, George Kateb nevertheless identifies how Emerson at least confronts the masculine/feminine dualism.23 In doing so, Kateb suggests, Emerson considers how we might ‘allow its rigidity to be loosened’, such that ‘the self-reliant eye, unimprisoned by gendered thinking, will see equal potentiality in men and women to become self-reliant individuals.’24 Kateb focuses on two ‘loosening strategies’ in particular.25 The first, whilst still based on the essentialist assumption that certain behaviours can be broadly attributed based on biological sex, concedes that women can display masculinity, and that men can likewise display femininity (a fact which, of course, undermines the validity of framing them in essentialist terms in the first place). The second loosening strategy is the claim that the most realised mode of self-reliance is predicated upon the idea that ‘both masculine and feminine traits […] are equally indispensable.’26 Kateb here cites from Emerson’s journal where he states: ‘[t]he finest people marry the two sexes in their own person. Hermaphrodite is then the symbol of the finished soul […] in every act should appear the married pair: the two elements should mix in

22 ‘Society’, p. 102.
23 Emerson and Self-Reliance, p. 119.
24 Emerson and Self-Reliance, p. 120.
25 Emerson and Self-Reliance, p. 120.
26 Emerson and Self-Reliance, p. 120.
The evolution of this thought would be evidenced years later in *Representative Men* (1850): ‘In fact, in the spiritual world we change sexes every moment. You love the worth in me; then I am your husband […] Meantime, I adore the greater worth in another, and so become his wife. He aspires to a higher worth in another spirit, and is wife or receiver of that influence.’ Kateb aligns this passage with the following from ‘Compensation’:

> The radical tragedy of nature seems to be the distinction of More and Less. How can Less not feel the pain; how not feel indignation or malevolence towards More? . . . It seems a great injustice. But see the facts nearly and these mountainous inequalities vanish. Love reduces them as the sun melts the icebergs in the sea. . . If I feel overshadowed and outdone by great neighbours, I can yet love; I can still receive; and he that loveth maketh his own the grandeur he loves.

The implication here, it seems, is that the oppressed should somehow accept inequality by finding ‘pleasure in thinking that although one does not share privileges, they exist in the world and enhance it. In abandoning resentment, one loses sight of one’s lack. To use gendered language, the feminine thus becomes masculine, or overcomes it.’ Whether Emerson’s own sentiment or Kateb’s exaggerated interpretation, this is an astoundingly problematic claim, which ultimately collapses any sense in which Emerson ‘tries to efface the stark distinction between men and women and hence between conventional masculinity and conventional femininity.’ My reading of *The Maytrees* which forms the closing section of this chapter will draw back to Emerson’s thinking on marital love in a way which redeems it somewhat from the essentialist understandings highlighted in this section. For the purposes of this section, however, I wish to highlight the disjunction between Emerson’s more abstract sense of the intersubjective dynamic as outlined in the opening section of this chapter, and its problematic application to sexual difference as outlined here. This disjunction marks another

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27 Ralph Waldo Emerson, cited in *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, p. 123.
30 *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, p. 124.
31 *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, p. 126.
way in which, in line with my argument throughout this thesis, the cultural discourses and imperatives of his moment limit the more progressive intent of Emerson’s thinking. As such, as will be drawn out below, it opens another avenue for exploring the ‘newness’ of the New Transcendentalism I propose here.

For both Benjamin and Irigaray, the recovery of female subjectivity must begin with a cultural revaluuing of the mother, who for too long has been denied subjectivity, not only within psychoanalytic theory (as demonstrated by the oedipal model) but across the entire history of Western philosophy (as demonstrated in part by Emerson’s thinking above which unequivocally defines the feminine as ‘the receiver’). Irigaray argues that due to this failure to grant the mother ‘her place and her thing in an intersubjective dynamic, man remains within a master-slave dialectic’. Benjamin also shares Irigaray’s belief that female subordination is most clearly reflected in the lack of subjectivity afforded to the mother within psychoanalytic theory and, indeed, the wider culture. For Freud and others who followed him, Benjamin argues, the mother is ‘an object of the baby’s needs’; is ‘provider, interlocutor, caregiver, […] a secure presence to walk away from […] – but she is rarely regarded as another subject with a purpose apart from her existence for her child’ (23-4). This conception of the mother-child relationship, so often positioned as the basis for all future interpersonal relationships, is, as Irigaray also recognises, indicative of many ideological imperatives underpinning Western culture, and particularly, as Benjamin posits, ‘our [implicitly American] culture’s high valuation on individualism’ (25). As a result, Benjamin contends, ‘this assumption does more than just give sanctuary to the old ideas, conscious and unconscious, about men and women; it also provides […] the ultimate rationalization for accepting all authority’ (7). She goes on to acknowledge the influence of Simone de Beauvoir, proposing that her own work reexamines the notion that ‘woman functions as

32 *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 10.
man’s primary other, his opposite – playing nature to his reason, immanence to his transcendence, primordial oneness to his individuated separateness, and object to his subject’ (7). Through this reexamination, Benjamin develops her intersubjective perspective which ‘reorients the conception of the psychic world from a subject’s relations to its object toward a subject meeting another subject’ (20). In doing so, Benjamin’s text ‘offers a fresh perspective on the dualism that permeates Western culture. It shows how gender polarity underlies such familiar dualisms as autonomy and dependency, and thus establishes the coordinates for the positions of master and slave’ (7).

The parallels that may be drawn between Irigaray and Benjamin are thus both methodological and thematic. Not only do they emphasise their revisionary intentions but both theorists also focus on a re-evaluation of female subjectivity, the mother-child dyad, and a belief in the importance of intersubjective interaction. Yet crucially, despite their strong sense of the limitations imposed by Freudian and Lacanian theories, both Benjamin and Irigaray consistently reiterate that their intention is not to overthrow or replace their predecessors. For, as both acknowledge, such a method ‘amounts to the same thing in the end’, and ultimately ‘reproduces the structure of gender polarity under the guise of attacking it’.[^33^] Rather, when asked in a 1975 interview whether her work constitutes a fundamental challenge to psychoanalytic theory and practice, Irigaray asserts that:

> It is rather a matter of making explicit some implications of psychoanalysis that are inoperative at the moment. Saying that if Freudian theory indeed contributes what is needed to upset the philosophic order of discourse, the theory remains paradoxically subject to that discourse where the definition of sexual difference is concerned. [...] And of course it would be interesting to know what might become of psychoanalytic notions in a culture that did not repress the feminine.[^34^]

Likewise, as she begins to posit her model of intersubjectivity in the first chapter proper of *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin remarks that her methods and Freud’s before her ‘should not be


seen in opposition to each other (as they usually are) but as complementary ways of understanding the psyche’ (20). ‘My point here’, Benjamin continues, ‘is not to reverse Freud’s decision for the inner world by choosing the outside world; it is, rather, to grasp both realities’ (21). Here, as shall be discussed in more detail later, in a method much like that which has been established as integral to the Transcendentalist mode of liminality explored throughout this thesis, Benjamin employs her model as her mode, resisting a cycle of (critical) rejection and domination by positioning her work within an intersubjective space that allows for the coexistence of both perspectives.

Recognising the liminal nature of this intersubjective space, the close readings that follow explore how the respective theories of Irigaray and Benjamin allow us to extend the significance of Dillard, Adnan, Robinson and Solnit’s formal and stylistic practices beyond the textual considerations of the previous chapter, thus adding another dimension to the politics of liminality alluded to within the preceding discussion. The analysis argues that this (perhaps inadvertent) engagement with recent feminist interventions in psychoanalysis exemplifies a fundamental aspect of the New Transcendentalism proposed within this project, whereby the underlying progressive principles of nineteenth-century Transcendentalism are propelled forward into our contemporary cultural context as a means of articulating intersectional experience.

**COPING WITH CONTRADICTION: THE CREATION OF A NEW POETICS?**

Despite the considerable differences between the two movements, not least those outlined in the previous section, there are several ways in which nineteenth-century Transcendentalist writings may be read as prefiguring elements of the radical poetics proposed within those later psychoanalytic works. This may be drawn out in relation to the following passage, taken
from the second section of *Speculum*, in which Irigaray suggests that a new iteration of language is required in order to recognise sexual difference:

> Let us imagine that man (Freud in the event) had discovered that the rarest thing [...] would be to articulate directly, *without catacombs*, what we are calling these two syntaxes. Irreducible in their strangeness and eccentricity one to the other. Coming out of different times, places, logics, “representations”, and economies. In fact, of course, these terms cannot fittingly be designated by the number “two” and the adjective “different”, if not only because they are not susceptible to comparison. To use such terms serves only to reiterate a movement begun long since, that is, the movement to speak of the “other” in a language already systematized by/for the same. Their distribution and demarcation and articulation necessitate operations as yet non-existent, whose complexity and subtlety can only be guessed at without prejudicing the results. *Without a teleology already in operation somewhere*.\(^{35}\)

Passages such as the above have led many critics to position Irigaray as ‘one of the high priestesses of *écriture féminine*, along with Kristeva and Cixous’.\(^{36}\) While Whitford argues that ‘this reading blurs the differences, both theoretical and political, between the three women’, Irigaray herself has acknowledged that her writing style – and *Speculum* specifically – ‘confounds the linearity of an outline, the teleology of discourse, within which there is no possible place for the “feminine”, except the traditional place of the repressed, the censured’.\(^{37}\) Again, however, Irigaray asserts that ‘it is not a matter of toppling that order so as to replace it […] but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an “outside” that is exempt, in part, from phallographic law.’\(^{38}\) Yet if we take this description out of its feminist context, it is striking how closely it resembles the liminal poetics identified as integral to nineteenth-century Transcendentalist discourses – both male- and female-authored – throughout the previous chapter. Moreover, Irigaray’s acknowledgement here of the intrinsic connection between teleological modes of discourse and the hegemonic values that underpin them reinforces the tension identified in the previous chapter as running throughout Transcendentalist writings.

\(^{35}\) *Speculum*, p. 139. Emphasis added.
\(^{36}\) *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 2.
\(^{37}\) *The Irigaray Reader*, pp. 2, 118.
\(^{38}\) ‘The Power of Discourse’, p. 120.
These affinities are still more evident in Benjamin’s work. Having acknowledged feminism’s ‘tendency to reinforce the dualism it criticizes’, Benjamin posits that ‘what is necessary is not to take sides but to remain focused on the dualistic structure itself’. Elaborating on this point, she asserts her intention to ‘retell Freud’s story of domination in a way that preserves its complexity and ambiguity. [...] To persevere in that approach, it seems to me, requires of theory some of that quality which Keats demanded for poetry – negative capability’. Given the premise of this chapter, Benjamin’s appropriation of John Keats’s term is intriguing, and tracing its origins allows us to draw together several key lines of enquiry. The phrase was first coined in a letter from the Romantic poet to his brothers, George and Tom, on 22 December 1817, in which he recounts a conversation he had when walking home one night from the Christmas pantomime:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with [Charles Wentworth] Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

Remarking that Samuel Taylor Coleridge is ‘incapable of remaining content with half knowledge’, he concludes that ‘with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration’. It is perhaps fitting, then, that this phrase in its original context – a debate between one of the most revered Romantic poets and the radical Whig politician and literary commentator, Charles Wentworth Dilke – seems itself to reflect the very hegemonic tensions that Benjamin, Irigaray, and this thesis wish to interrogate. For while it encapsulates the notion of a mode loosed from a teleological quest

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40 The Bonds of Love, p. 10.
42 Selected Letters, p. 42.
for ‘facts’, it simultaneously circulates exclusively in the world of men, in the world of Great Men no less; a world which can afford, Keats suggests, to privilege Beauty above all else.

Although he doesn’t refer specifically to the concept of negative capability, Ray Benoit draws a number of related parallels between the philosophies of Keats and Emerson. His 1963 article recognises the two men as near contemporaries who are both writing in the Romantic tradition, and his analysis focuses specifically on Keats’ and Emerson’s Platonic influences, with particular reference to the *Timaeus* dialogue. As we have seen elsewhere in this thesis, Plato is presented throughout Emerson’s writings as perhaps the Greatest of Great Men, and Benoit goes so far as to suggest that ‘if one does not understand the *Timaeus*, he can never understand Emerson’.  

Like many of the revisionary readings of Emerson considered throughout this thesis, Benoit’s central aim is to retrieve Emerson from accusations of inconsistency; from being labelled by turns a materialist and a naïve idealist. He argues that the many contradictions and ambivalences to be found in his work are, in fact, ‘a logical inconsistency that stems from his contact with Plato [whereby] he chose neither spirit nor matter’.  

Expanding on this point, Benoit posits a reading of Keats’s *Ode on a Grecian Urn* in which he argues that the poem’s final aphorism – ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ – could be rewritten as ‘Change is permanence, permanence change’, such that it reflects the conflict between these terms that runs throughout the poem. As such, Benoit argues, both Keats and Emerson gesture towards ‘a mutual harmony of those opposites in a higher third realm where the opposition ceases though neither item is reduced to the other.’

Within *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin makes no more than a passing reference to Keats’s notion of ‘negative capability’, appropriating it only briefly in order to contend that ‘the theoretic equivalent of that ability to face mystery and uncertainty […] would be the effort to

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44 ‘Emerson on Plato’, p. 490.
45 ‘Emerson on Plato’, p. 490.
understand the contradictions of fact and reason without any irritable reaching after one side at the expense of the other’.\textsuperscript{46} In doing so, however, she allows us to trace a number of significant philosophical affinities between her own approach and the Romantic tradition from which she borrows the phrase. Particularly significant here is the shared sense of the dialectical relationship between spirit and matter, which, as we shall see, is integral to both the Transcendentalist and psychoanalytic texts considered throughout this chapter. More intriguing still is the relationship of this dialectic to Benoit’s positing of an Emersonian notion of an intermediary ‘third realm where opposition ceases though neither item is reduced to the other’, a concept which anticipates almost verbatim ‘the potential space of thirdness’ that, as we shall see, is integral to the intersubjective models that both Benjamin and Irigaray develop throughout their work.

Having discussed at some length the parallels that may be drawn between Irigaray and Benjamin, the allusion to Keats here also allows us to highlight a significant divergence in their theoretical praxes. For while both theorists engage in modes of redemptive critique, Irigaray remains inherently suspicious of established forms, advocating, as the opening quotation of this section articulates, so fundamental a change to the current order that it would ‘necessitate operations as yet non-existent’.\textsuperscript{47} To follow many critics who seek to dismiss Irigaray’s work on grounds of its seemingly reductive essentialism is, as Whitford argues, not a position which ‘stands up to scrutiny’, and I have already acknowledged above my reluctance to overstate this aspect of her writings. Having said this, I would argue that by exploring sexual difference through the gendering of certain modes of thought, indeed, through the gendering of the underpinning ideas themselves as opposed to the culturally determined ideals that they come to embody in popular discourse, Irigaray backs herself into

\textsuperscript{46} The Bonds of Love, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{47} Speculum, p. 139.
a corner whereby the only possible resolution is, as she suggests, a fundamental overhaul of the current semiotic system. In contrast, Benjamin demonstrates a willingness, an eagerness even, to work with and within current psychoanalytic and cultural discourses, while all the time reshaping their relevance. We see this borne out in the following passage from a 2013 article in which Benjamin looks back at the circumstances that enabled her to write *The Bonds of Love*:

> this position of not throwing the baby out with the bathwater would not have been satisfying without the ability to actually analyze what goes wrong when people uncritically embrace ideals. The perspective [was that] even ideals that took form in perverse and painful expression could be redeemed by understanding the desire and aspiration that lay beneath. [...] This perspective allowed me to write *Bonds of Love* in light of what I felt were miscarriages in feminism [...] and psychoanalysis while trying to redeem them both.  

The central distinction I wish to identify here, then, amounts to the difference between rewriting the system itself and reimagining the contexts to which that system, model or idea are most progressively and productively suited. The first, it may be argued, is a practice that ultimately risks reimposing its own dialogical impasse between the sexes, while the latter mirrors more readily the reciprocal dynamic that both Irigaray and Benjamin ostensibly strive towards. As the central premise of this thesis argues, it is this integral distinction between original ideas and the cultural ideals that they come to evoke in the popular imagination that is most crucial to our understanding of the trajectory of New England Transcendentalism. For, as has already been discussed, and as Benoit also acknowledges, New England Transcendentalism is ‘a movement which, like Emerson himself, too often has been caricatured by an easy acceptance of the popular image’.

The analysis below will discuss Irigaray and Benjamin’s intersubjective models in greater detail, setting them into dialogue with close readings of both old and new

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49 ‘Emerson and Plato’, p. 490.
Transcendentalist texts. The readings recognise how elements of both New England Transcendentalism and feminist psychoanalysis – and particularly this dialectical interrelation between spirit and matter – converge in the writings of Robinson, Dillard and Adnan as a means of exploring the relationship between self and other, and of negotiating sexual and cultural difference. In doing so, this discussion continues to present New England Transcendentalism’s legacy in terms other than the overdetermined trope of (typically masculine) self-reliance and individualism, and to challenge critical conceptions of the movement which suggest that it is characterised by philosophical inconsistency. Instead, the close readings below demonstrate how the shifting and often ambivalent liminal poetics of New England Transcendentalism readily lends itself to contemporary explorations of sexual and cultural difference.

Let us now draw back to the centrepiece of this thesis, which proposes a New Transcendentalism that recovers the progressive principles of nineteenth-century (and particularly Emersonian) Transcendentalism to articulate my writers’ intersectional experiences of contemporary U.S. culture. Below I offer three readings which consider the implications of the various strands introduced above in order to bear out this claim. The first offers an Irigarayan reading of Rebecca Solnit’s *The Faraway Nearby*. Following Kateb’s claim that ‘it is possible to see Emerson as above all an advocate of distance’, my reading explores how Solnit’s text reflects an Emersonian sense of both the ‘innavigable sea’ that separates the self from the other, and the tension between potentiality and actuality that arises from that dynamic.  

these abstract elements of Emerson’s philosophy in the reality of human interactions in such a way that is informed by the cultural, personal and political contexts in which they circulate.

The second reads Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* in light of Jessica Benjamin’s concept of ‘the potential space of thirdness’. 51 Here, I examine how Robinson’s characterisation of Ruth bears out Emerson’s belief, cited above, that ‘there must be very two, before there can be very one’, and how Benjamin’s concept of thirdness provides a framework through which to explore the development of this dynamic throughout the novel. Returning to the specifically Transcendentalist mode of liminality that informs this thesis, my reading highlights again that coexistence of beauty and horror that is so integral to the Transcendentalist writings both old and new. Here, however, the Transcendentalist liminal experience in nature functions as a backdrop for the novel’s more pressing exploration of an interpersonal dynamic which is characterized simultaneously as a site of potentiality and existential jeopardy.

The final reading opens a four-way dialogue between Diotima’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium*, Irigaray’s response to that speech in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Emerson’s writings on both the poet and marital love, and Dillard’s 2007 novel, *The Maytrees*. While my readings of Solnit and Robinson centre on the implications of the intersubjective dynamic for female interactions, the final reading turns to a consideration of its implications for male-female relationships. Similarly to both *The Faraway Nearby* and *Housekeeping*, the landscape of Dillard’s novel evokes a particularly Transcendentalist aesthetic, and I draw a connection between the Provincetown location of Dillard’s novel and that of Thoreau’s *Cape Cod*. Again, however, this landscape becomes primarily a backdrop against which to explore the more materialist concerns of human relationships. With reference to George Kateb’s

distinction between mental and active self-reliance, I examine how the respective trajectories of Lou and Toby Maytree bear out several key differences I see between Emersonian Transcendentalism on the one hand and my sense of New Transcendentalism on the other. Drawing back to the specifically Transcendentalist mode of liminality developed throughout this project, I argue that all three texts considered here may be understood as responding to a question posed by Branka Arsić: ‘What kind of love relationship or friendship is predicated on the necessity of leaving?’

‘A RIDDLE I HAD TO DECIPHER’: REBECCA SOLNIT’S THE FARAWAY NEARBY (2013)

Within her introduction to *Speculum*, Irigaray contends that

women’s rebellions are never aimed at the paternal function – which is sacred and divine – but at that powerful and then castrated mother, because she brought a castrated child into the world. […] The fact that the woman has not solved the relationship to her beginning, to her mother, to those of her own sex, affects her love relations.

*The Faraway Nearby* may be understood as Solnit’s attempt to solve (or at least work through, given that *solve* suggests the very teleological thinking that both Irigaray and Solnit are keen to resist) her relationship to her beginning and to her mother. Having recognised the structural similarities between *The Faraway Nearby* and *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* in the opening chapter, I wish to consider here another way in which these two works may be considered companion texts. For if the stories told in *Field Guide* are held together through their exploration of a series of intersecting liminal landscapes (the desert, the post-punk city, the shoreline), *The Faraway Nearby*’s series of liminal landscapes (the perpetual daytime of Reykjavik, the desert, and particularly the Grand Canyon) are woven together in terms of their relevance to the central thread of the text: Solnit’s poignant reconstruction of her

53 *Speculum*, p. 106.
mother’s final months living with Alzheimer’s (itself, of course, a liminal phase) and the fraught history of their relationship. With those liminal contexts in mind, the reading below sets Solnit’s text into dialogue with Irigaray’s writings on the integral and symbolic mother-daughter relationship, contending that Solnit’s liminal poetics is the primary means by which she works through that relationship.

_The Faraway Nearby_ is structured into thirteen chapters that move towards a pivotal ‘Knot’ and, quite literally, back to their beginnings as the chapter titles repeat themselves in reverse order in the latter half. The first chapter explored one layer of meaning here, likening this pattern to the alternating chapters of _A Field Guide to Getting Lost_ in order to establish the liminal poetics that both texts share. However, a consideration of the following passage from Irigaray’s _To Speak is Never Neutral_ (1985; trans. 2002) adds another dimension to this reading:

> The Oedipus complex states the law of the non-return of the daughter to the mother. It cuts her off from her beginnings, her conception, her genesis, her birth, her childhood. […] The limit of transference would appear to be in this distanceless proximity between women – between mother and daughter? – distanceless because no symbolic process allows us to account for it. […] A chiasmus takes place in the immediate, with no mirror. […] Has not history forced this impossibility upon them: they must live, cut off from their beginning, and from their end?54

Read in light of this passage, the structure of Solnit’s text takes on new meaning, for we may now describe it as not only indicative of her wider liminal poetics, but, more specifically, as reflecting the chiastic structure of the mother-daughter relationship. The chapters unfold as such: Apricots – Mirrors – Ice – Flight – Breath – Wound – Knot – Unwound – Breath – Flight – Ice – Mirrors – Apricots. But what thread links these headings? In the context of Irigaray’s work, the shift from _wound_ to _unwound_ is particularly intriguing. For given the simultaneous connotations of both a winding thread and visceral wounding, we may perhaps describe this more appropriately as a connecting _cord_; as an attempt to move back and

54 Luce Irigaray, ‘The Limits of the Transference’, in _The Irigaray Reader_, pp. 105-17 (pp. 105-9).
beyond that first wound that establishes the ‘distanceless proximity […] between mother and daughter’.

Irigaray makes much of ‘our separations from our first home’.\(^{55}\) In ‘The Bodily Encounter with the Mother’, she asserts that ‘the unavoidable and irreparable wound is the cutting of the umbilical cord’, before going on to argue that Western philosophy’s skewed positioning of this severed bond as secondary to the ‘law of the father’ (as represented by the phallus) amounts to being severed from ‘the origins of our culture’.\(^{56}\) As such, Irigaray asserts that:

we must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover […] words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal.\(^{57}\)

As we shall see, *The Faraway Nearby* may be understood as engaging in such a project. The previous chapter alluded to the centrality of the corporeal throughout this text, tracing as it does not only her mother’s physical and psychological decline due to Alzheimer’s (discussed mainly in ‘Apricots’ and ‘Mirrors’, the opening and closing two chapters), but also Solnit’s own preventative cancer surgery, which serves as the primary focus of the pivotal ‘Knot’ chapter. It is due, in part, to this identification between her own corporality and her mother’s that Solnit begins to recognise her mother’s autonomous subjectivity as detached from her parental role, and thus begins to reconcile the fraught history of their relationship. Of course, such a reading cannot be established by considering the connection between these chapter headings alone. As we enter the first chapter proper, the connections become clearer. Solnit begins:

*To love someone is to put yourself in their place, we say, which is to put yourself in their story, or figure out how to tell yourself their story. […] What is it like to be the old*

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57 ‘The Bodily Encounter’, p. 43.
man silenced by the stroke, the young man facing the executioner, the woman walking across the border, the child on the roller coaster, the person you’ve only read about, or the one next to you in bed?\(^{58}\)

While the experience outlined within this passage may perhaps be more readily understood as empathy, there is a clear parallel to be drawn here between this recognition of the other’s subjectivity and the Emersonian and psychoanalytic models of intersubjectivity outlined above. Though perhaps we needed to look no further than Solnit’s title to establish this connection, for what is ‘the faraway nearby’ if not a perfect analogy for the intersubjective experience, an allusion to just that ‘distanceless proximity’ that Irigaray identifies?

In its recollection of her mother’s final years as Alzheimer’s disease takes hold, Solnit’s story is one of simultaneous growth and decay, loss and reclamation; a story mirrored by the ‘Apricots’ of the first and last chapters. A far cry from the redemptive readings of nature found elsewhere in her writings, this ‘mountain of apricots in every stage from hard and green to soft and browning’, which arrives within the opening pages, having been taken from their mother’s tree by her brother, presents an image of nature having outgrown its nurturing roots and in a state of terminal decline (5). ‘I had expected’, Solnit writes, ‘for them to look like abundance itself and they looked instead like anxiety’ (5). Throughout this first chapter, Solnit describes the apricots as an ‘inheritance from a mother who had given [her] almost nothing since [her] childhood’, as her ‘birthright, a last harvest’, ‘a magic seed’, ‘a riddle [she] had to decipher’, and in the final passage as ‘[seeming] to invoke old legacies and tasks and to be an allegory, but for what?’ (13-15). Here we find further echoes of Irigaray. For this uncanny mound of furry, fleshy, ripening and rotting fruit embodies, quite literally, the simultaneity of (and tensions between) abundance and anxiety, fecundity and decay, birthright and legacies that characterize the mother-daughter relationship throughout Irigaray’s work. This is perhaps most readily apparent if we turn once

more to ‘The Bodily Encounter with the Mother’, which first appears in *Sexes and Genealogies* (1987).\(^{59}\) It is notable that in the French original, the essay was entitled ‘Le corps-à-corps avec la mère’, a phrase which Gillian C. Gill acknowledges ‘has no simple translation in English’, connoting as it does both ‘armed combat between two warriors’ and, in Irigaray’s rendering, an encounter which generates ‘a new relationship between mother and child that accepts the body of both parties and moves toward a new imaginary and a new symbolic’.\(^{60}\)

If the ‘Apricots’ of the first and last chapters of Solnit’s book look like metaphorical equivalents of this *corps-à-corps*, then the ‘Mirrors’ of the second and penultimate chapters begin to flesh out the dynamic more explicitly. As we have already seen, ideas of mirroring and specularization are integral to Irigaray’s philosophy, providing as they do an analogy for the physical, historical and philosophical objectification of women. Thinking back to the earlier-cited quotation in which Irigaray describes the mother-daughter relationship as one in which ‘a chiasmus takes place in the immediate, with no mirror’, Solnit’s use of ‘Mirrors’ in the second and penultimate chapter of the text’s chiastic structure reads as her conscious attempt to reflect upon the fraught history of her relationship with her mother. Developing the fairytale theme introduced in the opening chapter – where they are described as being ‘almost always the stories of the powerless’ (14) – Solnit draws on the trope of the ‘mirror, mirror, on the wall’, remarking on how ‘that conjunction of mothers and mirrors made me recognize just how murderous my mother’s fury was’ (19). She depicts her mother as being ‘devoured by envy’, and acknowledges her mother’s sense ‘that beauty was the key to some happiness that

\(^{59}\) The essay was translated from a lecture Irigaray delivered at a Montreal conference entitled ‘Women and Madness’ in 1980. Here I am predominantly using David Macey’s translation as it appears in *The Irigaray Reader* (pp. 34–46); however, where Gillian C. Gill’s translation better articulates the premise of my argument, I have also cited the essay as it appears in Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 7–21. Here the essay’s title is translated as ‘Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother’.

\(^{60}\) Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 9.
had eluded her, that she had been done out of something that was rightfully hers, whether it was her mother’s favor or her daughter’s golden hair’ (20). Here, by tracing her own mother’s problematic relationship with her grandmother, Solnit recognises the genealogical nature of these mother-daughter tensions. What is more, the fact that much of her mother’s envy stemmed from a belief that she was less physically attractive than her daughter demonstrates her internalization of the patriarchal values that seek to dictate her worth as a woman.

We may draw this out further with reference to three interrelated points made by Irigaray. Firstly, in an essay entitled ‘Divine Women’, she posits that:

female beauty is […] almost never perceived as a manifestation of, an appearance by a phenomenon expressive of interiority […] We look at ourselves in the mirror to please someone […] The mirror almost always serves to reduce us to a pure exteriority – of a very particular kind. It functions as a possible way to constitute screens between the other and myself.61

Solnit’s experience bears out this claim. She suggests that, ‘for mothers, some mothers, my mother, daughters are division and sons are multiplication; the former reduce them, fracture them, take from them, the latter augment and enhance’ (21). She continues:

The queen’s envy of Snow White is deadly. It’s based on the desire to be the most beautiful of them all, and it raises the question of whose admiration she needs […] At the back of this drama between women are men, the men for whom the queen wants to be beautiful, the men whose attention is the arbiter of worth and worthlessness. (21)

Again, in this global to local narrowing from ‘[m]others, some mothers, my mother’, Solnit resists an essentialist presumption of what it is to be a mother whilst also bearing out the generalised tendency identified by Irigaray and others in the suggestion that the crux of the tension in her own experience was her ‘failure to be the miracle of her [mother’s] completion and to be instead her division’ (22).

Returning to ‘The Bodily Encounter’, Irigaray suggests that the resolution to these tensions may be to ‘try and situate ourselves within this female genealogy [on our mother’s side, for] this love is necessary if we are not to remain servants of the phallic cult, objects to be used by and exchanged between men, rival objects on the market, the situation in which we have always been placed’. This is a point she reinforces in a short interview originally published alongside ‘Le corps-à-corps avec la mère’ in 1987, in which she identifies the necessity for women to ‘establish a woman-to-woman relationship of reciprocity with our mothers, in which they might possibly also feel themselves to be our daughters’. And it is on this unexpected – and decidedly problematic – trajectory that Solnit’s mother’s deteriorating condition takes us. For if the ‘Mirrors’ of the first half of the text reflect an envious, bitter woman whose fury drives a wedge between herself and her daughter – and, indeed, a bitter daughter who remains bound by the perceived lack of affection extended to her throughout her childhood – those of the latter half present a much more balanced reciprocity between the two women:

Finally, the war ended. She forgot the stories that fueled her wrath, and when they were gone, everything was different. [...] Nearly all the grudges, comparisons, expectations, resentments, ancient histories, and anxious anticipations seemed to disappear in that second spring of her life. [...] Mostly she was festive, even if those jokes that I was her mother had an edge – as well as an edge of confusion about how this world was organized and how we were related. With Alzheimer’s time runs backward, and given that, maybe I was her mother, and certainly I sometimes played a mother’s part. (225)

*The Faraway Nearby* thus allows us to draw out Irigaray’s theories through a tangible exploration of sexual difference and its lived implications. Here, as ‘time runs backward’ for Solnit’s mother, she draws ever closer to that Irigarayian ideal of unmooring herself from the organising principles of a patriarchal order. And it is in these phases of her increasing ‘not-knowing’ that Solnit and her mother find a more harmonious relation to one another (226).

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Yet what conclusions are we to draw from this trajectory? Do we infer that Irigaray’s ideal is so incompatible with the complexities of human consciousness that it is only through debilitating neurological disease that it may be realised? Here the reader is once again projected into that ambivalent space that Solnit so often invokes, a space in which Solnit’s mother’s condition is presented as akin to a pharmakon, as explored in Jacques Derrida’s 1968 essay, ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’. Developed from Plato, the term refers to that which ‘acts as both remedy and poison [and] can be – alternately or simultaneously – beneficent or maleficent’. It is in this way that Solnit’s mother’s condition functions throughout The Faraway Nearby, as an element that ‘introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence’. Solnit presents her mother’s illness as at once that which sees her ‘being erased, a page returned to whiteness on its way to non-being’ and equally as marking a period in which she ‘achieved a new equilibrium and a new joy [having been] liberated from the burden of her past’ (222-5). Indeed, Derrida’s notion of the pharmakon is yet more apt, defined as it is as that which is both substance and anti-substance (‘nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance’), and also as that which ‘makes one stray from one’s general, natural, habitual paths and laws’ — a definition which describes most accurately the gradual shedding of identity that Solnit’s mother experiences throughout the narrative.

In the very closing lines of ‘The Bodily Encounter’, Irigaray offers the following observation:

Humanity might begin to wash itself clean of a sin. A woman celebrating the Eucharist with her mother, sharing with her the fruits of the earth she/they have blessed, could be delivered of all hatred or ingratitude towards her maternal genealogy, could be consecrated in her identity and her female genealogy.67

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65 Dissemination, p. 70.
66 Dissemination, p. 70.
67 ‘The Bodily Encounter’, p. 46.
It is in these lines that we find perhaps the most compelling parallel between the two texts. For having remarked in the closing line of the penultimate ‘Mirrors’ chapter, ‘[w]hat I have to say could count as a sutra or another sin’, Solnit’s final chapter turns our attention once more to that mound of apricots whose ‘faint sweet perfume’ lingers throughout her narrative (236). Now ‘two pints of those apricots from a summer long ago’ (240) are all that remains of that ‘human-size entity with a life of its own’ from the opening pages (12). Over the years, ‘that unstable heap […] went onward as gifts’ to Solnit’s loved ones who helped her through ‘that era of emergency’ (240). Reflecting on just what it was that those apricots ultimately represented for her, Solnit describes them as ‘a gift from my mother, or her tree, […] an invitation to examine the business of making and changing stories and locate the silences in between’ (240). The resonances here are clear, for in this act of sharing the fruits of her maternal family tree, not only literally in the form of ‘jams, preserves and liqueur’ but also in writing the story for which they were the catalyst, Solnit both works through her own fraught female genealogy and positions herself within a cultural genealogy of women who seek to redress the systematic silencings of women through history.

‘If I had written about this earlier’, Solnit muses, ‘the story would have the aura of the courtroom, for I had been raised on the logic of argument and fact and being right, rather than the leap beyond that might be love’ (19). Developing Solnit’s line of thought here alongside themes introduced in the previous chapter, the close readings below go on to explore just this connection between teleological modes of thought that succumb to ‘the temptation of a neat ending […] in which everything is tied up, a sealed parcel, the end’, and the capacity of love to move us between and beyond these limiting narratives. For, as Solnit asks, ‘[w]hat if we only want openings, the immortality of the unfinished, the uncut thread, the incomplete, the open door and the open sea?’ (249).
MODELLING INTERSUBJECTIVITY I: JESSICA BENJAMIN’S ‘POTENTIAL SPACE OF THIRDNESST’

Drawing on the work of D. W. Winnicott and Margaret Mahler, the latter half of Benjamin’s ‘Outline of Intersubjectivity’ draws out the fruitfulness of her intersubjective model for examining the mother-child relationship in particular. She recognises how the shifting power dynamics of this formative relationship bear out the Hegelian dialectic, and posits that ‘from the standpoint of intersubjective theory, the ideal resolution of the paradox of recognition is for it to continue as a constant tension between recognizing the other and asserting the self’ (40). Extending Winnicott’s notion of ‘play’, Benjamin contends that the ability to differentiate between fantasy and fact, the ability to recognise that ‘it is in contrast to the fantasy of destruction that the reality of survival is so satisfying and authentic’ is integral to the intersubjective dynamic (42). The trajectory of intersubjective relatedness, Benjamin contends, ‘begins with “[w]e are feeling this feeling,” and then moves to “I know that you, who are an other mind, share this same feeling”’, before finally being able to recognise that ‘“[w]e can share feelings without my fearing that my feelings are simply your feelings”’ (42-3).

If ‘An Outline of Intersubjectivity’ recognises the importance of this ‘field of intersection between two subjectivities’, Benjamin’s 2004 essay, ‘Beyond Doer and Done To’, sees her conceptualise this ‘field of intersection’, by developing ‘an intersubjective view of thirdness’.68 Intersubjectivity is here described as the process by which we ‘come to the felt experience of the other as a separate yet connected being with whom we are acting reciprocally’ (6). Following Emmanuel Ghent, Benjamin identifies a crucial distinction

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between passive submission, whereby an individual ‘gives in’ or ‘gives over’ to another person, and active surrender to the other, whereby one accedes to ‘a letting go into being with them’ (8). The latter, Benjamin asserts, ‘requires […] that we follow some principle or process that mediates between self and other’ (8). By foregrounding this distinction, Benjamin again seeks to move beyond ‘the twoness of complementarity’, which, she argues, exacerbates the inevitable division between two subjectivities in such a way that emphasises, even perpetuates, their opposition. Instead, she identifies this mediating process as the means by which we create ‘the potential space of thirthness’ (11), effecting a space within the dyad that enables two distinct yet connected subjectivities to ‘shape a co-created reality’ (9). As Benjamin suggests, ‘in a world without shared thirds, without a space of collaboration or sharing, everything is mine or yours, including the perception of reality’ (21).

Benjamin recognises the origin of the third in Lacan (himself influenced by Hegel), who, she says, understood the third ‘as that which keeps the relationship between two persons from collapsing’, a collapse that could manifest itself as either ‘merger (oneness), eliminating difference, or a twoness that splits the differences’ (11-12). Where Lacan’s argument falls down, Benjamin argues, is in its suggestion that this third is created by the father, whose ‘prohibition […] constitutes the symbolic third’ (12). She argues that ‘thirdness […] cannot originate in the Freudian oedipal relation’, and is in fact ‘not literally instituted by a father (or other) as the third person’ (13), but must be created by the mother’s ability to ‘hold in tension her subjectivity […] and the needs of the child’ (13). In recognising a space that lies both within and beyond the dyad, then, the potential space of thirdness affords us a ‘vantage point outside the two’ which doesn’t require the intervening subjectivity of the father, thus opening an intersubjective space that enables difference and any resulting conflict to be ‘observed, held, mediated, or played with’ (7-8). As such, Benjamin concludes, ‘intersubjective thirdness can orient us toward responsibility and more rigorous thinking, even as our practice
of psychoanalysis becomes more emotionally authentic, more spontaneous and inventive, more compassionate and liberating’ (42).

Drawing back to the Transcendentalist mode of liminality that underpins this project, Benjamin’s suggestion of a potential space of thirdness that lies betwixt and between interacting subjectivities clearly has strong resonances with Turner’s theories of liminality, and particularly his notion of *communitas*, through which – in its most immediate, ‘spontaneous’ form – individuals ‘feel that all problems (not just their problems), whether emotional or cognitive, could be resolved, if only the group […] could sustain its intersubjective illumination’.69 Turner’s concept of liminoid phenomena also draws heavily on the concept of play. Similarly to Benjamin, Turner understands play as ‘being “subjective”, […] free from external constraints, where any and every combination of variables can be “played” with’, and thus as a space ‘in which new symbols, models, and paradigms arise – as the seedbeds of cultural creativity in fact’.70 The following section explores how this notion of play, as well as other aspects of Benjamin’s intersubjective model, are borne out within Marilynne Robinson’s debut novel, *Housekeeping* (1980).

‘IT WAS AS IF I WAS HER SHADOW’: MARILYNNE ROBINSON’S *HOUSEKEEPING* (1980)

*Housekeeping* centres on Ruth Foster, a young girl who, as a result of her mother’s unexplained suicide, spends her childhood alongside her sister, Lucille, in the small Midwest town of Fingerbone, under the care of their grandmother. Following their grandmother’s death, and the arrival and swift departure of their great-aunts, the girls are left under the care of their mother’s sister, Sylvie, a ‘drifter’ who returns to the town after many years of absence. Throughout the novel, Robinson positions Ruth as a liminal character oscillating

70 ‘Liminal to Liminoid’, pp. 66, 60.
between her sister and her aunt, between Lucille’s increasing need to uphold social conventions and the apparent freedom of Sylvie’s transient lifestyle. The novel presents almost exclusively female characters, organised most often into female dyads: not only Ruth and Lucille / Ruth and Sylvie; but also Sylvie and Helen (Ruth’s mother) who, as we shall see, are also often conflated throughout the novel; and Nona and Lily, the two great-aunts who briefly look after Ruth and Lucille at the beginning. Indeed, the novel’s only significant male character is the grandfather who dies within the opening pages, and the only other male character is a cameo from the town sheriff who appears very briefly towards the close of the novel. Sarah Hartshorne is one of a number of critics who read the grandfather’s death as the moment at which Robinson ‘sends [American] culture’s patriarchal tradition to the bottom of Lake Fingerbone’, with the grandfather representing variously and simultaneously ‘the Creator, Noah, Adam, the American Adam, the American frontiersman, and primitive man’. Hartshorne thus presents *Housekeeping* as a novel in which ‘Robinson has quietly and brilliantly revised, reinvented, and feminized the “traditional” canon of American literature. […] She has made this tradition contemporary and has made it female.’ Extending this reading within the context of my own discussion, we might say that, like Benjamin, Robinson challenges the need for an intervening masculine subjectivity, creating a world in which women relate to one another on their own terms. Indeed, the fact that Robinson projects these various interacting female subjectivities onto landscapes (both literal and literary) which have so long been colonized by the lone male subject renders his absence all the more conspicuous.

Developing the relevance of Benjamin’s intersubjective model further, the discussion below applies her notion of thirdness across two overarching strands. The first considers

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72 ‘Lake Fingerbone and Walden Pond’, p. 50.
Ruth’s trajectory within the world of the novel, arguing that her inability to hold fantasy and reality in productive tension (evidenced, as will be shown, by the development of one stylistic trope in particular) and her tendency to define herself in relation to others rather than autonomously may be read in terms of an exploration of the intersubjective third. The second strand considers Ruth’s broader ideological function, arguing that, as a literary construct, she may be understood as representing the ‘potential space of thirdness’ itself, offering a mediating third perspective between the seemingly either/or trajectories represented by Lucille and Sylvie; between the typically feminine domestic stereotype and a ‘female hero, of sorts’ who I argue ultimately reads as a mirroring rather than a reimagining of the archetypal (and typically masculine) self-reliant figure.\(^\text{73}\) In doing so, the discussion positions *Housekeeping* at the intersection between the New England Transcendentalist tradition and feminist models of psychoanalysis, recognising how liminal experiences in nature akin to those outlined in the previous chapter become a catalyst for Robinson’s exploration of the intersubjective dynamic and its implications for female experience.

Many critics have drawn a parallel between the opening line of *Housekeeping*, ‘My name is Ruth’, and the much-quoted first sentence of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, ‘Call me Ishmael’.\(^\text{74}\) As Amy Hungerford asserts, the two statements set up different relationships between protagonist and reader: ‘Ishmael wants to enter into dialog with you, wants you to reach out towards him. Ruth offers you herself as something like the objective contemplation of a stranger.’\(^\text{75}\) Laura Barrett also identifies a number of shared narrative techniques including ‘philosophical ruminations, narrative digressions, poetic gestures, and disembodied voices’, proposing that ‘[like] Ishmael, Ruth is an orphan for whom flesh is merely an

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illusion of stability and permanence which distracts us from the more vivid life of memory and dreams’. Setting these readings alongside the models outlined above, such narrative techniques align with the notion of ‘play’ as the process by which we negotiate between fantasy and reality. For Ruth, this process is most readily apparent in her favouring right from the opening pages of the narrative of one stylistic trope:

One day my grandmother must have carried out a basket of sheets to hang in the spring sunlight, wearing her widow’s black, performing the rituals of the ordinary as an act of faith. Say that there were two or three inches of hard old snow on the ground […] and say she stooped breathlessly in her corset […] and say that when she had pinned three corners to the line it began to billow and leap in her hands. (16; emphases added)

Here, in direct contrast to the passivity that several critics have observed within the novel’s opening lines, Ruth’s narrative voice becomes increasingly assertive, due to the repeated use of the imperative, ‘say that’, a device through which Robinson conspicuously foregrounds the process of shared imagination between the reader and her protagonist. Indeed, these passages are so real to Ruth that they become blurred into a memory; they become spaces with their own dimensions and sensory landscapes: ‘the wind would be sour with stale snow and death and pine pitch and wildflowers’ (16). For Ruth, as we shall see, these passages invariably serve to reconnect her to the family members she has lost and particularly her mother, becoming a means by which she manages her grief by creating a holding space between her objective reality and the recurring memories of the departed. My analysis identifies the recurrence of this stylistic device at key moments in the narrative, examining their significance in relation to Ruth’s increasingly fragile sense of her own subjectivity.

In ‘Beyond Doer and Done to’, Benjamin acknowledges that her approach is influenced by Winnicott’s idea of ‘potential or transitional space’ (7). Derived from the

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77 In a recent essay, Anthony Domestico has termed these passages ‘imperative hypotheses’, and offered an alternative reading to that set out here, in which the moments are described as ‘a series of creedal statements’. See Anthony Domestico, “‘Imagine a Carthage Sown with Salt’: Creeds, Memory, and Vision in Marilynne Robinson’s Housekeeping”, Literature and Theology, 27 (2013) [accessed 18 July 2015].
primary sense of the mother who is able to ‘bear the other within, [...] without fusing together’, Winnicott argues that the concept of holding may be expanded to encompass those more abstract processes by which, as we grow older, we take on ‘responsibility for the other’, in such a way that enables each person to ‘remain connected without being compromised’. Much like Turner’s elaboration of van Gennep’s rites of passage framework, Benjamin’s intersubjective model places particular emphasis on this transitional space. Where Winnicott’s model presents it as a function of two subjectivities, borne out of their real-world interactions, Benjamin theorises the potential space of thirdness as a mediating third entity in its own right: an intervening space to which, as has been outlined above, both subjectivities surrender themselves willingly and productively, rather than submitting themselves to ‘an idealized person or thing’.

Throughout the first half of the novel, Lucille plays the role of Ruth’s significant other. As they become more accustomed to Sylvie’s erratic behaviour, however, a divide begins to develop between the two girls. At the beginning of Chapter Six, Ruth remarks: ‘In spring I had begun to sense that Lucille’s loyalties were with the other world. With fall began her tense and passionate campaign to naturalize herself to it. The months that intervened were certainly the last and perhaps the first true summer of my life’ (95). She recalls the days during that ‘very long’ summer when she and Lucille would ‘run off into the woods’, exploring the liminal spaces at the edge of the town, ‘the little clearings, the burned-off places where wild strawberries grew’ (95-6). It is often within these liminal spaces that Ruth’s imperative voice returns. Here, she imagines those who perished during the train wreck being resurrected: ‘Say that this resurrection was enough to include my grandmother, and Helen, my mother. Say that Helen lifted our hair from our napes with her cold hands and

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79 ‘Beyond Doer and Done to’, p. 8.
gave us strawberries from her purse.’ Say that my grandmother pecked our brows with her whiskery lips, and then all of them went down the road to our house’ (96). At this point in the narrative, while pure fantasy, this moment retains its coherence. At the same time, Ruth remarks: ‘in recollection I feel no reluctance to speak of Lucille and myself almost as a single consciousness even through the course of that summer’ (98). Reading this passage in light of Benjamin’s notion of thirdness, Ruth’s lack of any reluctance and also this use of ‘almost’ are significant, for in this willing surrender to her bond with her sister, she maintains an awareness of their distinct perspectives. She continues:

It was not the pleasures at home at suppertime that lured us back to Sylvie’s house. Say rather that the cold forced me home, and that the dark allowed Lucille to pass through the tattered peripheries of Fingerbone unobserved. It is accurate to say that Lucille went to the woods with me to escape observation. I myself felt the gaze of the world as a distorting mirror that squashed her plump and stretched me narrow. […] I went to the woods for the woods’ own sake, while, increasingly, Lucille seemed to be enduring a banishment there. (99)

Here, Ruth and Lucille’s relationship is presented as an exemplar of the functioning intersubjective dynamic, whereby ‘each person experiences the other as a “like subject”, another mind who can be “felt with”, yet has a distinct, separate center of feeling and perception’.80 Pages later, we enter a pivotal scene in the novel, when Lucille and Ruth find themselves stranded in the woods at night.

Convinced by Lucille to stay, the two girls build themselves a shelter: ‘We pulled down fir limbs and made a roof and floor. It was a low and slovenly structure, to all appearances random and accidental’ (114). The description of this place recalls both Emerson’s beauty and Thoreau’s horror: ‘The two arms of the land that enclosed the bay were like floes of darkness, pouring into the lake from mountains brimming with darkness, but stopped and turned to stone in the brilliant ether’ (115). It is this ambivalence that characterises Ruth’s experience. This liminal landscape elicits simultaneously ‘sounds in a

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80 ‘Beyond Doer and Done to’, p. 5.
dream’ and ‘sounds of stealthy approach – the sense of disturbed intention’; it is a space where ‘all [their] human boundaries were overrun’ (115). Despite this implication of existential jeopardy, it is notable that by recognising that ‘Lucille would tell this story differently’, Ruth again conspicuously recognises herself and her sister as two distinct subjectivities (116). Moreover, this liminal experience in nature encourages Ruth to raise her imperative voice once more: ‘Say that my mother was as tall as a man and that she sometimes set me on her shoulders so that I could splash my hands in the cold leaves above our heads. Say that my grandmother sang in her throat while she sat on her bed and we laced up her big black boots’ (116). As before, the fantasy holds its structure, holds its referents and remains within the realms of coherence. As the sun begins to rise, the ambivalent tone intensifies; Ruth describes how ‘half a dozen daubs of cloud, dull powder pink, sailed high in a pale-green sky, rust-red at the horizon. Venus shone a heatless planetary white among these parrot colors, and earth lay unregenerate so long that it seemed to me for once all these blandishments might fail. The birds of our world were black motes in that tropic’ (117). This experience eludes a definitive response; Robinson’s description (and implicitly Ruth’s consciousness) is able to maintain these ambivalent aspects in tension, allowing both the beauty and the hostility of nature to co-exist. The sun rises: ‘[a]t last it became an ordinary day’ (117). This episode marks a critical point in the narrative, providing the final catalyst for Lucille’s departure.

When they return to the house, Lucille is appalled by Sylvie’s apparent lack of concern, and, waking the next morning, recounts ‘a terrible dream’: ‘I was a baby, lying on my back, yelling, and then someone came and started wrapping me up in blankets. She put them all over my face, so I couldn’t breathe. She was singing and holding me, and it was sort of nice, but I could tell she was trying to smother me’ (120). When Ruth pushes Lucille as to the identity of the smothering mother-figure, Lucille replies: ‘She reminded me of Sylvie, I
guess’ (120). In a skewing of Winnicott’s notion of the mother’s self-affirming embrace, this image of the mother-figure’s attempts to care for the child becoming (or perhaps more importantly perceived as becoming) a threat of smothering acknowledges Lucille’s recognition of the threat Sylvie poses to both her and Ruth’s subjective autonomy. It is this dream that sets in motion the chain of events that sees Lucille leave Ruth, Sylvie and the family home. Even as she is recounting her dream to Ruth, Lucille is encouraging her to ‘change her clothes’ and ‘fix her hair’ (119). Ruth initially succumbs, accepting the pin curls and conservative outfit that Lucille imposes upon her. Once out in public, however, Lucille notices Ruth’s discomfort, exclaiming: ‘We have to improve ourselves! Starting right now!’ (123). Unconvinced, Ruth turns away from her sister. Leaving Lucille standing in the street, Ruth finds herself alone for the first time in the novel:

I was left alone, in the gentle afternoon, indifferent to my clothes and comfortable in my skin, unimproved and without the prospect of improvement. It seemed to me that Lucille would busy herself forever, nudging, pushing, coaxing, as if she could supply the will I lacked, to pull myself into some seemly shape and slip across the wide frontiers into that other world, where it seemed to me that I could never wish to go. For it seemed to me that nothing I had lost, or might lose, could be found there, or to put it another way, it seemed that something I had lost might be found in Sylvie’s house. (123-4)

Here, while the passage initially presents itself as a moment of liberating self-affirmation in which Ruth is at last able to identify her own autonomy, the final line undercuts the self-affirming rhetoric of the passage, for, in the space of a sentence, Ruth has reinterpreted the movement away from Lucille as inevitably a movement towards Sylvie. Yet in the liminal state between walking away from Lucille, and arriving back with Sylvie, another ambivalent revelation ensues. The passage continues:

As I walked toward it, and the street became more and more familiar, […] each particular tree, and its season, and its shadow, were utterly known to me. […] I had seen two of the apple trees in my grandmother’s orchard die where they stood. […] It seemed to me that what perished need not also be lost. […] And yet as I approached the house I was newly aware of the changes that had overtaken it. The lawn was knee high, an oily, dank green, and the wind sent ripples across it. It had swamped the
smaller bushes and the walk and the first step of the front porch and had risen to the height of the foundation. (124-5)

Here, Ruth again recognises her own subjective and self-affirming relationship with the landscape. Moreover, in this moment of detachment from either Lucille or Sylvie, and despite having convinced herself that ‘what perished need not also be lost’, Ruth’s more objective clarity allows her to recognise the cycle of decline that is taking hold of her family home. That Ruth frames this movement from Lucille to Sylvie as a potential reconciliation of loss is also significant. For if this passage serves to reiterate Ruth’s affinity with the natural landscape, it also symbolises the increasingly toxic environment that the family home and the relationships forged there – cycles of trauma mirrored down the generations – have created.

While Ruth-as-narrator seems to retrospectively recognise this as a moment of potentiality, however, Ruth’s younger self fails to do, returning home in the belief that Sylvie can fulfil whatever void may be created by Lucille’s departure. By the end of the chapter, Lucille has left to live with Miss Royce, the home economics teacher.

The very next morning, Sylvie decides to take Ruth out across the lake, ostensibly in search of ‘the children in the woods’ (148). As they head out into the landscape, Ruth remarks:

Sylvie was in front of me, and I put my hands in my pockets, and tilted my head, and strode, as she did, and it was as if I were her shadow, and moved after her only because she moved and not because I willed this pace. [...] I walked after Sylvie down the shore, [...] and I thought, We are the same. She could as well be my mother. I crouched and slept in her very shape like an unborn child. (144-5)

In contrast to the scenes with Lucille, in which Ruth is able to maintain the space between herself and her sister, Ruth’s assertions here that it was ‘as if I were her shadow’ and ‘[w]e are the same’ indicate the loss of the mediating transitional space between herself and Sylvie. Moreover, the fact that Ruth recognises that she follows Sylvie ‘because she moved and not because I willed this pace, this pocketing of the hands, this tilt of the head’ and that ‘following her required no will nor effort’ presents this as a scene not of willing surrender to
an intersubjective third but of passive submission to the other. Indeed, that this moment refers
directly to the relationship between a mother and her unborn child gestures towards the
psychoanalytic resonances of this scene, and supports my reading of this passage as
indicating the collapse of the intersubjective third. Once arrived in the woods, Ruth suddenly
finds herself alone:

Sylvie was gone. She had left without a word, or a sound. […] I pretended not to
know I was alone. I could see why Sylvie thought children might come here. Any
child who saw once how the glistening water spilled to the tips of branches, and
rounded and dropped and pocketed the softening shadows of frost at the foot of each
tree, would come to see it again. […] I knew why Sylvie felt there were children in
the woods. I felt so, too, though I did not think so. (153-4)

Here, while the movement of the narrative once again traces an underlying affinity between
Ruth with the natural landscape around her, we see that this innate connection is
overshadowed by her tendency to frame her own experience through Sylvie’s perspective.
Where before Ruth still differentiated between her own subjectivity and Lucille’s, here she
seems to experience the scene vicariously through Sylvie’s eyes. This is demonstrated within
the sentence ‘I could see why Sylvie thought children might come here’: even in
acknowledging her own awareness of the beauty of the place in which she finds herself, she
distances herself two-fold from that experience by articulating it from the perspective of an
imagined character in someone else’s mind. This dynamic is reiterated within the final
sentence: ‘I knew why Sylvie felt there were children in the woods. I felt so, too, though I did
not think so.’

As would be the small child left without its mother, Ruth is initially calm. Indeed, she
frames the experience as a game, as literally ‘playing’: ‘I thought she must be teasing,
perhaps watching me from the woods. I pretended not to know I was alone’ (153). When
Sylvie doesn’t return, however, the moment swiftly descends into one of existential crisis:

I let the numbing grass touch my ankles. I thought, Sylvie is nowhere, and sometime it
will be dark. Let them come unhorse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart. It has
no shelter now, it only kept me here alone and I would rather be with them. […] If I
could see my mother, it would not have to be her eyes, her hair, […] The lake had taken that, I knew. […] She was a music I no longer heard, […], lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished. (159-60)

This episode, then, very closely bears out Winnicott and Benjamin’s thinking. In *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott posits: ‘[i]t is only a matter of days or hours or minute [that the child can bear the mother’s absence]. Before the limit is reached the mother is still alive; after this limit has been overstepped she is dead. In between is a precious moment of anger but this is quickly lost, or perhaps never experienced, always potential and carrying fear of violence.’

The fact that Sylvie’s disappearance provokes not only the memory of her mother’s abandonment, but also the fear of her own death and disembodiment, demonstrates the extent to which the boundaries between herself, her mother and Sylvie have collapsed. Sylvie returns and we are once again presented with an image of mother-child holding. She opens her coat and wraps it around Ruth, in such a way that ‘prevented even the seep of light through [Ruth’s] eyelids’, rocking her to some unsung rhythm and simply repeating ‘I know, I know, I know’ (160-1). This moment clearly echoes Lucille’s dream cited earlier in the novel. While Lucille recognised this for the threat to her identity that it was, however, Ruth wears Sylvie’s coat ‘like beatitude’ (161). This is not to say, of course, that Ruth does not acknowledge the power dynamics at play here. She recognises ‘the pleasure she took in my dependency’, and the fact that ‘her expression was intent and absorbed. There was nothing of distance or civility in it. It was as if she was studying my face in a mirror’ (161). What is more, she acknowledges that: ‘I was angry that she had left me for so long, […] that by abandoning me she had assumed the power to bestow such a richness of grace, [yet] I would say nothing that might make her loosen her grasp or take one step away’ (161).

This moment is a clear example of Ghent’s definition of submission as ‘an agonizing, though at times temporarily exciting masquerade […]: a self-negating submissive experience

in which the person is enthralled by the other’. It is notable, therefore, that as her connection with Sylvie intensifies, the strength of agency found in those striking narrative digressions wanes. As they row back to Fingerbone, Ruth muses: ‘Say that water lapped over the gunwales, and I swelled and swelled until I burst Sylvie’s coat. Say that the water and I bore the rowboat down to the bottom, and I, miraculously, monstrously, drank water into all my pores until the last black cranny of my brain was a trickle, a spillet’ (162). Unlike those earlier instances of this patterning that draw the reader into Ruth’s subjectivity, I would argue that this is precluded in this passage in that the moment has become so detached from external reality that it offers no frame of shared reference. Sylvie and Ruth return to the town and the final chapter of the novel sees them attempt to burn down the family home before embarking on a life together as drifters. As they depart from Fingerbone, Ruth remarks: ‘I think that night we were almost a single person’ (209). In her reading of the novel’s ending, Karen Walker asserts that

Robinson achieves a more positive ending for her women characters […] At last, Sylvie and Ruthie can revel in being “cast out to wander,” can rejoice in the “end to housekeeping,” together and alone. […] Sylvie and Ruthie become able not only to self-define what female or domestic community means, but also to claim autonomy.

In light of the reading ventured here, however, I would argue that Walker’s sense of a positive ending for Ruth and Sylvie is highly problematic, particularly when we consider the closing passages of the novel:

Imagine Lucille in Boston […] Sylvie and I do not flounce in through the door […] My mother, likewise, is not there, and my grandmother […] and my grandfather […] does not examine the menu with studious interest. We are nowhere in Boston. However Lucille may look, she will never find us there, or any trace or sign. We pause nowhere in Boston, even to admire a store window, and the perimeters of our wandering are nowhere. […] She does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie. (218-19)

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Here we find a complete reversal from that imperative voice employed elsewhere in the novel. Where before these passages served to draw Ruth’s lost ancestors into her real-world experience, here the same technique sees Ruth herself draw into their ghostly world. As such, this recurring stylistic trope reads as a narrative marker for Ruth’s progressive detachment from her everyday reality or, more specifically, her gradual transition towards inhabiting liminality – a skewed echo of Emerson’s notion that ‘power resides in the moment of transition’.84 Rather than being able to ‘claim autonomy’, the repeated negation within these final pages enacts, to recall Ghent, the ‘self-negating submissive [nature of Ruth’s] experience’ (112). Thinking back, there is a distinct irony in Ruth’s earlier fear of being forced by Lucille to ‘slip across the wide frontiers into that other world [where she] could never wish to go’ (123) – is her fate by the end of the novel a more hopeful trajectory for a female character? It is hard to see how it could be argued so and I would thus contest Walker’s suggestion that Ruth and Sylvie are somehow able to ‘self-define what female or domestic community means’.

In *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, Robinson discusses Sylvie’s function within the novel. She begins by acknowledging that her ‘one great objection to the American hero was that he was inevitably male – in decayed forms egregiously male’.85 Robinson here evokes that ubiquitous image of the self-reliant patriarch exemplified, as we will see in the following chapter, in both Transcendentalist philosophy and (in increasingly decayed forms) in the ideology of the American West. Robinson herself traces this trajectory of the American hero from Whitman (‘the outsider’) and Thoreau (‘the critic’) to ‘the vernacular tradition of the Western myth [in which] he is a rescuer and avenger’, recognising that ‘in every version, he expresses discontent with society’ (92). For Robinson, however, ‘there is no inevitable

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84 Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Self-Reliance’, in *Selected Prose and Poetry*, pp. 72-93 (p. 84).
conflict between individualism as an ideal and a very positive interest in the good of society’ (92). This is borne out within her characterisation of Sylvie, in which Robinson contends that her aim was to envision ‘a female hero, of sorts, also an outsider and a stranger’ (92). She continues: ‘while Sylvie obviously has her own history, to the degree that she has not taken the impress of society she expresses the fact that human nature is replete with nameless possibilities, and, by implication, that the world is accessible to new ways of understanding’ (92)

In light of my reading above, however, can we really say that Sylvie’s mode of living reflects a world ‘replete with nameless possibilities’, or that Ruth and Sylvie’s trajectory suggests a world open ‘to new ways of understanding’? Several critics have argued as such, positioning Sylvie and her way of life as the novel’s liberating force and as the non-conformist solution to the conventional way of life signified by Lucille. Often this is drawn out in terms of Sylvie’s apparent affinity with the natural world: Galehouse, for instance, makes reference to her ‘hobo habits, which are informed, more than anything, by the unpredictability of Mother Nature’. She later aligns Sylvie more explicitly with Emersonian principles, in her assertion that ‘Robinson revises Emerson’s notions of the dominion of man in her presentation of Sylvie, who is conducted by nature as often as she conducts it’. I would argue, however, that Sylvie is actually more closely aligned with man-made, urban imagery rather than the natural. For example, Ruth remarks that ‘Sylvie had no awareness of time’ and while this may initially be aligned with a Transcendentalist sense of living in the rhythms of nature, she goes on to clarify that ‘for [Sylvie], hours and minutes were the names of trains’ (165-6). Indeed, the railroad comes to be intrinsically linked to Sylvie throughout the narrative and she is located less in the natural landscape and more often on bridges, park

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87 ‘Their Own Private Idaho’, p. 131.
benches, or in a boat. Moreover, it is striking that in the novel’s closing pages Ruth and Sylvie are depicted not in fields, or woods, or by a lake, but in the city, window shopping and supporting themselves by waitressing. As such, I would argue that *Housekeeping* precludes any privileging of either of the two potential futures presented within the novel, and that both are bound by those teleological principles that Emerson and his fellow Transcendentalists sought to undermine. Thus I would suggest that the ending may be read as ultimately upholding as opposed to subverting dominant ideals of female experience in their suggestion that the space for those unwilling to conform is … nowhere.

Such a reading is borne out by Robinson’s own remarks when asked to respond to readings of *Housekeeping* which foreground the numerous oppositions within the novel – and particularly the assumption that Sylvie’s way of life is privileged over that of Lucille and the other townspeople: ‘When I write in general I try not to create oppositions. What I’ve tried to do whenever there are conflicts is to make both sides as equal as possible.’\(^{88}\) In this context, given Ruth’s position as a mediating perspective between the seemingly binary options represented by Lucille and Sylvie – indeed, her position as the potential space of thirdness from which Robinson examines these opposing trajectories – I conclude here by suggesting that it is ultimately Ruth rather than Sylvie who most readily embodies the New Transcendentalist perspective ventured throughout this thesis. The previous chapter has already established how Robinson understands her tendency to open dialogical space in her writings as one of the most significant ways in which she has been influenced by the nineteenth-century New England (and particularly Emersonian) tradition. Ruth exemplifies this sensibility in her capacity to hold contradictory elements in tension. We have already seen this in her tendency (as a narrative voice) to experience the world at the intersection

between fantasy and reality, and also within her capacity to recognise the simultaneity of beauty and hostility in the natural environment. Elsewhere, Robinson draws attention to Ruth’s ability to conceive of a mode of living in which stasis and transience are not mutually exclusive: ‘It seemed to me that if [Sylvie] could remain transient here, she would not have to leave’ (103). Robinson encapsulates the anti-teleological perspective that is so integral to Transcendentalist writings. For Ruth, however, as I suggest is integral to the New Transcendentalist perspective, this recognition of productive ambivalence is not simply an abstract sense of ‘poetic creativeness’, but a mode which is itself prefigured by and thus borne out of her intersectional lived experience.

MODELLING INTERSUBJECTIVITY II: DIOTIMA’S DIALECTIC

Irigaray opens An Ethics of Sexual Difference with a reading of Plato’s Symposium, the first in a series of dialogues between herself and – similarly to Emerson’s Representative Men – six significant men of Western philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas (5). Irigaray focuses her attention on Diotima, the woman to whom Plato ‘gives the floor’ in his dialogue on love (20). Yet, as Irigaray recognises, ‘[s]he does not take part in these exchanges or in this meal among men. She is not there. She herself does not speak. Socrates reports or recounts her words’ (20). What Diotima presents in absentia and proleptically, however, is, Irigaray contends, an alternative to the Hegelian dialectic, one which ‘doesn't use opposition to make the first term pass into the second in order to achieve a synthesis of the two’ (20). Rather, Diotima's voice establishes an intermediary that will never be abandoned as a means or a path [but instead] unveils the instance of a third term that is already there and that permits progression [and represents] the existence or the in-stance of that which stands between, that which makes possible the passage between ignorance and knowledge. [...] The mediator is never abolished in an infallible knowledge. Everything is always in movement, in a state of becoming. (20-1)
The backwards shift Irigaray identifies here from a Hegelian dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis to a Diotimian dialectic that proposes ‘at least four terms: the here, the two poles of the encounter, and the beyond – but a beyond that never abolishes the here’, coupled with the notion of ‘an intermediary that will never be abandoned as a means or a path’, has clear resonances with the Transcendentalist mode of liminality explored throughout this thesis, particularly as articulated in Emerson’s notion of ‘[residing] in the moment of transition from a past to a new state’, and, by extension, the resultant shift identified in the previous chapter from understanding Emerson’s poetics as one of transition towards one of liminality (20-21). 89 Building on that earlier analysis, here we explore the implications of Diotima’s dialectic across three texts: Diotima’s speech in Plato’s Symposium, Irigaray’s response to that speech in An Ethics of Sexual Difference, and Emerson’s 1844 essay, ‘The Poet’. I argue that while they place their emphasis on different elements of the dialectic – Emerson on its implications for art and the artist, and Irigaray on its implications for love and the lover – both texts are underpinned by the logic (or, we might say, the liminal poetics) of Diotima’s dialectic.

Throughout Diotima’s speech we see, again, the close interrelation of model and mode that characterises the work of the various writers considered throughout this thesis – New England Transcendentalists, recent and current theorists, and Solnit, Dillard, Adnan and Robinson alike. Indeed, Irigaray identifies this as an integral aspect of Diotima’s method, remarking that ‘this mediating role is indicated as part of the theme, but is also perpetually at issue, on stage, in the exposition of the theme’ as Diotima ‘ceaselessly examines Socrates on his positions but without positing authoritative, already constituted truths’ (21-2). Here, much like Dillard’s method exemplified throughout Pilgrim at Tinker Creek and discussed at length in the previous chapter, Diotima demonstrates a knowing self-assurance whilst

89 ‘Self-Reliance’, p. 84.
simultaneously calling into question, quite literally, received notions of power and wisdom. Diotima – by extension, Irigaray too – presents love as ‘a mediator par excellence’ between all oppositions, and particularly between ‘reality and already established knowledge’ (21). Irigaray goes on to describe love as that which is ‘never fulfilled, always becoming’ and which ‘both leads the way and is the path’ (21). Despite the biblical overtones of this latter description, however, both Diotima and Irigaray refute the notion of Love (anthropomorphised interchangeably as Love/Eros throughout Irigaray’s essay) as a god, but instead emphasise its daemonic qualities: ‘He is neither mortal nor immortal. He is between the one and the other’ (21-2).90 ‘His function’, Irigaray contends, ‘is to transmit to the gods what comes from men and to men what comes from the gods’ (23). She goes on to describe love as that which ‘puts everything in touch with itself’, and asserts that ‘a being of middle nature is needed so that men and gods can enter into relations, into conversation while awake or asleep’ (23). Recognising Eros as the offspring of Plenty and Poverty (translated in the original Plato text used throughout this section as Resource and Need respectively), Irigaray follows Diotima in characterising Eros as a philosopher, and thus as ‘a seeker after wisdom [who is] midway between wise and ignorant’ and forever existing in a state between having and lacking.91 Diotima also asserts the inevitability of Eros’s love of and perpetual quest for beauty, having been conceived ‘on the day of Aphrodite’s birth [when] the gods were making merry’.92 Clearly, both characterisations resonate strongly with Emerson’s idealised figure of the poet, whose liminal perspective has been discussed within the previous chapter.

90 For an example of the ‘biblical overtones’ I allude to here, see Proverbs 3 and 4, New American Standard Bible, and particularly lines 10-12 of the latter: ‘Hear, my son, and accept my sayings, And the years of your life will be many. / I have directed you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in upright paths. / […] Take hold of instruction; do not let go. / Guard her, for she is your life.’ While it is outside the scope of this discussion, much could be made here of the resonances between themes of father-son genealogies, wisdom and love, ‘teleological quests’, and the mother as patriarchally-determined object.
As we have seen, Emerson’s ideal poet ‘stands between partial men for the complete man’, much like the figure Diotima describes who ‘puts everything in touch with itself’. Emerson positions his ideal poet as one who appears to the common man as ‘more himself than he is’, and stresses that, much like Diotima’s philosopher (the offspring of Plenty and Poverty who is ‘never altogether in or out of need’), ‘so the poet's habit of living should be set on a key so low and plain, that the common influences should delight him’. The essay goes on to posit that ‘the man is only half himself, the other half is his expression’, and thus that ‘we need an interpreter’. He contends that this duty – much like Diotima’s notion of a being through whom ‘men and gods can enter into relations, into conversation while awake or asleep’ – falls to the poet, ‘the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart’. Indeed, in keeping with his ‘middle nature’, Emerson’s poet is a ‘liberating god […] who shall sing of gods and their descent unto men’, who ‘unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene’.

The daemonic nature of both art and love and the relationship between these two interrelated concepts is central to both Diotima’s speech and Irigaray’s essay. For Diotima, the term poet itself reflects ‘just the same mistake’ as is made when we ‘give the name of Love to what is only one single aspect of it’. She continues:

> every kind of artistic creation is poetry, and every artist is a poet. […] But all the same, we don’t call them all poets do we? […] And that’s how it is with Love. For Love […] includes every kind of longing for happiness and for the good […] the man who

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93 Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘The Poet’, in *Selected Prose and Poetry*, pp. 121-40 (p. 133). The use of masculine pronouns throughout this section and elsewhere when discussing Emerson’s image of the idealised poet is not intended to indicate a gendered ideal of the poet on my own behalf, but to reflect that of Emerson who only ever refers to ‘The Poet’ as male.


95 ‘The Poet’, p. 123.


devotes himself to what is only one of Love’s many activities is given the name that should apply to all the rest as well.\textsuperscript{98}

In her response, Irigaray is more closely concerned with exploring Diotima’s suggestion that ‘like love, the philosopher would be […] sort of a barefoot waif who goes out under the stars seeking an encounter with reality’ as opposed to ‘a learned person who […] knows everything, and pedantically instructs us in the corpus of things already coded’ (24). ‘How does it happen’, she asks, ‘that love and the philosopher are generally represented otherwise?’ (24). This misrepresentation, Irigaray posits, is borne out of the fact that ‘they are imagined as beloveds and not as lovers. As a beloved, Love, both like and unlike the philosopher, is imagined to be of unparalleled beauty […] Yet the lover is of an entirely different nature. He goes toward what is kind, beautiful, perfect, and so on. He doesn’t possess it’ (24-5). While Emerson never cites Diotima’s dialogue directly here (despite Plato’s relevance being acknowledged at the outset of his essay and gestured towards throughout), ‘The Poet’ unites aspects of both perspectives, as we see within the following passage:

the Universe has three children, born at one time, which reappear, under different names, in every system of thought […] but which we will call here, the Knower, the Doer, and the Sayer. These stand respectively for the love of truth, for the love of good, and for the love of beauty. These three are equal. Each is that which he is essentially, so that he cannot be surmounted or analyzed, and each of these three has the power of the others latent in him, and his own patent.

The poet is the sayer, the namier, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre.\textsuperscript{99}

Anticipating both the ‘transitional surfaces’ of his 1850 essay on Plato and the tripartite structures found within the intersubjective models considered throughout this chapter, this passage also allows us to combine a consideration of Diotima’s perspective with an anticipation of Irigaray’s focus. For the double meaning of represents here positions the poet

\textsuperscript{98} ‘Symposium’, pp. 39-40.

\textsuperscript{99} ‘The Poet’, p. 123.
ambivalently as equally one who strives to articulate (goes toward) beauty through his words and as one who embodies (possesses) beauty in his own right.

If this relationship between the daemonic nature of love and art is an aspect of Diotima’s speech that Irigaray finds particularly compelling, however, the majority of her essay sees her take issue with Diotima’s apparent inconsistency. Elaborating on the analogy she draws between the philosopher and knowledge, the poet and beauty, and the lover and the beloved, she argues that, as her speech progresses, '[Diotima] seeks a case for love in the animal world: procreation. [...] From this point on, she leads love into a split between mortality and immortality, and love loses its daemonic character' (27). Irigaray sees this tendency to understand the child as ‘a beloved who is an end [which] is substituted for love between men and women’ as one which pervades Western culture more generally (27). She argues that through this conflation of love with the act of procreation,

the pair of lovers cannot safeguard the place for love as a third term between them, [so] they can neither remain lovers nor give birth to lovers. Something becomes frozen in space-time, with the loss of a vital intermediary and of an accessible transcendental that remains alive. A sort of teleological triangle is put into place instead of a perpetual journey, a perpetual transvaluation, a permanent becoming. For this, love was the vehicle (27; emphasis added).

The final pages of her response see Irigaray developing this notion of ‘an accessible transcendental that remains alive’ (27). Recognising, like Diotima, that a ‘perpetual renewal takes place [...] here and now in everyone, male and female, as far as corporeal and spiritual realities are concerned’, Irigaray calls for a conception of love that is ‘at once physical and spiritual, between the lovers, and not already codified duty, will, desire’ (28). Irigaray contends that this is only possible once we recognise the divine nature of the corporeal, and that to do so we must start by recognising the beauty of all bodies and not just that of the beloved: ‘from the attraction to a single beautiful body, he passes then to many; and from there to the beauty residing in souls’ (31). Quoting Diotima, Irigaray continues: ‘He will then have the vision of beauty “which is eternal, not growing up or perishing, increasing or
decreasing [...] never waxing, never waning, never impaired” (32; italics in original, ellipsis mine). The ability to recognise this co-existence between the physical and spiritual is integral to Irigaray’s notion of a ‘sensible transcendental’, a state which recognises ‘the material texture of beauty’, and understands it as ‘that which confounds the opposition between immanence and transcendence [and provides] an already sensible horizon on the basis of which everything else would appear’ (32-3).

Exploring the concept of the sensible transcendental in relation to Irigaray’s wider writings on phallogocentrism, Carolyn M. Tilghman describes it as a philosophical approach which ‘paradoxically fuses mind with body while, at the same time, it maintains the tension of adjacent but separate concepts, thereby providing a fruitful locus for changes to the symbolic order’. 100 Tilghman’s reading posits that in order to achieve a sensible transcendental, men must relinquish their claims to both language and women, and women must in turn reclaim their bodies and thus their subject position as those ‘who always reflect the divine’ (40). ‘The result of this relinquishment by men and this reclamation by women’, Tilghman contends, ‘will be a more ethical and satisfying relationship between the sexes. As such, the expression of the sensible transcendental can render substantive benefits to the lived realities of both men and women’ (46). This chapter has already problematised the efficacy of Irigaray’s suggestion that such a shift requires the complete overhaul of our current semiotic system, and Tilghman likewise acknowledges ‘the sheer improbability of its happening in the discernible future’ (46). However, she argues that Irigaray’s deployment of terms including the sensible transcendental may be able to achieve ‘slow, but discernible, change in how we think and construct reality [...] by persistently and consistently troubling received ideas through the use of language that disrupts the binary oppositions underpinning key power

relations that structure the way things are’ (46-7). This concept of the sensible transcendental, then, recalls Benoit’s contention that Emerson privileges ‘neither spirit nor matter’, and also draws together the intersecting themes of love, art, philosophy and nature that inform the writings of Plato, Emerson and Irigaray. If those writings go some way towards elucidating these ideas in abstraction, the following section reads Dillard’s *The Maytrees* (2007) as a novel in which the ideas coalesce whilst still retaining their tensions.


In 2007, Annie Dillard added a short second afterword to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in which she briefly addresses two related points. The first, discussed in the previous chapter, acknowledges a fond regret at her use of the first person throughout *Pilgrim*, through which, by her own admission, she tried ‘to be – in Emerson’s ever-ludicrous phrase – a transparent eyeball’ (283). The second recognises ‘how a writer’s style matures into spareness’, and posits that such an evolution may be traced through a comparison between her first book’s ‘excited eloquence and its metaphysical boldness’ and the pared-down prose of her then just published novel, *The Maytrees*. Yet the shift between these two narratives goes beyond the stylistic. Where *Pilgrim* is, as Dillard asserts, ‘a young writer’s book’, an intricate and introspective account of a solitary sojourn into nature, *The Maytrees* spans the lifetime of two people’s love: for one another, for literature, and for the landscape around them. As such, while *Pilgrim* may indeed be read as a young writer’s book – produced by someone feeling she must omit the domestic, suburban, marital contexts in which she was writing for fear such exposition would preclude her from the male-dominated tradition in which she is attempting to position herself – the more recent novel inverts this dynamic, projecting the ebbs and flows of marital intimacy onto a landscape that is suffused with America’s patriarchal history.
The narrative follows the lives of Lou and Toby Maytree, a couple living in Provincetown at ‘the tip of Cape Cod’, Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{101} The liminal nature of the town is foregrounded within the novel’s opening lines: Provincetown is described as ‘what still seems antiquity’s very surface’, a ‘peninsula [which] was narrow between waters’, and ‘a naked strand between two immensities’ (3). And if Provincetown may be considered a liminal place on account of its geology, its history renders it equally so, as it marks the very spot where \textit{The Mayflower} and the Pilgrim Fathers dropped anchor in 1620 – a fact which adds a rather intriguing dimension to the novel’s title. Equally inviting is the parallel that may be drawn here to the liminal context Victor Turner found himself in as he began his first work on liminality. Recalling the period during which they were awaiting their visas ahead of Victor taking up a post at Cornell University, Edith Turner writes: ‘We were in a state of suspense. The place of our waiting was on the margin of the sea, roughly at the spot where William the Conqueror first penetrated Britain […] while Hastings itself was felt to be a threshold, a gateway.’\textsuperscript{102} Robert Daly draws his own connection between this liminal period in the Turners’ lives, during which they were ‘no longer quite British, not yet quite American’, and the experience of those first Pilgrims who struck out for the New World.\textsuperscript{103} He recognises the liminal status of those early settlers, and – drawing on the work of Andrew Delbanco – asserts that the American experience ‘[has] been so intermittently ever since’, founded as it is upon the American Dream of radical self-renewal.\textsuperscript{104}

Just as Dillard’s style has ‘matured into spareness’, so too has the landscape that her narrative depicts, shifting from the fecund abundance of Tinker Creek to the rolling dunes of

\textsuperscript{101} Annie Dillard, \textit{The Maytrees} (London: Hesperus Press, 2008), p. 3. Dillard has since published \textit{The Abundance} (2016), though this is a volume of previously published essays collected together for the first time rather than an entirely new text.
\textsuperscript{104} ‘Liminality and Fiction’, p. 72.
this ‘exposed and mineral sandspit’ (3). It is in this light that the novel’s setting takes on an even greater significance, for here we may draw a direct parallel to the trajectory of Thoreau’s writings. If many have acknowledged the similarities between Tinker Creek and Walden Pond, the setting of this last novel may be even more clearly paralleled with that of Thoreau’s Cape Cod (1865), for The Maytrees is located in the very spaces that Thoreau describes in that text. Indeed, the last chapter of Thoreau’s book is entitled ‘Provincetown’; its closing lines describe the town’s shoreline as a place where ‘a man may stand […] and put all America behind him’.\textsuperscript{105} Thoreau’s Cape Cod is a text in which the sea and the sand are all pervasive, a text which reflects, Leila Hatch contends, Thoreau’s belief that ‘it is those who recognize themselves as a part of the ocean’s infinite cycling who live in the greatest balance between culture and nature, matter and spirit’.\textsuperscript{106}

In her review of The Maytrees for The Washington Post, Marilynne Robinson recognises Dillard as a writer whose work articulates just such a balance, contending that ‘the beauty and obsession of her work are always the integration of being, at the grandest scales of our knowledge of it, with the intimate and momentary sense of life lived’.\textsuperscript{107} Given the premise of this thesis and the rarity with which Robinson comments on the work of her contemporaries, her deep admiration for Dillard as evidenced throughout this review is striking, as is the level of engagement with her wider writings that her comments indicate. Speaking of The Maytrees specifically, Robinson describes the novel as ‘vast and elusive and inexhaustible’ but equally one which evokes ‘a resolute this-worldliness that startles the reader again and again’.\textsuperscript{108} It is in this sense, I argue, that The Maytrees – and, indeed,

Dillard’s wider body of work – posits a vision of a sensible transcendental, that Irigarayan concept which articulates ‘the material texture of beauty’, in such a way that ‘confounds the opposition between immanence and transcendence [and provides] an already sensible horizon on the basis of which everything else would appear’. If a pervasive sense of the ‘ocean’s infinite cycling’ is one ‘already sensible horizon’ of this narrative, another is the shifting tide of the Maytrees’ enduring intimacy. A novel in which, as Robinson notes, ‘nothing especially remarkable happens’, it is these two constants that hold this shifting narrative together and by which it is borne along. As such, similarly to the other texts considered throughout this chapter, Dillard’s Transcendentalist perspective – and the liminal poetics that is borne out of that perspective – becomes the backdrop against which she explores the complexities and ambivalences of the dialogical relationship between self and other; a means by which she sets the often contradictory Romantic and romantic ideals of Western culture into dialogue with one another.

Dillard herself describes the novel as a ‘human tale’ of ‘a woman and a man, both simplified and enlarged’, in which ‘everyone and everything represents itself alone’. In line with Emerson’s notion that ‘the poet’s habit of living should be set on a key so low and plain’, the couple’s lifestyle reflects many Transcendentalist ideals: they ‘lived often outside’ and spend summers in their ‘one-room shack in the parabolic sand dunes’; neither is willing to ‘sacrifice their free time for a job’ and they have ‘no car, no television […], no insurance, no savings’; ‘their city friends envied their peace’ and ‘nothing about them was rich except their days swollen with time’ (3-5). Like Thoreau, the Maytrees are certainly a couple who ‘recognize themselves as a part of the ocean's infinite cycling’. As the narrative asserts: ‘Clams lived like this but without so much reading’ (4). Moreover, in much the same way as

109 An Ethics of Sexual Difference, pp. 32-3.
110 Pilgrim, p. 283.
Irigaray describes Diotima’s mode in the *Symposium, The Maytrees* is a novel in which love’s ‘mediating role is indicated as part of the theme, but is also perpetually at issue, on stage, in the exposition of the theme’. The couple’s first meeting reads as a scene straight out of an all-American romance novel: a young army veteran (who, to reiterate his male-lead credentials, has also spent time as a cowboy out West) arrives back in town after the war and is dazzled by a young Ingrid Bergman lookalike, who cycles past wearing ‘a red scarf, white shirt, skin clean as eggshell, wide eyes and mouth, shorts’: ‘her loveliness caught his breath’ (7). An idealised courtship ensues: walks in the ‘otherworldly’ dunes at sunrise (11), Maytree tentative ‘lest he injure her trust’ (8), Lou ‘afraid of […] his over real eyes, of her breathing, everything’ (19). Their relationship is consistently described as equally transcendent and visceral: ‘After they married [Lou] learned to feel their skin as double-sided. They felt a pause. Theirs was too much feeling to push through the crack that led down to the dim world of time and stuff. That world was gone. They held themselves alert only in those few million cells where they touched’ (27). In these opening chapters, the Maytrees’ love reflects just that sense of ‘perpetual becoming’ that Diotima, Irigaray and Emerson aspire to: Maytree ‘[falls] in love with Lou again and again’, and Lou ‘wanted only a lifelong look at his face and his long-legged shambly self, broken by intervals of kissing’ (19). Given the intensity with which their love plays out in the novel’s prologue, it is all the more surprising that the catalyst for the novel proper is in fact their separation, when Maytree departs for Maine to embark on a twenty-year affair with their mutual friend, Deary. We may draw an analogy, then, between the structure and trajectory of this novel and the Irigarayan notion of a sensible transcendental which ‘paradoxically fuses mind with body while, at the same time, it maintains a tension of adjacent but separate concepts’. I would argue that, as a literary construct, Lou and Toby’s

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111 *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 21.
relationship plays out just such an ‘adjacent but separate’ tension, and that it is in this sense that love functions throughout the novel as that which ‘both leads the way and is the path’ for the novel’s interrelated meditations on wisdom and knowledge, the role of literature and of the poet. In what follows, I offer a comparative reading of the ‘separate yet connected’ narrative trajectories of the Maytrees, positing that while it is their enduring love for one another that sets the parameters of the narrative, it is in the dialogue that is set up between Lou and Toby’s separate outlooks that the novel most readily bears out the paradoxes of the Diotiman dialectic outlined in the previous section.

We learn in the novel’s opening pages that ‘after the war, Maytree became a poet of the forties and fifties and sixties’, and that alongside his published projects he dedicates innumerable ‘red-speckled notebooks […] not to marriage, but to love’ (9). The narrative is punctuated throughout with the questions posed within these notebooks, many of which are themselves taken from other literary works: ‘Do women in love feel as men do? Do men love as women love?’, and ‘Keats’s […] possibly unrelated but similarly unanswerable question: Who enjoyed lovemaking more – the man or the woman?’ (31). Years later, however, these innumerable notebooks have ‘expanded, without clarifying, this theme’ (9). As lover, poet and philosopher, Maytree’s narrative trajectory bears out the numerous paradoxes Irigaray recognises between these elements of Diotima’s speech. On the one hand, at the level of narrative, Maytree is an exemplar of that ‘barefoot waif who goes out under the stars seeking an encounter with reality’.113 Quite literally, in fact: Lou is struck when she first meets him and he arrives ‘barefoot at daybreak [asking] if she would like to see his dune shack’ (11), and he can often be found stargazing: ‘he stood on the foredune’s lip and looked at the stars over the ocean. A wider life breathed in him, and things’ rims stirred and reared back’ (30). On the other hand, within the world of the narrative he is consistently presented – from the

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113 An Ethics of Sexual Difference, p. 24.
perspective of the other characters, at least (including himself) – as the ‘learned person who […] knows everything, and pedantically instructs us in the corpus of things already coded’.\textsuperscript{114} Lou describes Maytree at the outset of the narrative as a man who ‘knew everything, including, and perhaps specializing in, love’ (16). Of his published works, we are told of one project in particular, a book-length, three-part poem, entitled \textit{Wood End Light and Race Point}, in which two Provincetown lighthouses represent ‘Aristotelean thought on the one hand and Platonic thought on the other’ (19). Maytree asks Lou to read a couple of sections, to which she responds: ‘Now all you have to do is reconcile them’ (20). ‘Right you are’, he accepts, ‘[a]ll I have to do is propose a metaphysic to cap Western thought. That year, Maytree was ready’ (20). As we have seen, integral to Irigaray’s response to Diotima’s speech is her sense that ‘Love, both like and unlike the philosopher is imagined to be of unparalleled beauty […] Yet the lover […] goes toward what is kind, beautiful, perfect, and so on. He doesn’t possess it.’\textsuperscript{115} Maytree’s failure to differentiate between the unparalleled beauty of Love and the unparalleled beauty of the beloved, coupled with his desire to possess the latter is a constant theme running throughout the narrative. When he first introduces himself to Lou the narrative notes his sense that ‘her wide eyes, apertures opening, seemed preposterously to tell him, I and these my arms are for you’: ‘I know, he thought back at the stranger, this long-limbed girl. I know and I am right with you’ (7). Dillard draws attention to Maytree’s desire to claim ownership over Lou on a number of occasions: ‘the two ignored parity’, we are told at the end of the opening chapter, ‘He slept with a long leg flung over her, as a dog claims a stick’ (6). We are also told that while ‘Maytree wanted [Lou’s] heart. […] She was outside his reach’ (9), and later that the fact ‘he did not possess her childhood drove him wild’ (38). Maytree’s narrative trajectory is thus constantly characterised by the

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\textsuperscript{114} An Ethics of Sexual Difference, p. 24.  \\
\textsuperscript{115} An Ethics of Sexual Difference, pp. 24-5.
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‘teleological quest’ he sets himself, forever striving to possess not only love (via the beloved) but also wisdom.

Years later, Maytree looks back on his Provincetown life with Lou from the perspective of his life in Maine with Deary, musing upon numerous explanations ventured as to the possibility of lasting love. Is it the case that the ‘beloved is love’s hat rack’ for ‘an enormous sack of love [the lover] hands whole from one beloved to another’ (110)? Is love ultimately delusional given that ‘the heart never learns and keeps leaping the length of its life’ (110)? Had ‘he never really loved Lou [and] found in Deary his true mate at last’ (110)? All such explanations that dismiss love as ‘imaginary or theatre, or inertia, or convenience’ are ultimately ‘apostasized’. For, in retrospect, Maytree is now able to recognise that ‘he had truly loved Lou for years and still did’ (110). Thus does he also reject Lucretius’s suggestion that ‘love was only a shudder mammals used to procreate’ – he ponders the notion that ‘lasting love makes no sense after the kids can hunt and gather’: ‘Screw that. […] That it was outside science’s lens did not mean it did not exist’ (110-11). While no satisfactory explanation presents itself, it is at this juncture that Maytree recognises that his enduring love for Lou is undeniable, and that while he had once loved Deary, this was now ‘a while he had been prolonging’ (112). Obliged to love Deary, Maytree had ‘wrapped his hands around oars, iced them fast, and kept rowing’ (112).

If the narrative ostensibly presents Maytree as the representative poet-philosopher-lover of this text, however, I would suggest that Dillard’s characterisation of Lou presents another philosophical mode that is more in keeping with the liminal, anti-teleological perspective so integral to both the Diotiman dialectic outlined above and the New Transcendentalism proposed throughout this thesis. In stark contrast to Maytree’s effusiveness, Lou is altogether more enigmatic, embodying a number of seemingly contradictory impulses. The narrative asserts that ‘her height and stillness made her look like
a statue’ and that ‘her courtesy, her compliance, and especially her silence dated from a time otherwise gone’ (5). At the same time, however, we are told that ‘intimacy came easily to her, but strangers could not see it’ (5). Her silence is a recurring theme ‘[making] her complicit, innocent as beasts, oracular’; while she ‘barely said a word’ in their early days of courting, she leaves Maytree ‘tongue-tied’ (8). We are told that her ‘candid glance […] contained neither answer nor question, only a spreading pleasure’ (8).

‘When we see through Lou’s eyes’, Robinson’s review asserts, ‘it is as if the objects of her attention lift off the page. Her awareness invests the world with a dimensionality and presence, […] she is always brilliantly attentive’. And it is no surprise that such a protagonist should appeal to Robinson, for there are many parallels that may be drawn between Lou and Housekeeping’s Ruth. Indeed, the similarities are all the more intriguing given Dillard’s own acknowledgement of her admiration for Robinson’s debut novel – in Encounters with Chinese Writers (1984), Dillard muses on her favourite American novels and Robinson’s Housekeeping is one of the two books she explicitly mentions. In this light, let us consider the following passage from Housekeeping: ‘[m]y life seemed composed entirely of expectation. […] That most moments were the same did not detract at all from the possibility that the next moment might be utterly different. And so the ordinary demanded unblinking attention. Any tedious hour might be the last of its kind’ (166). Compare this with the strikingly similar outlook acknowledged by Lou within her assertion that ‘Child Lou had no inkling […] that this was her final glimpse of her wonderful father. She could not remember what he ate, said, or read. She began to suspect that many moments were possibly last ones. She strove to impress what she could on her memory’ (75). As these passages indicate, both Ruth and Lou live their lives teetering on the edge of a perpetual present – an

outlook which, for both women, is borne out of childhood abandonment. Yet where for Ruth abandonment results in existential crisis, for Lou it becomes an opportunity to embrace that solitude that she has always felt so keenly. Indeed, even at the height of their romance Lou senses that ‘[e]very day she failed to tell him about herself and her solitude she led him further astray’ (18). Thrown back on her own resources when Maytree departs, Lou ‘enjoyed benefits. […] At last she had time to think. […] Here it was, all she ever wanted: a free mind. She wanted to figure out. With which unknown should she begin?’ (73). If her grief at having lost Maytree is ‘an edge from which she could only slip’, then, it is this deep attentiveness to the present to which she clings: ‘[t]his was the out-of-earshot life she cobbled from her freedom’ (164). Lou’s outlook on life is summed up late in the novel:

Books must know something. She dug from every direction. The bravest foray would be to try it, to hold all human consciousness, past or present, etc., in awareness…. Or just stay aware that… or just stay aware. She was wary. Conceding that there could be a point – merely granting it as a long shot – might lead to a mess. Both time’s back wall and front wall fell open. […] She felt she had gained, oh, half a millimeter on these questions over her lifetime. That is, her sense of the vastness of each aspect multiplied, and the more it expanded, the denser the questions grew. (163-4)

To draw this reading together, let us turn back to Tilghman’s assertion that in order to achieve a sensible transcendental, men must relinquish their claims to both language and women, and women must in turn reclaim their bodies and thus their subject position as those ‘who always reflect the divine’ (40). ‘The result of this relinquishment by men and this reclamation by women’, Tilghman contends, ‘will be a more ethical and satisfying relationship between the sexes. As such, the expression of the sensible transcendental can render substantive benefits to the lived realities of both men and women’ (46). It may be said that it’s just such a resolution we find in the closing chapters of The Maytrees. With nowhere else to turn and faced with both Deary’s and his own mortality, Maytree returns to Lou. Gone is Maytree’s obsessive and futile writings: ‘he had an idea, a structure, for a long poem all these last many years. But not so much as a phrase for it’ (162). Gone too is his claim over
Lou: ‘[s]he crept up and put her arms around his waist from behind. Instantly, one of his hands […] covered hers. […] His touch was with her. He was exactly with her but not holding, not pressing. Neither he nor she crossed the line beyond fond’ (165). ‘Intimacy with Lou’, Maytree realises, ‘knew no bounds. Half his life he had sounded her and never struck bottom. Perimeters edged Deary, and the girls of his youth, and for that matter himself and everyone he knew. Lou held nothing back, but he knew he never reached it all’ (171-2). Thus relinquishing his claims on language and on Lou, the couple do indeed uncover a relationship more ethical and satisfying, as they are able to hold love as a third term between them: ‘they cradled the world between them like a mortally sick child, loving it and not telling it all they knew. Now in compassion they bore, between them, their solitudes each the size of a raveled globe’ (171).

And with this renewed balance comes new perspective. ‘Tomorrow’, the final chapter begins, ‘is another day only up to a point. One summer five years later Maytree began to die all over the place’ (179). Looking back on his life in the face of his imminent death, Maytree turns to Keats once more, recognising that he has ultimately fallen short of his desire to acquire ‘knowledge enormous’, instead settling for ‘knowledge slim’ (176). It is only now that Maytree is able to meet Lou on the brink of the present:

Lou lay beside him, silent as bandages, her immense solitude so gloriously […] broached. *I wither slowly in thine arms, here at the quiet limit of the world.* […] He thought he witnessed, and was now witnessing, the cutting edge of things. Had he helped cut? *I scarcely knew how pleasantly the moments were falling.* […] Only now did he reckon beauty itself was the great thing. As a deathbed revelation this required – like most, he suspected, more thought. (183)

Having spent much of the previous section unpacking how Emerson’s figure of the poet relates to Diotima’s dialectic, in these final pages of Dillard’s novel we find an exemplar of Emerson’s marital ideal as characterised by George Kateb. In ‘Love’ (1837), Emerson muses upon what may realistically be expected when ‘two persons, a man and a woman, so variously and correlatively gifted, are shut up in one house to spend the nuptial society forty
or fifty years.’ In line with the above reading, he suggests that ‘nature, and intellect, and art emulate each other in the gifts and the melody they bring to the epithalamium.’\textsuperscript{118} Kateb’s study devotes considerable space to unpacking Emerson’s thinking regarding marital love, and concludes that ‘whatever sexual love may mean to Emerson, […] it does not have a lot to do with mental self-reliance understood as the desire to think one’s own thoughts and think them through. Love seems off to the side. Most people may not care that love appears unconnected to a poetical or philosophical reception of the world. But Emerson does’.\textsuperscript{119} As this reading shows, so too does Dillard. For the resonances between this sentiment and Lou’s recognition, expressed variously throughout the novel, that ‘all she ever wanted [was] a free mind. She wanted to figure out’ are palpable. Following Kateb’s line of argument, we find further similarities. For Kateb states that the logical extension of Emerson’s thinking on marital love asserts that ‘to gain relevance to mental self-reliance, sexual love must surpass itself and become friendship.’\textsuperscript{120} This sentiment is borne out in the closing lines of ‘Love’:

Thus are we put in training for a love which knows not sex, nor person, nor partiality, but which seeks virtue and wisdom everywhere, to the end of increasing virtue and wisdom. […] Though slowly and with pain, the objects of the affections change, as the objects of thought do. There are moments when the affections rule and absorb the man, and make his happiness dependent on a person or persons. But in health the mind is presently seen again, — its overarching vault, bright with galaxies of immutable lights, and the warm loves and fears that swept over us as clouds, must lose their finite character and blend with God, to attain their own perfection. But we need not fear that we can lose any thing by the progress of the soul. The soul may be trusted to the end. That which is so beautiful and attractive as these relations must be succeeded and supplanted only by what is more beautiful, and so on for ever.\textsuperscript{121}

Of marital love, then, as Kateb recognises, Emerson suggests

that we ‘make something really fine out of it — finer even than the early days of infatuation. Let it grow into the worthiest friendship, which is partly defined by

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Emerson and Self-Reliance}, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Emerson and Self-Reliance}, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{121} ‘Love’, p. 152.
distance. [For even] if infatuation could last, it exists to be superseded. Let distance come, and with effort it will not be the distance of dissatisfaction, but the proper distance, the distance of sympathetic detachment.\textsuperscript{122}

‘Mental self-reliance reliance’, Kateb concludes, ‘begins and may well end in solitude, but its point, which is love of the world, gathers indispensable help from the friendship in sexual love as well as the love in unsexual friendship.’\textsuperscript{123} In this final image, as Lou and Maytree ‘[bear], between them, their solitudes each the size of a raveled globe’, we find the embodiment of Emerson’s ideal.

And it is within these final pages that the novel draws back to that ‘love of the world’, by coming full circle to that Thoreauvian notion of ‘the ocean’s infinite cycling’. For all they have pondered, all they have reconciled, the novel’s closing passages pit the infinitesimal nature of their lifelong love and their literature, and their combined wisdom – what little of it they’d gained – against the beautiful and terrible perpetuity of the landscape:

Lou wondered where his information would go when he died. Would filaments of learning plant patterns on earth? […] Her brain would deliquesce too, and with it all she had learned topside. Which was not much, she considered, nor anywhere near worked out. Bacteria would unhook her painstakingly linked neurons and fling them over their shoulders and carry them home to chew up for their horrific babies. (184)

As much as any considered in the previous chapter, this passage represents an exemplar of the Transcendentalist liminal experience in nature. This time, however, the experience is not actively sought, but rather an unavoidable fact of our ever mundane, ever unfathomable existence in the margins of the much broader rhythms of the world. In \textit{The Maytrees}, Dillard’s Transcendentalist liminal poetics – her ability to hold in tension nature’s beauty and its horror, her desire to articulate the experience of absolute presence in the moment – is turned to an exploration of not simply the self in the world, but of the competing demands of

\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Emerson and Self-Reliance}, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Emerson and Self-Reliance}, p. 133.
world and the other. As such, the liminal experience is placed not in the margins of the landscape but at the centre of human existence.

Let us here return to Arsić’s question cited earlier in this chapter: ‘What kind of love relationship or friendship is predicated on the necessity of leaving?’ The three texts considered above may be read as staging the implications of this imperative, in ways which corroborate my proposition of a New Transcendentalism which challenges the Emersonian imperative to leave in favour of seeking a balanced middle ground between conflicting positions. In The Faraway Nearby, Solnit’s working through of her mother’s battle with Alzheimer’s and its implications for their fraught relationship presents a poignant and tangible notion of perpetually throwing off the past. Without attempting to definitively reconcile the ambivalences of either the relationship or her mother’s condition, Solnit’s recognition of ‘the capacity of love to move us between and beyond these limiting narratives’ situates love – much like the Diotiman dialectic discussed elsewhere in this chapter – as a balanced middle ground that allows these contradictions to coexist, and which effects just that sense of a simultaneous turning toward and turning away that is so integral to the Transcendentalist mode of liminality examined throughout this thesis. The readings of Housekeeping and The Maytrees foreground a more explicit consideration of the implications of leaving. While both novels are structured around a choice between staying or leaving, I argue that in their respective characterisations of Ruth and Lou, both Robinson and Dillard consider the possibility of a third choice: a way of living in which one – to return to Ruth’s phrase – ‘could remain transient here [such that one] would not have to leave.’ Indeed, if Sylvie and Toby Maytree represent the imperative to leave, neither novel ultimately presents their leaving as productive. Where both Robinson and Dillard do place their positive

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124 Branka Arsić, On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson, p. 12.
emphasis, however, is on Lou and Ruth’s awareness that ‘the ordinary demanded unblinking attention.’

It is this tension between actual leaving (which, I argue, ultimately becomes itself conformity to custom) and the ability to think one’s thoughts that constitutes a fundamental element of the New Transcendentalism proposed throughout this thesis. Yet, as we shall see, this tension is central to Emersonian Transcendentalism. Indeed, it is the underlying distinction between mental self-reliance and active self-reliance as understood by George Kateb. Within the texts considered here, however, the imperative to leave is interrogated in terms of its implications for everyday interactions and its tensions serve to highlight the irreconcilable ambivalences of lived human relationships. Having considered the textual and interpersonal implications of this aversive principle and the tensions that arise from it, the final chapter builds upon these analyses in order to explore how the Transcendentalist mode of liminality explored throughout this thesis impacts upon both old and new representations of the American West.

126 Housekeeping, p. 166.
CHAPTER THREE

‘WE GO WESTWARD AS INTO THE FUTURE’: THE SHIFTING GEOGRAPHIES OF NEW TRANSCENDENTALISM

In one of the most compelling images of his 1841 essay, ‘Self-Reliance’, Ralph Waldo Emerson directs our gaze towards a bed of roses beneath his window. These flowers, he asserts,

make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower there is no more; in the leafless root there is no less. Its nature is satisfied, and it satisfies nature, in all moments alike. But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time.¹

Here we find another exemplar of that anti-teleological Transcendentalist perspective which has informed the preceding two parts. Yet despite his advocacy of a mode of living that somehow exists ‘above time’, it is striking how often Emerson is himself caught ‘tiptoeing’. Indeed, the final line here reflects this contradiction, in that it simultaneously acknowledges both the anti-teleological ideal of existing ‘above time’ and the teleological process by which an individual (or wider culture) must move toward such an existence.

If the example cited above is somewhat oblique, we find a similar tension running throughout Emerson’s 1844 essay, ‘Experience’, which opens with the following poetic epigraph:

They marched from east to west:  
Little man, least of all,  
Among the legs of his guardians tall,  
Walked about with a puzzled look: --  
Him by the hand dear nature took;  
Dearest nature, strong and kind,  
Whispered, ‘Darling, never mind!’

Seeking to distance his nation from its cultural forebears whilst reaching towards a not-yet-realised future of American dominance, these lines reflect the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny so prevalent at this time, which understood the United States as the nation in which humankind would reach its apotheosis. New England in the 1840s is thus categorised here as a liminal time and space between the rich cultural traditions back East and the untamed potential of the yet-to-be-settled American continent to the West. The ‘little man, least of all’, presumably having made the journey across the Atlantic, is given the opportunity to make a new life for himself, and, moreover, to shape the intellectual future of this new continent, out from under the ‘legs of his guardians’ behind him in Europe. The opening lines of the essay reiterate the liminal status of this time and place:

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. But the Genius which, according to the old belief, stands at the door by which we enter, and gives us the lethe to drink.3

The analogy between the nation’s westward momentum and Emerson’s own intellectual endeavour underpins the wider essay, as exemplified by his later assertion that he is ‘ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West’.4 Yet Emerson’s use of ‘unapproachable’ here is telling, connoting as it does both unrivalled potential and a certain distance and inaccessibility. Thus, we are reminded again of the simultaneity of potentiality and jeopardy that the liminal condition effects.

Expanding the ever-widening circles of this thesis, this final part develops the liminal and dialogical themes of the previous chapters in order to explore American Transcendentalism’s relationship with both the real and imagined American West. Having

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3 ‘Experience’, p. 141.
discussed in the second chapter how teleological perspectives perpetuate structures of cultural hegemony, the present discussion begins by examining the tension identified above between the professed resistance to teleological modes and the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny that pervades many New England Transcendentalist writings. However, the analysis also notes an underlying recognition within New England Transcendentalism that it is only once the nation’s westward expansion is complete that these anti-teleological Transcendentalist principles may be realised. To use Emerson’s own phrase: ‘So many things are unsettled which it is of the first importance to settle, — and, pending their settlement, we will do as we do.’

A decade later, Henry David Thoreau would draw these themes together once more in his 1851 essay, ‘Walking’. Described by Susan J. Rosowski as ‘the most sustained, fevered call to the West in [American] literature’, the essay is only ostensibly focused on walking as a practice in and of itself. Instead, having established his own walking habits within the essay’s opening pages, Thoreau goes on to take us on a journey of a different kind, tracing the trajectory of the United States as a nation. Throughout the essay, he sets up a clear analogy between the literal westward momentum of the U.S. and its opportunity for cultural innovation, demonstrated most clearly within the following passage:

When I go out of the house for a walk, uncertain as yet whither I will bend my steps, and submit myself to my instinct to decide for me, I find, strange and whimsical as it may seem, that I finally and inevitably settle […] between west and south-southwest. The future lies that way to me, and the earth seems more unexhausted and richer on that side. […] I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe. And that way the nation is moving. And I may say that mankind progresses from east to west.

Like Emerson, then, Thoreau faces West from his New England locale, which is again positioned as the midpoint between Europe behind him to the east and the apparently

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5 ‘Experience’, p. 151.
untamed abundance before him to the west. Later in the essay, Thoreau – just as Emerson had before him – draws an analogy from Greek myth, describing the Atlantic as ‘a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions’. Here, much in the same way as Emerson’s epigraph to ‘Experience’, this allusion to the mythical river of forgetting presents America as a slate wiped clean on which an entirely new history may be written. Following a similar trajectory to Emerson’s earlier essay, ‘Walking’ veers towards the exceptionalism that is so often considered a particularly American trait. Thoreau endorses the words of Arnold Henry Guyot, a European-born geographer whose work, he acknowledges, goes ‘farther than I am ready to follow him; yet not when he says “[…] America is made for the man of the Old World. […] Each of his steps is marked by a new civilization superior to the preceding, by a greater power of development.”’ As with Emerson, here Thoreau clearly engages with the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. Where Emerson’s figure stands on a staircase ‘of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none’, however, Thoreau has a more objective measure of humanity’s timeline:

The Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions. If we do not succeed this time [i.e. in the settlement of the United States], there is perhaps one more chance for the race left before it arrives on the banks of the Styx; and that is in the Lethe of the Pacific.

Here, Thoreau draws a direct correlation between unchartered geographical space and the potential for intellectual and creative originality. This belief is reiterated throughout the essay, particularly within his assertion that ‘The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild, and […] in Wildness is the preservation of the world.’ As such, Thoreau implies that the westward settlement of the United States, and the cultural practices that are

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9 ‘Walking’, p. 236.
11 ‘Walking’, p. 239.
established during this journey, are integral to the success of humanity, given that the West represents the last area of terra incognita before humanity comes full circle on itself.

A century and a half after ‘Walking’, and with the colonising journey across the continent long complete, this chapter explores how Dillard, Solnit, Adnan and Robinson engage with both the myth and the reality of the American West, in such a way that we might read our contemporary moment as the not-yet-realised cultural context that Emerson and Thoreau so often allude to. The discussion draws on New West and Post-West criticism which – similarly to the idea of ‘redemptive critique’ identified in the previous chapter – reconsiders the cultural significance of the American West in our increasingly deterritorialized age, presenting it not as a terminus at the end of the map and at the end of history but, as Neil Campbell asserts, ‘a more routed and complex rendition, a traveling concept whose meanings move between cultures, crossing, bridging and intruding simultaneously’. The discussion recognises how these critics draw on very similar theoretical concepts to those considered in the previous chapters, a connection that is particularly apparent within Campbell’s exploration of the West’s rhizomatic qualities, and the related reading of the region as a thirddspace where multiple intersecting histories and identities productively coexist. The readings below examine how my four writers bring their various liminal poetics to bear on this shifting region. The first sections analyse Annie Dillard’s The Living (1992) and Marilynne Robinson’s Lila (2014), exploring how both these novels engage with the myth of the American West through a subversion of the generic expectations of the Western, in such a way that calls into question the hegemonic principles with which that genre has come to be associated within the popular imagination. The second part of the discussion goes on to explore how Rebecca Solnit and Etel Adnan present their

own lived experiences of the American West, exploring the (often problematic) interplay between the personal and political histories of the region.

‘VAGUE AND IMPERSONAL’: NEW ENGLAND TRANSCENDENTALISM IN THE AMERICAN WEST

For all its appropriation of the westward metaphor, it is notable that the nineteenth-century Transcendentalist movement was destined to remain wedded to its East Coast origins. While, as Ernest Marchand details, Emerson would frequently embark on lecture tours of the western states from 1850 onwards, the movement never developed a self-sustaining Western hub.13 As journalist and writer Rebecca Harding Davis would acknowledge when later recounting her 1862 trip to Boston, ‘[i]n the West and South there was no definite idea as to what truth this Concord man had brought into the world. But in any case it was American truth and not English. Emerson’s popularity, therefore, outside of New England was wide, but vague and impersonal.’14 Indeed, several decades earlier in the 1830s, a small group of Harvard Divinity School graduates had ventured to the Ohio Valley in an attempt to take the movement westward. In The Western Experiment (1973), Elizabeth R. McKinsey documents both the successes of the project – primarily the founding of *The Western Messenger*, which she identifies as ‘the first of all Transcendentalist periodicals’ – and the factors that ultimately led to its failure.15 While little critical attention has been paid to this short-lived project, to recall it now is to gain insights into the connections and tensions between Transcendentalist philosophy and the American West.

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In her opening pages, McKinsey asks: ‘[w]hy did these three men retreat from the land which, by logical extension of their own ideals, should have been the most congenial setting for Transcendentalism?’ 16 She contends that the project’s demise was due in large part to ‘a gap between their expectations and the reality they encountered which they simply could not bridge. So free in spirit, actively seeking freedom in fact, they were only threatened when they found it; their self-reliance failed them when put to the test.’ 17 More specifically, as McKinsey’s wider discussion acknowledges, the New Englanders were ultimately unable to reconcile the transition from ‘the theorizing Concord-Cambridge fold, […] into the world of action’. 18 Put into this unfamiliar context, the cracks began to show. James Freeman Clarke, the first of three men to head westward, became disillusioned due to a perceived lack of renown. Fixated on power and status, he was unable to cope outside of the hierarchical social structure that had afforded him the esteem of his peers back East. Christopher Pearse Cranch, a self-confessed compulsive wanderer, was unable to find the stability he’d hoped for when he set out West, an issue which was exacerbated by his uncompromising individualism. Perhaps too successful in his adherence to the Transcendentalist credo, Cranch became (paradoxically) ‘too self-reliant to relinquish his identity to any group, cause, or creed’, and eventually headed back east, to an isolated life of aimless drifting and wasted talent. 19 Third to arrive in the Ohio Valley was William Henry Channing, nephew of William Ellery Channing. Despite being some years older than the other two when he embarked on his trip westward, Channing remained torn between an ‘unrealistic idealism […] and his concern that Transcendentalism apply itself to the needs of the “real world”’. 20 As its editor, Channing

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16 *The Western Experiment*, p. 7.
17 *The Western Experiment*, pp. 7-8.
18 *The Western Experiment*, p. 18.
19 *The Western Experiment*, p. 40.
20 *The Western Experiment*, p. 43.
ploughed his energies into *The Western Messenger*.\(^{21}\) Ostensibly, the aim of the periodical was to provide a platform for the dissemination of western literature. In reality, though, as McKinsey acknowledges, the journal ultimately became a mouthpiece for East Coast ideals. Channing attributed the dearth of local contributions to the fact that the westerners were ‘busy living, doing, growing. The age of reflection and imaginative reproduction [had] not yet arrived.’\(^{22}\) Believing the West to be a haven for free speech (at least for those ideals corroborated back in New England), his faith was rocked in the wake of a scandal which saw him publicly vilified when the *Messenger* defended Orestes Brownson’s controversial article, ‘The Labouring Classes’ (1840). Channing was unable to resolve his crisis of faith, and by 1841, all three men had returned to New England.

The failed westward mission of these three men presents in microcosm a number of the issues raised throughout this chapter in relation to the wider representation of the West in nineteenth-century U.S. Transcendentalism. First, and perhaps most important of all, is the fundamental discrepancy between Transcendentalist idealism and lived experience, and the gulf that lay between the idealised West of their imaginations and the actual West that awaited them. Moreover, Clarke’s difficulty in adapting to the West’s less hierarchical social structure is indicative of an apparent Transcendentalist preoccupation with (at least intellectual) power and dominion. Cranch’s perpetual restlessness alludes to the problematic nature of a Transcendentalist philosophy which contends that ‘to find the journey’s end in every step of the road […] is wisdom’, but equally that ‘everything good is on the highway’.\(^{23}\) Lastly, in the fate of *The Western Messenger* we find an analogy for Davis’s claim that New England Transcendentalism’s relevance to the lived experience of the western states was ‘vague and impersonal’. The journal’s trajectory suggests that their cross-

\(^{21}\) *The Western Experiment*, p. 43.
\(^{22}\) *The Western Experiment*, p. 51.
\(^{23}\) ‘Experience’, pp. 148, 150.
continental ventures inevitably projected – and sought to impose – Eastern (or, more specifically, Bostonian) values, principles and perspectives onto a highly diverse range of cultures out west under the homogenising premise of developing an inherently ‘American’ culture. Less than five years after the demise of the Ohio Valley project, Thoreau would embark on his own adventure ‘into the wilderness’. As we have seen, however, he felt it unnecessary to venture as far as Ohio, instead heading just a few miles outside of Concord to the banks of Walden Pond. Despite the differing distances involved, McKinsey’s text often draws a parallel between the two projects, in that both sought to put the somewhat abstract Transcendentalist principles into living practice.

As Gay Wilson Allen acknowledges, both Emerson and Thoreau had considerable reservations regarding the westward expansion of the nation. Allen contends that despite the expansionist rhetoric of ‘Walking’, Thoreau was ultimately opposed to Manifest Destiny, positing that he was primarily concerned with metaphysical rather than actual frontiers. As evidence, Allen cites an 1853 letter from Thoreau to Harrison Blake, in which he remarks: ‘[t]he whole enterprise of this nation, which is not an upward one, but a westward one, toward Oregon [,] California, Japan &c, is totally devoid of interest to me, whether performed on foot or by a Pacific railroad.’ Allen also acknowledges Thoreau’s remark in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (1849) that ‘the frontiers are not east or west, north or south; but wherever a man fronts a fact, though that fact be his neighbor’. In Birthing the Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature, Susan J. Rosowski also underplays the relevance of this expansionist rhetoric. In a discussion of Walden (1854), she

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claims that Thoreau ‘casts off a conventional male stance of explorer or discoverer and assumes a female one of gestation or birth’. While Rosowski presents a compelling argument – noting that the main section of the narrative spans nine months, and highlighting the language of gestation within the closing pages – I would be reluctant to entirely dismiss the significance of the expansionist rhetoric here. Indeed, in the very same letter to Blake that Allen cites as evidence, Thoreau goes on to recognise this contradiction in himself: ‘[t]hus I declaim against them; but I in my folly am the world I condemn.’

To draw this out further, let us look to the closing pages of Thoreau’s most famous work, in which he reflects on his two years spent at Walden Pond. The narrative recounts how Thoreau mastered his environment and provides a template by which readers may themselves become comfortably self-sufficient. What is more, and significantly given my premise here, he has painstakingly mapped the geography of the pond having found it ‘remarkable how long men will believe in the bottomlessness of a pond without taking the trouble to sound it’. Within these closing paragraphs, Thoreau encourages the reader to

[b]e rather the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clark and Frobisher, of your own streams and oceans; explore your own higher altitudes – with shiploads of preserved meats to support you, if they be necessary […] Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state.

While this passage may constitute a reimagining of that colonising impulse, directed inward rather than out into the landscape, its hegemonic principles of control and mastery foreclose any real sense of progressive intention. Indeed, in his reference here to ‘the earthly empire of the Czar’, Thoreau suggests that this reorientation of perspective has the potential to offer power the like of which has not yet been seen. Within these same passages, Thoreau declares

27 Birthing a Nation, p. 5.
28 ‘Concord, February 27, 1853’, p. 69.
30 Walden, p. 369.
‘I do not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now.’

In both this excerpt and the passage cited above, it is telling that his allusions to journeying into these unnavigable waterscapes invariably depict the traveller aboard a ship (as opposed to immersed in the water itself) – in itself an image of human mastery.

It is in this sense, I suggest, that while Emerson and Thoreau may have denounced the potential ecological consequences of western settlement, and – in the ways identified in the preceding chapters – problematised the hegemonic imperatives of their time, both writers remain simultaneously bound by the hegemonic discourses of ownership and dominion. In particular, they show commitment to the cartographic practice of ‘mapping’ (and implicitly mastering) the terra incognita – be that of the land or of ourselves. Drawing together my analysis so far, then, while both writers may, as Gay Wilson Allen suggests, be more concerned with metaphysical than actual frontiers, this is not to say that the overarching frameworks by which they understand their intellectual endeavour escape complicity with the discourse of Manifest Destiny. This section goes on to examine how my four writers call into question these models of territorial expansion, exploring how the West takes on new significance in their writings. I argue that while they engage with the myth of the American West as a space of unrealised potential, much like their nineteenth-century predecessors, they also recognise it as a space in which received notions of hegemony and hierarchy are to be renegotiated rather than perpetuated.

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31 *Walden*, p. 372.

32 Of course, this is not to suggest that all who sail aboard a ship are in a position of dominance. It is simply to acknowledge that the very fact man has harnessed natural resources in order to engineer vessels able to traverse oceans is evidence of mastery in itself.
FROM NEW ENGLAND TO THE NEW WEST

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that the West has long since been considered ‘settled’. Indeed, as early as 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner famously declared that ‘at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and its going has closed the first period of American history’. Nevertheless, in the century that followed his seminal lecture, despite his suggestion that ‘there can no longer be said to be a frontier line’, the United States continued to expand. In 1910, Turner published ‘Social Forces in American History’, an essay in which he acknowledges how, at the turn of the century, the United States began to ‘engage in […] world-polities’. He goes on to suggest that by connecting its Atlantic and Pacific coasts [the United States] became an imperial republic with dependencies and protectorates – admittedly a new world-power, with a potential voice in the problems of Europe, Asia, and Africa. This extension of power, […] was no isolated event. It was, indeed, in some respects, the logical outcome of the nation’s march to the Pacific, the sequence to the era in which it was engaged in occupying the free lands and exploiting the resources of the West.

Within this essay, Turner also details the systematic and unprecedented exploitation of natural resources that occurred across the United States during these two decades. He issues a stark warning that ‘at the present rate it is estimated that the supply of coal would be exhausted at a date no farther in the future than the formation of the constitution in the past’. Now, less than twenty years from Turner’s estimation (which, by my calculation, gives us until 2033 at the outside), the consequences of such unregulated industrialism are, as predicted, coming home to roost.

34 ‘The Significance of the Frontier’, p. 8.
36 ‘Social Forces in American History’, p. 94.
37 ‘Social Forces in American History’, p. 91.
Perhaps triggered by the centenary of Turner’s frontier thesis, the late 1980s and 1990s saw a marked shift in critical approaches to the American West, with many critics keen to problematise prevailing cultural representations of the region. As Anne M. Butler and Michael J. Lansing explain:

these scholars questioned a history that mourned the death of George Armstrong Custer but cheered the murder of Sitting Bull […] In addition, the new wave of history took issue with the earlier invisibility of women in the story of the West [and] changed the discussion about the environment, questioning the long-term abuse of western ecosystems for short-term corporate gain. Thus, these scholars debated the very essence of the discipline, reconfiguring the definitions of place and language, people and experience.39

Within the field of New West criticism (as the discipline came to be known), the re-visioning process has fought its battle on two frontiers. The first concerns the ecological and environmental consequences of the region’s rapid expansion, calling into question the real-world implications of its increasing industrialisation. The second concerns the all-pervasive cultural iconography that has come to represent and often ideologically delimit the region in the popular imagination.

Enter the cowboy, that ubiquitous all-American figure who, it may be said, straddles these two critical strands. Having discussed at some length the apparent incompatibility between the American West and New England Transcendentalism, what is this self-reliant übermensch if not the Transcendentalist spirit par excellence? This thought is borne out in Sharman Apt Russell’s *Kill the Cowboy: A Battle of Mythology in the New West*, in which Russell acknowledges that

Here in the West, the dominant myth – of course – is the cowboy. Our love for cowboys, in the strict definition of the word, has little to do with reality […] Cowboys are the icon of the rural West. They have much to do with how all Americans think about the West. They have much to do with our cultural dreams of freedom and

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solitude […] In these dreams, we test ourselves on the anvil of self-sufficiency. In these dreams, we know the grandeur of an untrammeled continent. It is easy to see, then, as Rosowski acknowledges, how ‘Transcendental ideals of independence, self-reliance and nature readily translated into the myth of the West’, and how, in many ways, the cowboy may be read as the logical extension of Transcendentalism’s central imperatives. Or, that is to say, as one logical extension of this most complex of philosophies. In the closing passages of her study, however, Russell calls forth a new figure, in whom, she believes, lies the future for the West: ‘[l]et’s call her the green woman, an elusive dryad hidden in our hardened modern selves. A powerful green force. A generous spirit. Let’s call her the green woman and let’s call her out […] in all of us who live here and make this our home. Let’s call her out. Let’s see what she has to say about the West.’ In calling out this new figure – notably in a final chapter which takes a quotation from Dillard as its epigraph – Russell seeks to collapse the dualisms upon which the Western myth has been founded: between urban and rural, religious and secular, male and female, white and non-white. It is within this renegotiated West that the following analysis positions key works by my four writers, examining how they bring their New Transcendentalist perspectives to bear on this vision of the American West. In recognising a reflexivity of purpose between New West criticism and New Transcendentalism similar to that identified in the previous chapter between my four writers and Luce Irigaray and Jessica Benjamin, this chapter explores how the American West, both the physical space and its wider ideological function, remains integral to the reimagined Transcendentalist perspectives of Dillard, Robinson, Solnit and Adnan.

41 Birthing a Nation, p. 3.
42 Kill the Cowboy, p. 193.
In 1992, New West critic Jane Tompkins published *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, in which she identifies the factors that influenced the rise of the Western in the early twentieth century. Resisting popular explanations that emphasise “the conflict between industrial and agricultural America and the resultant nostalgia for the past”, Tompkins considers the ideological function of the Western, particularly in relation to gender, through an exploration of themes including religion, death, language and landscape. She asserts that the genre ‘doesn't have anything to do with the West as such. It isn't about the encounter between civilization and the frontier. It is about men's fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity, both of which the Western tirelessly reinvents.’ In order to illustrate this argument, Tompkins draws a distinction between the twentieth-century Western and the dominant strain of sentimental fiction popularised in the mid-nineteenth century by authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner and Maria Cummins. For Tompkins, it is this form of sentimental literature that provided ‘the real antagonist of the Western’. In what follows, Tompkins offers a ‘point-for-point contrast’ between the main narrative features of these two genres: female- versus male-authored; and a ‘young orphan girl’ protagonist and predominantly female characters who form ‘close relationships verging on what today we would identify as homosocial and homoerotic’ versus ‘full-grown adult male’ and an almost exclusively male cast who engage in, well, close relationships verging on what today we would define as homosocial and homoerotic.’ If sentimental novels tend to locate themselves in ‘private spaces, at home, indoors, in kitchens, parlors and upstairs

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44 *West of Everything*, p. 45.
45 *West of Everything*, p. 38.
46 *West of Everything*, p. 38.
chambers’, Westerns are often set ‘outdoors – on the prairie, on the main street – or in public places – the saloon, the sheriff’s office, the barber shop, the livery stable’.\textsuperscript{47} In the Western, ‘the hero is a man of few words who expresses himself through physical action’, while in sentimental literature, ‘emotions other than anger are expressed very freely and openly’.\textsuperscript{48} Ultimately, while the one requires the heroine to ‘to live up to an ideal of Christian virtue – usually involving uncomplaining submission to difficult or painful circumstances, learning to quell rebellious instincts, and dedicating her life to the service of God through serving others’, the other reveres the potent physicality of the male protagonist, as he takes the law into his own hands, exacting revenge as he sees fit.\textsuperscript{49} ‘Finally’, Tompkins concludes, ‘nature, which has played only a small role in the domestic novel, where it is always pastoral and benign, dominates the Western, dwarfing the human figure with its majesty, the only divinity worshipped in this genre other than manhood itself.’\textsuperscript{50} Taking Tompkins’s juxtaposition of these two genres as its point of departure, this section offers a comparative reading of Dillard’s \textit{The Living} and Robinson’s \textit{Lila}, exploring how they subvert this rigid dichotomy between these two generic templates. It argues that in doing so they open a critical space between the two genres in which the hegemonic imperatives with which they are commonly associated within the cultural imagination may be renegotiated.

Published in the same year as Tompkins’ critical text, Dillard’s debut novel \textit{The Living} presents four decades, from 1855 to 1897, in the history of the area surrounding the towns of Whatcom, Goshen and Bellingham, in Washington State on the West Coast of the United States. The narrative is divided into seven books following the booms and busts of this pioneering generation, which see the white population grow from just two families (the Rushes and the Fishburns, who figure throughout) to a thriving community of thousands in

\textsuperscript{47} West of Everything, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{48} West of Everything, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{49} West of Everything, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{50} West of Everything, pp. 38-9.
the wake of several gold rushes – with the once thriving and diverse Indian communities becoming ever more marginalised. Through its multiple narrators and multi-generational scope, *The Living* incorporates all seven of Frank Gruber’s basic Western plot lines: The Union Pacific Story, The Ranch Story, The Empire Story, The Revenge Story, Custer’s Last Stand, The Outlaw Story and The Marshal Story.\(^{51}\) This in itself is indicative of the extent to which *The Living* engages with the cultural iconography of the genre. However, as Gruber himself acknowledges, ‘it is not the plot that is important, it is what you do with the characters, the incidental material, the conflicts, the emotions that are plumbed’.\(^{52}\) As we shall see, then, despite bearing signatures of the Western, Dillard’s approach to these various plotlines subverts many of the key tropes of the genre.

For Tompkins, perhaps the most significant way in which these ideological imperatives are codified is within the genre’s representation of death:

> To go west, as far west as you can go, west of everything, is to die. Death is everywhere in this genre. […] Often, death makes a sudden, momentary appearance early in the story, as if to put us on notice that life is what is at stake here, and nothing less. The imminence of death underwrites the plot […] The ritualization of the moment of death that climaxes most Western novels and films hovers over the whole story and gives its typical scenes a faintly sacramental aura.\(^{53}\)

Throughout the novel, Dillard pits these interconnected communities against the unforgiving natural landscape around them, with key characters dying arbitrary deaths within the space of a few lines. This is particularly prevalent within the opening book of the novel, as many of the characters we assume will be integral to the narrative die unexpectedly and unceremoniously. We learn within the opening pages that Rooney and Ada Fishburn’s son, Charley, died on their journey west: ‘Charley fell out of the wagon and their own wheels ran him over, one big wooden wheel after the other, and he burst inwardly and died.’\(^{54}\) While

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\(^{52}\) *The Pulp Jungle*, p. 186.

\(^{53}\) *West of Everything*, p. 24.

Ada prays that with Charley's death 'God [...] was finished with the worst of it', the opening line of the sixth chapter tells us that their daughter, 'Nettie died when she was four, of an earache that leaked into her brain. Lura Rush bade Rooney blow pipe smoke into Nettie’s ear, [...] but it failed. Ada dressed the child to meet her Maker in a dress cut out of her own wedding shawl' (56). Pages later, we find out that ‘Lura Rush died in a carriage accident when a bear startled the horses on the Nooksack River bridge’, and within the same paragraph that ‘the oldest Rush boy, Derwent, [...] died the next spring of the putrid sore throat’ (69). In fact, within this final paragraph of Book I’s penultimate chapter, no fewer than five characters are killed off. As the narrative acknowledges, ‘Death mowed the generations raggedly and out of order’ (69-70). Despite its title, then, Dillard foregrounds early on that her novel is as much concerned with death as it is with the living.

In the fleeting and indiscriminate nature of these deaths and in their positioning very early on in the narrative, the novel’s attitude towards death shows clear parallels with the Western genre, as formulated by Tompkins. While Tompkins contends that death is ultimately the moment in which a (male) character’s ‘perfection is sealed’, though, Dillard precludes such reverence in death for her male protagonists. We see this in the final chapter of Book I, when Rooney Fishburn dies while digging a well:

Back of the house near the smoking slash pile, Rooney's well hole was ten feet deep. He picked up his spade, sat on the edge, and jumped in. Ada watched and thanked God for the well water, though she was premature, after all. Rooney whacked a slice of direct at one side of the hole. "It's right here," he said. He made a deeper cut, and Ada heard a hiss when he pried it off. No water came out, just the hiss.

Then Rooney fell over on his spade. He lay in the hole. He gone down like a tree, head last. (74)

Minutes later, George Judd jumps in after him despite Ada's protestations and meets the same fate, succumbing almost instantly to the poison gas as he tries to lift Rooney from the well. Here, far from venerating the death of the white man, as Tompkins suggests is so characteristic of the western genre, Dillard positions death as the most democratic of forces;
Rooney and George's deaths are just two in a long line of women and children, Indian and white, central and peripheral characters that have died abruptly within this opening book. As Dillard goes on to establish at length later in the narrative: ‘[n]one died prematurely, for death batten[ed] on only the living, and all of those, at any age. […] Death was ready to take people of any size, always, and so was the broad earth ready to receive them’ (245).

Midway through the novel, however, this theme of death as indiscriminate and above human control is complicated when Dillard introduces a new narrative strand. Book IV – entitled ‘Obenchain and Clare’ – opens on the scene of Beal Obenchain standing on the mud flats of Bellingham Bay, with

    a knife, a lantern, and a coil of rope in one hand and, as he put it to himself, a Chinaman in the other. […] Obenchain had chosen to tell the Chinaman his purpose, and he did so now: it was to “lash you to a . . . wharf piling and leave you to drown when the tide . . . comes in six hours . . . hence” (273)

A peripheral character until this point, Obenchain has already been established as a troubled character with an evil strain. In Book II, his adopted brother, John Ireland witnesses Obenchain torture and kill a young calf. The morning after this incident, Obenchain is uncharacteristically buoyant, believing that ‘he had escaped again, and gloriously, with his life, when he had believed lately that only death could relieve him. […] Did his accusers know […] how courageous he was, in fact, and how wilfully in control, to muster out of his paralysis the vitality to save himself?’ (133).

By attempting to usurp the omnipotent death that surrounds him, then, Obenchain perversely finds meaning in his own life. In the choosing of his victims, Obenchain is as indiscriminate as the death that claims others in the community: the calf is just ‘one stubborn calf, in a world of calves’ (133), and Lee Chin, the man whom he ties to the piling on the mud flats, was ‘found […] just five minutes earlier […] hurrying north up the beach towards

55 Ellipses not in square brackets appear in Dillard’s original text.
town’ (273). In the final passage of Book IV’s opening chapter, as he leaves Lee Chin lashed to the pilings with a lantern to watch the rising tide below, Obenchain distinguishes himself from the townspeople who

never left the life of sensation but only refined its objects: when they had a little land, or a ten-year-old name, they switched their boots from beer to sherry, and got them a Lummi Indian to cut their wood. Respectable people were those who avoided outcry. Obenchain was more than respectable; he was a natural aristocrat, self-made, whose high skull scraped the sky. (278)

By way of immediate contrast, we are then reintroduced to Clare Fishburn. The son of Ada and Rooney, Clare is, like Obenchain, ‘one of the few persons in the state of Washington who had been born there’ (310). Described here as ‘ordinarily careless of appearance’, it is this most ordinary of men who is to ‘represent his city - represent even his country’, as Whatcom welcomes the first overland train from Canada, in a bid to secure the contract for the Great Northern Railway terminus (278). As he gathers himself for the day’s events, Clare peruses a set of ‘no frills’ maps, with ‘only a black grid of squares the surveyor has inked on top of the brown, irregular coastline of Bellingham Bay’ (278). As he does so, the narrative declares: ‘these were stirring times in Whatcom, and the map showed the changes’ (279). Not only do Clare’s maps show the changes in the town, but his perusing of them shows the change in him. In earlier books, Clare had been a man of the land, the man to ask if you needed to ‘[saw] down cedars eight or ten foot across’, and one of those first-generation settlers ‘who had passed their infancies cutting cordwood and paddling canoes’ (178-80). In this shift from a life of physical exertion to one spent ‘[sitting] tight […] while the lot’s price swelled’, the development of Clare’s character, and the various roles he embodies throughout the novel, reflect the changing face of social power during the period.

In Obenchain and Clare, then, Dillard offers two alternative representations of patriarchal power. What is striking, however, is how the development of these two men throughout the novel undercuts many of the ideological imperatives we would typically
associate with the Western genre. This is brought to the fore in Book IV when, standing once again on the mudflats of Bellingham Bay, Obenchain hatches his next plan:

Now he knew what he would do. [...] He would repair to his stump and draw from the bucket the name of the man he would not kill. The way in which he had resolved not to kill him was by threatening to kill him and doing nothing. Obenchain would let the victim live as best he could inside the radius of his power, in the knowledge that he was at any moment to die. (303-4)

Soon after, Obenchain plucks a name from his bucket – Clare Fishburn. Here, then, Dillard simultaneously sets up and undercuts our expectations of the iconic Western showdown. On the one hand, this is the archetypal match-up between two physically imposing men, both standing at ‘six feet, three inches’ and so, literally, ‘a head above’ the other townspeople; between the amoral outlaw and, essentially, the town marshal (310). What is more, to return to Tompkins’s framework, this thread instils into the narrative ‘the imminence of death’, in which we anticipate the ‘ritualization of the moment of death that climaxes most Western novels and films’. 56 And yet we are wrong-footed, for this is the imminence of non-death; an exertion of mental rather than physical dominion. As Obenchain himself remarks, ‘Life is mind [...] and mind, in some spectral way, operates in words. In his every breath was power’ (311).

More intriguing still is the connection Dillard draws within the same pages between Obenchain and the New England Transcendentalists. Described as ‘a hermit’, we learn that ‘when he was seven [Obenchain] built himself a room in a cedar stump near the railroad right-of-way in the woods south of town’ (303). Although his name is never explicitly mentioned, I would suggest that this is a direct allusion by Dillard to Thoreau – Obenchain’s abode is unavoidably reminiscent of Thoreau’s own simple, self-built home positioned by the railroad in the woods just south of Concord. Looking to Walden itself, yet more evidence to suggest the connection is offered by Thoreau’s remark within its closing pages that: ‘[I]here

56 *West of Everything*, p. 24.
was a man in my neighbourhood who lived in a hollow tree. His manners were truly regal. I should have done better had I called on him’ (i.e. as opposed to the townspeople he has previously been obliged to call upon). Most compelling of all, however, is the scrap of paper nailed to Obenchain’s wall that simply reads: ‘Do the thing and you will have the power – R. W. Emerson’ (308).

If Obenchain may be understood as the novel’s somewhat skewed representation of the Transcendentalist spirit, then Clare may be read as its symbol of Christianity, and as a conduit for the profoundly theological element that permeates Dillard’s work. In this vein, a number of critics have been keen to highlight the significance of Clare’s name. ‘Fishburn’, Sandra Humble Johnson acknowledges, ‘is associated with Christ in the symbol of the fish. […] Fishburn is literally “Christ-aflame”, while “Clare” represents “clear”, the full name becoming “clear Christ aflame”, suggestive of abundant life and increased knowledge springing out of sacrificial death.’ While the connection drawn here and elsewhere between Clare and Christ is in some ways compelling, however, it fails to account for many elements of his character. As such, I would argue that, like Obenchain in relation to Transcendentalism, Clare’s benevolent (to the verge of vapidity) everyman persona represents an intentionally reductive embodiment of Christian ideals. In this most idiosyncratic of Westerns, then, what is at stake is not individual honour and glory, or even life and death, at least not literally. Instead, to employ an Emersonian analogy, Obenchain and Clare stand as representative men, and their respective fates have much to tell us about Dillard’s own philosophy.

Initially, Obenchain’s scheme unfolds as expected. Having been told of his imminent death, ‘every day [becomes] a day in which Clare expected to die’ (344). Trapped in this

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57 *Walden*, p. 379.
liminal state between life and death, Clare constantly contemplates the moment of reckoning, which he imagines (and we with him) will play out in typically Western style: ‘[w]ith a Bowie knife, a fighter could rip a man up close before either one of them could draw a revolver, he could throw a knife faster than Obenchain could raise and aim a gun – if he were a knife fighter, instead of a partner in a land company’ (359). Elsewhere, we learn, through the thoughts of Clare, that ‘the rule of law thinned and petered out south of town’, and the narrative alludes to such incidents as when ‘two masked men robbed trains’, ‘an old Indian fighter shot a three-card monte dealer’, and ‘the “True Love” bandit […] shot two blanket stiffs with his characteristic split bullets’ (364). Yet ‘these old stories’ are as fantastical for Clare as they are for the reader, and mere digressions from the main narrative in which, as we have been warned to expect, no such showdown occurs. Thus, in the midst of this existential limbo, Clare begins to find new meaning in his life, dedicating more time to his wife and children and reengaging with the physical landscape around him that had become merely incidental in comparison to the dollar-marked maps of his day job.

And so when Clare accidentally stumbles upon Obenchain as he walks alone along the mudflats we are, with him, expectant and anxious to find out how this tale of fluctuating power will resolve itself. And yet – nothing. Instead, after several paragraphs in which they approach one another and Clare debates whether or not to draw his fishing knife, the long-awaited confrontation occurs in the blank space between two paragraphs. We are simply told that ‘when Obenchain stood and stopped him […] and told him he was not going to kill him, he was not going to die, Clare looked out over the trestle and down to the water, where gulls flew without bending their wings’ (618). What follows is an extended meditation on the shoreline landscape, in which the image of a ‘distant figure […] turning pea rows over in perfect silence’ leads Clare to contemplate the nature of death once more: ‘The earth was
plowing the men under, and the horses, and the plows. […] No generation sees it happen, and the damp new fields grow up forgetting’ (619).

By thus undercutting the idealised, glorified moment of death that so often accompanies the Western showdown, Dillard subverts the traditional trajectory of the Western as we come full circle – it is ultimately Clare’s non-death that reiterates the democratising and indiscriminate nature of death that is set up at the outset of the novel. Moreover, it is notable that it is in not sacrificing himself (in the logical extension of the Christ-like analogy) that Clare is able to understand his existence as simply one insignificant element within the ever-renewing cycle of nature – a decidedly more pantheistic outlook than an Orthodox Christian perspective would allow. But what argument is being made here in relation to Transcendentalist philosophy?

In the closing pages of the novel proper, Obenchain recognises that Clare has reconciled himself with death and has thus usurped the power he once held over him. In this realisation, Obenchain loses all self-conviction:

His life he considered vile. The memory of his own fitful enthusiasms rebuked him. Nothing had come of them, and he could never believe in himself again; everything was draining away into a basin of loathing. […] If he was not, as he did not now feel himself to be, the exceptional and superior man, then he was no man. (656)

In Obenchain, then, Dillard emphasises those aspects of Transcendentalist philosophy that, as we saw in the opening sections of this chapter, preoccupy themselves with hegemonic concerns of intellectual dominion and uncompromising individualism. In his ‘experimental interest’ in death, Obenchain believes he is moving beyond the intellectual impotency of his generation, an accusation levelled by Emerson in ‘Experience’ when he asserts that, ‘[t]here is no power of expansion in men. […] They stand on the brink of the ocean of thought and power, but they never take the single step that would bring them there.’59 Yet Dillard’s novel

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59 ‘Experience’, p. 147.
suggests that it is not in exerting dominion over others that we find intellectual, spiritual, or cultural superiority. Indeed, in her characterisation of Obenchain, Dillard conspicuously foregrounds that same tension between thought and action so often levelled at Transcendentalist thinkers.

In the final image of the novel’s penultimate section, descendants of two of the first white families to arrive in the bay, Hugh Honer and Vinnie Fishburn, walk across the mudflats towards Bellingham’s harbour. Now sweethearts, they are preparing for Hugh’s departure, as he returns to Seattle to start a new college term:

Hugh watched a black eagle descend on the wing; its path took it towards them down and down. He glanced at the mud flat and looked again. The crabs were at something on the mud by a piling. [...] Suddenly he saw that what they were on was a hand underwater, a neck leading to a torso in a jacket, a damaged face, a man. (663)

Within this image of Beal Obenchain not standing but buried alive in the mudflats (and it is notable that nearly every key moment in Obenchain’s narrative is located at this littoral brink between land and water), Dillard’s novel precludes the potential for human mastery over this space. In this way, I would suggest that the demise of Obenchain articulates Dillard’s rejection of that mode of Transcendentalist thinking which privileges patriarchal notions of power, dominion and knowledge. And yet, I would argue, Obenchain is perhaps not the enduring Transcendentalist spirit of this novel.

Within the last section of the narrative, entitled 'Afterwards' (and so foregrounding ideas of legacy), Hugh Honer returns home from college once more. A sailing trip is arranged amongst the families and they head out to the islands off Bellingham Bay. As night falls, the younger members of the group decide to go bathing in a nearby pond leaving, significantly, the other adults behind – Clare Fishburn included. Initially reluctant, as he’s ‘not fond of bathing’, Hugh decides to join them: ‘He loaded his pipe and looked over the water westward. [...] He took a lantern, and set off alone on the path through the woods’ (691-2). It is no mistake, I would suggest, that Dillard evokes this particularly Thoreauvian image of the
lone male venturing out westward to the pond through the woods. In the closing passage of
the novel, Hugh arrives at the edge of the pond. Leaving the ‘soft and familiar’ forest floor
beneath him, he ‘emerges on a high platform’ (692). Here, in an immediate contrast to the
known space below him, Hugh enters a space surrounded by ‘unrecognizable people’ and
‘unfamiliar voices’ (692). At first, he cannot make out his surroundings: ‘he saw nothing: no
pond, no ocean, no forest, sky, nor any horizon, only unmixed blackness’ (692). Heeding ‘the
voices in the darkness’ below him, and, to allude to Emerson’s analogy once more, he takes
that decisive step over the brink (693). Suddenly, his view is illuminated, and the narrative
ends as he ‘flings himself loose into the stars’ (693).

Despite the Thoreauvian allusions throughout the passage, this closing image stands
in stark contrast to the image cited earlier of Thoreau ‘standing before the masthead, on the
deck of the world’. Rather than an image of masculine dominion, this closing passage depicts
Hugh as ‘trembling’ and ‘hopeful’ rather than masterful. It is here that we may consider the
following remark made by James Freeman Clarke (that young Ohio-bound Transcendentalist,
obessed with power and status) in an 1835 letter to Margaret Fuller: ‘I wish I could shake
myself free of New England and give myself heart and hand to the West. I am like a swimmer
who dares not yet to let go of the rope and swim alone.’60 What Clarke fails to recognise here,
as these final passages of The Living imply, is that one need not ‘swim alone’. Quite the
reverse in fact, for here Hugh (and, implicitly, we) must embrace the dark unknown and trust
the ‘unrecognizable people [with] unfamiliar voices’ that surround him. Indeed, while
Thoreau ‘does not wish to go below’, these closing passages are, quite literally, a call to
descending from one’s pedestal, and immersing oneself in the myriad of creative and spiritual
possibilities – elsewhere. I would argue, then, that this transition from the image of jaded
intellectual Beal Obenchain being found submerged on the mudflats to that of young scholar

60 James Freeman Clarke, quoted in The Western Experiment, p. 27.
Hugh Honer swinging out over the brink and ‘loose into the stars’ may be read as an analogy for the shift from a nineteenth-century New England Transcendentalist perspective to a New Transcendentalist perspective that seeks to challenge patriarchal dominion, embrace otherness, and provide a less exclusive platform for opening new lines of enquiry in Transcendentalist thought.

‘The Orphan Child of a Brilliant Century’: Marilynnne Robinson’s Lila (2014)

If The Living positions itself quite clearly within the Western genre, Marilynnne Robinson’s Lila is much more readily aligned with the sentimental novel. It tells the backstory of Lila, the young wife of John Ames, who has been a peripheral character in the two earlier Gilead novels. We soon learn that this third novel predates Gilead and Home, written from Lila’s perspective while she is pregnant with Robert – the young son to whom Ames writes his letter in Gilead. From this perspective, the narrative unfolds in two parallel strands. The main narrative takes place in the same setting as the previous two novels, depicting Lila’s arrival in Gilead and the budding relationship that she develops with Ames, and, in turn, with the Christian faith. The second offers an insight into her life before Gilead, and the years she spends as a young orphan alongside her surrogate mother, Doll, drifting aimlessly across the country. And it is upon this pre-Gilead life that the novel opens, with an image of ‘the child […] just there on the stoop in the dark, hugging herself against the cold, all cried out and nearly sleeping’. ⁶¹ That night, Doll, who also lives in this house, takes Lila up from her hiding place under a table and away, and so begins their life on the road, until Lila arrives by chance in Gilead and ‘[wanders] into the church dripping rain’ (11).

Clearly, then, this story of the bedraggled orphan who, years later, steps into a church for shelter and so embarks on an education in Christianity, marries a preacher and bears his

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son, transposes very readily onto Tompkins’s outline of the sentimental novel. This is clearer still given that, as context for her discussion, Tompkins makes reference to In His Steps, a religious novel that was written in 1896 by Kansas preacher, Charles M. Sheldon. In His Steps is the story of a preacher who is interrupted when writing his sermon by a young downtrodden man who comes to his door requesting work in order to support his daughter, whom he has had to leave with friends due to his wife’s recent death. With nothing to offer, the preacher turns the man away. The following Sunday, as the preacher finishes delivering his sermon, the same man enters and delivers his own sermon of sorts, announcing that his own plight is shared by many others who have been put out of work due to increased industrialisation. He suggests the great social changes that could be effected if the congregation were to go out and live by the sentiment of those hymns whose words they sing so ardently. The man then collapses. The preacher takes the man back to his house, but he dies soon after. Sheldon’s novel became ‘by far and away the most popular book of its time’, reigniting a reformative zeal throughout America’s Christian population.62 In his foreword to the 1935 edition, Sheldon notes that he was ‘informed by Publisher’s Weekly that the book has had more circulation that any other book except the Bible’.63

The legacy of In Her Steps is readily apparent within Lila. It may be gleaned within not only the image of Lila entering the church as she does but also within the apparently unquestioning ease with which she is accepted into the community. Indeed, the unwaveringly charitable Christian sensibility that Sheldon’s novel inspired within many of its readers is reflected in the attitudes of the women of Gilead. At times, Robinson takes this to the point of parody, as in the following example, when Lila asks one of the local women whether she needs any help:

62 West of Everything, p. 30.
There are women who take pride in how kind they are and jump at every chance, their eyes all shining with it so you can’t help but notice. You keep clear of them if you can, but they do come in handy. She said, “Why, yes, dear, I am!” Yes, I am looking for help!” Just like that. She didn’t give herself a minute to decide. Lila thought, I should mention the knife in my garter and see what she says then. (220)

And yet for all these resonances, as this passage indicates, there are a number of fundamental ways in which Robinson’s novel subverts our expectations of the domestic novel. While the narrative undoubtedly foregrounds ‘the interior struggles of the heroine to live up to an ideal of Christian virtue [and] to quell rebellious instincts’, Lila’s increasingly ambivalent and unconventional interpretation of Christian values precludes the neatly sentimental trajectory from which the genre takes its name.64 As such, I will argue, Robinson’s novel, and particularly its enigmatic protagonist, may be more fruitfully aligned with the Western. Given the Midwest setting of the novel, my suggestion here is perhaps somewhat counterintuitive. Yet by drawing out the parallels between this latest novel and Robinson’s Housekeeping, we find compelling evidence to support such a reading.

Like Ruth, Lila struggles to find her place in the world; she is similarly at home in the natural landscape but equally drawn to the security of a loving home. Moreover, as in the earlier novel, the working through of this tension is set within the context of Lila’s history as a young orphan who embarks on a life of aimless wandering with her aunt and surrogate mother-figure, Doll. Rather than the conclusion that the narrative works towards, however, Lila’s drifting life is the novel’s point of departure, a back story that is unveiled retrospectively from Lila’s perspective as a woman now married and pregnant. It is significant, therefore, that Lila’s trajectory is not presented as the unthinkable fate from which Ruth felt she must escape. Thinking back to the premise of the first chapter, the connections that may be drawn between Lila and not only Robinson’s debut novel but also the other Gilead novels presents yet another example of the dialogical relationships Robinson

64 West of Everything, p. 48.
sets up between her writings. Indeed, if we do fail to draw these connections, Robinson offers us a few subtle allusions to trigger our memories. Late in the narrative, for instance, Lila imagines a future conversation with her newborn son in which he asks where they’re going to be buried when they die, given that ‘the plots [alongside Ames and his late wife and child] are all taken up’ (251). Lila replies: ‘[i]t don’t matter. We’ll just wander a while. We’ll be nowhere, and it will be all right. I have friends there’ (251). This is a telling reversal given Ruth’s propensity to talk to her deceased relatives, and the fact that Ames talks to Robert in anticipation of his own death and his son’s adulthood. And while within the context of the novel this could easily be assumed to refer to Doll and others she has met throughout her life, I would suggest that the thematic significance and the symmetry of phrasing between this moment and Ruth’s memorable assertion that ‘the perimeters of our wandering are nowhere’ in the closing passage of *Housekeeping* point towards this being a subtle nod to that earlier novel.65

Drawing on Robinson’s own comments regarding her characterisation of Sylvie, the previous chapter has already ventured that Ruth may be read as a female revisioning of the archetypal male American hero; a more realised expression of Robinson’s sense that ‘the fact that human nature is replete with nameless possibilities, and, by implication, that the world is accessible to new ways of understanding’. Here, having recognised the parallels between her two protagonists, I argue that it is in her more recent characterisation of Lila that Robinson’s intention is even more fully realised. For, by Tompkins’s framework at least, Lila is as close to a female revisioning of that archetypal Western hero as we are likely to find. Consider the following description of the exemplary cowboy:

> Perhaps more than anything, nature gives the hero a sense of himself. For he is competent in this setting. […] Besides being agonistic and at times ecstatic, the hero’s relationship to the environment is steady, knowledgeable, functional, and pleasure-

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65 *Housekeeping*, p. 219.
giving. Over and over, [...] he makes the world answer his primary needs. [...] Far from town, far from the conveniences in modern life, far from outside help, the solitary man, with only nature at his disposal, makes himself comfortable.66

There is perhaps no more accurate a description for the relationship Robinson depicts between Lila and the natural landscape that surrounds her. Within the novel’s opening pages, we are told that ‘there was a long time when Lila didn’t know that words had letters, or that there were other names for seasons than planting and haying. Walk south ahead of the weather, walk north in time for the crops’ (10). If ever there existed a mode of living close to Emerson’s notion of being ‘above time’, in the rhythms of nature, this is it. And if she can’t be ‘out in that great sweet nowhere’, Lila is nowhere more comfortable than when she is alone and fending for herself in the small, simple – highly Thoreauvian – abandoned cabin in which she initially sets up home a few miles outside of town, with just her bedroll (217).

And the uncanny similarities extend beyond this innate connection with the natural landscape. In Lila, we find The Woman With No Name – despite the novel’s title we learn very early on that her name was chosen randomly by a woman who takes in Doll and the young child after their escape – “I been thinking about ‘Lila.’ I had a sister Lila. Give her a pretty name, maybe she could turn out pretty.” [...] “Maybe”, Doll said. “Don’t matter” (10). When Ames baptises her as ‘Lila Dahl’ (her teacher's misspelling of ‘Doll’ – “You’re Norwegian!” (46)), she remarks: “But that ain’t my name.” When asked what her real name is she replies: “Nobody ever said” (86). Later, when she arrives at the St. Louis brothel, Lila takes ‘another made up name’, Rosie, given to her by the mistress ‘because no one else was Rosie’ (192). Further parallels pervade the narrative, including Lila’s pathological distrust of others; her reluctance to confide in Ames; even the clipped cadence of her speech:

[Ames] said, “I suppose you still don’t trust me at all.”
“I just don’t go round trusting people. Don’t see the need.”
They walked on a while.

66 West of Everything, p. 81.
“The roses are beautiful. On the grave. It’s very kind of you to do that”.
She shrugged. “I like roses.” (80)

What is more, as may be inferred within the above interaction, Lila and Ames’s relationship conspicuously subverts the conventional gender roles associated with this genre. Where Lila is time and again associated with the natural landscape, Ames is almost exclusively confined (across all three novels) to his house, and in this narrative often appears in the kitchen preparing meals for Lila, or in his bedroom as Lila creeps in to lie alongside him. And while Lila is depicted as a woman of very few words, Ames is incessantly trying to elicit conversation – “[w]ell, if there is ever – anything at all. That you need – If you ever want to talk again, I might do better this time. […] I can’t promise, but I’ll try”’ (33)– with such earnest appeals recurring throughout the narrative. Thinking back to the previous chapter, these aspects of Lila’s character and the subverted dynamic of her relationship with Ames become more significant still. For we find here clear parallels between Lila’s characterisation and Emerson’s belief that ‘the most self-reliant person manages to combine in himself or herself both masculine and feminine intellectual traits and that both sets of traits are equally indispensable.’ 67 In this way, Robinson’s characterisation of Lila may be read as both highlighting the parallels between the Western myth of the cowboy and the self-reliant Transcendentalist, and also reimagining both of these archetypes by subverting the gendered imperatives within which both are reductively associated within the popular imagination.

Moreover, as we have seen elsewhere in this thesis, this elderly preacher represents more than just a benevolent sounding board for Lila’s existential dilemmas, and here we are drawn again to considering Ames as a representative of an antiquated Emersonian method that appears to foster intellectual authority as represented in essays and lectures at the expense of the tangible realisation of those principles in the external world. Like Obenchain

and Clare, then (and in an extension of the intersubjective dynamics discussed in the previous chapter), the marriage of Lila and Ames represents more than just the coming together of two individuals. If Ames is the Transcendentalist spirit devoid of tangible real-world action, then Lila is the world-worn Transcendentalist spirit deprived of the abstract knowledge to articulate it. Moreover, in aligning Lila with the archetypal Western male, yet tracing her tentative (if ambivalent) acceptance of the Christian faith and her precocious desire to learn, Robinson both reimagines the existing myth of the West while simultaneously undermining its pathological rejection of women, religion and language.

Ultimately, in positioning *Lila*, the novel, at the thematic intersection between the other Gilead novels and *Housekeeping*, Robinson both projects and subverts this intrinsically Western and, as we have seen, Transcendentalist sensibility onto the Midwest context of the novel. It is important to note, however, that the novel’s overriding message is not one of unambiguous resolution, as the above might suggest. In the closing pages, which occur in the hours after their son is born, Lila warns Ames that she misses her old life, and that she ‘might have to go back to it sometime’ (255). Ames recognises the inevitability that he will be leaving them alone relatively soon, and Lila claims that ‘[t]hat’s not really the problem’ (256). She thinks to herself:

The problem is […] that if someday she opened the front door and there, where the flower gardens and the fence and the fate ought to be, was that old life, the raggedy meadows and pastures and the cornfields and the orchards, she might just set the child on her hip and walk out into it, the buzz and the smell and the damp of it, the breath of it like her own breath, her own sweat. (256)

Here, like the young Christopher Pearse Cranch who couldn’t find stability in Ohio, Lila recognises that same perpetual restlessness that a life of motherhood and matrimony may not fully be able to quell. And yet in the life of their unborn son, there lies the hope of a future generation that will take the best of both parents, reminiscent perhaps of that ‘happier mixed
clay’ that Emerson alludes to in the closing remarks of ‘The Transcendentalist’. 68 Considering again Robinson’s comments in ‘When I Was a Child’, we find further Emersonian resonances that are applicable to these final pages of Lila, within her proposition that: ‘[p]erhaps it is a misfortune for us that so many interesting ideas were associated with access to a habitable wilderness.’ 69 For, as she realises, ‘the real frontier need never close. Everything, for all purposes, still remains to be done.’ 70

In this analogy of both the historical yearning for the habitable wilderness and the frontier that ‘need never close’, Robinson evokes Emerson’s call made a century and half earlier in 1842:

> It is droll to see the contentment and incuriosity of man. All take for granted,— the learned as well as the unlearned, – that a great deal, nay, almost all, is known and forever settled. But in truth all is now to be begun, and every new mind ought to take the attitude of Columbus, launch out from the gaping loiterers on the shore, and sail west for a new world. 71

Yet, clearly, this is not simply a reiteration of Emerson’s sentiment. For Emerson here demonstrates just that unfortunate (to paraphrase Robinson) perspective that we see demonstrated in so many Transcendentalist writings which equates an appeal for self-discovery with ‘the ambition to push, as far as fate would permit, the planted garden of man, on every hand, into the kingdom of Night’. 72 In Robinson’s revisioning of this ever-changing cultural frontier, contentment and self-discovery need not be mutually exclusive. Furthermore, in this image of Lila striding out into ‘that old life’ not with a pistol holster but ‘the child on her hip’, Robinson highlights that its exploration need not be isolating – and it need certainly not be the privilege of the solitary educated man. And yet, by the same token, 

69 ‘When I Was a Child’, p. 92.
70 ‘When I Was a Child’, p. 92.
in her acknowledgement that ‘in the West “lonesome” is a word with strongly positive connotations’ and thus ‘one’s greatest dignity and privilege’, Robinson simultaneously validates that radical individualism that is so integral to the established ideology of the American West.\(^73\) And it is at this juncture that we leave Lila: between an autonomous yet maternal, dignified self-definition and the novel’s parting note of contented intimacy: ‘[s]omeday she would tell him what she knew’ (261).

Within her work, and particularly within Lila, Robinson not only deftly articulates those ‘new ways of understanding’ that she alludes to within ‘When I Was a Child’, but also issues her own call, as posited within her essay’s final passage. Evoking not some hegemonic preoccupation with power but a gracious assertion of the region’s cultural richness, she concludes that ‘it would be a positively good thing for the West to assert itself in the most interesting terms, so that the whole country must hear, and be reanimated by dreams and passions it has too casually put aside and too readily forgotten’.\(^74\) As such, Robinson’s work both reignites and reimagines the ideological function of the West, opening up an inclusive critical space which takes us beyond outdated representations of the region as a cartographic and cultural terminus at the edge of the world.

‘I HADN’T REALISED THAT THE END OF THE WORLD COULD BE A PLACE AS WELL AS A TIME’: REBECCA SOLNIT IN THE NEW TRANSCENDENTIALIST WEST

At the outset of this chapter, a distinction was drawn between two overarching strands of New West criticism – that which pertained to the cultural, and that which re-examined the ecological and more explicitly political implications of western expansion. If the above analyses of Dillard and Robinson’s respective novels have focused primarily on the first of

\(^73\) When I Was a Child, p. 88, 90.
\(^74\) When I Was a Child, p. 94.
these strands, the following consideration of Rebecca Solnit’s work reintroduces the latter and explores its implications for a New Transcendentalism.

Brought up in Novato, Marin County and now living in the San Francisco Bay Area, much of Solnit’s writing is conspicuously located on the West coast of the United States. In her 2005 text, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Solnit discusses the evolving cartography of California and the United States more widely. She begins with Martin Waldseemüller’s 1513 atlas, in which the area since delineated into North, Central and South America ‘is nothing but a coastline full of small names and mouths of rivers and, in far bolder letters, across what is now Venezuela and Brazil, “Terra Incognita”, unknown land’.75 Like Thoreau before her, as we have seen, this terra incognita is a constant theme running throughout her writing, and here she traces its evolution. She acknowledges how ‘California was long portrayed as a huge island just off the west coast of North America, and the northwest coast of that continent remained undrawn, one of the last expanses of Terra Incognita to the Europeans mapping the world’.76 For Solnit, this terra incognita is a spatial representation of the limits of human knowledge; she contends that even the most comprehensive of maps ‘would be inadequate to depict the layers of the place, its many versions. [These terra incognita] spaces on maps say that knowledge too is an island surrounded by oceans of the unknown’ (165). Like Thoreau, Solnit suggests that this awareness of ‘the unmapped and the unmappable’ is integral to human experience and it is with a sense of regret that she recognises ‘our smugness now that maps of earth are so unlikely to say “Terra Incognita”’ (164).

While these cartographic unknowns would have been all but resolved by 1851 – the latest map Solnit refers to here was produced by Pedro Font in 1777 – Thoreau’s ‘Walking’, as we have seen, was written at a time when California, and the West more generally, still

offered this sense of unexplored, ‘unexhausted’ space. Here, Solnit evokes a nostalgia for that time, and a sense that Thoreau was vindicated in his assertion that ‘[t]he West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and [...] in Wildness is the preservation of the world.’\textsuperscript{77} Indeed, a century and a half later, and for Solnit, immersed in the urbanised – and increasingly gentrified – San Francisco of our contemporary moment, it has become ‘strange [...] to look at the old maps of the world and see my part of the continent as island and a void: [...] blank, so that the territory of my childhood is terra incognita there’ (167-68; emphases added).

Here, Solnit’s use of such emotive descriptors as ‘my part of the continent’ and ‘the territory of my childhood’ is indicative of an interweaving of the public and the private that, much like Thoreau, is so characteristic of her work. Given the themes of colonisation and dominion that run throughout this chapter, however, Solnit’s apparent claiming of ownership here is potentially problematic. Yet Solnit is the first to acknowledge the contentious politics of the West, and the American West in particular. In \textit{Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics}, she tackles this tension within her writing head on. The opening essay of the collection, in keeping with that dialectic common to these New Transcendentalist texts which sets up the interplay of beauty and horror in nature, depicts the sublime beauty of the Western landscape while acknowledging it as an acutely hostile environment for human life – ‘What feeds the soul starves the skin’, Solnit recognises.\textsuperscript{78} Such paradoxes proliferate here. Driving around the perimeter of the Nevada Test Site, Solnit gets to thinking about the failure of Americans ‘to measure the carnage caused by hundreds of bombs in one city by that of two hijacked airplane crashes in another’; about ‘the wars fought for our cheap gasoline, the wars that make viable not just my summer jaunts but year-round homes sixty or

\textsuperscript{77} ‘Walking’, p. 239.
seventy miles from the grocery store’; and about (much like Sharman Apt Russell) the essential contradiction in the ‘cowboy ethos that every man should fend for himself’, despite the inordinate federal reserves that underwrite ranch life. Yet when asked if she loves her country, Solnit will always reply in the affirmative, for ‘easy though all this is to deplore on moral grounds, the place is seductive’. Not only is it seductive, it is home: ‘There’s a sense for me that all this is home, that every hour, every mile, is coming home […] More than most nations, the United States has imagined itself as geography, as landscape and territory first, and this I too love.’ By discriminating between the physical geography of the Western landscape and the region’s wider geopolitical status, Solnit creates a distance between the political and the physical experience of this place. This is not to say that she distances herself from political engagement – far from it, Solnit is a leading voice within the Californian political sphere, as we have seen elsewhere – but that she understands herself as inhabiting two irrevocably connected yet distinct Wests.

Here we might draw back to Campbell’s 2008 study, *The Rhizomatic West*, in which he considers the direction of western studies in the twenty-first century:

[r]ather than the assumption that “roots always precede routes” in the definition of culture, one might rethink the West, as both roots and routes, both dwelling and traveling, which has much to offer western studies, providing an alternative framework that deterritorializes established traditions, displacing static myths with complex, intersecting strands.

The resonances here with Solnit’s creative practice are self-evident, and if the idea of deterritorialization has ‘much to offer’ western studies it also opens up new possibilities for Transcendentalist philosophy. The essential paradox between Emerson’s assertion that ‘to find the journey’s end in every step of the road […] is wisdom’ but equally that ‘everything

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good is on the highway’ has been noted earlier in this chapter. But, as Campbell implies, a conception of space in which stability need not inevitably engender stasis, and progression need not necessitate perpetual momentum, undermines the contradiction in Emerson’s thinking here. Moreover, it undercuts the hegemonic fixation on ‘lighting out for new territory’ that has for so long been an ideological mainstay of both Transcendentalist rhetoric and representations of the American West. And it is in this vein that Solnit claims the Western landscape as her own. For Solnit, the West is not an idealised El Dorado but the home she has always known, and her engagement with the Californian landscape confers an immediacy and an intimacy borne out of the many years she has spent (and continues to spend) living in the region. That Solnit so frequently locates her work within these Western settings belies a stable yet continually stimulating engagement with these environments.

In the opening chapter of Field Guide, Solnit asserts: ‘[f]or me, childhood roaming was what developed self-reliance, a sense of direction and adventure, imagination, a will to explore, to be able to get a little lost and then figure out the way back’ (7). In the very clear allusion to that pillar of Transcendentalism, ‘self-reliance’, Solnit recognises the influence of those nineteenth-century thinkers within her work. Yet Solnit suggests here that hers is a Transcendentalism borne out of experience, one that was fostered initially via a stimulating engagement with the external world, before it provided a philosophical underpinning for her writing. As such, Solnit implies a reversal of that Transcendentalist mode to which we keep returning that nurtures progressive thinking but so often precludes real-world action. And so with these several elements in mind – Solnit’s interweaving of the public and the private, by which she negotiates their distinct yet inherently connected nature; her stable yet stimulating connection to the Western landscape; the connection between this and a decidedly Transcendentalist sensibility; and, in turn, the parallel she draws between external experience and interiority – let us consider the last pages of Field Guide.
Within these closing passages, Solnit recounts the period in her childhood when her father was asked to work on the redevelopment of San Francisco. Having spent five years working on the proposal a development project that aimed to ‘[preserve] Marin County’s extraordinary landscapes and [prevent] its cities from sprawling together’, and after a lengthy redrafting process, her father’s plans were finally adopted in 1973 (205). As Solnit mentions in passing, the Marin County Planning Department published the plans in 1971, under the title *Can the Last Place Last?: Preserving the Environmental Quality of Marin*. Both this title and the text’s epigraph – ‘This is the last place. / There is nowhere else to go’ – are taken from a poem by Beat poet and fellow San Franciscan, Lew Welch (205). The poem, entitled ‘The Song Mt. Tamalpais Sings’, reiterates a Thoreauvian sense of the American West Coast – and specifically the San Francisco Bay Area – as the edge of the world: ‘the last place’ before humankind comes full circle on itself:

*This is the last place. There is nowhere else to go.*

Human movements, but for a few,  
are Westerly’. [...]  

Centuries and hordes of us,  
from every quarter of the earth,  
now piling up,  
and each wave going back  
to get some more.83

Despite the ominous nature of this seemingly exponential ‘piling up’ of bodies as expressed in the opening stanzas, the poem concludes:

For we have walked the jeweled beaches  
at the feet of the final cliffs  
of all Man’s wanderings.

*This is the last place.*  
*There is nowhere else we need to go.*84

84 *Ring of Bone*, 37-41.
Here, a far cry from Thoreau’s proclamation that ‘[o]ne who pressed forward incessantly, and never rested from his labors, who grew fast and made infinite demands on life, would always find himself in a new country or wilderness, and surrounded by the raw material of life’, Welch implies that such unrelenting westward momentum is not only impossible but also unnecessary. The suggestion seems to be that, as the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny would have it, humankind has, indeed, reached its apotheosis in America’s most westerly states.

Although the poem is no more than a passing reference here, its premise underpins these last sections of Solnit’s text, and the final passage of *Field Guide* takes up this idea of America’s West Coast as ‘the last place’ once more. Solnit describes her childhood home in Marin County as ‘a small place inside a larger one, or a small story inside a larger one’ and alludes to her father’s violent temper in her assertion that ‘terrible things were happening in that house, but they were tied to the redemption happening on the larger scale of the county, which was in part a reaction to the violent erasures going on across the country and the world’ (206). Despite the traumatic memories that she associates with her childhood home, Solnit recognises the area as a place to which she regularly returns. She recalls one visit in particular:

> on this return I’d seen the nesting of these stories, as well as some of the animals that had come back. [...] Most of them live out on the remotest peninsula of this remote place, [...] a peninsula at whose tip I had realized that the end of the world could be a place as well as a time. [...] The end of the world was wind-scoured but peaceful, black cormorants and red starfish on wave-washed dark rocks below a sandy bluff, and beyond them all the sea spreading far and then farther. (206)

Within these last pages, Solnit muses on the interrelation between public acts and private consequences, between private actions and ecological effects. In doing so, she poses the question once again: can this last place last? Like Welch, for all its apocalyptic connotations, these final lines suggest contentment – ‘the end of the world was wind-scoured but peaceful’.

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More than this, and paradoxically, ‘the end of the world’ is portrayed as a last bastion for ‘the animals that had come back’. A few pages previously Solnit recounts this same visit, and describes ‘watching a pair of white-tailed kites’ as she is told that ‘they had been thought to be extinct, and they were now doing so well that they were expanding their ecological niche and range’ (201-2). As she continues to discuss the many species that have been successfully reintroduced into the area, she remarks that ‘in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, tule elk were hunted into extinction altogether on this coast, and throughout their California habitat, only a few survived’ (203). Of course, the period Solnit refers to here is precisely that which produced the pioneering generation and industrial innovations that would lay the foundations, as Frederick Jackson Turner foresaw, for so many of the twentieth century’s ecological catastrophes. Yet it is also the period that saw the publication of Thoreau’s most celebrated works, including *Walden* (1854) and ‘Walking’ (1851).

In this image of several critically endangered species not only returning but ‘expanding their ecological niche and range’ in spite of near extinction, we may read an analogy for the creative endeavour of Solnit and my other writers who revisit and re-vision Transcendentalist philosophy as a means of recognising the intellectual and creative fecundity of the period, but also its ideological shortcomings. Indeed, within these closing passages, Solnit calls to mind both the Emersonian analogy of the impotent mind ‘at the brink of the ocean of thought and power’, but more intriguingly still given the thematic context, Thoreau’s metaphor for America’s most westerly coastline as the last place (and of course the Welch allusion underpins this reading) before ‘the human race […] arrives on the banks of the Styx’. And yet, as we have seen, Solnit depicts this space as both the cause of and remedy for our current ecological situation; as both an ending and a beginning. The image of Solnit looking out over ‘all the sea spreading far and then farther’ evokes not the Lethean non-space of Thoreau’s imagining, the only practical use for which is to foster forgetting of those
unfavourable aspects of the landscape we left behind. On the contrary, both here and elsewhere Solnit establishes this as the more liberating (and needless to say liminal) space into which, metaphorically speaking, we must venture; not so much a route as an ever-renewing destination. As she would term it in her ‘Coda’ – ‘The Pacific’ – at the conclusion of Storming the Gates of Paradise, this is ‘the sea that always seems like a metaphor, but one that is always moving, cannot be fixed […] One thing leads to another, and this is the treasure that always runs through your fingers and never runs out.’ Standing at the supposed ‘end of the world’ yet looking out over ‘all the sea spreading far and then farther’, Solnit strikes a very similar note to that elicited by Robinson’s evocation of ‘the frontier [that] need never close’, and confers that same open-endedness to be found within Dillard’s image of Hugh flinging himself ‘loose into the stars’. In this last image, then, Solnit articulates her sense that, just like those now thriving species, it is at this time, in this place, that the ideas and values of that most pivotal historical period would be able to flourish once more.

If the connection Solnit draws between the nineteenth century and her contemporary moment are somewhat oblique within Field Guide, the connection is much more transparent within her 2003 work Motion Studies: Time, Space and Eadweard Muybridge. Ostensibly the biography of the first photographer to capture moving images on film, the text traces the shift that has seen California change from ‘a world of places and materials to a world of representations and information, a world of vastly greater reach and less solid grounding’. As Edward Rothstein acknowledges, then, this is ‘the biography of an era; not a man’. Indeed, a counterpoint to Robinson’s sense of the West as ‘the orphan child of a brilliant century’, Muybridge functions here as ‘the perfect parent for the age […] in which we live’

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This may be gleaned within Solnit’s description of Muybridge as ‘a doorway, a pivot between that old world and ours, and to follow him is to follow the choices that got us here’ (24). Described as such (the term liminality of course derived from the Latin term *limen*, meaning literally ‘threshold’), Muybridge thus functions throughout this text as a symbol of the liminal status and potentiality of the American West.

The text details Muybridge’s working relationship with Leland Stanford, the railroad magnate who would go on to found Stanford University, which in turn begat California’s multi-corporate empire, Silicon Valley. In tracing the connection between Muybridge and Stanford, Solnit traces the beginnings of ‘Hollywood and Silicon Valley [which] became, long after these men died, the two industries California is most identified with, the two that changed the world’ (6). In doing so, Solnit articulates that tension between personal and artistic integrity and the capitalist means to bring those ideas into effect – a tension not dissimilar to that we have identified between Transcendentalism and the nation’s Manifest Destiny.

Throughout *The Rhizomatic West*, Campbell frequently reiterates the importance of the ‘outsider perspective’ to a re-visioning of the West, asserting that ‘from within and without western studies’ conceptual grid, the “outside” becomes a strategy for opening up and scrutinizing established ideologies and languages, canonical practice and texts, resilient and official mythologies’. While Robinson would later choose to articulate this perspective through her fictional protagonists, in Muybridge, Solnit finds a real-life exemplar of the outsider perspective on the American West. Born Edward James Muggeridge in Kingston-upon-Thames on 9 April 1830, Muybridge emigrated from England to America in the early 1850s, determined to ‘make a name for himself’ (27). As Solnit points out, he went about his task quite literally, arriving in San Francisco in 1855 as E. J. Muygridge. Initially working as

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a bookseller, Muybridge spent the latter half of the 1850s travelling in Europe, a time in his life which Solnit refers to as the ‘missing years’ given the lack of historical records accounting for his movements throughout this period, other than the fact that he was involved in a near fatal station wagon accident in 1860. Muybridge returned to San Francisco in 1867 to embark on his new career as a photographer, a skill that he had apparently acquired and honed during this ‘missing’ decade, and in this act of returning he effected a most intriguing layering of liminal person, place and practice. As the first step in this new life he simultaneously took on two separate aliases: Edward Muybridge (though he would later change the spelling of his first name, this was the final incarnation of his last name) and Helios. As Solnit puts it, ‘it was as though he had divided himself: Muybridge took care of the business and Helios took the pictures’ (43).

If Muybridge’s identity is characterised by this ‘betweenness’, then the city in which he lives is equally so. Solnit consistently refers to San Francisco as an in-between place, ‘with its balmy coast and snowbound mountains, and, it seemed, outsized everything’ (30). Drawing an analogy with an early process of film exposure, Solnit asserts that ‘the men and women scraped clear the glass of their own lives whenever they wanted to make a new image there, and San Francisco was a hothouse made out of these lives, incubating fantasies, erasures and new beginnings’ (37). Solnit reiterates many times the notion ventured in the opening pages that ‘perhaps because California has no past – no past, at least that it is willing to remember – it has always been particularly adept at trailblazing the future. We live in the future launched there’ (8). And so it was into this place, this moment – teetering between a forgotten (or denied) history and a not-yet-realised future (that same not-yet-realised future that preoccupies Transcendentalist literature) – that this man of shifting identities began experimenting with an artistic medium that would ultimately become ‘a breach in the wall
between the past and the present, one that lets the dead return, albeit as images of flickering light’ (115).

Before embarking on the motion studies, Muybridge spent many years travelling across the American West as a landscape photographer. As Solnit acknowledges, ‘Muybridge made many departures from what had been done before, went to locations that had never been photographed, and ended with a wholly new version of the place, and he seems to have been reacting against the clichés as well as responding to what else was there’ (85). In Muybridge’s work, then, we can draw many parallels with Solnit’s own artistic practice; this preoccupation with ‘responding to what else was there’ is, as we have seen, a key theme running throughout Solnit’s own writing. In all of his projects – his photographic studies of clouds; his San Francisco panoramas that produced, due to their composition over a period of time, ‘a simultaneity that is at once completely plausible and perfectly impossible’ – Muybridge experimented with a re-visioning of time and space that would come to its apex when in 1872 Leland Stanford asked him to capture the world’s fastest horse on camera. And, most fittingly, its name was Occident.

In a world of ever increasing speeds, Muybridge’s project required a freezing of time. As Solnit puts it, Muybridge’s motion studies capture a ‘world [...] hidden by time. It was the world of everyday things whose motion had always been mysterious’ (83). And in this text that is so permeated with metaphor, this project that required Muybridge to capture on camera a rampaging beast called ‘The West’ is an irresistible analogy. For such an undertaking evokes not only the incessant westward motion of the American continent within the period, but also, Muybridge’s attempts to find what was already there within the margins. As such, it also stands as a metaphor of Solnit’s own endeavour, in that by tracing how we got to where we are, she is also able to recover what has been lost, artistically and culturally, in the years that have passed between that time and this. In the final passage of Field Guide’s
penultimate chapter, Solnit draws this analogy once more, tracing the thematic correspondence between this and her earlier text:

Movies are made out of darkness as well as light […] If you could add up all the darkness, you would find the audience in the theater gazing together at a deep imaginative night. It is the terra incognita of the film, the dark continent on every map. […] We fly; we dream in darkness; we devour heaven in bites too small to be measured.\(^\text{90}\)

Muybridge and his creative practice, then, are a metaphor for that most pivotal historical period, a liminal character in those most liminal of times who, Solnit acknowledges, ‘demands a mixed reaction’ (152). And Solnit contends that it is ultimately this mixed reaction that makes him ‘the perfect parent for the age […] in which we live’ (152). And she continues:

the ‘great man’ version of history has been much attacked in recent years, but Muybridge is worth examination not because without him there would have been no movies but because with him we can start to understand something about their source. The great gifts might have occurred elsewhere, but the peculiar fingerprints on such gifts would not. (152)

Thus does Solnit rework that linchpin of Emersonian thought – the Representative Man. In ‘Emerson and the Inhibitions of Democracy’, Judith Shklar characterises Emerson’s thinking regarding the representative man as follows:

Heroes are relative to their time and place. Great today and gone tomorrow. Only humanity goes on. “The genius of humanity” should be the subject of biography. The spirit of the genius is absorbed in the flow of humanity’s passage through time. We ought to think of great people in social and impersonal terms, as messengers from an idea that they represent to us, or really to all humanity. Then, they should get lost as fast as possible.\(^\text{91}\)

Clearly, it is in just this sense that Solnit conceives of Muybridge in this text. Lost in the margins of history and far from the established historical elite (Plato, Shakespeare, Napoleon, as Emerson would have it), this relatively unknown man – ‘an explorer, a murderer, an

\(^{90}\) \textit{Field Guide}, pp. 175-6.

inventor, and the fastest photographer in the West’ (248) – is for Solnit the ideal representative for the era that begat the contradictory world we live in today; ‘an age of wonders, banalities, degradations, gorgeous spectacles and evils, irreparable losses and spectacular gains’ (152).

And so, as we have seen, Solnit’s West is as seductive as it is problematic. Yet as this passage and Motion Studies more generally demonstrate, there is a sense in which it has always been so – and that this is a large part of its attraction. In finding much of her creative inspiration in this most pivotal moment of the nation’s history, then, Solnit’s work celebrates the region’s greatest victories, while opening up the space to consider what the West may still achieve, if the cultural pivot were now to tilt in a new direction.

‘MY TWO TRUE HOMES’: ETEL ADNAN’S EASTERN ROOTS AND WESTERN ROUTES

As an Arab American woman who has lived between Beirut, Paris and California for most of her life, Etel Adnan’s experience of the American West is, one might argue, the most politically complex of the four writers considered throughout this thesis. When asked in a 2012 interview about how this transnational perspective informs her concept of home, Adnan replied:

Beirut becomes my home when it has problems. It is not my only home. I have spent more time in California than in Beirut. I am pretty much American. And I grew up in French schools. But when I read in the newspaper – about the civil war in Lebanon, about the war in Syria – the politics do not allow us to forget. […] To be honest, I feel alright in the world. There are certain places that I like best, but I cannot be in both places at the same time: northern California, near San Francisco, and Beirut. Those are my two true homes.92

As will be drawn out within this final section, Adnan, like Solnit, recognises the tension between her integral connection with the Californian landscape and the wider significance of

American politics. For Adnan, however, as we shall see, this tension is not so easily reconcilable.

On 16th March 2003, the United States declared war on Iraq. As her work bears out, this moment was to mark an irrevocable shift in Adnan’s perception of the West – and of her position within it. In 1978, Adnan published *Sitt Marie Rose*, the story of a young Lebanese woman who was executed by Christian militia during the Lebanese Civil War. Two years later, Adnan wrote *The Arab Apocalypse* (initially in French, but translated into English in 1989), a poem born out of the same war. She had also been involved in the writers’ movement against the Vietnam War. But while she often engaged in the politics of warfare within her work, the 2003 declaration of war with Iraq was to challenge Adnan’s very idea of home. In response, turning the dialogical tactics identified in the previous chapters to a more explicitly political purpose, Adnan published a scathing open letter in American arts magazine, *Pom²*. Structured as the imagined correspondence between Moby Dick and Captain Ahab, the letter reimagines that most famous of literary battles as one between East and West, with America as the archetypal megalomaniac and the Middle East as persecuted (yet potent) target. Adnan notes very specifically its being written at ‘fifteen and quarter minutes past one o’clock P.M. of this sixteenth day of March 2003’. As such, the composition of the letter is set within hours of Dick Cheney’s announcement that the U.S. was ‘in the final stages of diplomacy’ with Iraq – and, we may assume, within minutes of a lunchtime news bulletin that relayed this news to Adnan. Reference is made to Ahab’s ‘superb arrogance’, and it is noted that ‘the country you attack has open skies, no shields to match yours, mud houses, unprotected families […] Unequal battles are tragic, but they are

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also risible and the bulletins of victories are ridiculous’ (13). The letter implies that America’s position is ultimately one of complacent ignorance, asking: ‘Have you, dear Captain Ahab, ever bothered to know who I am, what makes me be what I am? […] With the power you control you must feel that you don’t need to bother with such knowledge’ (14).

The letter ends:

You, Ahab, and me, Moby Dick, we are no more. But our ghosts have returned to earth to resume their folly. They are watched as if they were the actors of a bloody movie, but in fact the finest people of the East are being slaughtered, and the carnage is for real, and the blood is coloring the dual rivers of Paradise, and the makers of this apocalypse will be shamed forever. (17)

Far from embracing them as analogies for her own intellectual endeavour, then, Adnan’s work treats the rhetorical and real-world implications of hegemony and colonialism with derision. Instead, she invites a new conversation, in the hope of a more balanced and egalitarian global politics – albeit with an overriding sense in those closing passages of the letter of its impossibility:

I wish you were not a captain and I was not a whale and that we had a conversation on some neutral ground, not in the Poles or on the Equator, but in some breezy place, with no military attendants, no cunning and fickle advisors, just the two of us, so I can empty my pouch and put my cards on the table, and that you will do the same. (14)

And it is a continuation of this conversation that may be read within her 2005 memoir, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*, which picks up where ‘Dear Captain Ahab’ ends, drawing an analogy to Melville’s novel once again:

It’s not about the ocean, it’s not about the whale, it’s not about Ahab, it’s about the American psyche.

And it’s not about democracy, it’s not about oil, it’s not about people, it’s about a child gone crazy with power.

And it’s not about history, not about suffering, not about the universe, it’s about pure motion pushing ahead.\(^{95}\)

\(^{95}\) *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*, p. 71.
Like ‘Dear Captain Ahab’, *Another Country* is quite literally a text in dialogue, in so far as the book takes its title and structure from William H. Gass’s 1968 work, *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*. Adnan’s introduction to *Another Country* describes how, in 1971, she first came across Gass’s text and was immediately drawn to its structure which develops through individually-titled paragraphs, ‘each headed with a recurring word or phrase’. In returning to Gass’s work a number of years later, Adnan recalls her sense that she ‘entered into a silent conversation with [Gass], his story. As I reread it, the paragraphs jumped off of the page as if addressed to me, asking for a response’ (xiii). Within *Another Country*, then, Adnan sets about ‘taking over his headings and “answering” them’ (xiv). She elaborates: ‘I thought along these lines: So you are in America, and I am here: you may think that you’re in trouble, or that there’s trouble in your country, but come here [Beirut] and see for yourself the mire into which we’re sinking’ (xiii). If this ‘silent conversation’ with Gass is, on the one hand, a much wider cultural dialogue framing *Another Country*, oscillating between the American context of her present and the Middle Eastern context of her past, it is also the very personal exploration of her own artistic and political position within these broader cultural discourses. Indeed, Adnan herself acknowledges this dynamic in her assertion that ‘personal history is involved’ in her attraction to Gass’s narrative strategy (xiv). She recognises that she has ‘always felt a particular attraction to paragraphs’ and recounts the writing tasks she was set as a young girl at a Catholic elementary school, in which her teacher would give an individual word and ask the pupils to write a sentence around it. Adnan recalls that she would often write a whole paragraph in ‘a state of trance’, experiencing ‘a kind of “rightness” there, like that which sailors feel when they reach the ecstatic moment of their cruising speed, when the smooth sailing on a sea merges with desire and becomes pure revelation’ (xiv). It may be

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96 Etel Adnan, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2005), p. xi. This text will be referred to as *Another Country*. 
said that this last sentence betrays a similar artistic idealism to that acknowledged as running throughout *Journey*. In placing this anecdote into dialogue with her broader political intentions, however, Adnan demonstrates how redeploying Gass’s narrative strategy allows her to simultaneously articulate a personal artistic continuity alongside an overarching cultural division. As we have seen in the work of Dillard, Robinson and Solnit above, *Another Country* negotiates the inevitable convergences and conflicts between the public and the private. As such, its title is intriguing in itself. In shifting its location from Gass’s Midwest to her Californian surroundings, Adnan reiterates the notion that while California may not be the geographical ‘heart’ of the country, its wider national significance allows it to function as a cultural bloodline. And yet while positioning herself at the cultural epicentre of the nation – and despite later describing herself as ‘pretty much American’ – this shift to ‘another’ implies her sense that she ultimately still experiences the West from an outsider’s perspective.

This may be gleaned most clearly within the *Another Country*’s final chapter, ‘To Be in a Time of War’. Written entirely in the infinitive, the piece depicts that very same moment in which Adnan (purportedly) composed ‘Dear Captain Ahab’. Here, however, as Adnan’s introduction to the text acknowledges, we are given a wider focus, as she offers a more personal account of that day:

> History was again bringing unbearable tensions. […] In California, very few people were really concerned. […] I was numb with apprehension, and it happened that at some moment, sitting at my table, detached from my environment, projected to an East of my own mind, and alienated from myself, I took paper and ink and started to write, ‘To Be in a Time of War’. (xvi)

Here, ‘To Be in a Time of War’ articulates just that notion cited at the outset of this section that ‘the politics do not allow us to forget’. As we have seen so many times across these New Transcendentalist writings, this passage draws conspicuous attention to its liminal

97 ‘I React to What is Happening’.
context, grounding itself in a specific moment – notably, the moment of artistic conception – while simultaneously depicting the subject transcending this moment. Looking to the chapter itself, this notion of temporal transcendence is integral, as Adnan considers the personal and political implications of her situation, interweaving details of her simply going about her everyday existence in a Californian home – ostensibly the most ordinary of days – while, on a national scale, the country declares war on the physical and cultural landscapes so near to those of her childhood. Whole sections focus on the banalities of everyday living: ‘to go to the kitchen, to reopen the fridge, to take out the cheese, to open the drawer, to take out a knife, to carry the cheese and enter the dining room, to rest the plate on the table, to lay the table for one, to sit down, to cut the cheese into four servings, to take a bite. . .’ (99). In several moments, Adnan is able to find solace in nature: ‘To go uphill, peek at Mount Tamalpais. […] To enjoy the enormous variety of shades of green on the mountain.’

98 Within such sections, she comes full circle from the assertion made in the introduction to the text:

Contrary to what is usually believed, it is not general ideas and a grandiose unfolding of great events that most impress the mind in times of heightened historical upheavals but, rather, it is the uninterrupted flow of little experiences, observations, disturbances, small ecstasies, or barely perceptible discouragements that make up the trivialised day-to-day living. (xii)

The ‘uninterrupted flow’ created by Adnan’s use of the infinitive throughout the final chapter destabilises the temporality of the piece, in that it creates a shift between the actual happening of these moments and the question of their contextual significance. Each action is underpinned by the wider context of the declaration of war and, thereby, Adnan’s displacement from her immediate surroundings. The use of the infinitive creates the effect of a continual gesturing towards what is not being said, including an underlying implication of guilt; a sense that simply to be in a time of war, ‘to hear a war from far away, for others’, is to

be complicit with its barbaric nature. We see this within its opening lines: ‘[t]o say nothing, do nothing, mark time, to bend, to straighten up, to blame oneself’ (99), and later ‘to blame oneself for the existence of evil’ (102).\(^99\)

In her 1995 essay, ‘Voyage, War and Exile’, Adnan remarks: ‘My memory, as well as my daily life, is woven with war.’\(^100\) Indeed, if Adnan’s love of the natural world is one thread running throughout her work, another which is consistently interwoven with this is her dismay at a world in conflict. ‘To Be in a Time of War’ articulates the intersection of these two strands of Adnan’s life perfectly; it captures a moment in which while her physical reality – her body, her desk, her landscape, her day to day environment – is America (‘To […] peek at Mount Tamalpais […] to enjoy the enormous variety of the shades of green on the mountain. . .’), her mind, her memory, her emotional reality as it were, travel back to the Middle East (‘…To think of the morning news, to be horrified. To despise, to hate. To empty one’s head of overflowing emotions’ (102)). Another striking example of this occurs again in a later passage, in which the staccato rhythm of the rest of the piece seems to be disrupted. Leaving her home at the base of the mountain, the narrative relocates to New York:

To walk to the Hudson River. […] To see the sun go down and see a band of light over the river. To remember the scene as it was, and still is. To wonder subsequently at home the mind created the notion of time when the place did not move. To understand, suddenly, with the suddenness of this same light, that time came out from the triangular confrontation of a place already visited, with the feeling of being actually in it. Memory allows that realization, and the interaction of all these elements with each other creates in our mind the notion – and therefore the nature – of Time. (113-14)

In keeping with the connection recognised in the opening chapter between water imagery and her memories of the Middle East, here the ‘band of light over the river’ transports Adnan back there ‘with the feeling of being actually in it’; inviting her ‘to remember the scene as it

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\(^99\) Although the first of these quotations seems to occur prior to Adnan’s awareness that the Iraq War had officially begun, the retrospective nature of the writing still lends evidence to such a reading of these opening phrases.

was’. But she must check herself – what she sees as a former reality ‘still is’. This causes her to muse on the interplay between time and consciousness, concluding that it is our memory alone by which temporality is created. More than an abstract musing on ‘the experience of poetic creativeness’, however, the transitional surfaces that Adnan creates here take on a much more tangible political significance. For her liminal role as artist is here secondary to her liminal status as an Arab American, serving as the medium through which she articulates the internal conflict she endures as a consequence.

Within the closing lines of ‘Voyage, War and Exile’, Adnan writes:

I have come to think that our predicament [i.e. the exilic experience] is not our own. Amid ecological disaster, economic predatory tactics, and political bankruptcy, a human appears to be a fallen angel exiled from the old Paradise as well as from the future. Exile is not the sad privilege of only a few individuals: it has become synonymous with the human condition. […] As contemporaries of this day and age, we are all very close to each other, but very few of us share this knowledge. (318)

Here Adnan comes very close to the ideas expressed by Edward Said in his 1984 essay, ‘Reflections on Exile’, in which he asserts that ‘we have become accustomed to thinking of the modern period itself as spiritually orphaned and alienated, the age of anxiety and estrangement’. Said’s essay provides a detailed commentary on the concept of exile in contemporary culture, describing exile ‘not as a privilege, but as an alternative to the mass institutions that dominate modern life’. He goes on to suggest that ‘the exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us with the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons […] Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.’ The final section of his essay concludes that:

for an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new

102 ‘Reflections on Exile’, p. 146.
and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. There is a unique pleasure in this sort of apprehension, especially if the exile is conscious of other contrapuntal juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgement and elevate appreciative sympathy. There is also a particular sense of achievement in acting as if one were at home wherever one happens to be.\textsuperscript{104}

In light of the analysis set out in this chapter, the significances of Said’s thoughts here are readily evident. The notion here of ‘contrapuntal juxtapositions’ – a musical term meaning ‘[to employ] combined or contrasting themes, structures’ – applies directly to the series of dialectical relationships Adnan sets up throughout her work, not only belonging and exile, but also, as we have seen elsewhere in this thesis, mountain and sea, obscurity and clarity, vision and language, past and present, and time and space.\textsuperscript{105} By considering Adnan’s writings in the context of Emerson’s less politically charged notion of ‘presenting as much transitional surface as possible’, however, we are able to explore Adnan’s experience of exile (and, indeed, the experience of exile more generally) as just one aspect of her much wider poetics of liminality. In fact, it allows space for those liminal perspectives that Said himself acknowledges as the ‘other contrapuntal juxtapositions’ that interact with the experience of exile, thus providing a less limiting framework through which to explore the many intersecting contexts that inform Adnan’s work, be they artistic, political or otherwise.

The significance of endings has been a recurring theme throughout this chapter. Looking to the closing pages of \textit{Another Country}, we find a somewhat different sentiment to that which has been identified in the works of Dillard, Robinson and Solnit:

To pick up the telephone, dial a number in Beirut. To hear the friend say that a Palestinian newsman has been cold-bloodedly shot by some earnest monotheist. To wonder on the necessity of God. To brush the problem aside. […] To look at the narrow and long road that leads the world to the slaughterhouse. (116)

For Adnan, then, the politics of the West are not so easily ‘brushed aside’, as may be read within the opposing trajectories of Solnit’s \textit{Storming the Gates of Paradise} and Adnan’s

\textsuperscript{104} ‘Reflections on Exile’, p. 148.
Another Country. Where Solnit’s ‘The Red Lands’, as we have seen, seeks to offer what many would read as a political disclaimer at the outset of her collection, working towards a reconciliation within the natural environment (as evidenced with the collection’s ‘Coda’), these final lines of Another Country preclude such hopeful optimism. Yet these final pages do not entirely foreclose an alternative future. In questioning monotheism, Adnan questions the founding principles of hegemonic culture, and while here this is just an aside (albeit a revealing one), it gestures towards her appeals cited elsewhere to a more balanced and egalitarian world view. As such, like Solnit – in fact, like all the texts considered in this chapter – Adnan invites us to now choose an alternative course. Thinking back to Campbell’s acknowledgement that ‘the “outside” becomes a strategy for opening up and scrutinizing established ideologies and languages, canonical practice and texts, resilient and official mythologies’, I would argue that Adnan’s work excavates the very foundations of U.S. mythology (as understood in terms of its Manifest Destiny) which positions the American West as a foundational space. In order to draw out this final point, let us turn once again to Journey.

While its title implies the westward direction of Adnan’s journey, it is striking that the text itself resists articulating the journey as a conventional ‘lighting out for the territory’, and, as such, undercuts the typical representation of the American West as the superior environment. As the opening chapter of this thesis identified, Adnan foregrounds her understanding of this new space as the natural (in the literal sense) continuation of her previous environment; that this is America at all is, it often seems, incidental. Indeed, we are much more likely to find the term ‘America’, if at all, used to evoke that colonial spirit that we find increasingly challenged within her later works. Moreover, Adnan aligns herself much more closely (as we see when she highlights the etymology of the name ‘Tamalpais’) with the indigenous Native American culture, as we see in the following passage from Journey:
The Indian called the Mountain Tamal-Pa, “The One close to the Sea”. The Spaniard called it Mal-Pais, “Bad Country”! The difference between the native and the conqueror is readable in these two different perceptions of the same reality. Let us be the Indian and let be! What is close to the sea shall remain close to the sea. (15-16)

In such moments, Adnan implies that the appeal of the region remains in spite of western settlement. For many generations, commentators on the American West were keen to employ that age-old analogy so often evoked in the justification of Manifest Destiny of the sun that rises in the East and sets in the West, an analogy which Thoreau exemplifies within the closing lines of *Walden*:

> I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this; but such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.\(^\text{106}\)

Within *Journey* this analogy is both reimagined and its logic undercut, as Adnan depicts the sunset over Mount Tamalpais:

> The large beam comes again. From the West to the East. The beam moves, revealing gradually and exclusively, places of its own choice. It goes on, it seems, for hours. I am amazed, but, more so, I am fulfilled. I am transported outside my ordinary self and into world as it could be when no one watches. The wind rises from the East. It is blowing toward the Ocean. The light show reverses itself. (17)

In an image strikingly similar to the graveside vision Robinson presents in *Gilead*, with this figure of the setting sun, Adnan presents a moment not of infinite dawn but of final opportunities. But it is in this moment alone, Adnan contends, that a balance is reached in which all directions are possible; all possibilities ‘fulfilled’. So it is with the later image of the sun ‘revealing gradually’ new places of interest, rather than with figures of incessant forward momentum, that Adnan represents her West. A similar image returns later in the text:

> A pink smoke sweeps the sky from the West to the East. It is the evening fire, the one which leaves no ashes. Tamalpais is there, pale and fused with the ocean, with the Bay, with lakes and reservoirs. We are not apples and oranges to be cut in two: we are binary systems yearning to transcend place and time. (51)

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\(^{106}\) *Walden*, p. 382.
It may be said, then, in line with this last quotation from *Journey*, that Adnan’s West is, like her, ‘yearning to transcend place and time’. For Adnan, it seems that ‘the American West’ is but a name written across one small section of the map that represents our interconnected planet. If we were to venture into that ‘world as it could be when no one is watching’; if we were to move beyond conceptions of space that are contingent on hierarchy and hegemony, Adnan suggests that we may yet be able to carve out a new trajectory for ourselves. Yet it seems to her that this may be a cost that we are not willing to pay.

**CAN THIS LAST PLACE LAST?**

We end this chapter with a consideration of that question that seems to preoccupy the minds of so many: *can this last place last?* On the face of it – probably, for now at least. Yet, as we have seen, this is not the question that we ultimately need to be asking. While each may draw their respective conclusions, all four of the writers considered here suggest that now is the time to move beyond such teleological and cartographic concerns that underpin and perpetuate hegemonic culture. That is, now is the time to step across that brink, though not into the Emersonian ‘ocean of thought and power’, but rather into a more inclusive critical space that challenges the very notion of hierarchy. This is not to suggest that the cultural significance of the West is not central to an understanding of the writings of my four contemporary writers’ works, however, but that in challenging its position as the nation’s (indeed, the world’s) apotheosis, they open new lines of enquiry for the representation of the West – and, indeed, America – that transcend its cartographic and ideological limitations.

Drawing back to the central premise of this thesis, then, the readings within this chapter reiterate once more that tension between leaving and the possibility of staying. As we have seen, this distinction is explicitly borne out in the disjunction between the idealised West of nineteenth-century Transcendentalist writings and the more tangible representations
of the actual West found in the works of Dillard, Robinson, Solnit and Adnan. For Emerson, Thoreau and other New England Transcendentalists, the West is positioned as one extreme of an East coast-West coast dualism from which many other dualisms emanate and as such becomes bound in, or even symbolic of the cultural imperatives by which those earlier writings remain bound. In the work of my four contemporary writers, however, the actual West functions as a space less beholden to its cartographic and historical boundaries, and as such becomes a space in which the mutable, ambivalent principles of a Transcendentalist mode of liminality can be more fully explored and realised.
CONCLUSION

By setting the writings of Etel Adnan, Annie Dillard, Marilynne Robinson and Rebecca Solnit into dialogue with those of the New England Transcendentalists, and particularly Ralph Waldo Emerson, this thesis has proposed a New Transcendentalism that both reinvigorates and reimagines Transcendentalist thought for our increasingly intersectional and deterritorialized contemporary context. In its vision of a female-led New Transcendentalism, the project contributes towards the twenty-first-century shift in Transcendentalist scholarship which seeks to challenge the popular image of New England Transcendentalism as uncompromisingly individualist, abstract and ultimately the preserve of white male privilege. Moreover, in its identification and examination of an interrelated poetics and politics of liminality across these old and new Transcendentalist writings, the project also extends the scope of a more recent strain of Transcendentalist scholarship which emphasises the dialogical underpinnings of the nineteenth-century movement.

With reference to key studies by Stanley Cavell and Branka Arsić, the thesis develops a specifically Transcendentalist mode of liminality which is predicated upon the aversive principle that Cavell and Arsić recognise as integral to Emersonian Transcendentalism. Framing my understanding of this aversive principle in relation to Arnold van Gennep’s rite of passage model, I contended that Emerson’s aversive mode may be understood as the perpetual initiation of a rite of passage which never reaches (or intends to reach) reintegration and instead prefers to ‘waver between two worlds’. However, I also highlighted a core tension in Emerson’s thinking, whereby the progressive potential of the liminal phase that his writing so often evokes is, to my mind, limited through being equated with perpetual ‘onwardness’ and abandonment. The introduction acknowledges Emerson’s awareness of the limitations imposed by his historical context and recognises the sense of deferred realisation that thus characterises nineteenth-century Transcendentalist thinking. My contention
throughout this thesis has been that the paradigm shifts of the mid-to-late twentieth century created a cultural space in which Transcendentalism’s underlying progressive modes and principles can be more tangibly realised. The readings presented in this thesis propose that the alternative trajectory that Transcendentalist ideals take in the writings of Adnan, Dillard, Robinson and Solnit constitute a New Transcendentalism. Instead of being bound by an imperative to perpetually supplant the past, this New Transcendentalist mode invites us to turn back to the founding principles of a seminal strand of U.S. intellectual and literary culture in order to recover their progressive potential which has become obscured over the intervening century and a half.

By returning to these first principles, this thesis recognises how the essential foundations of New England Transcendentalism – its anti-teleological perspective, its belief in the importance of conversation, its willingness to embrace contradiction, and its proclivity towards the ‘betwixt and between’ – readily lend themselves to the articulation of marginal or peripheral experiences.¹ Indeed, as we have seen in the case of anthropological theories of liminality and psychoanalytical theories of sexual difference, fundamental aspects of New England Transcendentalism may even be said to anticipate the preoccupations (and supposed innovations) of several twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical discourses. As such, and in keeping with the dialogical analogies that inform this project throughout, the relationship examined within this thesis between Adnan, Dillard, Robinson and Solnit and the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists is presented here as itself reciprocal, in that it not only demonstrates how my four contemporary writers may be read productively in the light of their New England forebears, but also how those readings in turn invite us to reconsider our understanding of those earlier thinkers.

Taking Ralph Waldo Emerson’s notion of ‘[presenting] as much transitional surface as possible’ as its point of departure, the opening chapter established the productiveness of reading both old and new Transcendentalist writings in light of anthropological theories of liminality, given the term’s ability to recognise transition as not only a process implying its two extremes, but also a state in and of itself, one which constitutes ‘a realm of pure possibility’. The chapter’s comparative readings argued that while Adnan, Dillard, Robinson and Solnit all reflect a Transcendentalist sense of the restorative, self-affirming potential of the liminal experience in nature, such experiences are but one aspect of a much wider dialogical perspective that informs their writings. The latter half of the chapter explicitly recognised the importance of this broader dialogical mode, tracing its origins back to Mary Moody Emerson, before projecting forward to a consideration of how the legacy of this mode may be traced within the dialogical tactics employed by Robinson in her Gilead novels. While each of my four writers employs her own distinct poetics of liminality to different ends, the opening chapter allowed us to establish three overarching (and interrelated) elements of a New Transcendentalist literary mode. Firstly, the value they place on ambivalence, articulated most succinctly in Adnan’s notion of ‘obscure clarity’ that recurs throughout Sea and Fog. A second trope of these writings is their ability to hold seemingly opposing perspectives in productive tension, as borne out within Dillard’s juxtaposition of the via positiva and via negativa, for example, and Robinson’s professed intention ‘to make both sides as equal as possible’ within her writings. Thirdly, their tendency to create dialogical structures both within and across their works, as exemplified by the bilateral symmetry of

Dillard’s *Pilgrim*, the mediating ‘Blue of Distance’ chapters in Solnit’s *Field Guide*, the intersecting narratives of Robinson’s *Gilead* and *Home*, and the ocean/mountain dialectic that is constructed across Adnan’s body of work.

Having thus identified the central tenets of the New Transcendentalist poetics of liminality proposed throughout this thesis, Chapter Two built upon the themes of intergenerational dialogue, betweenness and the renegotiation of power dynamics that were established as integral to my four writers within the opening chapter. It is within this second chapter that we see the clearest evidence of the mutuality of a New Transcendentalist poetics and politics of liminality. For the New Transcendentalist texts considered within this chapter – Solnit’s *The Faraway Nearby*, Robinson’s *Housekeeping* and Dillard’s *The Maytrees*, most particularly – may be understood as constituting ‘the potential space of thirdness’ between these two seemingly incompatible perspectives: New England Transcendentalism on the one hand and feminist psychoanalytic models on the other, where the former is popularly characterised as an exemplar of the patriarchal mode that the latter explicitly seeks to challenge. Yet by drawing on readings by George Kateb, Johannes Voelz and Branka Arsić, the discussion highlighted several striking parallels between Emersonian understandings of love and friendship and those ventured by Irigaray and Benjamin. As such, by projecting those feminist discourses onto the liminal landscapes that are so steeped in that patriarchal tradition, indeed, by reimagining those landscapes from the perspective of those feminist discourses and vice versa, the New Transcendentalist texts considered throughout Chapter Two uncover a number of intriguing points of contact between these apparently disparate modes: their anti-teleological perspective, for example, their dialectic sense of the relationship between spirit and matter, their belief in negative capability, their vision of the

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role of the artist. The three-way dialogue that is set up within Chapter Two, then, exemplifies both the vertical and lateral genealogies that inform the New Transcendentalism proposed throughout this thesis.

Moving beyond the local implications of the self-other dynamic, the third and final chapter of this thesis considered how my four writers renegotiate American Transcendentalism’s engagement with both the real and imagined American West. Taking Thoreau’s ominous assertion that the colonisation of the American continent – both geographically and intellectually – represents ‘one last chance’ for the human race before it comes full circle on itself and ‘arrives on the banks of the Styx’, the discussion highlighted a fundamental tension between New England Transcendentalism’s professed anti-teleological outlook and the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. Yet it also identified Emerson and Thoreau’s awareness of the liminal and, in this case, limiting historical context in which they were writing, and a sense of deferred hope for the full realisation of a Transcendentalist sensibility. As Emerson remarked: ‘[s]o many things are unsettled which it is of the first importance to settle, – and, pending their settlement, we will do as we do.’ Examining the centrality of the American West within the texts of my four writers, I argued that our contemporary moment may be understood as the not-yet-realised future in which American Transcendentalism would find itself ‘in fuller union with the surrounding system’. In contrast to the idealised imaginary West which is consistently gestured towards in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, however, the West emerges here as an ambiguous and contested space which is as problematic as it is seductive. In keeping with the dialogical strategies outlined above, however, it is the ambivalent characteristics of the region to which my four writers are

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inevitably drawn, allowing as they do the space to renegotiate the derivative stereotypes with which the region is popularly associated. At the end of the chapter, all four writers find themselves looking out beyond this liminal space so often presented as the edge of history, time and civilization. Rather than a sense of foreboding, however, each writer recognises the opportunity for moving beyond the cartographic and ideological limitations that have for so long delimited the image of the West and, indeed, America in the cultural imagination.

As Emerson tells us, ‘[e]very end is a beginning’, and so it is for this project.⁹ Where Chapter Three closes with each of my writers looking out from America’s farthest edge onto an uncertain future, we are invited to extend the Emersonian model of ‘ever-expanding circles’ further still, and to move ahead to a consideration of the transnational implications of the New Transcendentalism proposed here. Indeed, Neil Campbell’s claim that ‘[to] examine the [American] West in the twenty-first century is to think of it as always already transnational, a more routed and complex rendition, a traveling concept whose meanings move between cultures, crossing, bridging and intruding simultaneously’ presents in microcosm the wider transnational turn in American Studies, which aims to situate American literature within the wider contexts of an increasingly deterritorialized world.¹⁰ Of particular interest in this vein is Wai Chee Dimock’s 2006 study, Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time. If Campbell presents the American West as already having established its transnational significance, Dimock implies that the wider field of American Studies still has some way to go in this regard. Dimock draws on thinkers including Benedict Anderson and Anthony Giddens, positing that ‘the nation and the clock not only unify time but also “dis-embed” it, removing it from local contexts, local irregularities, and abstracting it

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into a metric, at once “empty and homogenous”. Dimock contends that these notions of time and space have been inadequately mapped onto literary criticism, and particularly American literary study, which, she asserts, has ‘for too long […] been seen as a world apart, sufficient unto itself’ (2). *Through Other Continents* challenges the notion that there is a ‘seamless correspondence between the temporal and spatial boundaries of the nation and the boundaries of all other expressive domains’, and argues that by uncritically mapping one onto the other ‘we limit ourselves, with or without explicit acknowledgement, to an analytic domain foreclosed by definition, a kind of scholarly unilateralism’ (3). From such a perspective, Dimock contends, ‘literature [becomes] the product of one nation and one nation alone, analyzable within its confines’ (3). Her study instead invites us to consider American literature as ‘a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures’ (3). Given the focus of this thesis, it is significant that Dimock presents the notion of ‘scholarly unilateralism’ as a particularly American phenomenon. For, as we have seen, the desire to establish an American literature that positions itself as ‘the product of one nation and one nation alone’ – a *self-reliant* national culture, as it were – can be traced directly back to New England Transcendentalist writings. In keeping with the premise of this project, then, it is within this wider context, as we renegotiate the role of American literature more generally, and move beyond the boundaries of both personal and national self-reliance, that I wish to position my own model of New Transcendentalism.

At the very outset of this thesis, it was acknowledged that any attempt to develop a rigid definition of what it means to be a Transcendentalist is as futile as it is problematic given the incongruous nature of those associated with the movement. I would argue here that

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the same may said of New Transcendentalism, for while this thesis has recognised many affinities between Adnan, Dillard, Robinson and Solnit, it is equally important to recognise their key points of divergence. As an Arab American artist, for example, Adnan clearly brings a very different range of influences – both artistic and political – to bear on her experience of contemporary U.S. culture. Equally, Solnit’s political activism is key to our understanding of her writings, just as our understanding of Robinson’s work is shaped at least in part by our understanding of her Calvinist faith. Likewise, while we may aim to align Dillard with Robinson in light of the theological discourses in which their writings are steeped – and, indeed, the mutual admiration they have recognised for one another – their differing relationships with their faith are such that we must be wary of drawing too neat an affinity between them. As we have seen, however, the ability to recognise and account for opposition is a central tenet of the New Transcendentalism I propose here. In positioning these ‘separate yet connected’ writers alongside one another, then, this thesis engages in the dialogical mode that it has identified as so integral to Transcendentalists old and new. In doing so, I add my own voice to the series of interconnected conversations considered throughout this thesis, in the aim of opening a new line of enquiry in the field of Transcendentalist scholarship.

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