'How Do You Read It?' Rowan Williams, Marilynne Robinson and Mapping a Postmodern Reading of the Good Samaritan Parable

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Abstract

To explicate the Good Samaritan parable, this paper employs Rowan Williams' interpretations of the parabolic imagination as explored in *On Christian Theology* (2000) and in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* (1980). Williams identifies reading strategies that open possibilities for reading parables through the lens of contemporary texts. Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* with its unconventional cast of unconnected women provides a contemporary way to explore the parable's opening question. Both Williams and Robinson, in their respective thoughts about 'housekeeping' as mutuality, discover that privileging established answers, conventional families and coded traditions interrogates the question 'who is my neighbor?' Both the theologian and the novelist explore behaviors that open the boundaries of family and traditions so that the elusive/allusive answer to the parable's question is found in unexpected haunting places with unfamiliar transients and on an ancient public road with one who has no name and voice.

Keywords: parabolic imagination, reading strategies, *On Christian Theology*, metaphor, *Housekeeping*, tradition

As the early twenty-first century economic crisis exploded, then prime minister Gordon Brown explained his financial rescue plan by noting

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that 'his Government could not simply walk by on the other side when people are facing problems'.[2] In response to Brown's citation of the well-known parable, former Archbishop Rowan Williams also points out the dangers of the fiscal stimulus policies as 'unconditional loyalty to a system that blocks out human faces and stories':[3]

> What about the unique concerns and crises of the pensioner whose savings have disappeared, the Woolworth's employee, the hopeful young executive, let alone the helpless producer of goods in some third-world environment where prices are determined thousands of miles away.[4]

In the allusion to the Good Samaritan parable, both the politician and the theologian highlight the economic dilemmas that commonly raise the question about 'who is my neighbor?' To creatively connect the biblical text with historical and contemporary contexts, Rowan Williams and novelist Marilynne Robinson locate webs of influences and an array of practices and patterns that complicate the reading of the parable.

Strategizing: 'The Profound Hermeneutic of Parable'[5]

In this contemporary situation that requires constructing meanings about who is 'my neighbor', the parable that Jesus tells in Lk. 10.25-37 becomes a contested site about one's role in this daunting twenty-first-century global economy. Interestingly enough, in his noted publication *On Christian Theology,* Williams suggests that responding to the parabolic in the world and acting with a parabolic imagination are strategies to recover a 'historical world of scripture',[6] and in that recovery, one discovers his or her neighbor.

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[2] Philippe Naughton, 'Prelate Frowns on Brown Rescue Plan', *The Australian*, 20 December 2008, http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,24824426-2703,00.html (accessed 20 October 2010).

[3] Martin Beckford, 'Archbishop of Canterbury Warns Recession Britain Must Learn Lessons from Nazi Germany', *Telegraph*, 22 December 2008, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/religion/3885458/Archbishop-of-Canterburysnewyearmessage (accessed 21 October 2010).

[4] Beckford, 'Archbishop of Canterbury Warns Recession Britain'.

[5] Rowan Williams identifies parables not only as the designated gospel 'parables' but also narratives that are 'effective images of a new world like the parables of Christ'. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, in Gareth Jones and Lewis Ayres (eds.), *Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), p. 27.

[6] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 42.

Throughout *On Christian Theology,* a compilation of essays that span a twenty-year period, several postmodern strategies on reading and interpreting biblical narratives thread through the entire collection. For example, the above interchange between the prime minister and the theologian engages one of the themes of the postmodern condition – the epistemological significance of narrative. The little narrative – '*petit récit*' – unlike the grand narrative or metanarrative of modernism tells a local and particular story. In its cultural and historical location, it can discover other voices, suppressed history, and dominant structures of power previously overlooked or ignored.[7]

> '*Petits récits*' are small narrative units at work everywhere locally. The '*petit récit*' is at odds with tradition and authority, omniscience and closure. It challenges the authority of master narratives without itself seeking to become a narrative of mastery: it is, by definition, a subversive alternative open only to those 'ousted possibilities' at the margins of a social system.[8]

These initial observations do not necessarily classify Williams as a 'postmodern theologian', but they do suggest that he considers postmodern approaches when reading parables in this new century. For example, Williams' theological method '*displays* [*sic*] modes of arguing and interpreting rather than advancing a single system'.[9] Working away from hermeneutical tendencies that justify and explain human behavior, social structures, institutions, and texts in grand narratives, Williams critically engages contemporary critical theories, that is, new criticism, narrative criticism, and new historicism. To briefly explain, form criticism examines rhetorical and patterns that reverberate within the closed and self-sufficient world of the text, and, when employed in theological formulations, the requisite 'close reading' shows the integral connection between form and content.[10] In this approach, each interpretation comes closer to finding a rhetorical 'key' that unlocks the correct meaning. Narrative criticism also focuses on the self-consistent holism of the text. As David Rhoads declares, 'narrative criticism brackets historical questions and looks at the closed universe of the story-world'.[11]

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[7] Jean-François Lyotard, quoted in Madan SarUniversity Press, *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 139.

[8] Gregory Castle, 'Ousted Possibilities: Critical Histories in James Joyce's Ulysses', *Twentieth Century Literature* 39.3 (Autumn 1993), pp. 306–28 (326, n. 11).

[9] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. xvi. However, Nancy Murphy and Brad Kallenberger view Williams as a postmodern theologian due to Williams being 'indebted to Wittgenstein'. N. Murphy and and B. Kallenberger, 'Anglo-American Postmodernity: A Theology of Communal Practice', in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 26–41 (40).

Williams generously acknowledges that these 'closed' scripts may be various strategies to read the story-world intelligently and consistently. Indeed, Williams points out that economic motivations and 'carefully calibrated exchange of material resources' may characterize the framework for the gospel parables, an interpretation which could include the Good Samaritan parable.[12] However, Williams equally cautions that when a religious discourse claims to be about the 'whole moral universe', then it must exhibit 'imaginative skill sufficient to confront the full range of human complexity. Religious and theological integrity is possible as and when discourse about God declines the attempt to take God's point of view – "a total perspective"'.[13]

New historicism, appearing in the later part of the twentieth century helpfully highlights the interrelatedness of all human activities, cautions against prejudices and judgment, and accounts for how particular histories and cultures affect the writing and reading of the text. In this vein, Williams points out that in the consideration of versions of human agency 'the larger picture [of parabolic meaning] is not the one that economics or biology or psychodynamics dictates. It is the richly textured process of shaping a story that is one's own.'[14] What Williams proposes in his collection of essays about the 'historical world of Scripture' and the readings of the Good Samaritan parable in this paper has 'something to do with the coherence of biography'.[15] Williams is not suggesting that such coherence is illuminating the 'story of God', an illumination which might appear as a 'total perspective'. Instead Williams discovers how biblical narratives and human biographies speak about God and the transformation of mortal vision, a vision that rejects the administration of addictive institutional power.[16]

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[10] See Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1984). Another overview on hermeneutical practices is found in Robert J. Plummer, 'Parables in the Gospels: History of Interpretation and Hermeneutical Guidelines', *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13.3 (2009), pp. 4–11.

[11] Narrative criticism discerns a theological, or ideational, viewpoint that may enhance the story's structure. Rhoads points out the unifying dominant point of view in tension with the ideology of the characters and a close reading of other narrative elements has the potential to reduce the narrative to an ordinary story. David Rhoads, 'Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark', *JAAR* 50 (1982) pp. 411–34 (413). Narrative criticism also is critiqued because the influence of secular literary theory on biblical narratives has led to concern whether 'this privileges against any kind of scrutiny that does not come from within the traditions of the faith community claiming the book as its own'. David Gunn, 'Narrative Criticism', in Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (eds.), *To Each its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticism and their Application* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), pp. 171–95 (193).

[12] Rowan Williams, 'Knowing our Limits', *Crisis and Recovery: Ethics, Economics and Justice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 19–34 (19–20).

[13] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 6.

Dismissing Total Meaning: 'Perception Simplified and Unified in Contingencies of Human Biography'[17]

Given Williams' perceptions, the Good Samaritan parable presents the dilemma of not only who is my neighbor but also whose biography/story is this? Does anyone have power in the parable? The innkeeper is the only one who may be making a legitimate profit, and there is no economic exchange between any other characters – other than robbers who take everything but life itself. Williams views the 'historical world of Scripture' not as an uncontested and optimistic linear historical progression toward a goal such as 'ought' imperative statements cast largely in a dominant Western grammar. The parable is simple enough in Jesus' telling, but are there epistemic obligations for the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan? Are there conflicting obligations; are there overriding obligations in determining whether or not any of the parable's actors should or ought to assist the robbed and beaten 'neighbor'? As symbolic logic states, the characters act on assumptions regarding whether their behavior is obligatory, permissible, impermissible, omissible, or optional given the defilement and ritual impurity in helping this wounded man – perhaps a lone Jew on the road to Jericho – or a Woolworth employee, or a developing-world coffee farmer?

In *On Christian Theology*, Williams states that Scripture, far from being a clear and readily definable territory, is a historical world in which meanings are 'discovered and recovered in action and encounter',[18] and, as such, parables inhabit a linguistic space that identifies the religious experience of a faithful historical community. As Mike Higton puts it, Williams understands that the revelation in Christ transforms key meanings in the language 'which enables our exploration, our questioning, our innovations'.[19] This extension of language is unified by the one figure of 'Jesus Christ, and through the diversities of Christian humanity'.[20] The language and grammar of the parable, such as the lawyer's question and the Samaritan's response, make traditional behaviors problematic. In this aspect, if the priest in the parable, an exemplar of the law, comes close to a 'dead' man, the priest is defiled and must be ritually cleansed, must spend money for a sacrificial heifer and must stand at the Eastern Gate with the unclean. These are requirements demanded by the law. This is the priest's legal response, and the Levite is under similar moral and legal restraints. Ritual efficacy demands the exchange of money and time, and so the priest and the Levite are indeed good 'neighbors' within their respective traditions. This obligatory action for the priest articulates a particular identity for a community with a traceable historical unity.[21] The parable itself is told in the context of the lawyer's question to Jesus about how one inherits eternal life, and the answer has often been to overlook the economic language of the lawyer's opening question. How can one inherit something grandly abstract as eternal life when the metonymic answer is oil, wine, and two denarii? Williams claims that 'speaking and hearing parables is a willingness to lose the identities and perceptions we make for ourselves', and 'such learning must include transformations of scriptural narrative'.[22]

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[14] Williams, 'Knowing our Limits', p. 22.

[15] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. xvi.

[16] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 14.

[17] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 13.

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[18] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 30.

[19] Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 78.

[20] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. 24–25.

[21] A postmodern view of history moves away from totalizing narratives and the notion that any historical period has a single point of view. On the other hand, biblical scholarship in whatever method has confronted the accuracy, objectivity, evidentiary sources, intentionality of how history shapes or does not shape the written text. J. Maxwell Miller helpfully describes two extremes of reading the Bible historically:

> At one extreme are those who insist that the Bible is literally accurate in all historical details, including the chronological data provided in Genesis–2 Kings that place the creation of the world approximately 6000 years ago. … At opposite extreme are those who regard the biblical accounts as being so theologically and nationalistically tendentious … that any attempt to reconstruct the history of ancient Israel is fruitless … an essentially ahistorical approach to the text.

'Reading the Bible Historically: The Historian's Approach', in Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (eds.), *To Each its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticism and their Application* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), pp. 11–28 (15). Williams says of his position about historical and critical inquiry:

In describing an 'historical world of scripture', Rowan Williams considers how the canonical narratives 'perform' in the Old and New Testaments. 'The roles Christians can take on are the roles created and enacted by the fathers [and mothers] of the Jewish faith.'[23] As noted earlier, Williams views the Jesus narratives both as a unifying point of reference and as a movement in the fluid, unpredictable, and incomplete process of history. This suggests that if the Christian claim is offering 'a direction for historical construction of human meaning',[24] then the resurrection narratives have something to say about Jewish and Christian life and faith of the first century, and, for this paper, how to read parables.

Story-patterns and the Empty Tomb: Absence and Presence

Williams notes that the believing Christian community sometimes has taken stances that distort the scope of divine love by exclusively identifying the actions of God with their particular belief system.[25] Meditating on biblical images, Williams tackles interpretations of the tomb narratives – the liberals' proclamation of God's acting and speaking as the risen one and the fundamentalists' 'substance' interpretation, defined as the historical demonstrability of the empty tomb. Williams' description of these binaries suggests

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(F'note continued)

'I am not happy with either an apologetic colonizing of historical study or a theologically dictated indifference to history'. *On Christian Theology*, p. 194.

[22] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 42.

[23] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 23. David Ford sees this strategy as a way forward for postmodern theology: 'it is deeply rooted in premodernity (especially in its and the traditions of their interpretation through commentary, theology, and "performance" in worship and community living.' David Ford, 'Holy Spirit and Christian Spirituality', in Kevin J. VanHoozer (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 269–90 (283).

[24] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. 36, 171.

[25] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 188.

that proclamation/substance compete for power in how the story of Jesus' death and resurrection is told. To deconstruct these opposites, it may appear at first reading that Williams takes a Derridean stance in discovering absence, gaps, deferral, and indeterminacy, in a text that 'endlessly unravels itself'.[26] To be sure, Williams resists closure, but he does this through a paradox that is modern and postmodern. He identifies a central image and simultaneously recognizes the failure of images.

> The central image of the gospel narratives is not any one apparition but the image of absence, an image of the failure of images, which is also an absence that confirms the reality of a creative liberty, an agency not sealed and closed, but still obstinately engaged with a material environment and an historical process.[27]

To recover image-patterning in the resurrection narratives, Williams focuses on the two angels flanking Jesus' tomb in the Gospel of John. Recalling the Old Testament cherubim that border the ark and the God who is present between them but not bodily there, Williams says this gap between the images is where God would be if he were anywhere. The God of Judah and Jesus are seen by looking into the gap between the holy images.[28] Williams suggests that in the resurrection narratives this 'non-representable, non-possessible dimension of the paradoxical manifestation of God to God's people' may connect with the nest of critical questions which make closure so difficult.[29] In the Good Samaritan parable, a version of presence in absence occurs in the narrative's silence about a central character. The seven figures in the parable are identified: Jesus the narrator, the lawyer the questioner, the robbers, the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, the innkeeper, but the one left beaten, robbed, stripped and half-dead is unidentified. Even the road is signed and connects two well-known ancient cities. The unnamed man has no identifiable biography, no face, no sense of presence, no voice, no past and no account of a future. He just exists and abandoned in the break-down lane.

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[26] Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible* (ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 135.

[27] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. 195–96.

[28] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 187. Speaking about this constant movement in Christian experience, Williams says there is movement again and again to the 'central and fruitful darkness of the cross and outwards in affirmation and inwards to emptiness'. *Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2nd rev. edn, 1990), p. 190.

[29] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 187.

Markus Bockmuehl exploring the intense cultural idiosyncrasy of the resurrection claim with its apocalyptic language refers to Rowan Williams' comments on the hyperbolic language of 'here but not here':

> And for all its inalienable cultural specificity, the angelic announcement that "He is not here, but is risen" encapsulates the only possibly way in which the Jewish followers of Jesus could explain the confusing diverse and yet convergent experiences of absence and presence.[30]

Pursuing the possibility that the empty tomb narratives say something about the character of divine presence or action, Williams notes that 'indeterminacy in the resurrection stories is one way of saying what the content of the stories is meant to convey: 'Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified is not confined in the past.'[31] One way in which Williams addresses this matter is to note that Jesus is not a 'comprehensive ontological schema' but a 'universally crucial question'.[32] Taking this tact, Williams retrieves an approach to inter-faith dialogue that counteracts a 'cosmic Christ' [Christian triumphalism] in favor of recognizing the '"otherness" of other faiths and the integrity of their systems'.[33]

Williams argues against a 'consummation of history' notion because it places, for example, Judaism and Christianity in conflict and rivalry. He calls for a postmodern understanding that the first-century historical 'period' and 'facts' do not form a single world view for either early Christians or Roman Jews: these two 'comparable systems' are particular units 'determined by particular systems of power'.[34] Jesus' claim on Israel's identity is in mortal conflict with the rulers of Israel's claim on that identity 'at a specific moment',[35] and in the Good Samaritan parable, it not only occurs in that initial encounter with the lawyer but also in that tremulous moment when the Samaritan first sees the wounded victim. The history of Jesus, as he reveals the nature of God, judges claims of total and authoritative meaning whether in

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[30] 'Resurrection', in Markus Bockmuehl (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 102–18 (113).

[31] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. 187–88.

[32] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 94.

[33] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 29.

[34] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 97.

[35] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 98.

Judaism or in Christianity, and equally critiques any finalization of history that seals the people of God into a parodic church manifesting a form of tribalism.[36] The parable challenges such tribalism whether that of the priest, Levite, lawyer or Samaritan. In fact, neither the narrator nor any other character labels the Samaritan 'good', but only as 'neighbor'. What happens to the victim who is unidentified, who is neither from a recognizable neighborhood nor from an ecclesial 'home', demonstrates something about human community.

According to Kathryn Tanner, Christianity is 'about a communal way of living, more specifically, the unified community of all peoples that Jesus enables to participate over the course of historical engagement in conversation and controversy with others in the world'.[37] Just as Professor Tanner calls for an enlargement of the language of faith to engage the world in its historical and communal conversation,[38] Williams locates the historical time of the text on a continuum with contemporary time. To read our world into the history of the text, Williams suggests that non-literal reading will too readily gloss over the rough and complicated historical learning to which the gospel calls. Literal reading, on the other hand, leads into the discipline of humility and finds 'ways of allowing ourselves to pay attention to the text's intractable resistance'.[39]

Engaging the Gospel Parable with a Contemporary Novel

Interpretations of the Good Samaritan parable abound with conclusions that being merciful defines a good neighbor, but what 'intractable resistance' emerges that demands the reader's attention and that complicates the reading? Much has been said about the legal scholar who poses the question in the parable, but what about the victim? Is he a mere role-player for an ethics lesson? What if the victim is an eccentric transient woman who has unconventional thoughts about home and housekeeping, and once healed at the inn, she leaves to wander the railroad tracks? Should some change in behavior be required, even demanded, of the victim since money has been exchanged on her behalf? In *Crisis and Recovery*, Williams notes that there is an etymological connection between 'housekeeping' and 'economics'.[40]

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[36] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 105. Williams cites Jacques Pohier (*God: In Fragments* [London: SCM Press, 1985], p. 295) on the meaning of Christ: 'The central and perhaps (paradoxically) ''universal'' meaning of Christ is in Christ's revelation, over against all religious totalities of interpretation of a God who is authentically creator of a world because this God does not wish to be everything.' Williams links eschatological tribalism with ideological violence: 'the third Reich's assault on the Jewish people in the urge to bring a kind of finality into history has rightly become the paradigm of ideological violence' (*On Christian Theology*, p. 102).

[37] Kathryn Tanner, ''Review of *On Christian Theology*,'' *Anglican Theological Journal* 83.1 (Winter 2001), pp. 161–62.

[38] Tanner, *ATR*, p. 162.

[39] Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, p. 63.

Noting the previously cited economic aspects of the Good Samaritan narrative, 'intractable resistance' emerges in the encounter between Williams' explanation of those etymological connections *and* the 1980s novel by Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*. According to Williams, 'housekeeping' develops our humanity, and equally, economic relations say something about humanity 'in the context of God's action':[41]

> "Housekeeping" theory is about how we use our intelligence to balance the needs of those involved and to secure trust between them. A theory that wanders too far from these basics is a recipe for damage to the vulnerable, to the regularity and usefulness of labour, and to the possibilities human beings have for renewing (and challenging) themselves through leisure and creativity.[42]

What Williams argues for in this housekeeping/economic theory connection is mutuality, an organic quality, 'a common identity shaped by the fact that each depends on all others for their life'.[43] Interpretations of the parable support such mutuality and the 'housekeeping strategy' (careful obedience to the legal code) of the two who pass by the beaten man destroy the nurture and stability that makes a household what it is.[44] By his merciful action, the Samaritan is subsequently labeled 'good' housekeeper and neighbor, but now the question emerges what housekeeping practices allow any mutuality on the part of the one who has nothing to commend himself or herself as a neighbor? The nearly dead man in the parable has no 'home', and home with its concomitant housekeeping, as historian Joseph Amato points out, centers families. 'Its walls, a set of enclosing surfaces, enwrap our physical, social, and emotional selves. A womb, a room, and tomb, home is the repository of our being.'[45]

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[40] Rowan Williams, 'Speech to the Trinity Institute: The Archbishop of Canterbury at Trinity Wall Street', 29 January 2010, pp. 2–3, http://episcopalian.wordpress.com/2010/01/29full-text-the-archbishop-of-canturbury-rowan-williams (accessed 5 February 2011).

[41] Williams, *Crisis and Recovery*, p. 19.

[42] Williams, 'Speech to the Trinity Institute', pp. 2–3.

[43] Williams, 'Speech to the Trinity Institute', p. 3.

[44] Williams, 'Speech to the Trinity Institute', p. 3.

In the novel *Housekeeping* by Pulitzer-prize winning author Marilynne Robinson, the narrator Ruth and her sister Lucille live in a weathered landscape in the American northwest. Throughout the novel, conventional home and housekeeping are disturbingly undermined, and yet a mysterious and strange kind of healing relationship occurs. At the outset, the mother abandons the girls and commits suicide, their father disappears for unknown reasons, and their grandfather dies in a breathtaking train accident and plunges into the dark, deep, cold Fingerbone lake. Two spinster aunts try to raise the girls until Aunt Sylvie Foster arrives with a radically different housekeeping strategy, one that completely disconnects her from being viewed as a 'neighbor'. As Anatole Broyard puts it, 'the novel is about a woman who is so far from everyone else that it would be presumptuous to put a name to her frame of mind'.[46]

In a strange twist, Sylvie is the wounded one of the parable, now discharged from the innkeeper but who remains the outsider with practices and behaviors that force the question again about why she should be considered someone worthy of being called 'neighbor'. In a telling scene, Sylvie, wearing a scarf around her head and carrying a broom, appears the housekeeper, but in fact she opens doors and windows so that the wasps, bats, barn swallows, and leaves mix with scraps of paper in the corners. 'Thus finely did the house become attuned to the orchard and to the particularities of the weather. She wrestled my grandmother's plum-colored davenport into the front yard, where it remained until it weathered pink. Sylvie liked to eat supper in the dark.'[47]

'Housekeeping' for Aunt Sylvie means living throughout the house in constant cluttered disarray, eating dinner with the lights off, taking the girls on serendipitous trips at all times of the day and night into the wild landscape, sometimes to dangerous and mysterious locations. One of Sylvia's housekeeping strategies is keeping the light off at dinner time:

> Just when the windows went stark blue, Sylvie would call us into the kitchen. Lucille and I sat across from each other and Sylvie at the end of the table. Opposite her was a window luminous and cool as aquarium

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[45] Joseph Amato, *Surfaces: A History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), p. 99.

[46] Books of the *Times*, *New York Times* (Sec. 3, Late City Final Edition, 7 January 1981), p. 18.

[47] Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), p. 85–86.

> glass and warped as water. We looked at the window as we ate, and we listened to the crickets and nighthawks. [The women] in the house are one with all that is outside.[48]

For young Ruth, Sylvie's permeable borders between inside and outside, become the symbol for living as the 'other'. Walls and windows do not mark housekeeping boundaries.

Reading Diachronically to Enter the Parabolic World

Housekeeping creatively shows that 'housekeeping' can have a myriad of complicated and human expressions, and when read diachronically, the novel, as Catherine Rainwater points out, 'explores the effects on people's lives of absence, transience, disconnection and abandonment'.[49] For Williams, reading diachronically is to read 'literally'. In this mode, the reader follows the linear movement of the text, a single time-continuum.[50] On the other hand, to read 'synchronically' is to read spatially, a strategy common to New Critical interpretive methods, and as Williams acknowledges, a reading tactic that also contributes to the search for unity.[51] Diachronic reading, a practice that Williams acclaims, requires increased knowledge about the historical and cultural contexts, and in this paper, knowledge about all sorts of housekeeping. Who are the Samaritans? Is there a relationship between the Samaritan and the innkeeper, or is she merely a profit-minded woman with no ethical or moral investment in the arrangement? Is she also an 'other', an outsider or someone from the 'house'?

Williams might argue that this parable needs to be 'cross-referenced' with other sorts of unnamed but analogical 'neighborly' or 'non-neighborly' persons in the parables. Who has not seen themselves like the elder brother as the government keeps the prodigal son's house from foreclosing when they have faithfully paid their mortgage payments? To read diachronically is to follow the historical frame of the narrative and to enter the conversation with the narratives' 'location in its world'.[52] In *Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought,* Marilynne Robinson explores the vices and failures of modern culture and the loss of pleasure in 'human presence'.[53] In her comments on family, Robinson advocates 'solace' as the human work of families:

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[48] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, p. 86.

[49] 'Marilynne Robinson (1944–),' in Laurie Champion and Rhonda Austin (eds.), *Contemporary American Women Fiction Writers: An A–Z Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 318–21 (319).

[50] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 45. Stephen Moore argues that there are two paradigmatic shifts influencing biblical studies: a methodical shift from diachronic to synchronic and from history to story. *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 130.

[51] Williams cites Old Testament narratives such as the reforms of Ezra that conflict with the contemporeity of Ruth's mixed marriage and the tension between James' letter and Paul's soteriology. These two reading strategies Williams does not view as false modern polarizations, but these ways enable a Christian community to articulate itself as a point of reference, given competing interpretations emerging from the intratextual tensions in the Church's diverse texts (*On Christian Theology*, pp. 53, 55).

> Imagine that someone failed and disgraced came back to his family, and they grieved with him, and took his sadness upon themselves and sat down together to ponder the deep mysteries of human life. This is more human and beautiful, I propose even if it yields no dulling of pain, no patching of injuries.[54]

No injurious wound is patched in *Housekeeping* but something relationally happens in the darkness:

> Once when eating in the dark, Lucille pulled the chain of the overhead light. The window went black and the cluttered kitchen leaped, so it seemed, into being, as remote from what had gone on before as this world from the primal darkness. We saw that we ate from plates that came in detergent boxes, and we drank from jelly glasses. In the light we were startled and uncomfortable. As Ruthie remembers, it is in the quiet darkness one knows if the other one is awake because one feels with finer senses.[55]

Sorting out the 'inner life' of the parable (not to be confused with 'essential core' that Williams rejects) takes time, and Williams sees diachronic reading as a movement in time where the 'interiority' of the text shows the complexity of temporal processes.[56] To read diachronically is to experience temporal formation and an emergence of meanings analogous to the biographies and events of characters in the parable. George Hunsinger, Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton University, agrees that 'literalism' in modernity can be seen in theological language as univocal or equivocal, but 'literalism' in theological language of postmodernism is analogical.[57] As Williams points out, 'in the Old and New Testaments alike, unity is evidently articulated through analogy: diverse events, persons, patterns of behaviour are reconstructed in writing and in the editing process of canonical formation a shared form emerges – a family resemblance'.[58]

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[52] Williams notes that synchronic reading or the non-literal will always be less influential than unfolding diachronic reading, because as TeSelle points out, 'we love stories because our lives are stories'. Sallie TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 138 quoted in *On Christian Theology*, pp. 48–49, n. 15.

[53] Marilynne Robinson, *Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), p. 27.

[54] Robinson, *Death of Adam*, p. 90.

[55] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, pp. 100–101.

[56] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 55.

These similarities-in-difference (analogy) are produced when a primary analogue, focal meaning, is chosen for interpretation. According to David Tracy, this 'focal meaning' for the faithful Christian communities is 'the event of Jesus Christ'.[59] Jesus' narratives are the primary analogue, and each 'analogue' is focused, interpreted, and relationships disclosed by that Christ event. Reading diachronically, then, offers that 'analogical bridgehead' – a mediation of a text – so that the concrete location of the parable and the location of the reader are open to their respective situations, experiences, and production of meaning.[60]

Focalizing the Sign

Although Rowan Williams does not use 'grand narrative' to describe the Christian claims, he does use 'primal texts' and 'foundational narratives' to situate Jesus' living and dying and rising as a 'focal sign' so that lives of men and women are open to horizons of new creation'.[61] The notion of 'focalisation' and 'focaliser', capably explicated by both narratologist Gérard Genette and later by Netherlands scholar and cultural analyst Mieke Bal, has implications for Williams' understanding that Jesus is a unifying point of reference: the ensemble of human stories are drawn together and shaped in relation to Jesus.[62] No conceptual pattern explains and predicts everything. No omniscient narrator and extensive third-descriptions unify the Jesus narratives: Jesus' living, dying and rising hold the stories together.

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[57] George Hunsinger, 'Postliberal Theology', in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 42–57 (47).

[58] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 22, n. 15.

[59] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), p. 408.

[60] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 53; a central aspect of establishing the unity of the God of the covenant and the God of Jesus is establishing the continuity, the analogical relation, between the role that a Christian may stand before the God of Jesus and the role of an Abraham or Moses before the God of Israel: this life now can have *that* [*sic*] kind of structure (*On Christian Theology*, p. 23).

[61] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. 26–27.

As Genette notes, events observed by a traditional omniscient narrator are non-focalized, whereas events witnessed within the story's world from the constrained perspective of a single character are 'internally focalized'. Genette's questions about 'who speaks?' and 'who sees?' open possibilities about the temporal and spatial relationship between narrator and story.[63] For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus' parable comes to the reader first by an omniscient narrator who relinquishes his point of view to second person narrator, and then to first person narrator. In this changing focalization of who sees and who speaks, the parable becomes the stage for our first person narration. Williams notes the text read this way displays a 'possible world', a reality in which my human reality can also find itself: inviting me into its world, the text breaks open and extends my own possibilities.[64]

One might say with Paul Ricoeur that parabolic 'narration serves to displace anterior symbolizations onto a new plane, integrating or exploding them.'[65] Jesus, the focal sign, the center of interest in the parable embodies the law with its implicit interrogative mood. As the focalizer, 'the law' assumes a character's view but does not yield the focalizing to him or her. By the conclusion of the parable, the focalization has shifted from the requirements for legal justification to coins offered for another kind of justice. The center of interest remains the same. In this parabolic explication, the focal sign does not pose the question, 'is it the same God?' but asks instead, 'is it the same hope?' and 'is it the same pattern of holy life?'[66] Is it the same outsider? Is it the same neighbor as in Lev. 19.18? Is it the same odd aunt who stashes saltines in her pockets and sleeps upside down on the bed with her shoes on? Is it the same stranger? Philosopher and theologian Paul Ricoeur calls this a 'respective character of narration closely linked to the prospective horizon of the future: narration preserves the meaning that is behind us so that we can have meaning before us'.[67]

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[62] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 172.

[63] Genette describes the diegetic (telling of the story by a narrator), the metadiegetic (stories told by a character inside a diegetic narrative), and extradiegetic (stories that frame the primary story). Mieke Bal, *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 11.

[64] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 133.

[65] In Mario J. Valdés, (ed.), *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 469.

[66] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. 23–24.

Moreover, Williams is also confident that when the gospel is immersed in cultures that construct and construe the world in other ways, a robust belief can survive, even amidst drastic circumstances.[68] One of Williams' characteristic theological activities is the communicative, that is, 'the gospel can be rediscovered at the end of a long and exotic detour through strange idioms and structures of thought in more than one cultural environment'.[69] Mieke Bal connects culture, history, religion in this way:

> This position [that the study of religion must be a branch of cultural analysis, whose boundaries with other cultural disciplines are porous and provisional] is grounded in a number of further premises. Knowledge of the past derives its relevance from this ongoing presence of the past within the present, not as its precursor or source but as an ineradicable, integral part of the present.[70]

In contrast, George Lindbeck, responding to contemporary 'progressive de-christianization' and 'ineffective catechesis in one's own religious language' proposes an approach that places emphasis on the semblance of religions to languages, the 'cultural-linguistic' approach. Lindbeck primarily argues for intratextuality that redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating reality into extrascriptural categories. 'The text absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.'[71] George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach seeks to recover the loss of Scripture's authority, to reverse the Church's accommodation to culture, and thereby to define the Church's identity within the social world.[72] Williams acknowledges Lindbeck's project to revive and preserve a 'scriptural imagination capable of deploying decisive and classical narratives in the interpretation of the human world'. However, Williams questions Lindbeck's endeavors to revive such scriptural imagination by inserting the human story into the 'world of scripture'. Williams primarily objects to Lindbeck's imagery: 'framework' and 'territorial cast' as a way to talk about the 'world of scripture' because the former archbishop believes reality is much more complex.[73] Yale theologian, Miroslav Volf also points out that part of the problems with Lindbeck's metaphors and reversing the directions of conformation and absorption is that one is never 'outside' the wider culture and the 'wider culture is not a monolithic whole'.[74] Novelist Robinson points out that 'one acquires a culture from within a culture – for all purposes, from the family'.[75] Ruthie creates an analogy that draws upon her familial and individual understanding of looking at outsiders:

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[67] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), p. 131.

[68] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. xiv.

[69] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. xiv.

[70] 'Postmodern Theology as Cultural Analysis', in Graham Ward (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 3–23 (5).

[71] *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 119. In the 'cultural-linguistic' approach, prominence is given to how doctrine is used for communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action (p. 18). For Lindbeck recovering the historical world of scripture means to interpret a text in terms of its immanent meanings, 'that is, in terms of the meanings immanent in the religious language of whose use the text is a paradigmatic instance' (p. 116).

> Having a sister or a friend is like sitting at night in a lighted house. Those outside can watch you if they want, but you need not see them. You simply say, ''Here are the perimeters of our attention. If you prowl around under the windows till the crickets go silent, we will pull the shades. If you wish us to suffer your envious curiosity, you must permit

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[72] John Riggs in *Postmodern Christianity: Doing Theology in the Contemporary World* agrees with Lindbeck that liberal theology sought to explain Christian claims in terms of human emotion and needs. Jesus was turned into a human person, and the Bible was turned into a 'historical book in which one could find the truths that supported the liberal project. The answer to this unacceptable accommodation of Christianity to the modern world is to let God be God by letting the canonical narrative be the canonical narrative' (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), p. 93.

[73] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 29.

[74] Miroslav Volf, 'Theology, Meaning and Power: A Conversation with George Lindbeck on Theology and the Nature of Christian Difference', in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis Okholm (eds.), *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1966), pp. 45–66 (63). Graham Ward also notes that 'Christianity, though rooted in all its various previous forms and traditions, is conceived in the cultural terms available, the cultural terms which maintain its current relevance and render it comprehensible … in contemporary society.' 'Suffering and Incarnation', in Graham Ward (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 192–208 (206, n. 1).

[75] Robinson, *Death of Adam*, p. 98.

> us not to notice it." Anyone with one human bond is that smug, and it is the smugness as much as the comfort and safety that lonely people covet and admire.[76]

Absorbing Narratives from the Margin

Although Williams agrees with Lindbeck that a unitary Christian world-view has disappeared, Williams urges a re-reading of the biblical texts that engages with 'appropriations of biblical narrative on the frontiers of the Church'.[77] For instance, how will parables and other narratives, in and out of the theological mainstream, and on the 'frontiers of the Church' be read and in turn be interpreted? Whereas Lindbeck might call such readings 'extratextual' and subject to becoming the governing framework of interpretation, Williams believes that absorbing these narratives from the margins enlarges understanding in the Christian community. The half-dead man in the parable never speaks. Who is he? Maybe he is from Fingerbone, and perhaps Ruth speaks for him as she observes transients wandering like ghosts through Fingerbone:

> We imagined that if they spoke to us they would astonish us with tales of disaster and disgrace and bitter sorrow. For in the case of such pure sorrow, who can distinguish mine from thine? The sorrow is that every soul is put out of house.[78]

In André Gide's *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* the re-telling of the biblical parable in Luke 15 offers another construction of meaning. In Gide's account, the prodigal son assuredly claims that his father is 'other than the House', for certainly the moral strictures in the House could not be the sum of the father. In turn, the father blames the house-bound elder brother for making the laws and for forcing the house rules to declare that 'outside of the House, there is no salvation.' In Gide's parabolic imagination, the Father can be found waiting for the prodigal in the wilderness. As the parable in Gide's reading concludes, the younger son prepares to leave for the desert where the prodigal will join him.[79] George Lindbeck might read Gide's parable as 'extratextual' with the potential to become a dominant framework and in turn an 'obstacle to intratextual theological faithfulness'.[80] More likely, Gide's parable presses judgment on the Christian community and allows for transformation even in the untamed desert.

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[76] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, p. 158.

[77] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 30.

[78] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, p. 179.

[79] 'The Return of the Prodigal Son', in Peter Brooks (ed.), *Western Literature: The Modern World* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), III, pp. 461–74 (466, 473).

Rowan Williams claims that transformative judgment enacted in particular events is not only performed in foundational texts but also enacted outside canonical narratives. A telling site is Caravaggio's 'Calling of St. Matthew' reproduced on the book cover of *On Christian Theology*. Mieke Bal notes that postmodern theology accounts for aspects that are 'other', including those elements of religion that function in the visual domain.[81] Christ's extended right hand and placement of his bare feet Bal might call gestures of 'modernist theology' based on historical reconstruction and 'purity of theological meaning directly derived from theological documents'.[82] From a 'presentist' perspective (a postmodern perception), Bal sees the sensual physicality of Caravaggio's figures grouped around the table as an integral part of everyday life of the Counter Reformation. The light on their faces reveals indifference, surprise, curiosity, and as Bal puts it, 'it can be on and in such bodies that the religious content took hold'. This becomes the historical account, and these images teach something about religion as lived experience instead of dead, authoritarian letters. The lesson is 'relationality'.[83] Robinson shapes her understanding this way: housekeeping has its own way of being and doing in the world:

> Neighbor women and church women began to bring us casseroles and coffee cakes. They brought me knitted socks and caps and comforters. The visitors glanced at the cans and papers as if they thought Sylvia must consider such things appropriate to a parlor. "That was ridiculous. Who would think of dusting or sweeping the cobwebs down in a room used for the storage of cans and newspapers – things utterly without value?" Sylvie only kept them, I think because she considered accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping, and because she considered the hoarding of worthless things to be proof of a particularly scrupulous thrift.[84]

Williams says 'not without each other we move towards the Kingdom. Christian history ought to be the story of continuing and demanding engagement with strangers, abandoning the right to decide who they are.'[85] John Dominic Crossan, in his explication of the Good Samaritan parable takes this small narrative outside Luke's framing interpretation in order to give it oxymoronic shape, a reversal of expectations. Linking the parable with versions of Camus's *The Plague* and Kafka's *The Trial,* Crossan calls this story morally inadequate for helping those in distress (the parable is not 'a cipher for concerned assistance') but an ahistorical paradox in which the 'bad guy' offers help and the good Jew passes by. Is this a Jewish narrator with a Jewish story for a Jewish audience? Crossan thinks not as the parable provokes the audience's cherished views on the outsider.[86]

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[80] Phillips and Okholm, *Nature of Confession*, p. 124.

[81] Bal, *A Mieke Bal Reader*, p. 393.

[82] Bal, *A Mieke Bal Reader*, p. 394.

[83] Bal, *A Mieke Bal Reader*, p. 395. In *The Wound of Knowledge*, Williams makes a cogent point that 'the future has appeared already; what the Christian life moves towards is the pattern of a human life already lived, in the conviction that this life is of enduring authority for all ages because it is the life of God-as-man' (p. 31).

[84] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, p. 180.

> The sheriff is at the house calling Ruth to come out of the dark orchard, to sleep inside, to go to school, to live in someone else's home, to eat apple pie. Ruthie's conclusion: Sylvie's housekeeping is no longer acceptable to the town's moral standards. ''We had to leave, I could not stay, and Sylvie would not stay without me. Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping.''[87]

In her extratextual reading, Tania Oldenhage in *Parables for our Time: Rereading New Testament Scholarship after the Holocaust* contends that subtexts in Crossan's work suggest traces of twentieth-century catastrophes: 'hidden in Crossan's hermeneutic premise is a promise that Jesus' sayings, like the writings of Camus or Vonnegut, can be read and understood in confrontation with twentieth-century catastrophes'.[88] Both Crossan and Williams in different but equally complex strategies are standing against paradigms of ideological violence and oppressive power and privilege.

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[85] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 286.

[86] Tania Oldenhage, *Parables for our Time: Rereading New Testament Scholarship after the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 104–05.

[87] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, p. 209.

[88] Oldenhage, *Parables for our Time*, p. 107. This is not to take lightly Oldenhage's concerns regarding both Crossan and Paul Ricoeur's anti-Judaic tones in their interpretations. *Parables for our Time*, pp. 107, 122. Oldenhage believes Crossan is attracted to these stories because they speak to the 'horrors of this century' and that 'hidden in Crossan's hermeneutic premise is a promise that Jesus' sayings, like the writings of Camus or Vonnegut, can be read and understood in confrontation with twentieth-century catastrophes.' *Parables for our Time*, p. 107. As Williams says about Crossan's premises in *The Historical Jesus*, Crossan identifies an 'unbrokered' society – one that does not work by privilege and power. *On Christian Theology*, p. 245.

In conclusion, Rowan Williams might say about 'us' and the parable of the good Samaritan:

> We are invited to identify ourselves in the story being contemplated, to re-appropriate who we are now, and who we shall or can be, in terms of the story. Its movements, transactions, transformations, become *ours* [*sic*]; we take responsibility for this or that position within the narrative and as in the Paschal narrative as if we did not know the end.[89]

So, who is our neighbor in a postmodern understanding? Alain Badiou, French philosopher speaks not of 'neighbor' but 'neighborhood'. 'Neighboring' is described as 'openness': 'a neighborhood is an *open* area in a world: a place, a subset, or element where there is no boundary, no difference, between the inside of the thing and the thing itself.'[90] Rowan Williams discovers the neighbor not in what religious meta-theory codifies but in expanding circles of encounter with the historical world of Scripture, the centrality of the Jesus event, and the engagement between past and present biographies. Throughout *On Christian Theology*, Williams maintains that theology equips us 'to recognize and respond to the parabolic in the world – all that resists the control of capital and administration and hints at struggles to a true sharing of human understanding'.[91] Marilynne Robinson takes up that task not by writing a more interesting or comprehensive parable in *Housekeeping* but by showing, as Williams puts it, that the Good Samaritan parable is 'at "*home*" with all the varying enterprises giving meaning to the human condition'.[92]

In communities of shared hope, in parables exposing violence and injustice, in analogues of living, dying, rising, in housekeeping lived outside and against black windows, and in a bar in Uganda, the neighbor appears.

> In *Housekeeping*, nature abides – the lake is always loomingly there – but people pass on, and then they haunt the others until they too pass on. At the end she becomes a drifter, a freight car rider.[93]

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[89] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 51.

[90] Kenneth Reinhard, 'Toward a Political Theology of the Neighbor', in *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*, from series Mark C. Taylor and Thomas Carlson (eds.), *Religion and Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 11–75 (66).

[91] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 42.

[92] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 142.

[93] Joan Acocella, 'A Note of the Miraculous', *The New York Review of Books*, 9 June 2005, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2005/jun/09/a-note-of-the-miraculous (accessed 15 February 2013).

The patron sometimes calls in for a glass,
perhaps; sits with his back
to the door.
Eyes shine and water in the woodsmoke;
who can tell who might be
welcome here?

– Rowan Williams,
'Kampala; the El Shaddai Coffee Bar'[94]

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[94] *The Poems of Rowan Williams*, Foreword Phoebe Pettingell (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 71.